

Harvest sermon, 9th October 2023

Harvest has long been celebrated in Britain as a celebration of the time in the year when all crops have been gathered in, before the weather deteriorates.

The word 'harvest' is from an ancient Anglo-Saxon word meaning autumn.

In Britain, Harvest celebrations have been traced back as far as the 5th Century, when there was a feast day known as Michaelmas, commemorating the Archangel Michael. Michael is mentioned in chapter 12 of Revelation, which records that he fought the devil and his evil angels, cast them out of heaven, and hurled them down to earth.

Long ago Michaelmas fairs were held with market stalls and games. Churches were decorated in autumnal and gold colours. Communion was said in the name of St Michael – Michael's Mass. Is anyone here scared of the dark? Is anyone worried about cold weather? Michaelmas was once considered a special time to turn to God for protection against danger, because it comes at a time when dark nights and colder days begin.

Today we may know the word because of the flower, the Michaelmas Daisy. An old English saying goes: 'The Michaelmas Daisies, among dead weeds, Bloom for St Michael's valorous deeds.'

Michaelmas became less popular after the Reformation in the 16th century. But some 200 years ago the church revived the practice of commemorating the autumn, though this time with a clear focus on thanking God for the provision of crops, for food. In particular, the tradition of holding a Harvest Supper was introduced. Again, churches were decorated, as ours is today.

Maybe we could hold a Harvest Supper here at St John's next year?

Harvest is not just celebrated in Britain but around the world. I understand that in Nigeria the Yoruba people celebrate it in a festival known as Ikore. In America they celebrate Thanksgiving.

And the appalling events in Israel come at a time when Jewish people had been celebrating Sukkot. Sukkot is a seven day period during which Jews recall the Festival of Ingathering – recorded in Exodus 34 - which marks the end of harvest time, and the Feast of Tabernacles in Leviticus 23, which reminds people of their dependence on the will of God.

These Jewish festivals are part of our heritage as Christians. So why do we – like our predecessors in Israel - have Festivals, or Feasts?

The book of Leviticus teaches that God instituted festivals for the Jewish people - and not just the Festival of Ingathering and Feast of Tabernacle but the Festival of Passover and Unleavened Bread, the Festival of Firstfruits, the Festival of Weeks, Festival of Trumpets, and the Day of Atonement.

God told Moses to treat these as sacred assemblies, times of rest, during which Jews should demonstrate their commitment to Him by bringing sacrificial offerings.

As Christians we are no longer required to keep these festivals. As the letter to the Hebrews (10:12) teaches us, Christ 'offered for all time a single sacrifice for sins.'

But Christians do set aside special times when we demonstrate our commitment to Christ. The obvious ones are Christmas and Easter, but there is also Shrove Tuesday (Pancake Day) and Lent.

And not so long ago many Christians celebrated Plough Sunday and Rogation Sunday, times when agricultural equipment and fields were prayed over.

So, I wonder, what does God make of such festivals?

I HATE your festivals, we read in Amos. I HATE your festivals.

Hate is a strong word! It's not merely 'dislike'. It is to DETEST something, to be REPULSED by it. Imagine. Here we are, singing hymns and songs - and God might be hating it? We are displaying fruit and vegetables - and God might hate this? Surely not!

Well – let's read verse 23 – 'Away with the noise of your songs! I WILL NOT LISTEN to the music of your harps.'

And during the Feast of the Tabernacles the Jews took branches from palms, willows and other leafy trees and rejoiced - just as we have put fruit and vegetables on the altar behind me and are rejoicing - and God said 'I WILL HAVE NO REGARD for them.'

Think for a moment. What activities or types of behaviour do you hate, or can't you stand? Seeing images of wars, as in Gaza and Ukraine? People suffering from malnutrition through poverty? People's rudeness? In so many public places these days we see warning notices: 'Please do not abuse our staff'. Why are people so cruel, so indifferent, so horrible to others?

What repulsed God - the Living God, in whose image we are made - was that although the Jewish people were keeping the festivals that He instituted, they were at the same time following idols and disobeying Him.

In his last sermon before he was martyred, Stephen recalled how the Israelites disobeyed God and, as a consequence, He 'gave them over to the worship of the sun, moon and stars' and sent them into exile. He cited the words of Amos: 'You took up the tent of Moloch and the star of your god Rephan, the images that you made to worship.' Moloch and Rephan were false idols (Acts 7).

