

## **HARVEST FESTIVAL Sermon 24th September 2023**

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There is no doubt that we have rather overcomplicated our lives. Particularly when it comes to food.

On a very simple, straight-forward level it is obvious that food grows all around us.

Our ancestors had their own, natural way of understanding their food source. Being aware of what is and what isn't edible.

And learning to understand it, to cultivate it, to collect seed and grow it, to harvest it and to store it for the winter period.

A profound awareness of nature's cycles, of the lifecycles of plants and animals, and how to live and survive through the seasons. How to work with these things for mutual sustaining.

In our own culture, since the industrial revolution, everything has become industrialised. Our farming too has become factory farming and our animals and our landscape have suffered, and continue to suffer, as a result.

On one level we have benefitted from cheaper food.

But the other side of the coin is inhumane animal factory farming and plants, and fruit and veg that is over interfered with. The overuse of chemicals and the irradiation of our so-called fresh food. The result can, ironically, despite all our plenty, mean greater malnutrition as people get hooked on synthetic food, fast food, that has little nutritional value. Not to mention our addiction to sugar, salt and buttermilk.

But whether we appreciate the very simple fact that God provides for all our needs. Or we give thanks for the misguided intention of those who control the way we produce our food. One thing we should do, and one thing today gives us an opportunity to do, is give thanks.

A harvest festival is the perfect opportunity for us to come together to say thanks for all that we have. And to give gratitude for where it all comes from. The farmers who grow things for us. The people who process it.

The haulage people who transport and deliver it.  
And the shopkeepers who put it in their shops for us to buy.

The only danger with buying things like we do is that everything just becomes, for us, a commodity.

There is no connection with it. We hand over our money and we don't connect with where things come from.

And so we look at things in shops as 'things' and 'stuff'.

But behind every item is a living process. Whether plant or animal.

Those who still work with the land understand, more than most of us, how the rhythms of life work.

The movement from seed, to shoot, to stem and leaf  
– to bud, to blossom to flower and pollination  
– to swelling fruit to airborne seed  
and so the cycle begins again.

And if we eat meat, we can recognise that the animals we eat also go through their life cycle too  
and at the end of it are sacrificed so that we can be fed.  
Both a piece of meat and a loaf of bread have a living story behind them.

They are created from living things, from the life that God gifts to them.  
They are not just objects and commodities for our benefit.

In order to be truly grateful for them we need to appreciate their life and our relationship with them.

For they are themselves born out of relationship.

The grain grows and is created by the necessary combination of relationships  
of good earth, and sunshine, and rain  
before it ends up in our bread and pastries or our cornflakes.

Now listen.

Because I'll tell you a secret.

And it's important.

When we eat these things we eat everything they have been through.  
All the struggle of the seed to sprout through the earth.

All the weather, the joy of opening to the sun, and the clinging on to the earth in the high winds and wet weather.

All the spring birdsong that echoed at dawn and dusk in between the stems of corn as each stem danced with its neighbour to and fro in the breeze.

All these wondrous things are embedded in the fabric of our food and the biography of our bread.

If you really engage with this idea you start to realise why the meat you eat should be from an animal roaming free not one hemmed in, in a metal cage in a place of torture.

For life is all about relationships and experiences. The idea of life as commodities is not a spiritually healthy one.

If we connect with those relationships we increase our sense of life. If we see God's produce as just things we increase our sense of death. To see everything around us as just things to use makes our own lives full of static and dead things that can be consumed instead of things that we can inter-relate and dance with and that bring us life.

And so when people talk about the environment and how it is important to look after our world because we depend upon it, this is only half the story.

The only way to save our resources is by healing our RELATIONSHIP with the earth.

And the way to heal this relationship is to recognise that the world isn't full of things it is full of life.

And this life is a gift from God. This life is a part of God.

Most of us if we fancy some chocolate will go into a shop. Check out the chocolate bars, buy one and shove it into our mouths pretty quickly to get rid of our chocolate craving.

But if we are given a box of chocolates from someone who is giving them as a gift to us to say 'I love you' or 'thank you for being you' or 'you are the person I care about most in the whole wide world' it is not just a bit of chocolate .

It is a gift that means so much more than something we buy just to get rid of a chocolate craving.

Or if we see a shiny necklace in a shop that looks nice we might buy it to make ourselves look nice or cool.

But if it is given to us by someone who loves us and we wear it as a token of their love for us and our love for them, it becomes something other than an object.

Well the reality is that everything we eat and everything we wear and use IS a gift. A gift of love from God.

Everything we use in the world is an expression of God's love for us.

If we take this to heart we will tread gently on the earth.

Not because we're afraid of things running out but because we appreciate it for what it is - a gift.

And we won't just say thank you at Harvest Festival.

But continually with everything that we eat and touch.

And what gives God joy in return is when we take simple things and transform them into beautiful things as a response back to him.

We take the simple grain and transform it with heat and yeast and make it into our staple food. A loaf of bread.

With a loaf of bread we have taken the grain that God has given us and we have made it into something to share. Recognising its importance as something to be used in relationship.

And the taking of bread and breaking it and sharing it together is a very ancient way of expressing our fellowship.

When we do this we are true companions. The word comes from the French word 'pain' meaning bread and the word com means to come together. So companions are people who come together to break and share bread.

Jesus used this in a very special way with the Eucharist.

He took the grain that we transform into bread and transformed it into a ritual of salvation. He added his biography to the biography of the bread.

In this way we ingest his story and make it our own.

We harvest and reap the rewards of his hero's journey.

So we have lots to be grateful for as we gather in this sacred place to say thanks.

Take time to wonder at the gifts we have brought to God's table. The fruit and the flowers. The water and the milk. The corn, the wine and the bread.

Enter into and appreciate their story, which has brought them to this moment in time, to delight our senses and nourish our bodies.

And when you receive the blessed bread recognise in that bread the story of the corn, which grows, is cut down and sprouts again.

And recognise the story of Christ's body, which grew, was put to death and rose again.

Hold that holy narrative within you because the biggest gift is that your soul too, echoes that same story.

Amen