

Harvest 2020 Year A

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 by the choir at the 9.45 (even I will remain mute!) 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 2020!

As many will know, I tend to point out the fact that 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 - 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. But what are we to make of Harvest in its fullest sense?

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 is 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. Into the chaos which humanity so often brings upon itself, and indeed of the damage caused to Creation by human exploitation, the Hebrew prophets spoke of the Day of the Lord – a time of restoration for humanity, and indeed for creation. 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 talks of the blessing of a spiritual harvest. We are, within our own capabilities, to respond generously, responding to those in need. This is the call to give freely of ourselves to those we interact with; sharing the grace and gift of faith in Jesus Christ, and allowing ourselves to be caught up in the same spirit of self-giving in situations which draw others to know God's rich grace. Paul says, *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.* Although Harvest tends to concentrate of the bounty of creation, in fact we are called to acknowledge that every aspect of our lives provides the opportunity for a spiritual harvest in sharing the gift of Faith. In this age of pandemic, it may be sharing ourselves in a costly way with those suffering from the mental exhaustion of the whole situation, or, as someone anonymously did so generously, giving to enable our community to use technology within these ancient walls to proclaim Jesus Christ through an online medium to those outside. What a blessing!

In the passage from Luke'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 and its abundance, 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 and revealed in the most costly and abundant way by giving us his Son. But is humanity doing to creation what it did to Jesus?



The Call of Matthew - Hendrick ter Brugghen (1588-1629) Centraal Museum, Utrecht

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.

Deuteronomy 8: 7-18

For the Lord your God is bringing you into a good land, a land with flowing streams, with springs and underground waters welling up in valleys and hills, a land of wheat and barley, of vines and fig trees and pomegranates, a land of olive trees and honey, a land where you may eat bread without scarcity, where you will lack nothing, a land whose stones are iron and from whose hills you may mine copper. You shall eat your fill and bless the Lord your God for the good land that he has given you. Take care that you do not forget the Lord your God, by failing to keep his commandments, his ordinances, and his statutes, which I am commanding you today. When you have eaten your fill and have built fine houses and live in them, and when your herds and flocks have multiplied, and your silver and gold is multiplied, and all that you have is multiplied, then do not exalt yourself, forgetting the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery, who led you through the great and terrible wilderness, an arid waste-land with poisonous snakes and scorpions. He made water flow for you from flint rock, and fed you in the wilderness with manna that your ancestors did not know, to humble you and to test you, and in the end to do you good. Do not say to yourself, 'My power and the might of my own hand have gained me this wealth.' But remember the Lord your God, for it is he who gives you power to get wealth, so that he may confirm his covenant that he swore to your ancestors, as he is doing today.

2 Corinthians 9: 6-end

The point is this: the one who sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and the one who sows bountifully will also reap bountifully. 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. As it is written, 'He scatters abroad, he gives to the poor; his righteousness endures for ever.' He who supplies seed to the sower and bread for food will supply and multiply your seed for sowing and increase the harvest of your righteousness. You will be enriched in every way for your great generosity, which will produce thanksgiving to God through us; for the rendering of this ministry not only supplies the needs of the saints but also overflows with many thanksgivings to God. Through the testing of this ministry you glorify God by your obedience to the confession of the gospel of Christ and by the generosity of your sharing with them and with all others, while they long for you and pray for you because of the surpassing grace of God that he has given you. Thanks be to God for his indescribable gift!

Luke 12: 16-30

Then Jesus told the crowd a parable: 'The land of a rich man produced abundantly. And he thought to himself, "What should I do, for I have no place to store my crops?" Then he said, "I will do this: I will pull down my barns and build larger ones, and there I will store all my grain and my goods. And I will say to my soul, Soul, you have ample goods laid up for many years; relax, eat, drink, be merry.'" But God said to him, "You fool! This very night your life is being demanded of you. And the things you have prepared, whose will they be?" So it is with those who store up treasures for themselves but are not rich towards God.'

He said to his disciples, 'Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat, or about your body, what you will wear. For life is more than food, and the body more than clothing. Consider the ravens: they neither sow nor reap, they have neither storehouse nor barn, and yet God feeds them. Of how much more value are you than the birds! And can any of you by worrying add a single hour to your span of life? If then you are not able to do so small a thing as that, why do you worry about the rest? Consider the lilies, how they grow: they neither toil nor spin; yet I tell you, even Solomon in all his glory was not clothed like one of these. But if God so clothes the grass of the field, which is alive today and tomorrow is thrown into the oven, how much more will he clothe you—you of little faith! And do not keep striving for what you are to eat and what you are to drink, and do not keep worrying. For it is the nations of the world that strive after all these things, and your Father knows that you need them.'