

2024-10-06 ... 10.30am Harvest Service Sermon ... Revd Pippa White

Job 1: 1 and 2: 1 – 10; Hebrews 1: 1 – 4; 2: 5 – 12; Mark 10: 2- 16

So, while we're celebrating Harvest Festival, I think it would be a good thing to check we all know a bit about it first.

Let's see if we all know how old Harvest Festival is... and by that, I mean how long it has been part of the Church of England's annual calendar. So, when did we start celebrating it every year, without fail. Baring in mind we're going to loosely call the Church of England about 500 years old.

So, hands up if you think Harvest Festival is about 500 years old? So we've been celebrating it since the beginning.

Hands up if you think it's about 400 years old? So broadly when England and Scotland were joined by one monarch.

Hands up if it's about 300 years old? So when this church was built.

Hands up if it's about 200 years old? So roughly when Queen Victoria was born.

Hands up if you think it's less than 200 years old?

Because you'd be right.

Harvest Festival is really quite a young festival in the church calendar. It officially became a festival in the Church of England in 1862.

The story behind it, is that in the 1840s there were multiple bad harvests, meaning that many people were facing consecutive years of hunger. Then, in 1843, there was a good harvest. A certain vicar, a Reverend Hawker, decided to get all of his community into church, told them to bring any surplus they could, and then this surplus was given to those who had been worst-affected for the previous years. This then set a trend, and after twenty years of communities celebrating the festival the church officially adopted it.

So while our tradition of bringing food in, for it to then be shared to those who need it, is quite a modern tradition, of course celebrating harvests is not a modern thing.

Because I don't know if you'll have heard of this before, but there is an important celebration in the church year called 'Lammas'. Lammas is celebrated right at the start of August, when the first crops are coming in. Lammas is an incredibly old celebration, which pre-dates the Church of England, right back through the Anglo-Saxon period, right back to early Christian churches, and even further back to before Christianity. Now Lammas is all about thanking God for the crops, or thanking creation for giving its bounty, depending on how far back you look.

Lammas has slowly been absorbed by Harvest Festival, so that thing that started off as a bring-and-share, then became and bring-and-share, and thanking God that we could do so.

But Pip, I hear you all cry, what about Harvest Suppers? Those are younger than Lammas, but older than Harvest Festival – what's the history of those? Well I'm glad you asked, as that's my next point.

Farmers have for years, for decades, for centuries, celebrated the end of harvest with a huge meal. Let's face it, it's probably the most well-earned meal that is ever eaten, and something that should definitely be celebrated. But, as these things happen, this idea of a harvest meal being eaten by exhausted farmers was slowly pinched, and incorporated into what we now know as the Harvest Supper, which comes hand-in-hand with our Harvest Festival.

Now, if there's one thing you remember about this sermon, it's this next bit coming, so don't zone out and start staring at the stained-glass windows just yet. In our gospel reading, in this very famous bit of the Bible, we have Jesus telling us not to worry.

‘Do not worry about your life’ says Jesus. ‘Do not worry, saying, “What will we eat?” or “What will we drink?”’ The problem is, at best, Jesus sounds very blasé in that bit, doesn’t he? And at worst, he sounds like he doesn’t care.

Imagine Jesus at our foodbank today, saying ‘oh don’t worry about what you will eat’. It’s insulting, isn’t it? And it doesn’t match up with the Jesus we’re taught about in the rest of the gospels either, does it? This Jesus who is always fighting for the poor, who is helping those excluded in society, is suddenly telling everyone to just chill out. **PTO**

And I think our problem here is in the translation. Can anyone tell me what language the New Testament was originally written in?

So the Greek word that is used for ‘worry’ in this passage, means much more than worry. It’s much more a sense of deep anxiety. The word, merim-nao, also shares the same root as the Greek word for being divided.

So where we have:

**‘do not worry about your life,
what you will eat or what you will drink,
or about your body, what you will wear.’**

Perhaps a better translation would be:

‘Don’t fill yourself with anxiety about your life, don’t pull yourself apart worrying about what you will eat or what you will drink, or about your body, what you will wear’.

Because if you notice the antidote for that, as Jesus tells us, it’s first of all, striving for the Kingdom of God. And how do we do that? By following the two greatest commandments, by loving our God, and loving our neighbours.

And do you notice what the other thing Jesus tells us to do? **‘Look at the birds of the air’. ‘Consider the lilies of the field’.** Return back to nature. Stop, and breathe, and see how beautiful creation is. Anyone who’s younger than me, I’m sure, will be familiar with the online phrase ‘go touch some grass’. There’s a reason that’s a phrase – because nature, and the natural world, has a way of bringing us back to ourselves. Of bringing us back to what really matters.

After all, how many people here find it easier to get in touch with God, or the universe, or that thing which is greater than all of us, however you want to phrase it, by going into nature? I do!

Today, we are celebrating a festival, that was inspired by hunger. It was those years of hunger, that when they were finally broken by a good harvest, drove a priest to bring his community together to celebrate.

So frankly, if people throughout history can move celebrations around, and pinch ideas from Lammas, and can pinch traditions from the farming community, so can we.

We can take what this tradition stands for, which is giving thanks to God for what we are given, giving thanks to farmers for their hard work, when that work is only getting harder for them, and celebrating when times of hunger are broken by times of plenty.

So, friends, if you have times throughout the year, when you feel like you are in a time of hunger. And I’m not talking literally, if you are having some days, or some weeks, or perhaps a month or two, where something in your life is really lacking. This could be a hunger for joy, a hunger for fun, a hunger for being able to relax.

When that hunger for whatever it is breaks, **don’t forget to have a mini Harvest Festival. And by that, I mean thank God that the hunger breaks, thank those people whose labour and hard work helped to break it, and don’t forget to go out and share that bounty with others.**