

**A Sermon for St. Peter's Addingham by the Revd. Andrew Tawn**  
**16<sup>th</sup> November 2008**  
**'Wulfhere's Harvest'**

In today's gospel we hear of the importance of using the talents God has given us. Last night we saw many of the talents in our church put to good use in the performance of the play, Wulfhere's Harvest, by the children of Junior Church and LEAF: talents of acting, producing, catering (with the Saxon food afterwards) and not least creativity in writing. Pat Laycock's script is full of humour, insight and theology – and it is this script I would like to take as my text this morning.

The play is set in the years 867 – 872 AD, and tells of Archbishop Wulfhere's arrival in Addingham, the effect of his stay here, and his return to York. Just as good science fiction is set in the future but deals with the issues of the present, so Pat's play is set in the past but has a message for the church today.

To set the scene, 'Big Ed' is the local big man in Addingham – rather bossy and self-important. After Wulfhere has arrived in Addingham Big Ed begins to get some big ideas about the church:

**"Ah, Wulfhere,"** he says. **"I've been thinking. It looks as though Addingham is going to be the most important church in the kingdom now you have decided to live here..."**

**"Shelter here, I think you mean,"** says Wulfhere.

**"Yes well, but here you are, and as I was about to say – I feel we ought to have a status symbol, show off to the other Christians, extend our church, have a tower to connect us to the sky, enlarge the hall..."**

That last line is as appropriate today as it was in 2000 when the play was first performed and of course the audience laughed. It is good that we can recognise a little of ourselves in Big Ed. We have indeed a beautiful church building in a fabulous setting. Our church hall has been the envy of many a visitor from other churches and when it is rebuilt and the new office is completed it will be better than ever. We are rightly proud of our church and the condition it has been kept in, but we must be careful that this pride reflects on God, to whom the building is dedicated, and not on us who look after it. The church should never become a symbol of *our* status – it must always be a symbol of God. A symbol does not draw attention to itself but points away from itself to that which it symbolises. The buildings must never become an end in themselves, and as a PCC we must try to prevent the Fabric item at a PCC meeting becoming the main issue on the agenda. The great thing about having a church in such excellent condition as this is that it can allow us to concentrate instead on building up God's people and God's kingdom.

So instead of taking up Big Ed's project of building a bigger church, Wulfhere gives a different symbol – not a status symbol but a carved stone cross, the symbol of Christ. The narrator says, **"this was not quite what Big Ed had in mind, but certainly made of stone, and with a bit of luck it should last a while..."** The Anglian cross shaft has indeed lasted for around eleven hundred years. Wouldn't it be wonderful if the carvings we have commissioned for the church hall as part of the Heritage Project last another few hundred years and become a symbol of our faith for future generations!

There is a theme running throughout the play about what really is important: What really matters? When Wulfhere arrives with his party from York, Big Ed is anxious to

welcome this V.I.P. But, looking for the best dressed member of the party, he greets first a traveller, then a scribe, then a candlemaker and he quite fails to recognise the unostentatious archbishop. When Wulfhere himself greets the peasants of Addingham Big Ed interrupts rudely: **“These peasants don’t matter. I’m Mr. Fix-it! And I wish you monks would move out of the way. I’m expecting a visit from a V.I.P., the archbishop of York as a matter of fact”**

During the play we see Wulfhere building up the self-esteem of the peasants. When he has to return to York he says: **“I know that the very important people I am leaving behind will never be kept down.”** (Note how ‘V.I.P.’ has shifted in meaning from Very Important Person to Very Important People). He identifies one of the peasants, called Dingham, as the future leader of Addingham, rather than the self-important Big Ed. But Dingham finds this hard to accept:

**“What, me? But I am just a nobody,”** he says. Then he remembers the message Wulfhere has kept repeating to them. **“Oh yes, I nearly forgot. Every one of us is important to God – he has a job for each one of us.”**

The play illustrates two mistakes we can make in our spiritual lives. Big Ed thinks only of his own importance and needs to learn to see the importance of others. Dingham thinks of himself as a nobody and needs to learn that he is important in God’s eyes too. The play helps us to see that we are all important. **“God can use everybody’s gifts”** as Wulfhere says. Even Big Ed – who Wulfhere chooses to take with him to York to help rebuild the city.

The other theme which runs through the play is the importance of prayer. When Wulfhere arrives he says that **“a voice from heaven”** told him to shelter in Addingham. He tells Dingham to listen to God so God can tell him what to do. Whenever there is a decision to be made Wulfhere says, **“We should pray about this.”** Almost every scene ends with Wulfhere or his monks going to pray. **“I’ll have to pray about it,”** he says. **“I’ll have to ask God what he wants me to do.”**

To Dingham this life of prayer is an exciting discovery: **“As a matter of fact”** he says, **“I talk to God a lot these days. And sometimes he replies!”**  
To Big Ed, all this praying instead of getting on and doing things, is rather irritating: **“I bet he said he’d have to pray about it!”** he says. **“Some people!”**

In every church there are ‘Big Ed’s – usually the incumbents! In every church there are people like Dingham who do not realise what special gifts they have to offer in God’s service – possibly because they have never been encouraged to use them. In every church there are people who are more interested in building up the fabric than the people, in every church there are people who are more interested in doing things than in asking what God wants us to do.

Let us pray that by God’s grace *we* may become a church where everyone may have the opportunity to use their gifts in God’s service; where everyone may learn how important they are to God and how important we all are to each other; where building up God’s kingdom matters more than maintaining the fabric of the building; and before every decision and after every scene let us, like Wulfhere, ask God what he wants us to do.