Sermon 27/09/26 – Harvest

I will begin with an apology. For me this morning's service and readings are a continuation of the previous two Sundays. Thinking about God's generous gifts to us. But I realise that most of you haven't been in the same place as me on those Sundays so some of that continuity will be lost. Two weeks ago, the parish eco group led the service at St James and we were encouraged to think about ways in which we could be more caring of the things God created. Last week we had readings about Jonah and some grumpy vineyard workers who disliked the idea that God might decide what to do with what was his.

This week we have a trio of readings (sounds a bit like a pudding on a pub menu) all of which reflect different reactions on the receipt of generosity. In Leviticus God has given Moses some very specific instructions of what to do in thanks for the harvest, They specify the produce to use, what to do and the day on which you must do it. It also makes clear that you should not use grain from the harvest until this ritual of thanks has taken place. The thankfulness lacks spontaneity.

In the gospel story there is no mention of God even though he has provided a bumper crop. All the rich man is focussed on is how to preserve his bounty. His barns are too small to accommodate it so he must rebuild, and bigger. It is all about him. There is no thought of sharing in a community in which we know the majority of people were poor. His whole focus was on himself.

Then we read of that early Christian community in Jerusalem. They were held together by the apostles teaching. They eat and pray together and they share. Property and possessions are sold and the proceeds used to address their needs. These early Christians also had a habit of thankfulness, although it would seen mean to call it a ritual. They went to the temple, they ate with glad and humble hearts, praising God and enjoying the good will of all the people.

Three very different responses based on obedience, selfishness or thankfulness.

If you have had a sneaky look to see what hymns we have today you will have spotted the omission of, 'We plough the fields and scatter'. It's an obvious choice when we are thinking about harvest and the decision may have been skewed by the fact that neither Shirley nor I particularly like it. More to the point is that so few of us do 'plough the fields and scatter', even arable farmers who are ploughing are sowing seed to a calculated density along predetermined furrows. It is hardly scattering. Food production is of course still important, we all need to eat, but the Western world has changed so much that few people now are involved in the growing part of the food chain. Nowadays it is all about the distribution.

And, of course, this year's wet spring followed by a dry summer has served to remind us how dependent our crops are on the timing and intensity of the weather. Arable crops are depleted while vineyards report good crops. People are weary from carrying buckets or water, but the vegetables at the Malvern show are of monster proportions.

This does give us the opportunity to rethink harvest. Should it now include education, healthcare, clothing and vehicles.? What about those abstract things like love and caring? When Richard first came to the parish we filled a net with cut out people, us, to show the idea of being a fisher of people. Perhaps it is people who should be included within the harvest crop.

It can be hard to follow the trail from the original created world to say watching live theatre but those trails do exist, through the excess of crops that allowed people to stop using all their waking hours to produce food. This allowed experimentation with using wood for building, wool and linen for clothing, bark and soot for writing. As technology developed we worked out how to use water power to make electricity for heat and light. Without the abundance of the earth none of that would have been possible.

There remains something cosy about a traditional harvest – small children staggering under the weight of a giant marrow or bringing a handful of muddy carrots. Seeing all that bounty at the front of a church. In more recent times we have encouraged gifts with a longer shelf life, so that Churchwardens do not spend the next few days franticly distributing them. The recipients less likely to be elderly members of our own congregations but unknown families, still living nearby for whom life is currently tough. And what food bank does not love a cash donation?

In the reading from Acts there is no mention of carrots or bags of flour and wineskins. It simply sets for us an example of the way that we can live together, showing our thankfulness together. So that's my challenge today that we all practice our thankfulness for the beauty and wonder of nature, for the things that the human race has developed to make our lives easier and more varied, but mostly for each other. For the ways in which we teach and nurture and care as we demonstrate God's love for us.