



22nd Sunday after Pentecost

Sermon by Revd Margaret Place



Sunday 24 October 2021

READINGS

Job 42: 1-6, 10-17; Psalm 34: 1-8, 19-22; Hebrews 7: 23-28; Mark 10: 46-52

Look at God's work

Welcome to all our online worshippers. We thank God for many things today, and we give praise for all God's goodness.

Today we are celebrating the end of a period of giving – and we have allied it with a Harvest Festival. Giving thanks for and celebrating food harvested is something we find in many traditions all over the world, but increasing urbanization made it something of an anachronism. However with Climate Change and all that threatens us, awareness of the importance of nature is being brought to mind, and many rituals of agricultural origin are being revived.

In 1992 King Goodwill Zwelethini revived the “first fruits” or Ukweshwama festival amongst the Zulu people, and recently it has been opened to those outside the nation to watch. Swaziland celebrates “Incwala”, Botswana celebrates “Lethlafula”, and on the 1st of August, “Selemo sa Basotho” celebrates the end of the dry season and the beginning of a new year. All cultures in South Africa have similar occasions, and they have sprung out of a traditional need for food, for being thankful for past blessings, and praying in all its various ways, for a good harvest to come. All cultures of the world have their food celebrations. Before the modern era with its ability to store food, to transport it and to use various scientific means to get the most out of our soil, humankind was very much at the mercy of the elements and harvest celebrations were as much about relief from the anxiety that we may or may not eat for another year, as gratitude to God for providing for us.

“Harvest home” in northern hemisphere countries was a similar celebration, and the party afterward with much homemade wine drunk, was legendary. It was also a time of giving to those with nothing, and various ways of helping the poor were practiced. It became a church festival first in England, in 1843 when the Reverend Robert Hawker invited his Cornish parishioners to celebrate and give thanks for the harvest on a specific Sunday in his church. We have all been to variations of this over the years, and as we have become more urbanized, it has been less about decorating the church with produce from our gardens, and more about collecting for poorer people or for supporting charitable institutions with money.

In the Bible we learn of two harvest festival celebrations. The first is called Shavuot, which is the Jewish “Pentecost.” It begins during the Passover celebrations when the barley harvest is gathered, and ends fifty days later when the wheat harvest is completed and all the grains being gathered in. It also marks

thanksgiving for God's giving them the Torah, or the law at Sinai, the fifty days representing the number of days it took to travel to that mountain.

The other one happens later in the year and is called Sukkot. It begins in the week after Yom Kippur, or the Day of Atonement and is a week of celebrating and joy at the bountiful provision from God. Those who take it really seriously build little shelters in their garden and the family lives there for the week to remember the time when they were wandering homeless in the desert, and God provided manna for them to eat so they would be fed in an inhospitable environment.

So throughout history, in all parts of the world, humanity has lived between these two poles – anxiety in case there is not enough and we don't survive, and gratitude for plenty through good weather and health and strength enough to work for our food. Latterly harvest festival services in our churches has been tied to giving as well as thanksgiving. We are grateful, and therefore we give of our excess so the less fortunate can survive.

This year has similar thoughts behind it. We have been asked to contribute a special gift to the church as our gratitude to God for all we have been given, and one of our concerns is those parishes whose contributions have been hard hit by unemployment, exacerbated by Covid. There is huge need in our country, and the requirements are not only for food to put on the table, but to help churches relieve those with skills and willingness to work being not needed by our society as it is currently structured and for whom depression and hopelessness as a result. In this environment, those of us who have work and enough resources to live good lives are extremely fortunate and we express our gratitude to God in what we give to help others in our Diocese.

Harvest Festival in our more sophisticated times has moved away from the very rural nature of earlier celebrations. With about 80% of the world living in urban environments, we tend to have lost sight of where our food comes from, and to what extent our weather controls whether or not we eat well in the following year. This has led to a rather taken-for-granted attitude to things natural, and the Climate Change which is threatening us is in the process of re-awakening our consciousness of how very much we depend on such things as soil, water, sunshine and hard work for our food. If we approach Harvest Festival these days, it has to be with a far more global, holistic perspective than merely survival from one season to another. Because of this, we can look at our Bible readings today, none of which have anything to do with harvest festival, but we can see a general attitude towards the things of God which will help us when we consider thanking God for providing for us.

Job is crawling with humility and embarrassment for having the temerity to question God as to why the calamities happened to him. In those glorious roaring chapters before today's reading, God is reminding Job of the vastness of his creation and his power and presence in the world. Job has to learn his place, and it's not to treat himself as equal to God and expect answers to his questions. Once this humbling of him has happened, the three unhelpful friends have to repent, and Job has family and fortunes restored. What we learn is that God is God. We obey God and live in this world according to rules God established. We have dominion over things by God, but we know we are not ultimately in control.

In something of a contrast, we have the letter to the Hebrews which shows us that as Christ is our high priest, we have one who has saved us from our sins, and, as the priest is the mediator between ourselves and God, so Jesus mediates between us and God, and his sacrifice, made on our behalf, pays for those sins of which we are guilty. So while we have an all-powerful God who controls the world, we also have a lov-

ing God who reaches down to us, becomes one of us, saves us from our wrong-doing, and always stands between us and God, leading and teaching us, and praying for us before God's throne.

Finally, in the story of blind Bartimaeus, we should notice one thing. When he stands before Jesus, Jesus asks him what he wants. I'm absolutely sure Jesus didn't need to be told – it was obvious. But he needed Bartimaeus to own his miracle "Lord, I want to see." Because once Bartimaeus could see, he was no longer a victim dependent upon the good will of others. He was a seeing man who had to go and get a job and fight his way through the hurly burly of daily living. So the roaring God who is in is in control and the loving God who in in Jesus mediates, supports and saves us for us, is also the God who expects us to take responsibility for our decisions and the answers to our prayers.

So what does that tell us about harvest Festival? Firstly, we live in a world where God's rules are inviolate. If we are going to have things to eat, we need to understand the world God made and follow the science. Any attempt to be god-like and we land up with disasters like Climate Change and global warming and we risk killing ourselves and everyone else, starting with the poorest. Secondly, we need to humble ourselves before a saving Jesus and admit that we are weak and need all the help we can get, and in our modern world we need to heed those who are telling us that our land is suffering and sacrifices have to be made on our part to allow our planet to heal. We also need to look at our society and ask Jesus to show us why there are so many poor, and follow the economics and analyse the social structures which are causing this, even if the results are not comfortable, politically, psychologically or any other way. And finally, we need to know exactly what it is we want from God, and take responsibility for the answers.

Take a bit of time today and look at God's work. Find something that is growing – in a garden, a park, a window box, a patch of weeds. Look at the plants and insects and birds and goggas and know God thought about each one and made them exactly as they are, and they are doing what they were created to do exactly where they are. Then look at yourself. You are exactly as God made you and you have been put here to be YOU for the good of all, however little we may think of ourselves, and however much our ambitions have been thwarted. And as we thank God for all the things given us, let us acknowledge that we are also part of that magnificent creation, and God has called us to be part of his great harvest.

Lord thank you for our ability to see you and what you have done. May we, too be your labourers and be part of a harvest for which this world is thankful.