

St Mary-le-Bow, Cheapside, London EC2V 6AU

**The Costermongers' Harvest Festival**

The Revd Daniel Warnke, Assistant Curate, St John's Church, Hyde Park

Saturday 16<sup>th</sup> September 2018

*May I speak in the name of God, who is father Son and Holy Spirit.*

Now I wonder if you remember where you were when *One Direction* split up, ok, how about *Take That*? Or when Martin Luther King was shot, or when the king of Rock & Roll died? Where were you? Perhaps you remember where you were on the day of 9/11, or when you heard about Grenfell, or the Westminster Attack. When something important happens, we tend to remember where we were. Places matter. You only have to see some flowers laid by the roadside, or on a monument to know that where you pass means something.

Places matter, and we're not gathered here in this church today because it's beautiful (although it is), or because it's convenient, or because no one else would have us. We're gathered here because the things that have happened here matter, they've become part of our shared memory and our traditions. They help shape our identity, and what we remember, and celebrate here today at St Mary-le-Bow is that all we have is ultimately a gift from God.

During my training for ministry, I served here as an ordinand. It was a great privilege, and it continues to be standing before you all today. During my time, you might say I had a varied brief; whether it was helping the homeless, serving at the altar, preaching, cleaning the loos when they got blocked (someone's got to do it), or answering the phones. I remember receiving a number of calls enquiring if (based on their location of birth) they, or their mum, or dad was a 'real cockney'. Now, it's not for me to say (as I'm no judge of such an important status) but what I can tell you is that being born within ear-shot of these Bells certainly means something. And being identified by way of tradition, family, or location gives us all a great sense of who we are.

Having been born and raised in East Greenwich, I remember meeting several Pearly kings and Queens who came to visit our school. I was about 8 years old, and having never seen anything like it, the sight of all those pearls and buttons was quite mesmerising (I can't tell you how happy I am to be wearing this fine Pearly stole today). And I remember they were friendly and kind and spoke about caring for others. I've no idea what else they said, but that memory remains with me to this day. Of course, this rings true with my understanding of Henry Croft, the first Pearly king, who was a generous man himself. Having been raised in an orphanage, he seemed to have this in-built desire to help those who fell on hard times, and in particular those who needed medical care. And so it goes, that raising funds on

behalf of the poor and living a charitable, and compassionate life, seems to be within the very nature and DNA of the Pearlies. The 4C theologian and Church Father, Gregory of Nazianzus, spoke about this kind of charity as being ‘the first and greatest commandment’. He said:

*We must open the heart of our compassion to all the poor and those afflicted with misfortune no matter what the cause, in obedience to the exhortation to rejoice with the joyful and weep with the sorrowful. Since we ourselves are only human, we must set before others the meal of kindness no matter why they need it – whether because they are widows, orphans, or refugees [...] All such people are equally deserving of mercy, and they look to us for their needs just as we look to God for ours.*<sup>1</sup>

And so it is with us here today. We celebrating the bounty and boundless provision of God in this Costermonger’s Harvest Festival. These gifts are laid before the altar as a symbol, reminding us that what we have is not of our *own* creation, but is given to us by God.

But this is where it gets tricky. It seems it’s easier to be the one giving, than to be the one in need, receiving. We have our pride. Maybe you know someone who you’ve tried to help, but you know they’ll never accept it ‘because of their pride’, they don’t want to be a ‘charity case’. It seems that it’s far easier to be the one giving, or helping, than to be the one receiving. For some reason, we like to be the one giving, the one helping. It’s harder to be the one who needs help. Whilst our society is geared towards being self-reliant, I tell you what, the friends I’ve got who’ve seen me at my worst (when I’ve been unable to help myself) they’re the friends I love and trust the most. This is what’s going on at Harvest. It’s not simply a case of saying to ourselves: “look at how generous I’m being, look at what I can give”. It is a humble recognition that what I have was actually *given* to me in the first place. This is what Henry Croft understood, and this is what we heard St Paul saying to the church in Corinth. (v7-8)

*Each of you must give as you have made up your mind, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver. And God is able to provide you with every blessing in abundance, so that by always having enough of everything, you may share abundantly in every good work.*

This church was only wealthy because it’s how things worked out for them, and what Paul is basically saying is this: “don’t forget that *all* of this is a gift anyway. Share what you have, because it was given to you in the first place.” This is about learning to live by receiving *and* giving – they go together. If you want to pass a ball in sport, someone has to be there to

---

<sup>1</sup> A Reading from an oration of Gregory of Nazianzus, from *Celebrating the Seasons*, p.323

receive it, and so it is with our giving: before a gift can be given, it must be received by open hands. And your giving today will go towards those who most need it, and to the vital work of maintaining the presence of this place here in the City. And so may our giving remind us that we ourselves have first received of God's bounty, and as Paul reminds us:

*...by always having enough of everything, you may share abundantly in every good work.*

Amen.