

Harvest 2019. 290919

In the Name....

Harvest Thanksgiving is traditionally a time when people join together in Church to thank God for a good harvest, be it wheat, vegetables, beef or even herrings from the sea. The origin of the festival, as we know it today, isn't that distant. If it hadn't been for a Victorian vicar in Cornwall, there probably wouldn't be harvest thanksgivings in any of our churches. The Revd Robert Stephen Hawker, for forty-one years Vicar of Morwenstow on the wild Cornish coast, is said to have initiated the modern Harvest Festival.

However, during the Middle Ages the Church had a harvest festival of its own. It was called Lammas – meaning Loaf Mass. This was held on 1st August, before the harvest had properly started. Each farmer cut one sheaf of corn, and the flour from those sheaves was made into one huge loaf. Everyone went in procession to their village church and the loaf was offered to God as the first results of the coming harvest. Later, when the crops were all safely gathered in, the farmer would throw a big party celebrated with beer and plenty of hullabaloo for all his workmen and their families. But these customs gradually died out and today many people ignore Lammas. Towns were growing bigger and the people who lived there weren't interested in farms or crops. Even in the villages people began to think that the Lammas celebrations weren't very 'proper'

Robert Hawker was acutely aware of the life-and-death importance of the harvest to his parishioners and he was convinced that the germination of the wheat was supernatural. He liked the old customs and, despite criticism from neighbouring clergy who thought him most peculiar, he held a service in 1843 to which everyone was invited to bring their produce as a way of saying thank you to God. And thereafter he urged his parishioners each year to come to church for harvest thanksgiving. And so the idea caught on. Along with the service, the traditional lessons, hymns, and fruity decorations, went a Harvest Supper with an abundant supply of cider and the Vicar singing silly songs to round off the proceedings. Done it myself. People would come from far and wide and there were many harvest-festival enthusiasts who would do the rounds of country churches during the harvest season. Even today, in many people's eyes harvest festival ranks as one of the church's important annual feasts. But how relevant is this historic festival in the 21st century? You only have to go into a Tesco or Sainsbury supermarket to see a wide variety of foods on display – foods from every corner of the world. But today few people actually work or live on a farm. Most people live in complete ignorance about what actually goes on in the farms you see all around you. Most people are probably unable to say whether it's been a good harvest this year, or a bad one. Even though you live in a city within a large agricultural area, you read nothing in the local paper to tell you whether our local farmers are happy or not.

Actually, when I finally rang up the National Farmers' Union last week to get the answer to this question for today's sermon, I was told this year's harvest is been an average one, an average one that's been made harder by increased fuel prices. But that's not the current major issue facing farmers. It's the Common Agricultural Policy, or CAP reform. The new system, introduced a few years ago, aims to move agriculture into a new era of farming practices and economies of scale with traditional methods of animal and crop husbandry set to change dramatically. And all this creates a great deal of uncertainty and stress in the minds of many farmers who'll have to transform their way of life. And of course, we have Brexit now to contend with. And so our focus moves away from the farm, away from the land, away from the fruits of the earth, to more prosaic matters such as Government policy. And we think less about God's bounteous hand in producing a good harvest and more about the European Union and its external trade policies. We take for granted the fertile land around us – what the Old Testament writer called a land “flowing with milk and honey”.

So is Harvest Thanksgiving really very meaningful today and why do we continue this Festival? Well, I was born and brought up in a small village surrounded – then – by farmland and I still find this ceremony a proper and relevant one. I believe the whole point of this occasion is not that we reflect on our agricultural harvest, but that we re-affirm and re-cultivate that Christian virtue of thankfulness. Through the symbolism of Harvest, we remember to give thanks. The purpose of today's celebration is not to wallow in the nostalgia of Robert Hawker's first Harvest Festival. The reason is to pause and say, “Thank you! Thank you for all those good things that have come our way this year.” To pause and think; to pause and thank. Now, thankfulness is an attitude central to Christian belief.. The occasion of the harvest pilgrimage festival is when the worshipper gives thanks for God's generosity – his gift of land which produces food abundantly, a land “flowing with milk and honey”. The great medieval mystic, Meister Eckhardt, once said, *"If the only prayer you ever say in your entire life is thank you, it will be enough."*

It's an easy prayer to memorise. To say, “Thank you”, is simple and straight forward. But if the truth be told, it's a prayer we so often forget. As I was preparing this sermon, I thought about this simple prayer of gratitude and I've been wondering if it's enough. Is it enough simply to feel thankful for one's blessings and to say so? Well, on one level I would say, certainly, it is enough, if it comes from the heart. But on another level I would say, it may be enough, but it's hardly sufficient to fulfill the full meaning of what thanksgiving is all about. Thanksgiving is both an attitude and a response, it's both faith and works.

The writer of the Book of James said, "Faith without works is dead." Likewise, thanks without giving is no thanks at all. Moses instructed the people to take some of the “first fruits” of their land, put them in a basket and offer them to the priest. And St Paul reminds the people at Corinth to sow bountifully, not sparingly. “For,”

he says, “God loves a cheerful giver.” “God is able to provide you with every blessing in abundance, so that you may always have enough of everything, and may provide in abundance for every good work. He scatters abroad, he gives to the poor.” A verse in the Book of Leviticus notes that the ancient Hebrews were told to leave the remnants of their harvest for the poor and the stranger in their midst. Their harvest festival of Succoth, or Sukkot, wasn’t complete if the people of Israel gathered their harvest and kept it all for themselves. Gratitude without sharing was no gratitude at all.

And there’s also the Jewish idea of a Jubilee - when, every fifty years, land is returned to its rightful owners, debts are remitted and slaves are freed. The people of Israel were told to forgive all financial debts and obligations of service to one another, and to allow every citizen to reclaim their land and property free of all debt. The fundamental principle of this fifty-year code is that land is a sacred possession belonging to God. As such, it’s not to be separated from God’s people, to whom it was originally assigned. Imagine what such a practice might do to the real estate market or to the banking industry which relies so heavily on credit card debt and mortgage payments. Our materialistic secular culture elevates getting over giving to an inordinate degree. For instance, when Christmas comes the first thing the children ask one another is, "What did you get?" No one ever thinks to ask, "What did you give?" If you and I can remember that we are celebrating thanks-giving, and not thanks-getting; if we can reclaim the attitude and actions expressed in the ancient Hebrew celebration of Succoth which rejoiced in the harvest and remembered the needs of the poor and the stranger; if we can recapture the Jubilee sentiment of forgiving one another our accumulated debts, then perhaps, and only then, can we honestly say with Meister Eckhardt that a simple prayer of "thank you" honestly expressed in word and in deed, will be enough. In fact, it will be more than enough, abundant and overflowing with grace and love made manifest. And so let’s thank God, for life, thank God for food, family and friends, thank God for the opportunities of living in a rich land flowing with milk and honey, and thank God for being able to express our gratitude in acts of love, sharing and giving. We must avoid being like the little girl at the party who was told by her mother to say thank you for having me. When she arrived home, her mother asked if she had thanked her hostess. The little girl replied, “No, the girl in front of me did and the lady said “Don’t mention it”. So I didn’t”.

In the Name.....Amen