

Antony and I returned from Sri Lanka just in time for our Harvest Festival, and the journey to the teardrop isle has given me a fresh way of seeing Harvest.

Sri Lanka is extraordinarily green: rice fields, coconut palms, banana plants and mango trees fill the lowlands, while tea plantations cover whole mountainsides as the road climbs into the hills.

I even tried picking tea. It looks easy when experienced hands do it, but I soon discovered the difference between plucking a few leaves for pleasure and working hour after hour, moving quickly across a hillside to pick enough to earn a living. I don't think I'll look at a cup of tea the same way again.

Tea, like so many of our everyday foods and drinks, is easy to take for granted. We put the kettle on without thinking about the people who planted and tended the bushes, picked the leaves and helped bring them to our kitchen.

That is why Harvest Festival matters: it makes us pause and consider where our food comes from. Because so much arrives neatly packaged, we can forget those who sow and reap, pick and pack, transport and sell it. However independent we imagine ourselves to be, our lives depend on the labour, skill and care of people we will never meet.

This dependence on others leads into our Gospel reading. Before telling the parable of the rich farmer, Jesus is asked to settle an inheritance dispute. He replies: "Be on your guard against all kinds of greed; for one's life does not consist in the abundance of possessions."

He then tells of a man whose land produces more than he can store.

His land produces so much that he has nowhere to store it all. So he decides to pull down his barns and build larger ones, and then he can say to himself, "Soul, you have ample goods laid up for many years; relax, eat, drink, be merry." The harvest is not the problem; the farmer's response is. His thoughts turn entirely inwards: my crops, my barns, my grain, my goods. Faced with abundance, he thinks only of storing more, never of sharing.

This is part of Jesus' warning that life does not consist in possessions. What we own can turn our attention inwards: What do I have? How much can I keep? How can I ensure there will always be enough for me?

The farmer believes his possessions can guarantee his life: "You have ample goods laid up for many years." Yet that very night his life will end. As the saying goes, you cannot take it with you.

I thought of this parable in Sri Lanka, where faith is visibly woven into daily life. Buddhism, Hinduism, and Christianity all have deep roots there, and I was struck by Buddhism's emphasis on loosening attachment to possessions and desires and cultivating generosity and compassion.

That may sound close to Jesus' warning, but the Christian emphasis is different. In Buddhism, letting go of attachment is part of the path to freedom from craving and suffering. Christians should loosen their grip on possessions because they trust in a personal God who creates us, knows our needs and gives us life.

That trust is precisely where Jesus takes the parable next: “Do not worry about your life, what you will eat, or about your body, what you will wear.”

Jesus knows how readily we worry about health, family, money and the future. Worry makes us cling more tightly to whatever promises security.

So Jesus points to the ravens, which neither sow nor reap, yet God feeds them, and to the lilies and the way they grow. He invites his disciples to trust the God who gives life and knows what they need.

That trust makes generosity possible. If everything depends on what I store for myself, I shall hold tightly to it. But if my life is held by God, I can hold possessions lightly and share what I have received. Christian generosity is not merely freedom from attachment; it is a response to God’s grace. That is also where St Paul takes us: “God loves a cheerful giver.”

Paul speaks about the God who “provides seed for the sower and bread for food”, and says, “You will be enriched in every way for your great generosity.”

What a contrast with the farmer in the parable. Both receive abundance, but the farmer asks how he can keep it, while Paul asks what it can make possible for others.

God gives seed; it is sown and becomes a harvest; the harvest becomes food; the food is shared; and the sharing gives rise to thanksgiving. That movement—from gift, to gratitude, to generosity—lies at the heart of Harvest.

When Jesus teaches us to pray for our daily bread, he teaches us to say, “Give us today our daily bread.”
Us.

We pray for the bread everyone needs. If I have plenty while someone else wonders where the next loaf will come from, that prayer surely asks something of me.

God often provides for us through other people, just as my cup of tea depends on those working on the hillsides of Sri Lanka. And sometimes God provides for someone else through us.

That feels especially appropriate today, because after this service we shall gather for our bring-and-share Harvest lunch. Each of us will put what we have on the table. No one provides everything, but together we bring, share and discover that there is enough.

Perhaps that is what the farmer could not see. Faced with abundance, he thought he needed a bigger barn. Perhaps what he really needed was a larger table to share his abundance with others.

That image leads to the heart of Christian life. At the communion table, Jesus takes bread, gives thanks, breaks it and shares it. The bread is not stored away but received, reminding us that our life comes from God and is given for the life of the world.

We come to this table empty-handed and receive together. The bread and wine proclaim Christ’s self-giving love: not hoarded, but offered; not reserved for a few, but shared with all who come.

As we receive, we learn to see God's gifts not as possessions that secure us, but as means of blessing others.

The communion table and the Harvest table are not the same, but both point to gratitude, dependence on one another, and sharing what we have received.

When I make a cup of tea now, I think of Sri Lanka's green hillsides and the people who pick the leaves. But I will also consider how much of my life depends on people I will never meet. And I shall remember Jesus' words: "One's life does not consist in the abundance of possessions."

The farmer's mistake was not his plentiful harvest, but imagining its abundance was his alone. Jesus invites us to see abundance as a gift to give thanks for and an opportunity to make room for others.

This is the life we glimpse at the communion table and practise at the Harvest table: receiving with gratitude, sharing with generosity and making room for one another. Amen.