

A harvest of 45 years

26 9 10

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.

I am by no means bilingual, but I do know a little French. And I think that the following nursery rhyme, trivial as it is, nevertheless has a message for us in today's world:

Au clair de la lune
Mon ami Pierrot,
Prête-moi ta plume
Pour écrire un mot.
Ma chandelle est morte,
Je n'ai plus de feu;
Ouvre-moi ta porte
Pour l'amour de Dieu.

Or, in English:

In the moonlight
My friend Peter,
Lend me your pen
To write a letter.
My candle's gone out,
Its light is no more,

For heaven's sake

Open the door.

But that is only Part One. Mark the sequel:

Au clair de la lune

Pierrot répondit:

Je n'ai pas de plume;

Je suis dans mon lit.

Va chez la voisine

Je crois qu'elle y est,

Car dans sa cuisine

On bat le briquet.

Or, in English again:

In the moonlight

Peter said:

I haven't got a pen:

I'm in bed.

Go next door,

She's there all right,

And in her kitchen

You'll get a light

I put it to you that that is a devastatingly accurate commentary on human relationships.

Trivial? Humorous? A pretty little jingle for the infants to sing? Yes, it is all that. But, as with so many rhymes for the tiny tots, there is a sting in the tail; a sharp lesson in a simple story. It is a cry for help, and then the answer: Don't bother me, I'm busy.

In what is now my home church in Windermere, we have recently been studying the Epistle of St. James. The Epistle of James was castigated by Martin Luther as 'a right strawy epistle', meaning, I take it, that there is nothing of value in it. One can imagine Saint Paul scoffing at James: 'It is faith alone that we are justified by: you cannot earn your way into heaven by good deeds: only faith is what matters.' I hear James replying, 'Faith alone is dead, because if your faith does not issue in deeds it can't be worth much.' So James writes about everyday behaviour, not about abstruse theological propositions. Be ye doers of the Word, not hearers only.' So Christian living reduces itself to behaviour, not merely to the assent to doctrinal propositions. This is why the Epistle of St. James is so strawy and down to earth: it is written for people living in the real world, among the pots and pans of daily life, rather than the clouds of theological speculation.

A cynic once said: Theologians spend their time answering questions that nobody has asked.

Which brings us back to Pierrot and his refusal to answer a friend's call for help. Jesus said Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with the whole of thy

being, and love thy neighbour as thyself. It means helping one another along the road upon which we are all travelling.

Living the Christian life is utterly simple – I don't say easy; it can be grindingly difficult; but it is clear, simple and straightforward. I am not differentiating between James and Paul. Each has one side of the truth. Paul gushes out with torrents of high-powered theology: James stresses the nitty-gritty nuts and bolts of daily living in the world.

I remember at the licensing to my first parish, when several church dignitaries, from fellow clergy up to the Bishop himself all had something to say in the service. The Rural Dean was a small man with a big voice and he began his exhortation by thundering out: 'Go therefore and teach all nations'.' Then the Archdeacon, very much the senior and a real heavyweight (and whom I was to follow into his parish many years later) said: 'Be diligent in the saying of public and private prayers.'

And so one graduates into the ranks of the ordained clergy with the commission to give to these among whom we live and work, something of what God has given us. 'The Lord loveth a cheerful giver'. And do you know why? Because the Lord is Himself a cheerful giver.

Which at last and finally brings me to Harvest Thanksgiving. Most of us do not live today in such close contact with the soil as our forbears did. I am profoundly thankful that in each parish I never lost contact with the soil. I have both witnessed and taken an active part in seed time and harvest every year, both watching and participating in the seasonal round of country living.

Did you know that cattle are attracted by music? I have sung to a congregation of cows over the back fence of the Rectory garden. They clustered round listening intently and absolutely silent. Only when the recital ended did I receive vocal acknowledgement of my efforts.

In one parish some of the harvest gifts of Almighty God were a saucer of salt, and a shovelful of coal and some iron ore. In another parish I was hard put to it to explain to small children (whose parents all worked in the nuclear industry) why we couldn't have a dish full of atoms on show.

Harvest is the easiest to understand of all the great occasions in the Christian Year. Because it is saying thank you. The tokens we see around us in this church witness to our gratitude for all God's good gifts. I recall the infants singing grace before their school dinner.

'Thank you for the world so sweet,

Thank you for the food we eat,

Thank for the birds that sing,

Thank you God for every thing.

And concluding with a devastating AMEN.

I have occasion today, the 26th September to offer thanks for my ordination exactly 45 years ago in 1965 and to see so many friends both of long standing and more recent. May we all be grateful to our heavenly father every single day of our lives, for, as the psalm says:

His mercy endureth for ever.

Amen

Preached at the Eucharist

St Bartholomew's Dinard

26th September, 2010

