

Sunday 5 October 2025
Sixteenth Sunday after Trinity
Harvest Festival

Liverpool Parish Church

OT: Deuteronomy 26.1-11
NT: Philippians 4.4-9
Gp: John 6.25-35

“Come, ye thankful people, come, raise the song of harvest-home! All be safely gathered in, ere the winter storms begin;”

The opening words of our first hymn seemed most appropriate yesterday morning as I was pulling my thoughts together for this sermon as Storm Amy, the first named storm of the winter was passing over Liverpool. The thoughts of the coming winter storms and the gathering in of our Autumn plenty. The hymn written by the 19th century cleric Henry Alford has become a staple of the church Harvest which we come to celebrate today. Although the Anglican tradition of Harvest in its current form has more to do with the Reverend Robert Hawker, as those who have read our former curate Fr Fergus Butler-Gallie’s first book would know “The mad mermaid of Mormenstow” had a full life with many diverse interests. It was Hawker who in September 1843 revived the custom of making Eucharistic Bread from the first ears of the wheat harvest “Let us gather together in the chancel of our church, and there receive, in the bread of the new corn, that blessed sacrament which was ordained to strengthen and refresh our souls.”

Giving thanks to God is at the core of our being as Christians and today we are celebrating the season of thanksgiving for the harvest, a time when we give thanks to God for everything, he has given us. Thanking God for providing for our needs and especially giving thanks for the gift of the harvest.

I know there are times when we find it hard to be thankful as it seems that there is little to be thankful for whether in our own lives or in the world around us times are very dark yet into this darkness, we are called to give thanks and not just thanks because of what we may personally receive in material things but that despite everything we are called to be thankful because of the promises that we have through God as Paul writes in the letter to the Philippians “the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.”

Giving thanks to God is a central tenet of both the Old and New Testaments. In our Old Testament reading this morning; Deuteronomy 26:1-11, Moses commanded the Israelites to give thanks to God for delivering them from slavery in Egypt. They were to give thanks by giving God the first fruits of the harvest. They could not take anything for themselves until they gave the first fruits to God. The concept of giving God the first fruits was rooted in divine property rights. All created beings of any kind belonged to God and were regarded as holy. Before the harvest could be eaten by humans, it had to be “redeemed” from profane use. If this was not done, divine justice demanded retribution. The only way to resolve this situation was to give back to God the first part of the taboo object-in this case, the harvest. This nullified God’s property rights. This passage deals with the concept of stewardship. Specifically, as we celebrate Thanksgiving, it refers to offering to God the first fruits of our labour as an act of worship, thanksgiving and dedication of ourselves and our possessions to God. By doing this, we commit ourselves to living in God’s way. We, like the Israelites, must remember and tell others how God has rescued us in the past.

These remembrances strengthen our faith and give us the courage to endure in difficult times. God created us to be close to him and rejoicing in God is a great and powerful way to draw close to him. Paul writing to the church in Philippi from his prison cell echoes Deuteronomy "Rejoice in the lord always". Through prayer and supplication combined with thanksgiving let our requests be known to God. Paul's offer of prayer in Philippians 4:4-9 is not an easy solution or a magic formula or a bedtime repetition of words that we have labelled prayer. Paul is talking about the serious business of bringing our lives before God, examining our dependence on God, placing our lives in God's hands to be used, remembering and celebrating what God has already done, confessing our needs and dedicating our gifts, and committing ourselves and all that we are to make our common cause God's kingdom, not our own kingdom.

Prayer, supplication and requests are not to be separated. They include genuine thankfulness regardless of our circumstances. God loves us and provides for our needs, both here and through eternity. God loves to hear our prayers because he is always ready to give his grace to his children, but God gives with wisdom. He gives gifts that help us to learn and grow. He gives us the resources to deal with the issues we face. Christianity shares with Judaism, a firm belief in the goodness of the world. The material creation is good, a gift of our heavenly father. We rejoice in and celebrate the blessings that come from the good earth that God has made. We acknowledge that all we receive is God's gift.

At the same time, we are mindful of the call to reflect God's generosity and goodness. We are to share the blessings we receive, so that no-one is in need. This requires, of course, that we have to be attentive and notice those who are in need. So, this too is part of our harvest thanksgiving.

But harvest is also used as a metaphor in the Bible. It speaks of the harvest we reap from "doing what is right" and a "harvest of righteousness". Not crops, these, but the good things that grow in our lives by the grace of God. But these good works are connected with the harvest of the earth, because they are about enabling ourselves and others to grow and flourish as God intends.

There is also the harvest at the end of time, of which Jesus speaks, the gathering of all the redeemed into God's Kingdom. The produce of the good earth nourishes us for this earthly life. But the bread of God which comes down from heaven nourishes us for eternal life. That bread is Jesus himself, his flesh given for the life of the world.

Today's gospel reading is set just after the feeding of the five thousand with the bread and fishes, earthly food, and the crowd have followed Jesus because they want more of the same. But Jesus instead begins his teaching about the Eucharist, making the promise of the great gift that he would leave to his church at the Last Supper. This is the food that endures to eternal life. In the Eucharist earthly bread and wine become the sign and vehicle of that heavenly food. By the power of the Holy Spirit the earthly harvest of wheat and grapes becomes our spiritual food and drink, the body and blood of Christ nourishing us for the eternal. All of these aspects of harvest are there in the Bible: the produce of the good earth, which is God's gift, and which we are to share; the harvest of good works and righteousness in our lives; and the harvest of eternal life when all the redeemed will be gathered into God's kingdom.

As we come forward to receive the sacraments of bread and wine this morning come forward with a grateful heart to receive the bread of life and cup of salvation “that blessed sacrament which was ordained to strengthen and refresh our souls.” and be thankful. “I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never be hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty.

Fr Bill Addy