

A Sermon for Harvest – Sunday 4th October 2020

Looking back on it now, I had a very privileged child-hood. Maybe many of you did too. Maybe you remember a childhood of long warm summers, walks and cycle rides, perhaps even horse riding. Swimming in pools or a river. Watching farmers bringing in the harvest. Some of you may have lived, worked or helped on farms.

And in churches all over the country, Harvest celebrations taking place. Harvest suppers, barn dances, lunches, pickles, preserves and harvest loaves. What a wonderful time of great abundance, with goods from fields and gardens displayed in complete profusion all over the place.

Many of us feel a great affinity with the season of harvest but maybe it is only those who have sweated in the fields to bring a harvest in, who can really understand the sense of satisfaction at a job completed.

In past times, the celebration of Harvest was as much a sense of relief, as anything else. Relief that drought or disease had not visited the crops. Relief that the hard work of harvest itself had not resulted in injuries to farm workers. Relief that winter was coming, and perhaps a quieter rhythm of life could take over just for a while.

All is very different today. Harvest now takes place every day of the year. For many of us our harvest is a trip to a supermarket, we buy the goods rather than grow them. If plants will not grow in the fields, we grow them in green-houses – resulting in hundreds of square miles of plastic-sheeted fields. If we can't grow them in England, we buy them from other parts of the world where they *will* grow.

Labourers are still needed, but mechanical systems of picking food are taking over, more and more, and no-one tosses hay onto trailers with a pitch fork like they used to. If drought beckons, irrigation systems can, in some parts of the world, compensate.

More to the point, we are no longer a rural society, in the main. Even those who live in the villages and hamlets of England may now be commuters who work in the city.

The word 'Harvest' just doesn't have the resonance that it once had. And yet, at the same time, the world of *nature* has perhaps never been more in our minds than for some years. Many of us turned parts of our gardens this spring and summer into vegetable patches. We grew tomatoes, green beans, courgettes and all manner of fruits and vegetables for the first time or for the first time for many years.

We are far more aware than we were in the 1970s of the interconnected nature of all living things. On our TV screens we witness the destruction of the rain-forests, and the rising of toxic chemicals in our atmosphere. We worry about the death of the bees, and the

arrogance of genetically modified crops. We watch the melting of the glaciers and ice-fields, and we build our heightened sea-walls against the rising of the seas.

Yet, we could say that, even with our renewed interest in growing things, there has never been a time when as a society we have been less *reliant on* the land around us for our food, and yet more *worried* about the earth.

From the 1970s to now we have witnessed a marked shift in the way we think about God's relationship to creation and harvest, too. Every year we hear the words from the hymn 'We plough the fields and scatter', and celebrate that our crops are 'fed and watered by God's almighty hand'. But actually, I doubt that many of us really believe that anymore. We have far more faith in the science of weather-forecasting than we do in the idea that God sends the rain.

My hope and observation, however, is that with the advance of our scientific understanding of creation and the harvest, we are in fact growing up. Beginning to see that we are not children making a wish list of what we want God to do for us and his world but actually learning to take some responsibility for our own actions.

We are moving away from the agricultural God in the sky, who granted the wishes of his farmers, towards the God who is the energy at the centre of all things. Our God is the one who inspires us, his people, to use the gifts and talents we have been given to shape and control our own environments.

Instead of a Father Christmas God, to whom we cry for solutions to our problems, the problems that people have created, we are confronted instead by the God who made the earth and who, gives it to us, his children, with the command that we should 'take care of it'. We know the story of Joseph in Egypt, when they made provision to store up harvests, so that food could be distributed in times of famine. And we are aware that the Laws of the Hebrew Bible dictated that the poor and the widow and the stranger should be cared for out of the stored and tithed bounty of the community.

What have we learned from those times? Have we learned to be careful with what we have? To be thankful? To be wise stewards of all we have been given? Both goods and gifts? We say that 'All good gifts around us are sent from heaven above' but do we really believe that?

This harvest time, let us take time to express our heartfelt gratitude to God, creator and sustainer, to pray for a church which will teach the world of a God who inspires us to take care of creation, to be grateful for what the Lord has provided and to share the bounty we possess for the good of all.

Amen.