

8th October 2017

Preacher: Jennifer Potter

HYMNS: 81 “Now thank we all our God”
 727 “God in his love for us lent us this planet”
 124 “For the fruits of all creation”
 125 “Praise and Thanksgiving”
 130 “**We plough the fields and scatter**”

READINGS: Joel 2:21-24
 Romans 8:18-25

**As this was our Harvest Festival Service
there were two addresses in place of the normal sermon**

“WHERE THE HARVEST IS PLENTY”

Do you have any idea whether the harvests of various crops in Britain this year have been good or not? Unless we have family or friends who are farmers or in the agricultural business in one way or another we probably do not have a clue about how the weather has affected the growth of crops and the harvesting of crops in various parts of the country.

Well, in fact, over much of the country there has been lots of rain during the period of cereal harvesting. It has meant a late harvest in some places, a need to dry out grain and especially to dry out the straw for use as animal fodder. The wet summer also affected the potato harvest in some areas – the yield of the crop is not so bad but the quality of the potatoes has been affected. Salad crops, by and large have done well this year.

Apple and pear trees suffered from the frosts in April and the harvest yield has been very variable across the country and with different varieties.

Most of the time we have no idea about our local harvests in this country because any shortfall in produce is made up by importuning what we need. The only indicator of any difficulties may be a slight rise in price.

At the end of this service we shall sing, “We plough the fields and scatter the good seed on the land” and I think I can be pretty sure that very few of us here have ploughed this year and the only seeds we shall have scattered are flower seeds in our gardens or vegetable seeds in our allotments.

Yet for so many people – and we had quite a discussion about this in Sisterhood the other week – no harvest festival would be complete without these traditional harvest

hymns which are more relevant for rural churches where members can and do still bring the produce of their own land and labour.

Some people claim that harvest festivals only became popular once the majority of the population of this country had moved into urban areas as a result of the Industrial Revolution. Harvest festivals, they say, are just a time for indulging in nostalgia for the myth of a wonderful, rustic, rural past.

But there is nothing sentimental or nostalgic about farming. In any country farming is a tough task. Farmers can't stay in bed when they want or go on holiday without careful planning – the animals need feeding and the crops and land cared for whatever the weather and 24/7.

So the first thing we need to say today is, 'thank you' for farmers. Secondly we need to thank God for the rain and the sunshine even if they don't always come at the right time or in the right amounts.

We also need to realise that whatever our opinion about Brexit – and I am sorry to mention this - it will have an enormous impact on our farming industry. Currently we are part of the EU Common Agricultural Policy. After 2019, unless there is a great change in direction, we won't be in the EU and no longer part of the CAP. That may be good in some ways, challenging in others but what is clear is that these are uncertain times for farmers. These changes will have an impact on the goods in our shops and the prices we pay.

So, during this service let us look at all this produce we have brought. It did not fall from the sky or appear miraculously on supermarket shelves. All this food represents hard labour by people in this country and around the world. All this food represents a partnership between human beings, the created world and the God who gave us seedtime and harvest, rain and sunshine.

We live in a country where there is rarely any scarcity of food – what we can't grow we import. This was not always the case. The older people among you will remember that during World War II a blockade was put on ships bringing food to Britain. Every small piece of land had to be brought into cultivation, every type of produce was rationed and the population came close to being starved into surrender.

So let us never take our food for granted – let us give thanks for the great variety of produce we are able to enjoy and pray for those whose hard work gives us this food.

As we shall sing later

“We thank thee, then, O Father
For all things bright and good
The seedtime and the harvest
Our life, our health, our food”

“WHEN THE HARVEST IS MEAGRE”

In some parts of our world where people depend completely on the food they can grow and the animals that they rear, life is always fragile, utterly dependent upon the weather. In places such as these people know how to pray earnestly when the rain is too little or too much, where the winds and the wild animals are destructive or where what little good soil there is gets washed away.

Most of the time these situations of dire need do not make it to the headlines. People struggle on as best they can. But this year, very recently, we have all become aware of the devastating effects of hurricanes and storm tides. We have seen appalling images coming out of the Caribbean and the southern USA. Whole islands laid waste, destruction on a truly apocalyptic scale. And for a number of us here this is all very personal. We know these places, we have family among those people. Islands, advertised as tourist paradises have become like hell on earth – buildings, crops, power and fresh water supplies all destroyed not to speak of the toll of human life.

And as we gather here today, once again people are being evacuated from the path of the latest hurricane, Nate.

How many hurricanes can this region battle with in one season? How can life be sustained on tiny, vulnerable islands whose land is just a few metres above sea level? We also need to ask ourselves what we are doing by our lifestyles to imperil, to put at risk the harvest of the future by contributing to climate change and global warming.

Yes, there have always been hurricanes but this season has seen a greater number and of greater ferocity than ever before in recent history. Our lifestyle contributing to continued global warming is one of the causes of these more extreme weather events all around the world – even here in Britain.

We need to be willing to change our lifestyles and to let our politicians know that we want change so that the most vulnerable people in our world no longer need to live in continual fear of the elements.

There will be no harvest for many in the Caribbean this year. There will be no harvest for the Rohingya people of Burma who have been forced to flee their land. There will be no harvest in places of drought, flood or warfare.

Normally on our Harvest Festival any money collected goes to the Whitechapel Mission but this year in response to the hurricanes in the Caribbean we are sending any money that you donate to that appeal.

The Methodist Bishop in Puerto Rica has sent the following update to our World Church Office:

“Our Island of Puerto Rico suffered the direct impact of hurricane Maria. Our power, water and communications systems collapsed completely. Thousands of families have lost their homes and the church is helping the entire community in a number of ways.

The entire island was directly hit. There are areas where the crisis is more severe and where there is no access to food or money. In these areas, we have converted out local churches into support centres where food parcels can be prepared and distributed to families. We have ministers serving as chaplains to the Puerto Rican police, FEMA (Federal Emergency Management Agency) and hospitals.”

Monet raised by the Caribbean Appeal will go to all the islands affected by the recent hurricanes.

As we give thanks for our plenty, please give generously to those who will have only a meagre harvest or no harvest at all this year. Amen