

SEPTEMBER 2 THE HARVEST SERVICE READINGS: GENESIS 8: 22; EXODUS 23: 14-19

Harvest time as we know it and celebrate it in churches today stems from a service of Harvest Thanksgiving instituted by Rev Robert Hawker, the Anglican vicar of the parish at Morwenstowe in Cornwall. Hawker, who was a Cornish patriot and poet, thought that as well as the villagers celebrating the pagan aspects of harvest, they should also give thanks to God in a special church service where they could offer gifts of their own home grown produce to the lord for the benefit of the poor.

But Hawker was only reviving a tradition that had its roots in the Old Testament as far back as the earliest chapters of Genesis when Cain and Abel brought their offerings to the Lord. A little further on in Genesis we read of God's promise to Noah, "Whilst the earth remains, seedtime and harvest, and cold and heat and summer and winter shall not cease." As a token of this promise God set a rainbow against a cloud in the sky.

In the book of Exodus the Lord also gave Moses other laws that the Israelites were commanded to obey. We are told that a ceremony should be held to celebrate the gathering of the first fruits, namely, the first crops produced at the beginning of the year. The first sheaf of the 'Barley harvest' was presented to God on the final day of the Passover festival. In our calendar this would be about the middle of April. Then in autumn was held the feast or festival of 'ingathering' the most popular and joyful of all Jewish festivals. This was held when all the fruit crops had been gathered.

In bygone days people realised that if the harvest was poor there was a strong possibility that they would be very hungry indeed during the coming year. I imagine that it might have been very hard for them to give the first fruits of their labour as an offering to God. I can imagine too the feelings of relief and thankfulness and joy when the harvest was good!

Today in many respects our lives and the food we eat are divorced from where food is grown. Many children do not realise that everyday foods such as cornflakes, rice crispies, chips and chocolate come from what were originally living plants. Until recently people had to work hard physically to get food. Planting, digging and weeding were hard work and often efforts were frustrated by drought or flood, animals or insects that ate them or human enemies who destroyed them. To people of those times growing crops must have convinced the ancient Israelites of the power of God to punish or to bless.

Today, of course, we know that God does not use the forces of his creation to punish. Even today, although we mostly do not notice it, the growing and harvesting of crops still underpins the whole of human activity. Without agriculture we could not live. The agricultural processes are also a picture of our own spiritual growth. During our earthly lives we are growing and developing spiritually as well as naturally. Our individual spiritual crop is the things that we have done for others in the course of our own lives, not for our own benefit but for the sake of others. It is the effort that we have made to become more like the Lord our Creator. Hopefully by the things that we have learnt and the love that we have shown our lives will be like the crop that produces a hundred fold.

May the Lord truly bless our natural harvests and the spiritual harvest of lives well lived.

PRAYER: O Lord, you are the sower of the Word bless us with the good ground of an honest and fruitful heart, that neither weeds nor thorns, the cares of this world nor the deceitfulness of riches may choke the Word and make it unfruitful in our lives. Amen

The celebration of harvest, is I think, one of the loveliest services of the year. This service of celebration and thanksgiving reminds us of the wonders of creation through all our senses. We can see the rainbow colours of fruit and vegetables, feel the texture of peel and skin, smell the distinctive earthiness, taste the sweetness of the fruit, and whilst we can't hear fruit and vegetables, we can enjoy singing the special, evocative, harvest hymns.

The purpose of all living things, whether plants or animals is to multiply and bear offspring. When the purpose is completed, fertility usually declines and the living thing dies. From the smallest bacterium to the largest mammal, from the tiniest flower to the giant redwood, all go through the same cycle of life that nothing living can escape. We ourselves are the only exception, for as the Writings of our church tell us 'The Lord's Providence has as its creation a heaven of angels from the human race.'

Alone amongst creation, human beings have the ability to bear two sorts of fruits or offspring - natural offspring, the fruit of our bodies in our children and grandchildren, and also spiritual fruit or the actions and deeds that we do in the course of our lives. Sometimes we use the phrase 'Fruits of our labours' to describe the things that we have accomplished.

In the Word of the Lord a human being is frequently compared to a plant. In Psalm 1 a good person is compared to a tree planted by a river that bears fruit at the appropriate time. Where does a tree come from? –obviously from the seed of a more mature tree. At this time of year the seasonal cycle of a year in the life of a tree is entering its autumnal phase. Foliage and flowers have grown in spring and early summer; pollination has taken place and the ovaries of the flowers have swollen to become fruit. What does a tree need to make it a successful fruit bearer? It needs to become established with strong roots within the soil; the trunk needs to have produced branches to bear leaves which feed and oxygenate the plant; and it needs to produce buds that grow into flowers.

