

We gather once more in Church for Harvest Thanksgiving. It is one of those ‘feel good’ days in the Church year. It is an excuse to decorate our Churches – I always love opening up the Church on a Harvest morning – there is that lovely smell thzt has settled on the Church.

Of course, Harvest Thanksgiving has its roots in rural life. The custom in Britain and Ireland dates back to 1847 when the vicar of a parish in Cornwall organised a special service to offer thanks for the blessings of harvest. It soon took off and was adopted right across the country.

Of course giving thanks to God for the blessings of harvest is not confined to Britain and Ireland. It is reflected in other countries; in the American Festival of Thanksgiving and we have attended services in France to mark the arvesting of the grapes and the pressing of the first juice. On that occasion in the Cathedral in Avignon the offertory procession included some rather nice bottles of wine.

As we read in our first Lesson from Deuteronomy, the people of Israel, as they prepared to enter the Promised Land were called to thankfulness, that each year as they gathered the harvest the first fruits of the harvest were to be dedicated to God. Earlier in this same book, the people are reminded never to forget the ultimate source of their blessings.

¹⁷ Do not say to yourself, "My power and the might of my own hand have gotten me this wealth." ¹⁸ But remember the LORD your God, for it is he who gives you power to get wealth, so that he may confirm his covenant that he swore to your ancestors, as he is doing today. *Deut 8:17ff*

This is where Harvest and the message of Harvest moves out from the simply rural and speaks to all people in every generation, both rural and urban. It will apply to the harvest of the sea, to all of man's technological innovation, as we are reminded '17 Do not say to yourself, "My power and the might of my own hand have gotten me this wealth." 18 But remember the LORD your God, for it is he who gives you power to get wealth ...'. We are reminded that this world is a gift, the very powers and talents we possess are a gift - and we are but stewards of this gift.

We are stewards, we are not outright owners. The Hebrew farmer was instructed:

9 When you reap the harvest of your land, you shall not reap to the very edges of your field, or gather the gleanings of your harvest. 10 You shall not strip your vineyard bare, or gather the fallen grapes of your vineyard; you shall leave them for the poor and the alien: I am the LORD your God.

Leviticus 19:9,10

There is at the very heart of the Old Testament Law a fundamental recognition of our obligation to the other, the one on the margins, the poor and the alien. This is not an optional extra, this is an integral part of our service and worship of God.

We are but stewards of all we possess. Collectively we are all stewards of this wonderful, fragile planet. In recent years we have seen signs of a progressive change in our climate. A few years ago we were in Norway and we visited a glacier – in the previous 20 years it had retreated over a mile up the valley. We are seeing signs of a reduction in the icecaps and rises in sea levels. The rise in levels of carbon dioxide in the atmosphere are causing measureable increases

in global temperatures and increase in the number of extreme weather conditions be they hurricanes, floods or droughts – and still leaders and people say we are not prepared to pay the sacrifice of reduced consumption, reduced prosperity. We in the more prosperous parts of the world can no longer expect the poor and the marginalized of the third world to pay the price for our prosperity.

There is a responsibility upon humanity as a whole to act, even at this late stage, to protect our fragile environment, to insist upon justice for the poor, not just in immediate provision of food, but, more importantly in ensuring justice in the whole area of international trade and the indebtedness of nations crippled by natural disaster. Jean Vanier, the founder of L'Arche, once said, having been challenged on how the God he worships could allow the poor to die responded; 'Don't ask how God can allow the poor and the starving die – ask instead, how can God allow the rich not to share?'