**Sermon: Harvest**

(slide 2) Ah, harvest time – beautiful golden fields with happy children helping to tie bundles of wheat into sheaves; baskets of apples collected to be pressed for juice or cooked to fill a pie, amusingly shaped vegetables, award winning marrows, homemade jams and pickles! I love this time of year and I love the imagery that goes with it, but sadly, all too often these visions of mellow fruitfulness are a romanticised version of what our harvests typically look like.

The reality is very different. (slide 3) The picture of a peaceful and harmonious coming together of man and nature gives way to economies of scale – mass production, cutting of costs, the search for ever more efficient ways of giving the consumer what they want, when they want and at a price that rarely factors in the cost to the environment.

It seems that whenever there is money to be made, the long view is lost and the immediate desire for profit overrides all else. And if this leads to the burning of 200,000 acres of Amazonian rainforest every day, annual food waste in the UK alone to the tune of £10 billion, over fishing to the extent that the World Wildlife Fund claim that at current rates there will be no fish in our oceans by 2048, well, that’s just struck off as collateral damage.

And then there’s the pollution involved (slide 4), the mass of plastics used for packaging, the millions of air, sea, road and rail miles to get the harvest to us, the free flowing of chemical waste into our rivers, lakes and oceans and power required for production pumping tons and tons of carbon into the atmosphere. Sadly, tragically, sacrilegiously that is what today’s harvest looks like.

But, that’s OK isn’t it? (slide 5) Surely, we are just doing what we are entitled to do as the dominant species? Surely, we can represent no one’s interests other than our own? And surely, we’re just following what God commanded us to do? Aren’t we?

Well, that all depends on how you interpret our Old Testament reading this morning. Today, we heard the Message Bible translation – a modern translation that crucially focuses on our being responsible for God’s creation – and can sound very different from other translations such as this one (NIVUK). “Fill the earth” and “subdue” it; rule over all other forms of life.

It is very easy to read this as “only pursue what is good for you and make all other things work to your advantage”. Sadly, this is how it has been used by some theologians in the past and many environmentalists have argued that our current plight and willingness to sacrifice the health of the earth for wealth and power can trace its roots back to such thinking.

(slide 6) The technical term for putting human interests first is “anthropocentricism” and it is a philosophy that has arguably had a significant impact on how we view other forms of life on this planet. At its most extreme, it claims that our position as the dominant species is our rightful place and we ought not to give way to the interests of any other. (slide 7) It is this thinking that justifies the irreparable damage to landscapes and ecosystems, and which is responsible for the UN estimating last year that over one million species currently face extinction.

But there is obviously another way of looking at this human centred view of the world and that is to recognise that our health and well-being and the flourishing of future generations is intimately and inseparably connected to the health of the planet. It is becoming ever clearer to us that we cannot survive without honouring all life and recognising its place as part of God’s creation – not God’s random creation, but God’s “good”, God’s “very good” creation. We are called to be responsible stewards, to recognise the beauty and goodness in the handiwork of our benevolent creator and to show our love by protecting and nurturing.

(slide 8) The Church has not always had a good record in caring for creation and even today, it can be hard to convince some church leaders that environmentalism comes close to other marks of mission such as evangelism and teaching the faith. And yet, if we fail to prioritise a response to the existential crisis that we all face – one that I might add far exceeds the threat posed by coronavirus – then we will struggle to show how we are fulfilling even the very basic tenets of our faith.

(slide 9) At the heart of Christianity is a call to love God and love our neighbour – what Jesus identified as the most important of any commands. We cannot claim to love God if we abuse His creation, His “good” and holy creation. And we cannot claim to love our neighbour if we ignore what we know will be the outcome of continued climate change – huge areas rendered uninhabitable by rising temperatures and sea levels, food shortages, mass migration, meteorological disasters and war. Inevitably, it will be the poor who suffer the most.

As Christians, it is our unquestionable duty to take this crisis seriously and act (slide 10). There are plenty of things that we can all change in our lifestyles – buying fewer new things, taking seriously the impact of what we eat – especially meat, committing to travel less and take fewer trips abroad, insulating our homes and cutting back on the energy we use. But it is also important that we make our voices heard - as a church, in our workplaces and as individuals. This isn’t someone else’s fight; we are all involved.

(slide 11) Many of you have spoken with me about the joy you felt when the skies and roads were cleared during lockdown. Air quality improved, peace was tangible and nature seemed to draw a huge sigh of relief. It felt good, it felt right, it felt as though something that was out of place was starting to be set straight again.

We need to remember that feeling (slide 12 – perhaps summed up no better than in this picture of Philip!) It is no coincidence that when we let go of selfish ambition, when we slow down, live simply and connect with the world around us, then something switches on inside us. We remember who we really are – children of God, placed deliberately in His perfect garden. If we live to truly honour the harvest, caring for creation and providing for others, then we gain not just food, drink and the things that sustain us, but we fulfil the greatest commandment - to love God and love each other – - we fulfil our true purpose and reap the harvest of God’s blessing.

Amen