

Harvest Festival

A sermon preached by the Rector, the Very Reverend Tim Barker, at the parish church of St Andrew Guernsey on Sunday 2 October 2022

Readings: Deuteronomy 26 vv 1-11 and John 6 vv 25-35

Later this month, I will be preaching at a service in the Town Church during which the standards of the Royal British Legion and the Guernsey Fire and Rescue Service will be laid up. I will then have the privilege of dedicating new standards.

Weaving the interests of the two organisations presents some challenges. So a visit to the National Museum of Serbia in Belgrade during our holiday was helpful. There was an excellent timeline of human history from the earliest days through to the present. The explanation of how our earliest ancestors moved from being nomadic hunters to settled communities, where cultivation of crops became possible was familiar. But what struck me in a new way was a simple statement about the transforming effect of the discovery of fire, and how to use it, on early human experience.

The harnessing of fire, to keep ourselves warm, and to cook food, dates back many hundreds of thousands of years. There is archaeological evidence of wood ash. The ability to create and control fire was of the most profound importance. Without fire, there would be no point in the development of the glorious complexity of agriculture. It is a defining feature of our being human. As is our ability of complex reasoning, our use of sophisticated language, our ability to solve difficult problems, and introspection - describing our thoughts and feelings.

It is a uniquely human characteristic to value how our well-being is linked to that of others. It is a uniquely human characteristic to be grateful, especially when we see the cornucopia of gracious gift that is the underserved experience of so many of us. We live in a land, literally and metaphorically, flowing with milk and honey, as we read in the beautiful passage from Deuteronomy in the Old Testament. As we celebrate the bounty which is our privilege and our experience, we cannot but be grateful and thankful.

We give thanks today for the harvest. We thank God for the farmers and growers. We pray for them as they continue to produce the food we need to stay alive. We pray for a growing understanding of how farming can be both profitable and sustainable, without excessive use of chemicals which pollute and damage the environment.

In the collect today, the prayer which sets the theme and the tone of our worship on a particular Sunday, we prayed that we might use the fruits of the earth to God's glory, for the relief of those in need and for our own well-being. The order is deliberate.

In the prayer after Communion, we will take this a stage further. We are reminded that our sharing in the bread and the wine of Communion is a foretaste, a promise, of the feast of heaven which, please God, we will all enjoy one day. The bread is made of the wheat grown in our fields. The wine is made from the grapes growing on the hillsides. These are symbols which Jesus has given to us as signs of the promise of heaven. In Jesus' words, which we heard in the gospel reading, 'My Father gives you the true bread from heaven. For the bread of God is that which comes down from heaven and gives life to the world.'

Those who heard Jesus says these words were captivated. 'Sir,' they said, 'give us this bread always.' Jesus' response is this: 'I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never be hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty.'

This is a gracious gift. But it is one that demands and requires a response, if we are to demonstrate that we have understood the value and significance of that gift. St Paul offers us a pattern of life in his letter to the Philippians, urging us to embrace and love 'whatever is true, whatever is honourable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is pleasing, whatever is commendable'.

Whilst this might at first seem to be simply an encouragement to the highest standards of personal morality and behaviour, it is this - and it is more. The prayer after Communion continues with our prayer that God, by his grace, will 'plant within us a reverence for all that [he gives] us and make us generous and wise stewards of all the good things that we enjoy.'

Harvest festival is our response to God's goodness and a reminder of both the value and the fragility of human life. Harvest festival is also thanksgiving for what we have and an opportunity to commit ourselves to do what we can, in small but still significant ways, to ensure that there will be many harvests to come - and that the harvests will benefit not just the comfortable people but all God's people.