To enable this process to take place successfully the tree needs plenty of water, fertile soil, light and space. It might also need pruning and trimming and preventative measures to guard it from moths and aphids and other pests.

The growth of a tree is a picture of the growth of our own spiritual lives. The seeds in us are the ideas and suggestions that are planted in the soil or ground of our minds. In the "parable of the sower" related by the Lord we hear what happens to some of these seeds. Ideas might die or get swallowed up but some ideas always take root and flourish in receptive parts of our minds.

Spiritually speaking we may have an intention to do something good and useful; we might need to study an idea and to think about it before we can put it into practice. With many of the ideas and principles of life we need to develop a certain maturity before we finally develop our lives in accordance with heavenly principles. When our knowledge and principles have become strong then eventually we grow to delight in them and to feel happy with them and this is the flowering stage. The culmination of knowledge and love in our lives produces beautiful fruit in the form of uses that we do for others. Of course if our principles and thoughts are hellish the resulting crop is thistles, thorns and weeds. The tree of our life is evident from the things that we do with our lives and the way in which we live them.

It is the Lord's purpose that one day we will all become angels but the development of our heavenly nature is an ongoing work. Sometimes if we examine our life tree we might see that it

requires watering, a little more food or maybe a drastic pruning of the unsatisfactory parts. At this harvest time let us think about the harvest crop which is our own life. May it be colourful, useful and bring joy to others. AMEN

PRAYER: O Lord you give us all good things. Give us thankful hearts. Amen

SEPTEMBER 16

THE BREAD OF LIFE

JOHN 6:29 -35 and 47-51; AC 3478

It doesn't stand out in the supermarket as the leading offer for the week. You don't see it stacked up in the 'two for the price of one displays.' It's not heavily promoted on television. It's not presented in elaborate packaging. It's a humble everyday product that most of us pick up and put into a basket or trolley without even thinking about.

It is your average sliced or unsliced loaf, brown or white - nothing fancy - but stick it in a toaster and it provides a quick hot meal - with marmalade or honey or even scrambled eggs for breakfast or baked beans or sardines or cheese for a quick snack. Eat it as it is with just butter, or sandwich two slices together with every type of filling you fancy. Go to an Indian restaurant and use the naan bread to mop up your curry, go Italian and have it hot with garlic butter, or Mexican and stuff it with chilli beans and mince. Wherever you go in the world, bread of some kind is a basic or staple food – a cheap, nutritious filling food. There is still the odd street corner bakery with delicious smells of home baked bread! The wonderful taste of freshly made bread – something that we miss when we eat factory made bread.

Bread is one of the earliest foods known to man. It is sometimes called the staff of life because in times past it was often the main or only food, and the lives of whole communities depended on a successful grain harvest. In Biblical times two kinds of cereal plants were used to make bread, either barley which made quite a coarse sort of bread and was usually eaten by poorer people, or wheat which made much finer bread and was eaten by better off people. Making the bread, even after the crop was sown, grown and harvested was a long process requiring great effort. After the corn was harvested it had to be threshed and winnowed to separate the grains from their outer covering and sifted to remove stalks, before being crushed or ground between large stones to make flour - usually the woman's job.

All people in Biblical times were familiar with making bread and instead of taking it for granted as we do today knew just how important it was. To get a worthwhile crop of corn you have to grow the cereals en-masse. The stalks, growing closely together, protect and shield the individual plants as they grow. The resulting grain is small and hard – quite unlike the fruits that grow on bushes and trees which tend to be sweet and juicy. Yet these small, hard, unexciting grains become food that fills and makes us feel warm and satisfied – rather than the more spectacular and easily-picked fruits. Our daily lives are not made up of spectacular things. It is the everyday acts, the routine things of life that give us satisfaction. It is the sum of many small things that make us the people we are. The small acts of kindness or things that we feel we ought to do and don't relish doing, but which nevertheless we carry out faithfully and well - such tasks as caring for others. We show our love for others in the way in which we live our lives.

In our reading from John's gospel the Lord compares himself to bread. Just as he literally fed crowds of people so he feeds us spiritually in the sacrament and throughout his Word. The food which he gives to us through the teachings in his Word sustains us, satisfies us and nourishes us. Truly the Lord himself is the living bread that comes down to us from heaven and gives life to the world.