In Britain, until around 100 years ago dolls used to be made from the last sheaves of corn produced at harvest-time, in the belief that they contained the Corn Spirit, a descendent of the Roman goddess of grain, Ceres. The corn doll was then kept until the Spring, in the belief that this would ensure the continuation of a good crop next year.

What are OUR idols today? What takes OUR hearts and minds away from the true, living God?

In Amos, God expresses concern that the Israelites were following the rules that He set for feasts and festivals but NOT living according to the principles He had set for their lifestyles.

'Let justice to roll on like a river' he says, 'and righteousness like a never-failing stream' (v24).
(repeat)

I like rivers. And some of you know that, to keep myself fit and prevent getting overweight, I go running.

My FAVOURITE run is along the River Rivelin. The Rivelin starts on the moors outside Sheffield, and ends at Malin Bridge, near Hillsborough.

And along its journey, from its source up in the hills to where it joins another river, the Loxley, it rolls on. It never stops. Never fails.

And that's just as well, because for many centuries its constant flow was exploited as a source of energy, driving the water wheels used by industry – from forges for shaping metal to flour mills. Without the river rolling on, there would have been no knives or spoons. And no bread.

God says this is how JUSTICE AND RIGHTEOUSNESS should be. Rolling on. Continual. Never stopping. Never failing.

Psalm 72 calls on Jewish kings to be just, which meant that they should support the needy, help the afflicted, take pity on the weak, rescue anyone facing oppression or violence.

But evidently the Jewish people did not exhibit justice.

Justice is central to our faith. I have here a book of direct quotations from the Bible that relate to justice. It's nearly 200 pages long!

If we do not strive for justice and righteousness in our neighbourhoods and in the world around us, Amos warns, God will hate our festivals and turn away, just as He did to the Jews. He will not accept our offerings. He will not listen to our songs.

So, how can WE exhibit justice and righteousness in today's world?

Jeremiah (22:3) describes what God considers to be just and right. Rescuing victims of crime. Doing no wrong to foreigners, the fatherless, widows. Not harming the innocent.

Have these problems gone away? Of course not!

Each year millions of people are victims of crime. Thousands of foreigners - asylum seekers – are wanting to escape to our country. A huge number of families split up, and children no longer see their fathers. And loneliness is a big problem, especially for widows – and widowers - who have lost their life partner.

Think - what can our church, St John's, do for them? How do WE ensure that justice and righteousness roll on, like a river?

In our gospel reading from Mark (12:33) a scribe affirms to Jesus that he is familiar with the teaching that we are to love God with our heart, mind and strength and to love one's neighbour as oneself. But, Mark records, the scribe added that this is "much more important than all whole burnt offerings and sacrifices." And Jesus replied: "You are not far from the kingdom of God." In other words, the kingdom of God is close to us - God is reigning, ruling our lives - when we recognise the importance of LOVE: love of God and love of our neighbours.

We know that, through the ultimate sacrifice of our Saviour, Christ, we have no need to offer burnt offerings and sacrifices to God.

But we can still go through religious routines. Go to church. Tick. Wear nice clothes. Tick. Sacrifice some wealth by putting money in the collection. Tick. Take communion. Tick. Say hello to friends. Tick.

Perhaps these are today's equivalent of burnt offerings and sacrifices. And God demands more. He wants us to love our neighbours, to demonstrate justice and righteousness.

So how do we ensure that justice and righteousness roll like a river?

As I said a few moments ago, Jeremiah tells us what God considers just and right. Helping victims of crime. Foreigners. Children living without their fathers. Lonely widows. We must constantly consider what our church, what we, can do for them, and for all people in need. Because justice and righteousness should roll on like a river. Never stopping.

Where does Harvest fit into all this? Let me conclude with an example.

The way we produce food – our harvests – affects the climate. For example, cows emit a greenhouse gas called methane. Fossil fuels used for transporting food over long distances emit carbon dioxide, another greenhouse gas.

So the type of food we buy affects the global climate. If we want to reduce the threat of harm caused by climate change, we could try to eat slightly less meat, or avoid food that's been transported over long distances.

The term 'climate justice' has been coined in connection with rising global temperatures, because it is the poor who are at greatest risk of the effects of climate change.

Climate justice is a way of saying that it's unfair – unjust - when people in rich countries cause a problem and other, much poorer, people suffer the consequences.

And our God wants justice to roll on like a river, righteousness like an ever-flowing stream. Amen.