

## **5<sup>th</sup> October 2025, Harvest Eucharist**

### **16<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Trinity**

*Deuteronomy 26:1-11; Psalm 100; Revelation 14: 14-18; John 6:25-35*

This morning we come together to say thank you. This is the day when we celebrate the abundance of food grown on the land and we give thanks to God for the harvest. Harvest has been observed since pre-Christian times when Lammas, or Loaf-Mass was celebrated at the beginning of the harvest season and included the making of loaves of bread and the participation in community meals. In all societies, from earliest days, there has been a desire to give thanks for the safe harvesting of crops, and different rituals have emerged – like the making of corn dollies from the last blades of corn. They were kept safe until the next seed-sowing when the ears were ploughed back into the soil as a blessing on the new crop – an early awareness of the life and death cycle, that out of every ending there is a new beginning.

Churches did not at first include harvest festivals within the liturgical year. Christmas, Easter and Whitsun were all there, but not the harvest. Until a wonderfully eccentric cleric in Cornwall, the Revd Robert Hawker, invited his parishioners to a special thanksgiving service in 1843. I like to think that this might have been a thoroughly cheerful event; Mr Hawker was described as colourful, never wearing black except for his socks. He had a pet pig and 9 cats, one of which he excommunicated for catching mice on a Sunday.... Such eccentricities delight me, and I think I would have enjoyed his harvest festival very much more than that held in Norfolk 11 years later by the Revd Dr William Beal. His service was aimed at ending what he saw as disgraceful scenes at the end of harvest – the imagination boggles. Not much merry-making in that parish I daresay. These two events seem to mark the gradual spread of harvest services

across the country. As a child, I spent my earliest years on a farm and vividly remember going into the fields when the last sheaves were being stooked. We made little houses in the stooks, and our bare legs got scratched by the sharp stubble, and we joined in the picnic our mother brought out for the farm workers. The service in the village church, very soon after the final stooking of the corn, I remember more for its wonderful smell of fruit, vegetables, corn and newly baked bread. Very Thomas Hardy, but experienced within my lifetime.

Nowadays lots of us seem to have forgotten how to say thank you. Everyone is too busy being angry – about the state of the country and the state of the world, and angry with other people; or impatient – why are things not improving now? This should have been done last week. So rather than saying thank you, we look around for someone to blame. We find scapegoats everywhere. I suspect that gratitude needs to be taught; I'm not sure it comes naturally. "What do you say?" we hiss at a mutinous child who is emphatically not grateful, and a mumbled "thank you" emerges.... If we're lucky. In an age that's always talking about wellbeing, we need to remember that being thankful can make us feel a whole lot better. Gratitude can transform the atmosphere. Saying thank you to God is an excellent start to each day.

The Book of Deuteronomy shows us that in a very early part of their history the Israelites gave thanks to God for the first fruit of the harvest, setting it down in front of the altar, and then the people coming together as a community, a community that included "the aliens who reside among you" – a perfect example for the present day. What's more, the whole ancestry of the Old Testament (according to this passage) descended from a "wandering Aramean"... who "went down into Egypt and lived there

as an alien"... Donald Trump, in his recent speech to the UN told the assembled company that European countries were being ruined by illegal "aliens" taking them over: that they were being invaded by a force of illegal aliens "like nobody's ever seen before". Yet we are told very clearly in today's OT reading that the so-called "alien" must be included in our celebrations – in this instance the sharing of food and drink that marks the harvest. And so, in the spirit of that bidding, churches include the needy in their celebrations, and they collect food, as we do here today, for food banks, for charities and in many cases for disaster areas globally and for developing countries. Quite right too, because this is who we are. As Christians and as citizens of the United Kingdom we welcome the stranger in our midst. We have a long and proud tradition of hospitality as a country, and at this cathedral, especially through our Benedictine forebears who practiced hospitality as part of their rule.

Images of planting and sowing, nurturing the tender shoots and finally reaping and harvesting permeate the Bible, with Jesus' parables featuring seeds, and with John the Baptist introducing a winnowing fork to the process of harvest, separating wheat from chaff. In today's reading from the Book of Revelation there is no winnowing fork, but two rather terrifying angels appear bearing sickles, ready to reap the harvest of the earth – that's all of us.... We will be harvested, cut down with the sickles. There is no threshing or winnowing here, but there are two different harvests, one of grain and the other of grape, representing salvation or judgement. The assumption is that the grain is stored safely in barns, whereas the grapes are trodden in the wine press. Personally I'd prefer the barn, and I daresay I'm not alone. We are not told any criteria for judgement here, but we only have to think of another parable of Jesus where he differentiates between sheep and goats, to have a fairly clear idea of some of the required criteria.

Have we cared for the hungry, the thirsty, the stranger, the naked, the sick or the prisoner? I'm pretty certain that list would cover the so-called alien – the migrant, the refugee, the asylum seeker. With that list ringing in our ears, how do we feel when we consider the sickle-bearing angel ready to fling us in the wine press if we fall short? And I don't just mean us individually, but as a society. Society at the moment falls shockingly short of biblical expectations.

We need to lift our eyes to today's Gospel where Jesus offers us the food that is salvation given by God in the Son of Man. The crowds of people flocking to Jesus are confused and questioning. "When did you come here?" – they had been looking for him. "What must we do?" and finally "What sign are you going to give us, so that we may see it and believe you?" For goodness sake, this is the same group of people who witnessed the feeding of the 5,000 immediately beforehand! How many signs do they need? But it's easy for us with the wisdom of hindsight to judge them for not seeing. How much do we really see? When we are beset by so much that is wrong in the world, most recently with the terrible attack on the synagogue in Manchester, can we lift our eyes from the atrocities of humanity and see that greater vision that Jesus offers us? We, like the crowds round Jesus seek him in the wrong way. We would like a sign please, just to show that God still cares and is in charge despite everything. Collectively we turn our backs.

Charles Causley's poem "The ballad of the breadman" puts things sharply in perspective. I will read just 3 of the later verses starting with Jesus travelling from place to place as a young man:

He went round to all the people  
A paper crown on his head  
*"Here is some bread from my Father,  
Take, eat",* he said.

Nobody seemed very hungry  
Nobody seemed to care  
Nobody saw the God in himself  
Quietly standing there.

And finally, after the resurrection:

Through the town he went walking  
He showed them the holes in his head  
*"Now do you want any loaves?"* he cried  
*"Not today"* they said.

It's quite brutal, but it needs to be. We should be seeking the bread Jesus offers, the bread of life, eternal life. Jesus longs to give us the food that is salvation offered by God – offered by God here in this Eucharist today, where we take the bread that is the bread of life. Here heaven meets earth in the true bread, giving life to the world. Jesus is both giver and gift: he gives the bread of life, and he is the bread of life. As we approach the altar today, we approach the eternal in the earthly that is Jesus the man in God the divine, God the divine in Jesus the man, and the love between the two.

And we say thank you.