PRAYER: Dear Lord, you are the true Bread of Life. We ask you to feed our souls with your heavenly bread and nourish us with your love. Amen

SEPTEMBER 23 SEEDS GENESIS 8:20-22; and 9: 1-3; LUKE 8:4-15; AC 932

Almost as soon as we have celebrated harvest autumn is upon us and the green and gold of summer is replaced by the brown, orange and russet as leaves change colour and fall to the ground along with any remaining fruits. The conkers that children collect are the potential chestnut trees; the spinning jennies that seem to land everywhere are the potential sycamore trees; the hips and haws on bushes are potential roses and hawthorns, and the blackberries, as well as providing fruit for the jam that I often make, are the potential bramble bushes.

We often use the analogy of seeds in our everyday lives. We might talk about 'sowing an idea' when we make a suggestion. When we talk about having 'the germ of an idea' the word germ is shorthand for germinate not for the viral influenza.

Repeatedly in the Word of the Lord the cyclic nature of seedtime followed by harvest is stressed. The promise to Noah in the book of Genesis 'Whilst the earth remains, seedtime and harvest, cold and heat, summer and winter shall not cease.' This promise is the basis of life in this world. It reminds us that there is always a new beginning but that beginning comes from what has gone before.

Every person in this world, whether they realise it or not, is constantly the recipient of the seeds of love and truth from the Lord. Every act of goodness done in the world, whether the individual acknowledges it or not, is a result of the initial sowing done by the Lord.

Each one of us receives seed from the Lord in many different ways. If we consider the seeds that are sown through the world of nature, the numbers that never even come to fruition are mind-blowing. In the same way so many spiritual seeds never come to fruition but the supply is infinitely on-going.

In the parable of the sower we can see some of the reasons why the seeds in our minds do not grow, perhaps our minds might have stony places with little soil for nurturing ideas to take root. Other seeds are like sudden enthusiasms and ideas which start off brilliantly but the enthusiasm wears off and the idea and interest withers and dies. Some seed falls by the wayside of our lives and becomes prey to the first birds of falsity and is eaten. Yet amazingly some seed always grows in our hearts and minds for we have all been blessed with some good soil and if we cherish the seeds of goodness and truth in our lives we too will have harvests. What will our harvests be –the joy of inner peace that we have from trying to love the Lord and from trying to live a life of loving and serving others? It is ultimately the spiritual things within us that will grow to eternity.

SEPTEMBER 30 QUESTIONS GENESIS 1: 24-31

This talk is suitable for a family gathering with young children

Do you ask a lot of questions? Not questions like 'What's for tea mum?' or 'Can I have my pocket money early?' but questions that your mum and dad might find difficult to answer.

In the summer I went on a family holiday in the Yorkshire Dales. My five year old granddaughter asked me, 'Grandma why does milk come out white from cows when the grass they eat is green?' Well I'd no idea about that answer so I just said, 'Pass.'

Then a bee came along-just a bit too near my grandson for his liking. He brushed it away crossly and asked, 'Why did God make bees when they're no use to anyone and a nuisance to everyone.'

Now that was a question I thought I could answer. 'God made bees because they are very useful. People would have a lot of trouble finding food if we didn't have bees. As they fly into flowers looking for nectar to take back to their hive they accidentally pick up pollen from one plant and transfer it to another.'

I couldn't remember how the next bit worked because it's a long time since I was at school. But I did know that flowers can't produce seeds without bees pollinating them. So no bees, no fruit, no seeds, no new plants, no fruit, no vegetables! 'I guess God designed and made bees as part of this wonderful world where we all depend on one another and where everything has a use,' I concluded.

Answering questions can be stressful for grown-ups but then I had a good idea, 'Let's go to an ice cream farm!' 'You're kidding, grandma!'

But I wasn't! There is an ice-cream farm. They keep lovely Jersey cows and turn their milk into the most delicious ice cream! There's a fantastic ice cream bar with loads of different flavours, and a counter with high stools where you can enjoy ice cream with pancakes and waffles.

'What would you like madam?' Now that's a question I have no problem answering!

So from bees to grass, to cows, to milk, to ice cream – it's all a part of the wonderful pattern of creation where we are all interdependent.

Here's what the Word of the Lord says in **Genesis 1: 30-31** *To every beast of the earth and every bird of the air and to everything that creeps on the earth, where there is the breath of life, I have given every green plant for food. And it was so. And God saw everything that he had made and it was very good.*

A POEM PRAYER:

The harvests have ripened in the sun. There's plenty of food for everyone.

There's some for ourselves and more to share with all of God's people everywhere.

WORD MAKING: HOW MANY WORDS CAN YOU MAKE OUT OF HARVEST? I CAN MAKE 20 OF 3 OR MORE LETTERS. CAN YOU MAKE A 6 LETTER WORD THAT HAPPENS TO SOME PEOPLE IF THEIR HARVEST IS POOR?