

Sunday 21st October 2018
Harvest Thanksgiving (B)

Liverpool Parish Church

OT: Joel 2.21-27

NT: I Timothy 6.6-10

G: Matthew 6.25-33

“Yet I tell you, even Solomon in all his glory was not clothed like one of these.”

It was a balmy summer’s evening off the Cornish coast and the townsfolk of Bude had gathered to observe something that was nothing short of a supernatural phenomenon. As the light of the great Atlantic moon began to dapple upon the still waves, a series of gasps and stage whispers began to ripple through the crowd of Poldark lookalikes on the cliffs as, out in the bay, on a solitary rock, the unmistakable figure of a mermaid had appeared and begun to sing her haunting lament.

Except, as the townsfolk found out when a local farmer threatened to shoot the creature and it burst out with a rendition of the National Anthem, it was no mermaid at all but the Reverend Robert Hawker, curate of Bude, dressed in a wig made of seaweed and pair of modestly placed scallop shells. After an interesting curacy, Hawker moved up the coast to the tiny village of Morwenstow, where he came up with the idea of the Harvest Festival, the precursor of the event we are celebrating today. Hawker had many other foibles and strange habits. Doubtless there is some low and frivolous tome where one might read of them, available in second rate bookshops, but I wouldn’t know.

It is fashionable in the Church of England to disparage the harvest festival, to dismiss it as a pseudo-pagan nonsense fest, better consigned, like the memory of its eccentric founder to backward agrarian settlements, such as the farming communities of the Victorian era or Cornwall now.

I must confess that I dissent from such a view. Firstly, I spent a chunk of my childhood in rural Kent where, far from being a strange and unknown process of which I knew nothing, the process by which the harvest was brought about, namely farming, was everywhere. The early decades of this century were, however, not a happy time in the countryside- I remember being made to stay inside at school break time, due to the volume of the smoke from the pyres of livestock destroyed in a somewhat tardy government response to foot and mouth. Harvest was about rural businesses barely surviving, about giving thanks for what services and community amenities were left, before, invariably, they were gone the next year. Put another way, if you ask people from where I came from what they thought of Tony Blair, you might get a similar response to the one you would get from someone in Toxteth if you asked about Margaret Thatcher. Harvest was bittersweet, and, for many, all too real.

Secondly, and much more importantly, even by the time Hawker came up with his Harvest idea in the 1840s, Britain was already a majority urban nation- the idea of a festival reminding us of harvest is not to give a salutary reminder of where milk, or beans, or spam comes from but, rather, to remind us where we are going. In short, an agrarian, rural society is reminded every year of the majesty of the life cycle and of the frailty of humans within it while we, amidst the fumes and the phone chargers and the concrete are wont to believe the comforting lie that this, the physical sphere of which we so modestly consider ourselves to be an integral part, will be here forever. A celebration of harvest- which is the ultimate cycle of birth and of death serves as a reminder that, like a potato or a beetroot or a leek, having come from earth and dust, to dust and earth we shall return.

Despite this crucial role in reminding us of our own mortality, Harvest is not, a moment for melancholy, as our readings from Holy Scripture today make abundantly clear. The cycle of life and what it reveals about our tiny place and short time in the ever rolling spheres of the

universe are not causes for concern. Quite, Jesus says, the opposite. Can we by worrying- worrying about the banalities of existence, about who, what, where- add a single hour to the span of our life? How can we, as St Paul says, who bring nothing into the world, possibly expect to take anything out of it?

The Gospel points us to the same truth as the cycle of the Harvest does; namely that the ways of this world will have their ending and that their importance, our importance, is manifestly limited. But like process by which harvest repeats itself, the Gospel points to something beyond, it tells us that, in the midst of the earth of our own mortality, might be found the shoots of eternal life, of the Kingdom of God and its righteousness- true righteousness. This is the ultimate harvest- that which will break the cycle of mortality, the cycle of striving and worry and pain and fear into which, as Jesus points out the Gentiles (or, we might say, all human societies, before and since) so easily fall into. The stirrings of the greater harvest are already here.

This harvest is a time when, as Joel prophesied, 'The threshing floors shall be full of grain, the vats shall overflow with wine and oil'. This is an image not of a prosperity gospel come true, whereby we will be rewarded by lottery wins, or designer clothing, or as many non perishable edible goods as hearts might desire, but rather it is a foresight of the heavenly harvest- of that which dispenses with the cyclical, banal nature of life here on earth and, instead, ushers in perpetual harvest celebration. It is a foretaste of the Kingdom of God.

Harvest reminds us that Jesus exhorts us to live, not as slaves to the petty concerns of the day to day- what Paul calls 'the many senseless and harmful desires that plunge people into ruin and destruction' in his first letter to Timothy- but rather as people filled with the confidence that the Heavenly Harvest will come and will make us new, with its glories and riches far surpassing the things we have store up in earthen jars now. To live as if that

foretaste is our diet for eternity. To live as if we believe the Kingdom of God to be a joyful, imminent reality, not just a theological conjecture. To live, in short, the life of faith.

This is the message of Harvest and our offerings here, to feed the hungry, the destitute, the desperate and the poor are a sign of confidence in that message- but let us go one further, going forth from this place and live lives this week and beyond marked not by the cares of the world but the confidence of the Gospel. To live a life of permanent harvest festival. To show that the life of the heavenly harvest is far from an anachronistic irrelevance but, instead, the prize offered to all who will embrace it.

Robert Hawker was an odd man but, be it harvest thanksgiving or mermaid impersonation, he did not worry about the tomorrows of this life but rather lived as if he truly believed in the real, risky, promises of God, in the perpetual joy of the eternal harvest tide. So: dust off those scallops and that seaweed for “I tell you, even Solomon in all his glory was not clothed like one of these.”

Fr Fergus Butler-Gallie