

ANGLICAN CHAPLAINCY OF ALL SAINTS' MARSEILLE
WITH AIX-EN-PROVENCE AND THE LUBERON
Reflection – Harvest Thanksgiving – 9th October 2022

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Celebrating the safe gathering in of the year's crops is ages old, with a good harvest signifying plenty for the year ahead, and a poor harvest meaning people would go hungry. It's perhaps something that city dwellers find something of an anachronism, but this year, with the war in Ukraine stopping the export of wheat from the world's biggest producer, perhaps even the most urban are realising just where their food comes from and how important the farming industry is.

Traditionally, in Britain, Harvest Festival was held on the 1st of August, at the beginning of the harvest and was called Lammas, or loaf harvest, after the special loaves baked from the first corn and used for communion. Farmers would lay on a lavish supper at the end of the harvest to thank the workers, for they would recruit anyone who could help, from reapers to stackers. Old school attendance records show that many of the children in farming areas were absent from classes at harvest time. Leftover corn would be left in the field for the poor to glean, to see them through the winter.

In rural areas today, churches are decorated with flowers and garden produce and in a benefice or chaplaincy like ours, harvest will be celebrated in each church on different Sundays. This relatively modern tradition began in 1843, in Morwenstow in Cornwall, when the Revd Robert Hawker held a special thanksgiving service at his church. Victorian hymns like Come, ye Thankful People Come, and All things Bright and Beautiful, along with Dutch and German hymns like We Plough the Fields and Scatter became popular and decorating the church became a much loved ritual. As did the supper afterwards in the church hall, with a distribution of the goods given to those who needed them, or in wealthier parishes, raffled off and the money given to charity. Here in our own chaplaincy we are delivering our

offerings to the local Restos du Coeur, and in Manosque next Sunday, we are having our own Harvest Supper after the service. (Everyone welcome!)

In our last parish, deep in rural Northamptonshire, Harvest Festival brought one of the few rare sightings of the local farmers in church, looking most uncomfortable in their good suits and ties. They even produced old farming implements, wooden ploughs and scythes, to decorate the ancient church and a big sheaf of corn.

But one year we had a locum priest who had ministered in Coventry, where there were no farms, but a lot of heavy engineering. His church would be “decorated” not with flowers, fruit and vegetables, but with Rolls Royce engines, as people gave thanks for the fruit of their labours in heavy engineering and the like. And we too changed our decorations – models of lorries to reflect the transport industry, laptops to represent office work amongst the apples and marrows, and so on. In towns and cities there’s a growing emphasis on thanking God for all our labour and productivity in all forms of work, plus a growing awareness of and concern for people less fortunate than ourselves, people who are still reliant on a good harvest and for whom drought and disaster don’t mean inconvenience and less Weetabix in the supermarket, but disaster and famine.

This year in particular, has brought a new emphasis to us all. Just as we thought we were coming out of the Covid pandemic, we were hit by something we probably all fervently wished we would never see – war in Europe, as Russia invaded Ukraine. Sanctions on Russia were brought in by America and the West, and prices of fuel and goods in the shops soared. Economic warfare has ensued, and it is the poorest who suffer the most. If that weren’t enough, we have had one of the hottest driest summers on record in Europe, with devastating consequences. Farmers and gardeners have had to watch their crops wither and die. Animals have had little to no grazing, even up in the mountains due to a lack of rain. Fires have broken out, devastating vast swathes of woodland. In other areas of the world such as Pakistan, they have had widespread flooding, with no sign of the waters receding for another 2 or 3 months, decimating their crops.

It's tempting to look at Jesus's words in John's Gospel telling us not to look for food which perishes but for the food of eternal life from God as easier said than done. Hunger, physical hunger, is all too real. But perhaps Jesus isn't talking to the starving, he's talking to those who have enough and some to spare. It's they who

have the ability to not only assuage the hunger of those without food, but at the same time build up their store of good deeds which will be recognised by God. By sharing what we have with those who have so much less, we are doing God's work.

Harvest is a time of thanksgiving – literally to give thanks to God for his generosity. It's something the early settlers took to America, when they give thanks on Thanksgiving Day, for safe passage and finding food at the other end. Those first settlers founded the most powerful nation on earth. But they also founded one where there is a huge gap between the very rich and the very poor.

Here in Europe, we have sophisticated economies which have provision for the poor and the jobless. It's easy to say that's all sorted out and we don't need to worry about it. But we too have children who are malnourished, families with nowhere to go, homeless people living on the streets, penniless migrants. It was heart-warming to see the welcome given to Ukrainian refugees as people stood in line to offer clothes, food and accommodation to people fleeing their home country with what they stood up in. It is amazing what people can do as individuals, to make a difference to some-one else. We may not be able to solve world poverty on our own, but we can solve another person's needs.

At Christmas we have a Bishops appeal for a nominated charity. But perhaps it's at Harvest that we as a church, as a chaplaincy, should be looking at what we give to others to help them in a harsh world. As we give thanks for all that God has given us, not only for our families, friends, jobs and income, homes, fresh clean water and plenty of food around in the shops, it's sobering to realise that all that we take for granted isn't something that others have. To them it's just a dream.

There is enough and more in the world to go around. But it's not evenly distributed and that's where we all have a role to play. If we want to look forward to the food for eternal life, we need to start shopping for it now, before it's too late. Collectively, we have the power to stop the pollution of the world, to stop our oceans being filled with plastic, to stop cutting down the trees and digging up the peat bogs that are the lungs of this planet, to grow healthy food without chemicals, to bring clean water to those without it, to raise animals for food outside on clean pasture, to put right the damage we have done resulting in floods and droughts. If we all do our bit in our own backyard, it adds up. No, we can't do it on our own. My glut of tomatoes won't stop world poverty. But I can give them away to people

without gardens, with big families and not much money. I can make them into chutney and sell them at the Christmas Fair for charity. Every little helps.

When we have to answer to God, will we have an answer to the questions about our own harvest – “what help did you give to others? When did you feed the hungry, clothe the poor, house the homeless, give water to the thirsty? When did you use the gifts and abilities given to you to help others?”. Let's stop meaning to do it and as a former colleague of mine used to say, “Do it now!”