

Harvest Festival September 27th 2020

Of course, the third Sunday in September is a very arbitrary date to choose for Harvest Festival. Not even a 'thing' in England until the mid 19th century, there is no definitive date for Harvest. Some crops have been harvested for months, others have yet to be gathered in. Added to this, even as one field is being harvested, another is showing signs of new crops, winter greens perhaps. And never mind the livestock, whose breeding season takes place at a different time of year. I am sure any farmer will tell you that that work is never done... And this year has been particularly hard work for those in agriculture. This is an extract from a report by the Arthur Rank Centre, a charity which resources, trains, and advocates for rural Christians, rural churches and the communities they serve. It's a summary of the situation at harvest time: 'This has been a difficult year for many in the farming community which is negotiating a 'triple threat' of challenges. The weather is, once again, proving to be problematic for many farmers but added to this, the COVID-19 pandemic has created significant challenges for the farming community. Migrant labourers have been prevented from coming here to help gather the crops. Other farms have sought to increase their income by diversifying into farm shops, holiday lets and other activities; again, COVID-19 restrictions have made much of this activity impossible over the last few months.'

In the face of this, it would be quite easy simply to give in to despair. Where is Jesus in all this we might ask, what is there to celebrate this harvest time? We might well scorn the glib answer 'he is right beside us, with us as we negotiate these difficult times, helping us to walk in the paths of righteousness, even though these paths are stony and rough'. Except that the glib answer is the true one, as it so often is in Christianity. God is with us, in the thick and the thin of it, the good and the bad. And we are still here.

And this is part of the purpose of harvest – to pause for a moment, to remember God's presence with us and be thankful. We are here to spend just a few moments reflecting on the past year, the bounty that it has offered to us in terms of food, shelter, sustaining relationships, interesting experiences, life shaping encounters with people, places and things. For some people, these encounters will have been painful or difficult, challenging and perhaps altering our view of the world.

The coronavirus has made things harder, especially when it comes on top of the usual troubles of life: the onset of an illness, accidents, broken relationships and altered standards of living all may have blighted the past months, and these are significant things, not to be dismissed or made light of. But still we are here, and we can thank God for another year spent on this earth.

But this is not enough, really, simply gathering in gratitude. For a major task of harvest festivals is to remind us of the vital importance of the landscape which surrounds us. You will remember the press photographs of deer in the centre of Oxford, you will have been grateful for the silence and stillness of our country roads, which have made our daily allotted walks a joy rather than a chore. One of the things I have cherished is regular walks to Shorthampton church – treading the same path on an almost daily basis has led me to witness the gradual unfolding of spring into summer and the corresponding changes in the landscape. If we haven't gone far, we have been able to go deep. And these experiences have been a useful reminder that our relationship with the land is a profound and mutually dependent one, visceral and rooted - that to ignore this leads to deprivation of body and mind. Like a human relationship it flourishes when treated with respect and thoughtfulness, and withers and rots if too much is taken for granted or an atmosphere of contempt develops. To ignore the landscape in which we live and move is to lose a dimension from our lives, and our lives will be poorer as a result. So harvest thanksgiving is an imperative placed upon us from earliest times as a way of recognising that people and land are better when treated with respect.

The flow of benefits is not one way; we have a duty to care for the entire planet and an individual and corporate responsibility for what happens to it. The devastation of South American forests is every bit our concern as the use of illegal pesticides or our neglect of our field edges.

Finally, at harvest, we remember that while we sit here in comfort and privilege, millions of people around the world suffer from lack of the most basic necessities for life. The Old Testament reading we heard is one of the most beautiful evocations of harvest responsibility that I know. Boaz, a wealthy farmer, is engaged on gathering in what appears to be a particularly successful crop. But even in the midst of rejoicing in his good fortune, he is mindful of others. With the amount of labour at his disposal, Boaz could have ensured that every scrap of grain was harvested from his fields, thus increasing his wealth significantly.

Instead, he is careful to leave a considerable margin around the edges to allow the landless and dispossessed a generous area in which to glean and gather supplies for themselves. Incidentally, it is through this generous action that Boaz encounters Ruth, who will become his wife and the mother of his son, who will be an ancestor of David and thus of Christ. So the line of Jesus springs from charity and thoughtfulness. This contrasts strongly with the behaviour of the man in the gospel reading who is more concerned with building barns to store his grain than who else might benefit from his wealth and good fortune. The work that Boaz began, we can continue in Charlbury Cornerstone, where the excess harvests of some, in the form of apples, marrows, tomatoes etc, is gratefully used by others, who in turn may give to the community in different ways.

So although perhaps today we cannot sing joyfully that 'all is safely gathered in', we can at least pause and take stock. 'The earth is the Lord's and all that is in it', the Psalmist writes, uniting land, people and God in a precious continuum, mutually giving and sustained with love. And at the centre of it all is Christ, who broke bread with us and by doing so, taught us the value of the everyday and let us in to the heart of the universe.

Prayers

Let us pray for the church and for the world and for all people according to their needs.

We thank you, Father, for the riches of the Harvest and for the wisdom in today's readings. Please help us to appreciate the riches you give us, while not allowing our lives to be controlled by material things.

Lord, we find it hard to follow you sometimes, for your way is demanding, asking us more than we feel we can give. Yet though our faith may founder, so that we repeatedly fail you, we know in our hearts that you have the words of eternal life, and that without you our lives are ultimately empty, starved of real fulfilment. So we come, asking your mercy, and asking you to speak again, so that we might keep faith with you as surely as you keep faith with us to the end.

For what we have received, make us truly thankful.

We thank you, Father, for the work of the World Health Organisation and ask that you intervene in continents and countries suffering most strongly from Coronavirus, including The USA, South America, India, Spain.

We ask that you strengthen and bless those who make great sacrifices for their faith or to gain political freedom. We ask that you help the work of reconciliation in Belarus, Pakistan, Hong Kong among others. We thank you for the democratic, parliamentary legacy which we enjoy in this country.

For what we have received, make us truly thankful.

We pray to you, Father, for the Queen and her ministers, for the good judgement of Justin our Archbishop, and for our own clergy and PCC. We give thanks for Tish's ordination and pray that her ministry will produce rich spiritual fruit.

Have mercy on us all as the virus rate increases again. Please bless and guide those suffering from loneliness, families which exceed six in number who can get together less, those who are unemployed or needing to re-think their careers, and young people tempted to ignore social distancing. We ask you to bless the Charlbury Medical Centre and its work, the Cornerstone initiative and foodbank, and the Messy Harvest Picnic Service in this church later today.

Mighty God, we thank you for this Harvest Festival. We are surrounded today by so much that speaks of your gracious provision, creative purpose and sustaining power. We come now to worship you - to acknowledge your goodness, to thank you for your generosity, to celebrate the wonder of this world and to rejoice in the rich harvest it so faithfully yields. Help us again to recognise how fortunate we are, remembering those less fortunate, and the environmental dangers that press so urgently upon us all. May those lessons shape our living and loving every day, through Jesus Christ our Lord.

For what we have received, make us truly thankful.

O God, Father, to whom alone is known the mystery of suffering, hear our prayers on behalf of those who are sick or in pain, or have to undergo an operation. In their weakness and anxiety draw near to them with your comfort and strength, and give them the assurance that, sharing their suffering, you will also share with them your peace, in Jesus Christ our Lord.

We commend to you, Father, the souls of those who have died: Ann Davidson, Peggy Haslam, David Labett, Wendy Thornton, Ruth Harper. May you grant them peace, and comfort for their loved ones.

Merciful Father, accept these prayers for the sake of your Son Our Saviour Jesus Christ.