

HARVEST THANKSGIVING – OCTOBER 7th 2018

I Timothy 6:6-10

Matthew 6:25-33

When I was a girl, my dad used to have a pretty good-sized vegetable garden at the back of our house. With four children to feed, filling us up with home-grown veg was pretty much a necessity to eke out the housekeeping money every month. On the day before Harvest Festival every year, Dad would go out into the back garden and dig up parsnips, carrots, beetroot and onions, and bring them in for us to wash and put into four plastic bags – one each – to take to church the next morning.

And the church was decorated with all sorts of fresh produce and we would have all the traditional harvest hymns, just like we have here today. In fact, I should think “We plough the fields and scatter” was one of the first hymns I knew by heart. So my childhood impression of God was of someone of generosity and goodwill, able and willing to provide for us bountifully. And I suppose that view has probably underpinned my understanding of God to some extent ever since.

In the Old Testament book of Deuteronomy, we see the regulations laid out for a “first fruits” ceremony which sounds an awful lot like our harvest thanksgiving now. So it’s easy to imagine that this was how it all started and had been passed on through church history ever since.

Well, not quite.

In fact, the first Harvest Festival in this country was held as late as 1843 and all the ‘traditional’ harvest hymns date from after that, so it’s not as old as perhaps we thought. There had been pagan harvest ceremonies back in Saxon times, but no formal thanksgiving for harvest in the Christian era as far as we know.

So what caused the Harvest Festival to come about in the 1800s? The answer to that lies in a little village called Morwenstow, in north Cornwall, just up the coast from Bude. The vicar there from 1834 until his death in 1875 was one Robert Stephen Hawker – quite an eccentric character and a well-known priest in his time as well as a poet.

In September 1843 Hawker pinned a notice on the church door, inviting his parishioners to come to a special service of thanksgiving for the first corn. What has always intrigued me is what motivated him to do it that particular year, and why the Harvest Festival took off across the country from this rather remote corner of Cornwall. Maybe the harvests were particularly good and it was a time of plenty... Well, actually, no – when Hawker first arrived at Morwenstow nine years earlier, the parish was so run-down that there had not been a vicar there for over a century. The farmers and agricultural workers round about were virtually destitute. In fact, at the start of his ministry there, Hawker was gently suggesting to them that they might be best to consider emigrating.

So the first Harvest Festival was born in a period of want, not in a period of surplus. And, within a matter of years, thousands of starving Irish immigrants were arriving in this country because of the Potato Famine. For people who worked the land, these were hard times, not plenteous ones.

Like some of you, my parents were of the generation who lived through the rationing of the war years, and as children they told us early on about times when there was barely enough to eat, and the rather strange combinations of food that could be rustled up into a meal. But that experience will have passed out of living memory in the next few decades, and, let's face it, many of us are no longer used to going without anything much.

Conversely, more and more people in the UK struggle to buy sufficient food. We know from the news how much the reliance on foodbanks has increased over recent years and the Dean highlighted just a few weeks ago the number of people in this city who live in poverty. If you can't afford much, it's very difficult to get a good quality diet with enough fresh fruit and vegetables. Cheaper food tends to be laden with fat and sugar which does little to help people's health in the long term. So the picture of food provision in this country is very mixed.

Who knows what the next few months will bring as Brexit becomes a reality? Speculation is rife about the potential increase in food costs, the lack of choice that we enjoy now and even whether we will face major food shortages. The ingenuity our older generations developed in the war years may yet serve us well if any of that comes about.

What's certain is that, as we leave the EU, we in the UK will have to take sole responsibility for our own moral compass as far as food production goes. That should mean building into every new free trade agreement safeguards concerning human and animal wellbeing right down the food chain. Opinion polls suggest most of us don't fancy eating chlorinated chicken or genetically-modified beef because we are worried about the impact it might have on our health. But are we as concerned about the ethical production of our food if it just comes down to price sensitivity? There is a danger that everything will become focussed on lowest price, regardless of how that is achieved. Yet morally-speaking we cannot afford to become immune to the real cost of producing our food, nor to the plight of others who have little or nothing.

In our second reading today, we are given a dire warning about becoming too attached to our money – in fact, the author calls it the 'root of all (kinds of) evil'. We cling to what we have and hold it ever more tightly in our fists at our own peril, because ultimately that attitude will determine everything we do and will remove us further and further from God and his intentions for us.

On the other hand, our Gospel reading assures us that we are not to worry because God will always provide for us somehow. That may be easy for us to understand, because we don't want for much, but what about others in the world? How do you read that passage if you live in a war zone or somewhere where the crops have completely failed?

The world has the capacity to support everyone – that is the way God has created our global eco-system – but we in the ‘first world’ countries have got used to being greedy and having more than our fair share. We could feed everyone on this planet adequately if we wanted to, but those of us who hold the power and the purse-strings choose not to do it.

As the gathered Christian community here today, hopefully we already realise that one of God’s ways of providing for other people is by relying on us to be generous and share what he has already given. So if we are to be part of his solution to the difficulties faced by those who have nothing, what are we going to do about it? To turn our backs is simply unacceptable.

If that seems a problem too vast for us to solve, I suggest we can all take small steps towards it. The generous donations we have brought today are one of those. But what else can we do week by week to make a difference?

Next time you do your food shopping, if you can afford to (and only if you can afford to) I challenge you to do one thing sacrificially – by that, I mean it costs you enough that you think ‘ouch’ as you spend it. For some of us that might be an extra 50p, for some of us it might be a fiver or even more than that.

You could buy something extra to donate to someone who hasn’t got much – someone you know or a collection for a foodbank or a charity.

Or you could choose not to buy your normal tea or coffee but to buy some Fairtrade instead.

That way, you’re paying a fair price for the tea or coffee being produced in poorer countries around the world and you will know that the money is going back to them and their communities rather than to global corporations.

Each of us doing one little thing every week is all it takes. It may be one small step, but that sustained awareness starts to pave the way to balancing things out, so we have our fair share and other people around us and across the world have a chance of a decent life too.

As we celebrate harvest thanksgiving today, God’s generosity should encourage all of us to respond for the good of others less fortunate than ourselves. What are we - as individuals or collectively - going to do to play our part? How can we modify our attitude to what God has given us, to become more caring and sharing? And how can we model that behaviour to others around us who don’t yet understand that moral responsibility?