

Being God's harvesters

May I speak in the name of God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

About twelve years ago, my close friend suggested we go on a lad's holiday together in Europe. There would be sun, there would be beer, there would be shenanigans. I was all for it.

I was bit surprised, though, when rather than booking us tickets for Ibiza, he arranged for us to stay - at a monastery. We certainly knew how to have a good time.

He decided we were going to visit Taizé, which is a monastic community in France. It's where Taizé music comes from, which is beautiful meditative chants that are often sung in churches.

So off we went to Taizé. I was a Christian, and my friend was an interested agnostic; very philosophical, very clever, *always* had something to say.

We had a meeting with one of the brothers who lives in the community. And the brother turned to my friend, and looked at him, and simply said to him – “what's important in your life?” “What's important in your life?”

For the first time (possibly in his entire life), my friend was speechless.

He didn't know what to say. He had no answer.

Looking back on it now, it seems clear to me that that was a 'God moment'. A moment when somehow, God speaks.

My friend is now a priest. And looking back, I realise now that message wasn't *just* a message for him. It was a message for me too.

But for a long time I didn't grapple with it. I didn't want to look directly at it, because I knew it would challenge me deeply; I would need to change.

It can be hard to know when God is trying to speak to us. It can be hard to recognise *who* God is using as a messenger for us.

It can be particularly hard to hear God's voice in a day like today, as we hear the terrible news of the violence in Israel and Palestine. The pain of this world can make it hard to trust that God is still speaking.

Our gospel reading today says something about the challenge we have in really listening to God's messages.

Jesus tells the crowd a parable; a summary of God's relationship with humanity. God chose ordinary people to be his hands and feet; the workers in his vineyard. And as we heard in our reading from Isaiah, God intended them to be fruitful; to build communities of love and justice to bless the world.

But things went astray. The people didn't follow God's path. They followed paths of self-focus; of exploitation; of violence.

And so, like the landowner in the parable, God sent messengers to call the people back to God's way. Jesus is speaking here of the prophets – people sent by God to call out oppression, to speak truth to power.

But like the tenants in the vineyard, the people ignored God's messages. They rejected the messengers. Because they didn't want to face up to the truth that their ways of living were damaging themselves and others and the land.

And so, Jesus tells the crowd, the landowner went even further. He refused to give up. He sent them something of himself – his beloved son. When the son comes, the landowner is present.

Jesus is, of course, speaking of himself here. He's saying that in him, the landowner has come to his people. He has come, even though he will suffer and be cast aside, like the stone that will become the cornerstone.

Jesus' parable contains a warning to his listeners about what is at stake. He was saying to them: if you continue in this path of self-focus, of tribalism, of returning hate for hate – you will fail to be the harvesters God wants you to be. You risk destroying yourselves.

The gospel writer says that Jesus told this parable to challenge the complacency of the leaders of his day. But it is also a challenge for us too.

Who are we in this parable?

We are called to be the harvesters in God's vineyard.

We're called to work in partnership with our creator; to build communities of justice and forgiveness and joy. We're called to a life of relentless loving: where we reflect God by pouring out an abundant love, without limits. We're called to do this in the middle of the pain and violence of the world.

That's what it means to produce fruit for God's kingdom, to harvest for God.

But being God's harvesters is not something we can take for granted. We can't be complacent. We need to look honestly at ourselves, and ask – are there ways in which we are like the *tenants* in the parable, ignoring God's messages?

We are not, hopefully, abusive like the tenants. But sometimes we live in ways that are unloving; ways that exclude others, or dehumanise those we disagree with. Sometimes, without meaning to, we inflict pain – on others, on ourselves, on the planet. And we become deaf to God's messages.

Sometimes we become deaf to God's messages because we *choose* not to listen. We don't want to admit that we are wrong; that we need help to change.

And sometimes it can happen because we can't help it. We get so weighed down by the busyness of life, or by the suffering we've experienced. We are called to be God's harvesters; but what we've suffered means we struggle to hear God's voice.

If we feel like this, we can take encouragement from St Paul.

Paul is an example of someone who could not, or would not, hear God's message of love. As we heard in our second reading today, Paul admits he was a "persecutor of the church"; he thought he was doing the right thing by hunting down Jesus' followers. But in reality, he was like the tenants in the parable; turning his back on God's path.

But God still chose him, this person no one would have expected, to be his harvester; to be his messenger. Paul came to see that all the status he had valued in his old life meant nothing compared with knowing the love of God, revealed through Jesus.

Paul's story shows us that God keeps on reaching out to us; keeps on finding ways to speak to us, even when it's hard for us to hear, amidst the brokenness of the world.

And it reminds us that God may be using totally unexpected ways, and totally unexpected people, as his messengers to us. God has a habit of speaking from the margins, through ordinary people without power. And sometimes God speaks to us through people who are very different to us; people we may have written off.

And God also speaks through *us*, through *each* of us. No matter where we've come from; no matter how unworthy we might feel – each of us can be God's messenger. Sometimes we don't realise the ways in which God is *already* using us to be his messengers. Learning to be a harvester for God means trying to tune in; tune in to how God is already using us.

Being God's harvesters means proclaiming to others, despite the pain of the world, that they are loved, utterly, for who they are, by the God who is always with us. That is the fruit of the kingdom.

As we learn to be harvesters, let us ask God today to help us listen again.

Ask – what is God saying to you today?

Who might it be that God is using as a messenger to you? Who do you need to listen more closely to?

And ask God to show you how *you* are to be his messenger. What does God want *you* to say to other people? How is God calling *you* to serve in his vineyard and show his love today?

Amen.