

The Harvest is plenteous but the labourers are few

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There was a young curate who said:

May I take off my collar in bed?

But the Bishop said: No,

Wherever you go

You must wear it until you are dead.'

A young confirmation candidate once asked me whether I had to wear my dog collar in bed. It is a perfectly reasonable question. At a man's (or woman's) ordination, what is imposed upon the candidate is something indelible and permanent. You cannot renounce that status. You can resign your membership of a political party or any human organisation, but ordination is permanent. But the appointment into the ministry of the church is not for everyone: most baptised Christians are not ordained. It is Baptism which is the distinguishing mark of the Christian. We are all members of Christ, children of God, and inheritors of the Kingdom of heaven, from the most venerable Archbishop to the newest baby being christened at the font.

At the season of harvest we come together to thank our heavenly Father for our creation, preservation, and all the blessings of this life.

The gifts we see in most churches are our way of showing our gratitude to God. There may be just a token display of some of the items of our daily living, or there may be an avalanche of fruit and vegetables, produce from farms and gardens in our more rural districts. We are offering to God things which God himself has given us. If you think about it, what we are doing is a very simple, almost childlike action: we are saying, Look, all these things we have received from you O God. We are putting them on display so that everyone can see them and so that they can say thank you. It is exactly like the communion service; we bring bread and wine into church. First, we thank God for them, and then we ask a blessing on them so that we can use them for God's glory and then share them with other people so that they can say thank you also. Every communion service is a little harvest.

In one parish where we were planning the gifts to put in church, the Sunday School children suggested items for the harvest decorations, with particular reference to people in need overseas. We could send money (that's the most practical) but how about bread, potatoes, fruits cabbages, gravy? All this was at the time when Biafra was in the news. One small child drew a picture of a large cross with a cluster of little dots surrounding the foot of the cross: 'What are these?' I said. 'It's packets of soup.'

In another parish where there was a large nuclear research establishment, one child suggested we could make a display in church of some atoms.

However, we decided that although God made atoms, they would be rather too small to see and we couldn't provide everybody with microscopes.

Jesus was talking about harvest; not literally the ingathering of the fruits of the earth; but his concern was the ingathering of people into the Kingdom of Heaven.

Preaching the Gospel, the Good News that Jesus had come to deliver to the world, was like labouring in the fields to bring in the harvest. The harvest is plenteous but the labourers are few. The labourers in the harvest are the clergy, Deacon and priest, and indeed Bishop: these are seen as the labour force. Our Lord's words have a more urgent meaning today. There are fewer men and women being ordained nowadays, the average age of ordinands is higher, which means on average, fewer years of active work. And the brutal facts are that there are fewer people in the pews. Although this church is a notable exception to the general picture. This means that there are increasingly more people in the whole country with no church allegiance. Our urgent problem is how to win them back. This is not a new and recent situation, although we often tend to think it is something new. Consider the situation as it was when Jesus was speaking: a handful of disciples over against many thousands of Jews – and never mind the rest of the Gentile world.

But wait a moment: so many thousand clergy over against – I don't know –so many million others? The parson active for God and the congregation passive? It is all very well to speak of the minister as a shepherd but I should hate to be the vicar of a parish where the people were just a lot of sheep.

No: it is all too common to think that the 'church' means the clergy. It is sometimes said of a young man (or woman) that when he left the university he decided to go into the Church. I don't know about you, but I went into the church on the 20th of May 1928, at the age of a few weeks. The Church is the whole community of Christian people, all of us, not just the dog collar brigade. Did you realise that no member of the clergy was born wearing a dog collar? We all started as laymen and women. And that means we are all labourers for God's harvest, we are all ministers of the Gospel. The commission which Jesus has given to us, he gave to the twelve disciples originally. And he says to each one, 'Let your light so shine before men that they may see your good works and glorify your Father which is in Heaven.'

It is this joint enterprise, of the whole Christian community doing the Lord's work, that will bring in the harvest. The labourers may indeed be few – and a good many of them seem to be on permanent strike. But it is our privilege and our joy to engage in this work. In the words of the most splendid prayer in the language. We beseech Thee, give us that due sense of all Thy mercies, that our hearts may be unfeignedly thankful, and that we show forth thy praise, not only with our lips but in our lives, by giving up ourselves to thy

service, and by walking before Thee in holiness and righteousness all our days.

Preached at the Eucharist

St Bartholomew's Dinard

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