

St Mary's Holy Communion 30th September 2018

Harvest Festival

Philippians 1:3-11 **Matthew 6:25-33**

last Sunday five people from this parish were confirmed over in St Peter's Burnham by the Bishop of Buckingham – two adults and three young people – and here today, sharing Communion with us at St Mary's for the first time: Charlotte, St John, Harriet and Chad

Sue and I had great fun preparing the two groups for this important step; it was a real joy and privilege to help them on their journey and to see them make this commitment to following Jesus

Charlotte, St John, Harriet and Chad, please come out here where we can see you, and ask you some questions:

why did you want to be confirmed?

what were the preparation classes like?

how did you feel during the confirmation itself?

what does it mean to you to be receiving Communion here today?

confirmation is not an ending but a beginning of a new path; how are you going to live this out? what might help you on the way?

I want to reflect now on how we can all play our part in nurturing faith in others, and in ourselves; how can we ensure that the seeds of faith sown, for example, in these who have just been confirmed, do put down deep roots and bear good and lasting fruit?

in the Parable of the Sower, much of the seed proves unfruitful; it gets snatched away before it can even germinate; or it puts down roots but they're too shallow and the sun scorches the plant; or after growing well for a while it gets choked by weeds that grow up around it

when it comes to the seeds of faith, that last scenario is the one that I see most often – where promising growth is stifled by 'the cares and pleasures of the world', 'life' takes over, and faith shrivels away; as the church we must take responsibility for ourselves, and for each other, to ensure this does not happen!

let's look at Paul's prayer for the Christians in Philippi; he clearly cares a lot about them, and wants their faith to flourish and grow; he prays that 'your love may overflow more and more, with knowledge and insight, to help you determine what is best ... and produce a **harvest of righteousness** through Jesus Christ for the glory and praise of God'

that's a lovely prayer, one I would want to say for these candidates, and for everyone here, that we would all 'produce a harvest of righteousness' in our own lives, as we seek to follow Jesus

now we have lovely displays of flowers, fruit and veg around the church, but what if we were to add this ingredient, 'a harvest of righteousness', **people** growing and flourishing as Jesus' disciples

now who's going to make sure these new plants flourish, and bear good and lasting fruit?

firstly, God himself; Phil 1:6 is my favourite verse in all the Bible, the reference is engraved on the inside of my wedding ring; what does it say? 'I am confident of this, that the one who began a good work among you will bring it to completion by the day of Jesus Christ'

so it is God's job, to finish what he's started in each of us, but especially in these four lovely people; it is his 'good work' and he will 'bring it to completion'; so if you ever feel a bit down, a bit of a failure as a Christian, just remember that God does believe in you, he believes in your potential, and you just have to let him do his work!

but second, we all have a part to play in nurturing faith in one another, in encouraging, challenging, supporting each other in our walk with Jesus; if we want Christians that grow, and a church that grows, then we must all do our bit of 'gardening', and stop the plants getting choked by the weeds!

worry is a weed, that strangles faith! in Matthew 6 Jesus tells us, 'don't worry! don't fret over food, drink or clothing, or even how long you may have to live! trust God to know that you need those things! don't worry; instead strive for the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be given you as well'

how can we strive for God's kingdom? one way is to be **thankful**; thankfulness is the best 'weed-killer for worry'; it puts our lives in perspective, helps us to notice all the good around us, and stops us constantly complaining about what we don't have, or always looking for more

a second way is to be generous; generosity reminds us that what we have is not ours by right, but a gift from God, and that we lose nothing by giving it away, where we see a need these two themes – thankfulness, generosity – were at the heart of our Harvest Celebration in the Park last weekend; we invited our community – 5 school groups with attendant families, 5 charity speakers, Scouts, churches and others – to join us in being thankful for our blessings and in taking responsibility for those in need, especially the homeless and hungry in our community and around the world

today let's practice those two qualities, being thankful for the harvest, and being generous in giving, to today's special collection for the Philippines Typhoon Appeal; in these ways we can strive for God's kingdom and see a harvest of righteousness grow among us

a final thought from last Sunday's confirmation service; near the end the candidates are commissioned; the whole congregation respond to five questions that set out our intent as Christians, with these words: 'with the help of God, I will'

the first is: Will you continue in the apostles' teaching and fellowship, in the breaking of bread, and in the prayers?

the last is: Will you acknowledge Christ's authority over human society by prayer for the world and its leaders, by defending the weak, and by seeking peace and justice?

what begins with prayer, Bible study and worship, ends by changing the world; what starts here on a Sunday morning, nurturing faith together, can take us out to make a real difference for good; that will be a real and lasting 'harvest of righteousness'

can we do it? 'with the help of God, we will!'