

Harvest 2018

On this Sunday when we celebrate the Harvest, it is sometimes difficult to remember that this festival is a comparatively modern one in terms of the Church of England. The familiar hymns which will be sung later, with their strains of Harvest home and God's garner in which to abide, will give many a warm glow, but in fact it all seems far removed from the world as we know it in 2017!

In fact, it was over 170 years ago today that Parson Hawker, the eccentric vicar of Morwenstow in north Cornwall (and part-time merman) introduced a service thanking God for the bounty of the land, at which a loaf using flour made from the first cut of the corn was used for Holy Communion. From this first service, now virtually the whole of the western church keeps some form of Harvest celebration. Much of this was (and in some cases still is) highly sentimentalised. Yet reality has overtaken the tradition of gifts, as you will see here - where tins and packets have replaced the heaps of fresh produce and flowers which might have been seen in this church thirty or forty years ago. Although this means that we are removed further and further from the wonder of creation itself the tradition of gifts remains a laudable contribution to those less fortunate than ourselves.

So what are we to make of Harvest?

The Jewish Festival of Sukkot is the Biblical inspiration for Parson Hawker's reinvention of the Harvest and has a double significance. Exodus talks of the agricultural nature of Sukkot as the "Feast of Ingathering at the year's end" (Exodus 34:22) *22 You shall observe the festival of weeks, the first fruits of wheat harvest, and the festival of ingathering at the turn of the year* – and marks the end of the harvest time and thus of the agricultural year in the Land of Israel. The more elaborate religious significance appears in the Book of Leviticus and ties this to commemorating the Exodus and the dependence of the People of Israel on the will of God (Leviticus 23:42-43).

You shall live in booths for seven days; all that are citizens in Israel shall live in booths, 43 so that your generations may know that I made the people of Israel live in booths when I brought them out of the land of Egypt: I am the Lord your God.

The Book of Deuteronomy describes a beautiful land to which the Children of Israel will be brought, not just flowing with milk and honey, but one in which the landscape itself is made up of the bounty of creation – iron, copper, silver, and gold – with a reminder that ultimately this journey towards such imagined wealth if one totally led by God's loving kindness. From slavery in Egypt and a journey through a great and terrible wilderness the people are reminded that this was all brought about through God's care – water from the rock, and manna from heaven – all signs of loving care.

However, time and time again this vision is shattered through the human desire for control – the people end up in slavery, or else enslave themselves through selfish desires. Joel talks of the destruction caused by locusts, and he may be talking of a specific event in Judah's history, but ultimately the prophet points forward to a Day of the Lord – a time of restoration for humanity.

