

Homily for Harvest 2024



Texts: Genesis 1: 11-13, 8:22, Matthew 6: 25-33

Acknowledging the good that you already have in your life is the foundation for all abundance.

Meister Eckhart

I can no other answer make but thanks, but thanks and thanks and ever thanks. Shakespeare

Being of a curious nature I thought I would look up the origin of the word harvest to discover that it comes from Old and Middle English and was understood primarily to be the name of one of the four seasons and it was only in the mid thirteenth century that it came to be understood and hence firmly established as meaning the time for the gathering of crops while the word autumn replaced it to denote the season itself. And now a question for you when was the custom of holding Harvest Festival Services first begun? The answer is, perhaps surprisingly, not until 1843 when the Reverend Robert Walker, the vicar of Morwenstow in Cornwall introduced to his parish such a service with special hymns giving thanks for the harvest, thanks for the bounty of the fields and orchards and all God's goodness in Creation. An innovation which quickly caught on in the ritual of the church's year which has led to the delight of beautifully decorated churches filled with flowers, fruit and vegetables and some wonderful harvest hymns being written and composed such as we are enjoying today.

But of course, the annual custom of celebrating the time of harvest goes way back into antiquity and Jesus would certainly have celebrated the annual Festival of the Booths or Sukkot as it was known which was a week-long celebration held at the end of harvesting. Even today at the time of Sukkot observant Jews continue the custom of building a little booth, a shelter of impermanent material and having their meals in it as a reminder that nothing in this world is

permanent and fully secure and that we do always need especially as it were in the poor harvests of life to depend on the harvest of blessings that God even in the leanest times gives us so abundantly..

But to return now to harvest customs observed in this country, a little research revealed a multitude of quaint practices associated with harvest including the making of corn dollies and the feasting at churn suppers so called because of the large jug of cream which was often provided, no cholesterol worries then ultimately led me on to the delightful fact that in Cornwall as one of the reapers cut the last sheaf of corn with a scythe he would hold it aloft and shout 'I have 'un, I have 'un, I have 'un. To which his fellow workers would reply 'What 'ave 'ee? What 'ave 'ee? What 'ave 'ee? To which apparently the reply was 'A neck! A neck! A neck! And then everyone shouted 'Hurrah, hurrah for the neck!'

And while Harvest Festival services are a fairly recent innovation Harvest Home has also been celebrated from antiquity. The safe bringing in of a good and plentiful harvest to ensure enough food for the coming winter months was quite definitely a cause for celebration involving much feasting, singing and dancing. And it is I think quite hard for us to properly appreciate just how crucial a successful harvest was to the well-being of the local community and history is full of the sufferings caused by a poor harvest and it was not for nothing that the 1840s were known as the 'Hungry Forties' which resulted in starvation and destitution for many not just here but right across Europe. We are so blessed here with our supermarket shelves stocked high with food very little if any of which is actually locally produced but I do wonder if we really take time to appreciate how blessed we are. We are certainly very quick to panic if for any reason there is some sort of shortage real or threatened as happened at the outbreak of Covid. Possibly we were aware when, earlier this year, there was a shortage of eggs because of bird flu or we have noted the escalating price of olive oil because of the vulnerability of olive groves to changing climate conditions. But let us be honest with ourselves we may grumble at such shortages or rising prices but all of us here know there will be food on our table, in our cupboards and our freezers when we go home. That is not true of so many millions around the world nor has it been true for our grandparents and even parents who will have known all the food shortages of the Second World War and of being subject to rationing.

There is in my mind absolutely no doubt that we are incredibly and bountifully blessed and that is why I think that this Harvest Festival Service should have at its heart thankfulness to the Lord our God, the Creator for all his uncountable blessings he pours out upon us. We have

already sung that wonderful hymn ‘Now thank we all our God with hearts and hands and voices’ which expresses so well the overwhelming sense of gratitude we should surely all feel as we recognise all God has done for us and the profusion of foods, the beauty of flowers, the majesty of trees and the glorious panorama of the surrounding Surrey Hills all of which he has provided for our delight and our joy.

Giving true and heartfelt thanks to God is surely something we should **never** neglect to do however bad, however impoverished, however starved of joys and delights our life might appear at times. Look at the psalms and they are full of praise and thanks despite the woes and troubles that can beset the psalmist just as they do us. For example, psalm seventy-nine begins: ‘O God, the nations have come into your inheritance: they have defiled your holy temple they have laid Jerusalem in ruins.’ And it goes on in this vein begging for deliverance and retribution on their enemies until it ends: ‘Then we your people, the flock of your pasture, will give thanks to you for ever; from generation to generation, we will praise you.’ And that is surely what we are called to do today to continue to give thanks in **all** circumstances, no matter how hard, for the harvest, the gathering in of the good things of God’s creation just as generation upon generation has done before us be it at a church service or a harvest home or simply in the quiet of their own homes as they looked at store cupboards whose contents would ensure they would not starve over the coming months. So let us add our thanks to the thanks of all those who have celebrated the gathering in of the harvest in this church and this parish and in so doing find the truth of Meister Eckhart’s words that: ‘Acknowledging the good that you already have in your life is the foundation for all abundance.’ And in seeing the wonders of God’s creation around us not just today but every day echo the words of Shakespeare: ‘I can no other answer make but thanks, but thanks and thanks and ever thanks.

A Cornish Thank You. By Pat Robson

For silver fish to fill our nets, for corn to make our bread,

For milk and cream, to brim the churn, for tin and clay and lead,

For sunshine, flowers and fields of hay, for shimmering seas of blue,

For laughing children neath our skies, our thanks, O Lord, to you!