Harvest Sermon 2021 by Rev’d Graham Earney

1 Timothy 6.6-10

Matthew 6.25-33

I believe that one of the aims of the sermon should be to inform its hearers of something new – or at least to make them think in new ways about a familiar thing. That would appear to be a perennial problem about harvest. Everyone thinks they know all about it. Traditionally it was about the produce raised in the parish – its farms and its gardens – epitomised in the phrase “all is safely gathered in”.

Today we have got used to getting produce from all round the world – despite the ‘air miles’ involved. What was thought of as seasonal is now available twelve months of the year. As we get more serious about climate change this is a state of affairs which we will need to change. The fruits of the earth in their due season may need to be our watchword once more!

In the meanwhile it might to be good to learn a little of the native produce from other parts of the world. Recently I had personal experience of this. Before lockdown ended we went to B&Q for some things. Not wanting to stay long I grabbed a pack of carrot seeds off of the display – the packet clearly showed lovely long slender carrot shaped produce! Once home I went to plant the seeds, but they didn’t look like carrot seeds – more like radishes! Then I looked more closely at the packet to find that they were a variety of radish. My son in the USA tells me they are from south-east Asia and are considered a spicy delicacy there. I await their maturing so that they can be sampled.

But we don’t have to go that far to find vegetable ‘stars’ of the show, or different traditions about harvest. Here are a couple of examples:

In rural Northumberland I was introduced to the Leek Club Show – the high point of the harvest season. Most years there were lots of other flowers and vegetables – one year hard frosts in late June killed everything but Leeks and Onions! But the ‘not so humble’ leek was the centre point every year. Every gardener had his leek trench in which he attempted to grow the biggest leeks within the rules. The rules were strict [*present leek*]; a ‘stand’ for the show comprised two, as near identical, leeks as possible. Size was computed from the circumference and the distance between the root and the button (where the lowest leaf ended). Anything bigger than 6 inches from root to button was disqualified. The judges docked marks for bad presentation or split ‘flags’.

The rewards were great – even in a small rural village back in the 1970s first prize equated to a high value washing machine or cooker. The best I managed was to come 22nd. The voucher I won was enough to buy a 6 piece cooking set, one piece of which we still had when we came to Pulverbatch 35 years later!

Looking back I realise that nothing was wasted. After the show the produce was sold in aid of the local hospital. One person said the leek they bought would give them enough leek soup to see their family through the winter. In its way everything was re-used or recycled.

Around this was arranged the various harvest services. On the Thursday evening we had a combined service followed by a supper. On the next Sunday the Anglicans, the URCs and the Methodists had their own services with produce distributed to those in need. Things not suitable for gifts were sold to the benefit of local charities.

When we moved to Somerset I was introduced to the concept of “The Harvest Home”. These were whole community events. The one I best remember took place in three small villages in north-west Somerset. It began with standing room only for the service in church at which I had been asked to preach – moved on a huge lunch in an even larger marquee next to the village hall – speeches and presentations – a small fairground for the children – games – a dance and cabaret – and a national comedian to round things off in the evening. It is the only time I can claim to have started things off on a ‘bill’ that finished twelve hours later with the comedian Frank Carson!

There may be some of you saying by now that this is not the harvest sermon you were expecting. Perhaps not, but it is the sermon the church should be hearing. In his letter in this month’s magazine the bishop of Hereford encourages us to re-imagine what the church is and what it should be doing. What we have been doing over the last month, by thinking about climate change and the need to recycle and repair, I believe to be part of that re-imagining. I fear that in recent years the church has withdrawn into itself. It has forgotten it is, in Christ’s name, the servant of the community within which it resides. We can’t leave these things we have tried this year as a ‘one off’ – let’s be bolder next year and involve farmers and the community more in what we are attempting.

So, what should be the ‘watchwords’ of what we attempt. The clues are in the readings set for this year. We should re-align our thinking from “what we want” to “what we need”. We should live in the now and not be so anxious about what is going to happen tomorrow. We should live more simply to release resources to enable others, in different parts of the world, to simply live.

Think repair rather than replace. It really doesn’t matter if other people see us in the same clothes (suitably washed) as they saw us in the last time we met! Do we really need to keep present levels of food stuffs in the cupboards? Shouldn’t we be thinking of alternative power sources to gas powered central heating? We need to learn to live in godly contentment rather than strive for more money and more possessions.

Harvest is a time for giving thanks for all the bounty we have received from God’s earth. But in future harvest festivals we may have to retune our praise to reflect the changing time of the age. As more farmers move from ploughing to direct drilling the next crop to reduce their carbon footprint we may need to rewrite “We plough the fields and scatter …” – now that would be considered radical!

We need to remember we are not the Lords of creation. We are, for a short span, its custodians and conservators. Harvest is about being thankful for what we have received. It should also be about being thankful and respectful for what we are handing on to future generations. God, we pray that you give us the strength to pass it on to our children’s children in a better state than we have it now.

Rev’d Graham Earney