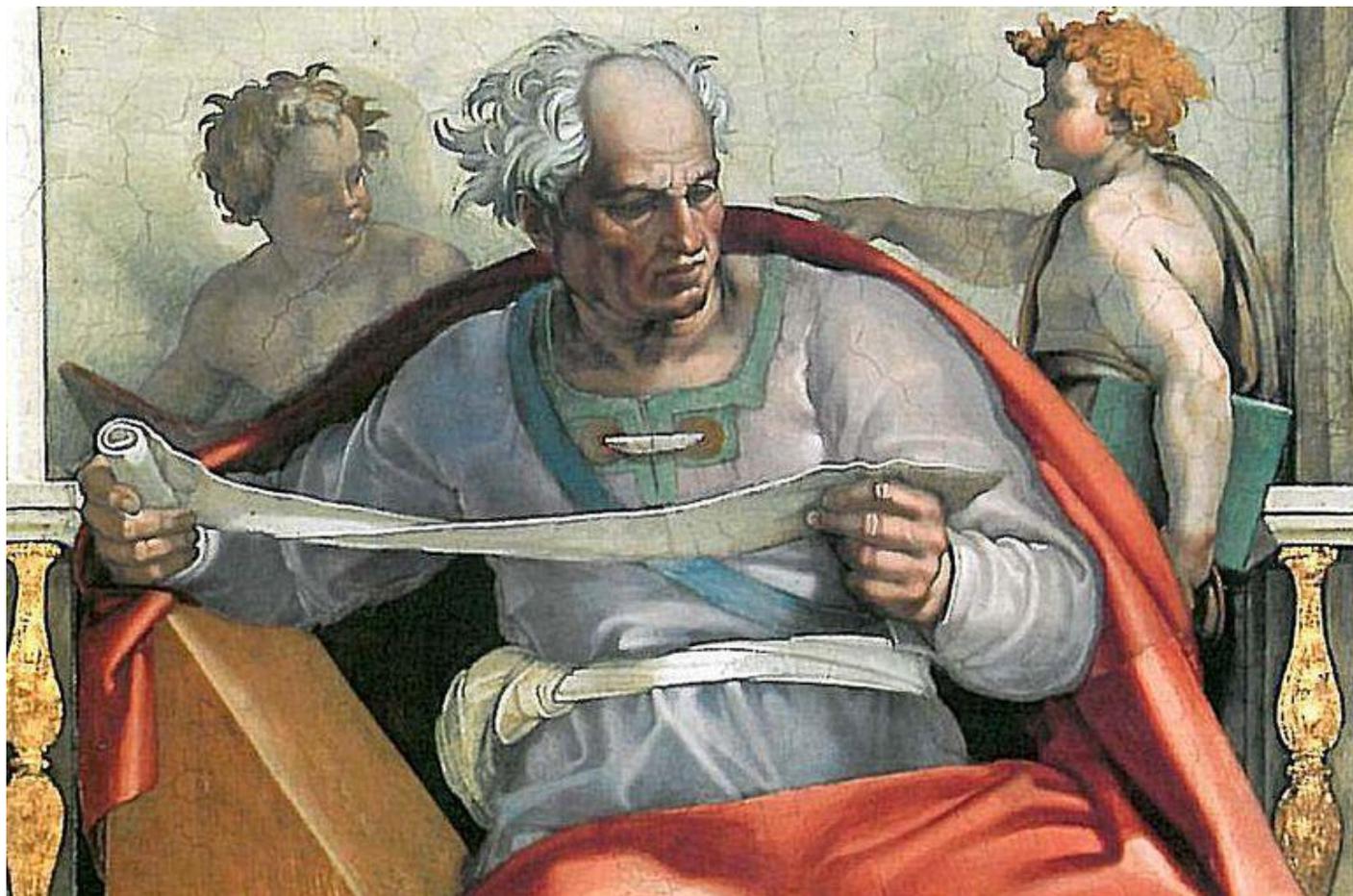
Indeed, there is a running theme to all three readings. One is an acknowledgement of God's presence in the whole of creation, together with the abundance of blessings which flow from this knowledge - in other words, caring for the precious environment in which we live. This includes our care for not just the animal and plant kingdom and the responsible way in which we should preserve as well as garner the resources of the planet, but the wider concerns of the knowledge of the way in which **what** we do impacts on other people. Paul's letter to Timothy talks about the sense in which it is so easy to become bogged down with possessions. If the desire for wealth or property overtakes us, we will never ultimately become satisfied. This passage is often misquoted - 'Money is the root of all kinds of evil,' – when actually it is the LOVE of money, putting it before our human relationships and our own spiritual needs that lead to unhappiness. Paul is not saying that all wealthy people are consumed thus! Bill and Melisa Gates, for example, show a quite remarkable philanthropy, channelling much of their huge wealth into projects which seek to alleviate human suffering and affliction. We are all called within our own capabilities to respond generously to the call to helping those in need.

In the passage from Matthew's Gospel Jesus calls all not to be absorbed by the worries and cares of this life so as to neglect what is really necessary: relationship with God. Again, this is about transformation, and he appeals to our imagination. He is not making a moral point about lilies, sparrows, or even Solomon! Jesus is calling us to consider that our relationship with the world should mirror the wonder of God's creation, because in so doing, we are entering into relationship with the Divine Love which is at the core of all that exists. Giving thanks for the Harvest, is a part of this, as is care of our environment and of each other, because all of this reflects God's Love within creation.

