

Harvest Festival

PREACHER : Catherine Staziker, Reader

Rochester Cathedral – 8th October 2006
10.30am Sung Eucharist

Year B – Harvest Festival
Joel 2: 22-24, 26, Mark 6: 30-34

May I speak in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen

You shall eat in plenty and be satisfied, and praise the name of the Lord your God, who has dealt wondrously with you.

A journey from the Myanmar's capital, Rangoon, to the country's borders reveals a picture of hungry, malnourished children that is "serious" and "getting worse", reports a UN official.

In some areas along the border, chronic malnutrition among children under 5 years old may be as high as 70 percent.

The situation across the rest of the country is just as severe.

There are a huge number of people who desperately need help.

You shall eat in plenty and be satisfied, and praise the name of the Lord your God, who has dealt wondrously with you.

Infant mortality in Myanmar is the fourth highest in South East Asia.

Maternal mortality the third highest.

HIV and AIDS are enormous problems.

The black market is estimated to be as big as the official market, and one of the biggest products is opium.

The political situation has become increasingly dangerous;

civil war, economic instability and extreme poverty

are combined with uncertainty as to the future of the ruling military junta, which is increasingly hard-line.

The country's pro-democracy leader,

Aung San Suu Kyi has been under house arrest for almost 11 years.

You shall eat in plenty and be satisfied, and praise the name of the Lord your God, who has dealt wondrously with you.

Myanmar, is a potential paradise haunted by poverty and war. Yet 40 years ago was one of the richest countries in South East Asia.

It has a wealth of natural resources:
natural gas, oil, tin, coal, silver and gold,
gems, large teak forests and fertile rice fields,
to mention but a few.

Yet, the majority of the people of Myanmar
do not benefit from its wealth.

and much of the country's history has consisted of a struggle as to who should control it.

For most in Myanmar, the threshing floors are not full of grain, and the vats do not overflow with wine and oil. Few eat in plenty, few are satisfied but they nonetheless praise the name of the Lord their God, who has dealt wondrously with them.

The Reverend Saw Stylo is a priest working in Toungoo diocese in the rural heart of Myanmar (Ralph is wearing a stole from that region).

There he oversees 3 churches, one a 17 mile walk across difficult mountain terrain.

He believes in a holistic gospel: one that caters for physical welfare as well as spiritual needs.

So alongside church services, and pastoral care, he has set up a school for orphans, a fish farming programme and an agricultural training course; he has built a water supply for an isolated village, as well as helping them with other practical tasks.

He has been enabled to do all of this through USPG funded training.

He sees his Christian vocation as dedicating himself to helping his local community and meeting their needs, whether spiritual or practical.

What he wants, he says, is **“to see development, to see human potential being realised, to see a person blossom through education and encouragement.”**

“With God all things are possible, so in whatever I do I rely totally on God.” he says.

You shall eat in plenty and be satisfied, and praise the name of the Lord your God, who has dealt wondrously with you.

In today’s gospel, we see Jesus and his disciples seeking rest and solitude, exhausted from their ministry of teaching and healing.

But the people who’ve congregated in nearby towns, probably gathered for the Passover, hear of this and seek them out.

Jesus immediately has compassion on them and teaches them until late in the evening.

A crowd of more than 5000 are then fed – a miracle – from just 5 loaves and 2 fish.

Was this a demonstration of divine power?

Or did the disciples share their own loaves and fishes with the people nearest them?

And were others, seeing this splendid example of unselfishness, inspired to share what they had too? (the real miracle being the discovery of the joy of caring and sharing with others)?

Jeffrey John in his book *The Meaning in the Miracles* talks about his 2 RE teachers and their approach to miracles.

One was a Welsh non-conformist.

He applied the scriptures in their plainest, most literal sense.

Had Father Christmas, leprechauns and King Arthur appeared there, he would have believed in them too!

The other was an Anglican with “modern views”.

She had read books by modern theologians such as John Robinson.

Her great speciality was to demolishing miracles!

She dismissed anything that sounded supernatural as being primitive and unscientific.

Both of these people treated the miracle stories in a naively historical way, assuming that the main question was what did or did not happen.

They missed the point! In fact, Jesus' acts of power are gracious responses to the concrete needs of people: the crowd were hungry and he fed them.

You shall eat in plenty and be satisfied, and praise the name of the Lord your God, who has dealt wondrously with you.

Miracles are not worked for display,
for Jesus' own glory or comfort.

In fact, those benefiting from his mighty acts are often urged to tell no one what has happened.

In his healing miracles he identifies himself with people in fear and distress and hurt, in order to release and restore them:

That reveals his mission:

I have come in order that you might have life – life in all its fullness.^a

And so, are we hoping at our harvest thanksgiving today that God will perform a great miracle?

That he will alleviate the poverty and suffering of our brothers and sisters in Myanmar, or indeed in Rochester?

Are we just going to sit here passively and pray about it,
or are we going to act?

As disciples of Jesus Christ our mission and calling is exactly the same as his:
to **nurture the radical hope of human flourishing.**

We are the ones who can perform the miracle.

There is no reason why the whole world should not eat in plenty and be satisfied and praise the name of the Lord God.

Shortly in the breaking of bread together and in our harvest thanksgiving lunch, we will eat in plenty and be satisfied, and praise the name of the Lord our God, who has dealt wondrously with us.

Let us make a commitment to offer what we have to Jesus and to share our talents, our time, our money, our ideas with our neighbour.

He will take them and do great things with them.

Let us today help USPG to enable others in Myanmar, like Saw Stylo, to help their community's practical and spiritual needs, so that we might **“see human potential being realised, and see people blossoming through education and encouragement.”**

We too can perform miracles!

Christ has no body now on earth but ours,
No hands but ours,
No feet but ours,
Ours are the eyes through which Christ's compassion looks out into the world;
Ours are the feet with which he is to go about doing good;
Ours are the hands with which he is to bless now. ^b

Amen

^a John 10: 10

^b Theresa of Avila – Carmelite nun - 16th Century mystic