

12/10/08 Harvest Service (Family Communion)

Texts: Deuteronomy 16:9-17, (Psalm 127), (Isaiah 28:23-29), Matthew 6:7-15

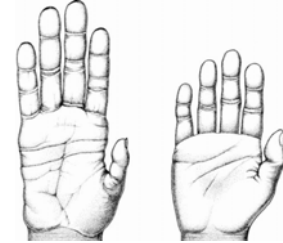
Underline = biblical quotes **[BOLD CAPITALS]** = activity

Hello. I hope by now everyone has noticed that today is our annual harvest festival. We celebrate harvest once a year. In contrast, the Old Testament mentions *three* harvest festivals. The first two take place, quite sensibly, at the beginning and the end of the harvest season. The Jews have a festival when the earliest crop, the barley, ripens. Then 50 days later, when the latest crop, the wheat, has been gathered in, they celebrate Pentecost – we heard about that in our reading just now from Deuteronomy. At these two festivals, the Jews give thanks for God’s bounty. As a token of their thankfulness on each occasion, they bring some of the crops that they have harvested as offerings. We have done the same. Here they are **[POINT TO HARVEST GIFTS]**.

But the Old Testament mentions a third harvest festival. We also heard about this one from our reading just now. It is very interesting *when* the Jews are told to have this festival: ‘when you have gathered in the produce from your threshing floor and your wine press.’ In other words, when they have done some serious work with what they have harvested, after they have done the *threshing* and the *wine pressing*. I wonder if the children know what those activities are? **[ASK!]** Threshing is beating the crops to get at the edible grain; and wine-pressing is treading the grapes to release the juices. Each is hard work. At the end of that, the Jews are told to celebrate, ‘because the LORD your God will bless you in all your produce and in all the work of your hands’. In other words, they are celebrating the fact that their hands (and feet) have been able to do fruitful work.

Now, if you have been to church over the last few Sunday mornings, you would have realised that we have been thinking a lot about this topic of ‘the work of our hands’. In particular, a number of us have shared from the pulpit our reflections on our Monday to Friday work *as Christians*. This harvest festival is then a climax to this series of reflections on the work of our hands, which is why we have asked everyone to bring in tokens of what they have worked on over the last year. Here they all are **[POINT TO WORK TOKENS]**. And what a marvellously varied collection this is. I see ... **[PICK OUT & IDENTIFY A FEW]**. God has blessed the work of our hands in *all* of these areas.

Now, I want to think a little more with the adults about God blessing the work of our hands in a moment. But before that, I want to talk to the children about these marvellous things that God has given us called *hands*. Let's see how much our children know about hands. So, who can tell me what other animals have hands? **[HAVE A QUIZ.]** So the animals that biologists call 'the primates' – monkeys, chimps, apes, us – all have hands, so that hands are not unique to humans. But I wonder if the children can tell me what is *so* special about the way God has made our hands. **[HAVE ANOTHER QUIZ.]** So the answer is that our hands are very special because of the way our *thumbs* are. Let me show you what I mean by way of another quiz. Can you tell me which of these two pictures shows a human hand, and which shows the hand of a chimp? **[ASK FOR A SHOW OF HANDS]**



The key difference is that our thumbs are, relatively speaking, much longer. It pokes out beyond the bottom of the first finger. If your thumb is like that of a chimp, it would only be half as long – little more than a stub! To get a feel for what it may be like to be a chimp, we can try to imagine doing things *without* our thumbs all together. So I have some challenges for the children. Here is a cricket kit. Who would like to come and try to bat without using the thumb? **[CHOOSE SOMEONE]** We won't try to bowl in church – it may lead to costly accidents. But you can imagine how hard it would be to do that without using the thumb. Here's another challenge. Who would like to come and try tying up these shoe laces without using their thumbs? **[CHOOSE SOMEONE]**

Now you see how essential properly functioning thumbs are. That is why chimps with their much shorter thumbs cannot do many of the things that we can do with our hands. In fact, without our kind of thumbs, I think we would not be able to do any of the things represented by all of those tokens we have brought in today. So next time you look at your hands, remember that God has given us very special thumbs to enable us to do the things that we do – the sort of things that we are thinking about today.

Let's sing a song before I continue. **[SING!]**

So, God has given us humans very special hands, and part of the purpose is that we can *work* with them. I now want to reflect with the adults a little bit about this with the help of the Lord's prayer, our second reading today. Let us start off with the petition, 'Give us this day our daily bread.' This is the first request in the prayer that is for ourselves. Now, God can, in principle answer that prayer the way he fed the Israelites during their

escape from Egypt – by raining bread from heaven (Exodus 16). Or God could feed us the way he fed Elijah during a long drought, by asking a raven to bring food (1 Kings 17:1-7). But we know that ordinarily, God chooses to answer our petition for daily bread by blessing the work of our hands. We feed ourselves and our children by working at the sort of things that are represented by these tokens. But success is not guaranteed. The writer of Psalm 127 puts it straightforwardly: “Unless the LORD builds the house, those who build it labour in vain.” That is why we have to ask God to bless the work of our hands. For me, each time when I say ‘Give us our daily bread’ in the Lord’s prayer, that is precisely what I think I am asking God for, to bless the work of my hands. What we are doing today is to come together to give thanks to God for answering our prayer.

As we think about the work of our hands, we need to remember that not all work, and certainly not all ways of working, is pleasing to God. The Lord prayer carries a reminder of this: ‘Your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.’ The tokens we brought represent a huge variety – a veritable microcosm of work across Scotland today. The amazing thing is that God has a will for each and every single area of activities represented by these tokens we have brought. And it is a key part of our Christian discipleship to seek to discern this will, with the help of the Holy Spirit and of our brothers and sisters.

I can’t go into the details now; that would take a whole series of sermons! But let me point out a truly amazing paragraph hidden in the middle of the Book of Isaiah about the will of God for our work. Isaiah here is talking about the work of farming – an appropriate theme for Harvest Sunday. **[READ ISAIAH 28:23-29]** Isn’t that amazing – the farmer learns how to farm by discerning *God’s* will for the way each crop should be planted! Going to agricultural college and doing research on seeds can indeed be part of learning to discern God’s will. There is no split between religion and work here!

It’s time to close. Let me draw all the threads together by way of pointing forward to what we’re about to do. Soon we will be offering up the Eucharistic gifts of bread and wine. As we do so, we will be saying this:

Blessed are you: God of all creation: We have this Bread to offer. *Fruit of the earth, and work of human hands.* It has become for us the Bread of Life.

Blessed are you: God of all creation: We have this Wine to offer. *Fruit of the vine, and work of human hands*. It is the Cup of our Salvation.

Fruit of the earth and of the vine [**POINT AT HARVEST GIFTS**] and work of human hands [**POINT AT WORK TOKENS**]. God blesses these and transform them into the bread of life and the cup of salvation. That is a fitting symbol for what I have been trying to say this morning, and what the whole of our series on ‘the work of our hands’ has been driving at: Work that is pleasing to God, work that is blessed by God, will be taken up and used by God and used to further life and salvation, or ‘wholeness’, for ourselves, for others, and for the whole of creation. That is why it is appropriate for us to come together and thank God for having blessed the work of our hands. Amen.