

Faith, not worry: a sermon by Rev Phil Wootton for Harvest 2020

2 Corinthians 9: 6-11, 15; Luke 12: 22-34

When I did the research for my little drama, I found 'Stone Soup' is a folktale, with different versions told in different countries, with different spins on its meaning. In my version the moral was about the value of sharing even in times of hardship. Other versions make my 'soldiers' into real tricksters, and the story becomes a warning about getting caught out by con artists. Either way, I guess, Jesus' message stands true. The problem is fear, and the antidote to fear is faith leading to generosity.

'Do not be afraid,' said Jesus to the crowds, many of whom lived from hand to mouth, who had reason to be afraid if they didn't get work that day. 'Do not be afraid,' says Jesus to us in the modern world – we who rush around in a perpetual state of tension, worry on our faces, terrified at missing targets of time or money or achievement; we who clear the shop-shelves in case we're caught short without pasta, or chocolate digestives, or toilet paper. 'Do not be afraid,' when for months of pandemic we have been told we must be afraid: it's quite a revolutionary message.

Why should we not be afraid? – because we have faith. We have faith in our heavenly Father who knows our every need. Have faith that we will be all right even without all the things 'the [so-called] pagans' run after. We don't need most of them, after all. (We'll even be all right if the toilet paper does run out: the world has survived greater disasters.)

Our heavenly Father never say the ride will be anything other than bumpy, but he does promise he is with us through it all, and will see to it we come through.

Have faith in the One who is the Creator of all things. The beauty and abundance of that creation is a sign that the Creator provides for all. At this time of year, we see the proliferation of seedbearing trees – acorns crunching underfoot, ash-keys in dense bunches ready to fly on the wind, the richly coloured berries of the elderberry and rowan and hips of the dog-rose. It's all more than strictly necessary. So, if nature is built on abundance, why do we want to store up for ourselves? Why do we believe we have to keep building bigger barns, or bank accounts – let alone stashing away cash in tax-havens? There is wise provision for retirement, but when that becomes a worry, a source of stress, then we've got things out of proportion. We've let fear replace faith, and our lives are impoverished as a result.

Faith leads to generosity. If we know life is not about storing up for ourselves, then we are free to give. If we know that it's God who provides, then we don't have to worry about locking it away. If we are blessed with more than our bread for today – and I would suggest most of us are – then we are charged to use that abundance for God's kingdom. That's not an appeal to give it all to the church! Much as the church is dependent on the generous giving of its members and supporters, God's kingdom is much bigger. The kingdom is not a place; it's not locked up in bricks and mortar, nor are its investments in the stock market. Jesus never defines the kingdom tightly, but I suspect it's more about the sum total of what's done in his name, actions for the poor and needy, words spoken affirming Jesus' sovereignty, transformations of society to be more just and fair, work that upends human destructiveness and puts the planet back to rights. We're accustomed to think this project is too big – and of course it is, for any one of us – but the pooled resources of human beings realigned to the ways of Christ, faithful to him, bursting with his generous Spirit – that is a way to a new world, to the true harvest of all creation.