

### What can you harvest?

Here we are on the first Sunday in October 2024, at our Harvest Festival. Let me take you back to the first Sunday in October in the year 1843 - 181 years ago, because it was then that Harvest Festival, as we have known it first happened. Of course there had been religious ceremonies about agricultural seasons – we read about them in the Old Testament, and in England there were things like Lammas - the festival of the first loaves on the first of August. But it was in 1843 that a clergyman in Cornwall held the kind of Harvest Festival we know, when people gave thanks for the Harvest, and brought gifts of produce which were given to the needy. That idea became widely known, and we inherit his idea today, with the wonderful display we have around us in church.

That eccentric clergyman was called Robert Hawker, the Vicar of Morwenstow. To say he was eccentric would be an understatement. If we saw Kelvin walking round Ludlow wearing sea boots, a blue fisherman's sweater, a claret coloured coat, a yellow poncho and a pink hat, we would probably label him as eccentric. That a clergyman dressed like that in the 1840s would be even more bizarre. But he was bizarre. According to the person who first wrote about him - Sabine Baring-Gould, the author 'Onward Christian Soldiers', he sometimes dressed as a mermaid, and was often accompanied to church by his nine cats – one of whom he excommunicated for mousing on a Sunday.

Thus got me thinking about how I have seen the nature of Harvest Festival change over my years of ministry. When I was a curate in Lancashire fifty odd years ago, it was probably much the same as it had been in Morwenstow. Although it had its own eccentricities. We had one lady who each year brought a beautiful basket of fruit and veg, and after the service took it home again, because she regarded herself as someone who was needy. Later in Yorkshire we had an afternoon service from which the fruit and veg were dispatched to individuals and home via our young people. But when I went to Surrey in 1997 we encountered a problem with that kind of Harvest bounty. Of course there were a few elderly and sick people we could take fruit to, but there was far more to be used. And the local nursing homes and hospitals told us they couldn't cope with the largesse of so many churches. They politely refused our offerings. So we tried to be imaginative, and harvested other things. Sometimes it was things people bought specially. So one year we harvest pencils – and after a deal with manufacturers, our small village of 8,000 raised enough for 21,000 pencils, which I am assured would mean over 9 million words could be written by the pupils of schools in Uganda to which they were sent. Decorations in church were somewhat different – the best perhaps being the year we appealed for socks and pants for a Homeless Refuge in London. Other years we asked for things that were going to waste. We collected tights, which could be used for dressings in an African hospital. The appeal for unused garden tools was amazing. But the best of all was the year we harvested unused bicycles. We had discovered that a prison in Bristol was refurbishing them to be sent to Africa to help children who had long distances to travel to school. We thought we might get twenty or thirty. In fact we got so many we had to have a furniture van to

transport them to the West Country. It wasn't just the congregation who got involved. Our schools and indeed the whole village responded. As well as bringing new hope to those children, I am sure it was good mission thinking to show that Christians care.

But what is sad is that my old parish has now reverted to collecting fruit and veg, because the local food bank has desperate need. Sad, because it says something about the state of our society at present. But not sad that Christians continue to show care in that way – as of course we do in the same way here.

So thank you for what you have collected. Thank you for what you may give to the Christian Aid collection. But can I challenge you to think of other ways in which you might do some harvesting. There will be things that are around your house or garden shed for which you have no longer any use. Can you think about how you can harvest them? There may not be readily accessible schemes like the ones I have mentioned. But opticians collect old glasses for re-use by charities abroad. Charity shops may be able to sell things, which not only are useful or pleasing for the purchaser, but also raise money for a wider benefit. Oxfam, for instance, can recycle a huge variety of goods, quite apart from any they can accept in the local shop. Have a look on their website for details – and you can send parcels of them for free. And of course the Food Bank will be grateful either for goods left in the collection boxes in the supermarkets, or for cash donations, as well as the Harvest donations today.

Harvest Festival is not quite the right word. It really should be thought of as Harvest Thanksgiving. We thank God for what he has given us. And we show our thanks by what we do with those gifts – how we use them for ourselves, and how we use them for others. We are all capable of being excellent harvesters. Maybe we just need to grow in our awareness of what God has given so that we can be better at harvesting and sharing it. Let me end by reading you a harvest hymn which broadens our minds to how great that harvest is.

Praise God for the harvest of farm and of field.  
Praise God for the people who gather their yield  
The long hours of labour, the skills of a team,  
The patience of science, the power of machine.

Praise God for the harvest that's sent from afar,  
From market and harbour, from tropical shore;  
Foods packed and transported, and planted and grown  
By God-given neighbours, unseen and unknown.

Praise God for the harvest that comes from the ground,  
By drill or by mineshaft, by opencast mound;  
For oil and for iron, for copper and coal,  
Praise God, who in love has provided them all.

Praise God for the harvest of science and skill,  
The urge to discover, create and fulfil;  
For all new inventions that promise to gain  
A future more hopeful, a world more humane.

Praise God for the harvest of conflict and love,  
For leaders and people who struggle and serve  
To conquer oppression, earth's plenty increase,

And gather God's harvest of justice and peace.