Thomas Traherne the 17th century clergyman and mystical writer and poet imagines this wonder of unity seen in living an everyday life – in his Centuries of Meditation

I saw all in the peace of Eden; Heaven and Earth did sing my Creator's praises, and could not make more melody to Adam, than to me: All Time was Eternity, and a perpetual Sabbath. Is it not strange, that an infant should be heir of the whole World, and see those mysteries which the books of the learned never unfold?

The corn was orient and immortal wheat, which never should be reaped, nor was ever sown. I thought it had stood from everlasting to everlasting. The dust and stones of the street were as precious as gold: the gates were at first the end of the world. The green trees when I saw them first through one of the gates transported and ravished me, their sweetness and unusual beauty made my heart to leap, and almost mad with ecstasy, they were such strange and wonderful things: The Men! O what venerable and reverend creatures did the aged seem! Immortal Cherubim! And young men glittering and sparkling Angels, and Maids - strange seraphic pieces of life and beauty! Boys and girls tumbling in the street, and playing, were moving jewels. I knew not that they were born or should die; But all things abided eternally as they were in their proper places. Eternity was manifest in the Light of the Day, and something infinite behind everything appeared which talked with my expectation and moved my desire. Amen.



The Prophet Joel – Sistine Chapel - Michaelangelo

Collect: Creator God, you made the goodness of the land, the riches of the sea and the rhythm of the seasons; as we thank you for the harvest, may we cherish and respect this planet and its peoples, through Jesus Christ our Lord.

Joel 2: 21-27

²¹Do not fear, O soil; be glad and rejoice,
for the Lord has done great things!

²²Do not fear, you animals of the field,
for the pastures of the wilderness are green;
the tree bears its fruit,
the fig tree and vine give their full yield.

²³O children of Zion, be glad
and rejoice in the Lord your God;
for he has given the early rain for your vindication,
he has poured down for you abundant rain,
the early and the later rain, as before.

²⁴The threshing floors shall be full of grain,
the vats shall overflow with wine and oil.

²⁵I will repay you for the years
that the swarming locust has eaten,
the hopper, the destroyer, and the cutter,
my great army, which I sent against you.

²⁶You shall eat in plenty and be satisfied,
and praise the name of the Lord your God,
who has dealt wondrously with you.

And my people shall never again be put to shame.

²⁷You shall know that I am in the midst of Israel,
and that I, the Lord, am your God and there is no other.

And my people shall never again be put to shame.

I Timothy 6: 6-10

⁶Of course, there is great gain in godliness combined with contentment; ⁷for we brought nothing into the world, so that we can take nothing out of it; ⁸but if we have food and clothing, we will be content with these. ⁹But those who want to be rich fall into temptation and are trapped by many senseless and harmful desires that plunge people into ruin and destruction. ¹⁰For the love of money is a root of all kinds of evil, and in their eagerness to be rich some have wandered away from the faith and pierced themselves with many pains.

Matthew 6: 25-33

²⁵“Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat or what you will drink, or about your body, what you will wear. Is not life more than food, and the body more than clothing? ²⁶Look at the birds of the air; they neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not of more value than they? ²⁷And can any of you by worrying add a single hour to your span of life? ²⁸And why do you worry about clothing? Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow; they neither toil nor spin, ²⁹yet I tell you, even Solomon in all his glory was not clothed like one of these. ³⁰But if God so clothes the grass of the field, which is alive today and tomorrow is thrown into the oven, will he not much more clothe you—you of little faith? ³¹Therefore do not worry, saying, ‘What will we eat?’ or ‘What will we drink?’ or ‘What will we wear?’ ³²For it is the Gentiles who strive for all these things; and indeed your heavenly Father knows that you need all these things. ³³But strive first for the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well.