

The 14th Sunday after Trinity – Online Harvest Festival

Collect: Lord God, defend your Church from all false teaching and give to your people knowledge of your truth, that we may enjoy eternal life in Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

Psalm 65: ¹ Praise is due to you, O God, in Zion, and to you shall vows be performed.

² O you who answer prayer! To you all flesh shall come.

³ When deeds of iniquity overwhelm us, you forgive our transgressions.

⁴ Happy are those whom you choose and bring near to live in your courts. We shall be satisfied with the goodness of your house, your holy temple.

⁹ You visit the earth and water it, you greatly enrich it;

the river of God is full of water; you provide the people with grain, for so you have prepared it.

¹⁰ You water its furrows abundantly, settling its ridges, softening it with showers, and blessing its growth.

¹¹ You crown the year with your bounty; your wagon tracks overflow with richness.

¹² The pastures of the wilderness overflow, the hills gird themselves with joy.

¹³ The meadows clothe themselves with flocks, the valleys deck themselves with grain and they shout and sing together for joy.

An extract from Cider with Rosie by Laurie Lee:

From our seats in the choir we watched the year turn; Christmas, Easter and Whitsun, Rogation Sunday and prayers for rain, the Church following the plough very close.

Harvest Festival perhaps was the one we liked best, the one that came nearest home. Then how heavily and abundantly was our small church loaded; the cream of the valley was used to decorate it. Everyone brought of his best from field and garden; and to enter the church on Harvest morning was like crawling head first into a horn of plenty, a bursting granary, a vegetable stall, a grotto of bright flowers. The normally bare walls sprouted leaves and fruits, the altar great stooks of wheat, and ornamental loaves as big as cartwheels stood parked by the communion rails. Bunches of grapes, from the Squire's own vines, hung blue from the lips of the pulpit. Gigantic and useless marrows abounded, leeks and onions festooned the pews, there were eggs and butter on the lectern, shelves, the windows were heaped with apples, and the fat round pillars which divided the church were skirted with oats and barley.

Almost everyone in the congregation had some hand in these things. Square-rumped farmers and ploughmen in chokers, old gardeners and poultry keepers, they nodded and pointed and prodded each other to draw attention to what they had brought. The Church was older than its one foundation, was as old as man's life on earth. The seed of these fruits, and the seed of these men, still came from the same one bowl; confined to this valley and renewing itself here, it went back to the days of the Ice.

Pride, placation, and the continuity of growth were what we had come to praise. And even where we sang, 'All is safely gathered in', knowing full well that some of Farmer Lusty's oats still lay rotting in the fields, the discrepancy didn't seem important.

Reflection: My earliest recollection of Harvest was stooking in the field next to the house where I was brought up in Nassington. It seemed that everyone was there – men, women and children – all lending a hand at this, the busiest time of the year. Several days later, or maybe a week, depending on the weather, huge carts would come to collect the dried-out sheaves and take them to the stack yard. The tallest and strongest would pitch them up onto the carts and a young man, nimble on his feet, would stack them, moving up higher and higher as the cart filled up.

By the time it was full he was halfway to the sky – or so it seemed to me as a five-year-old down on the ground. A similar process took place in the stack yard as the carts were off-loaded onto ever-growing ricks and, several months later, was reversed when the Threshing Machine arrived in the village on its tour of the neighbourhood. Much has changed in the sixty years that have passed since that scene I have just described, but not everything. Farmers are still just as much at the mercy of the weather as they ever were and, despite the labour-saving machinery now in every-day use, harvest is still the busiest time of the year for those who work on the land.

It also remains very much a time in the year when we come face to face with the greatness of God and with our dependence on him, and on one another. I would like to share with you a favourite reading entitled 'Breakfast' that reflects the extent of that dependence and has a particular resonance in this year of the pandemic when we have found ourselves utterly dependent upon the selfless work and dedication of key workers:

Lord. A thousand people gave me my breakfast this morning, but I gobbled it at a gulp and thanked no-one.

There was the cereal harvested from rolling fields of wheat by farmers who had ploughed and planted, and driven combine harvesters through to reap, by drivers transporting it through the night taking it to the factory, by engineers who built the processing machines and others who service and operate them, by lines of cheerful workers who packaged the product, and those who drive trains and trucks to bring it to the shop, by those at home who bought it, carried it and served it to me.

Then, on the cereal, milk first gathered before dawn by a distant farmer at his parlour, then processed, then bottled, then transported, then delivered by yet another army of workers.

And on the milk, sugar growing green amongst the red fields of the tropics, then fired in the night to a sea of black stalks, cut by sweating labourers under blazing sunlight, driven to mills to be crushed by roaring machines, guarded by oily hands, poured into the holds of ships and carried across the sea by sailors, delivered to the white-coated operators in refineries, boxed by the nimble fingers of production-line workers, driven in lorries to my village, and then carried to my table.

That bowl of cereal has taken a thousand people to produce. And another thousand have arranged for that egg and that bacon, that tea or coffee, that toast, butter and marmalade. Two thousand fellow human beings have worked to produce the simplest meal of the day.

It makes you think Lord, of how much we all depend on each other, for, without a million mouths like mine to feed two thousand people would be unemployed.

It makes you realise Lord, that each of us is necessary to the other. That in this vast family there is no place for people who would serve only themselves.

It makes you see Lord, that everyone has a duty to their neighbour in the next house, the next village, the next town, the next continent. And if in thanks we want to love our neighbours, we must be concerned about those thousands who have no breakfast to wake up to.

But loving our neighbour is only the second commandment Lord, for I had forgotten that without your creation there would be no wheat for the farmer, no oil for the tractor driver, no steel for the machines, no paper for the packing, no fuel for the train, no work for the thousands, no breakfast for me.

So, Lord, as I swallow that last mouthful, let me give thanks to you for all your creation, and thanks to my thousands of neighbours who make my breakfast possible. Amen.