**Harvest, year B**

**May I speak in the name of God: Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen**

Up and down the country, over the past couple of weeks and probably for the next couple of weeks, churches are celebrating their harvest festivals.

There is something very basic and satisfying about the fact that the earth has once again ‘brought forth its increase’, as the phrase goes. Those who live in rural areas such as most of Cornwall watch the seasons come and go; can estimate likely yields of crops; and are personally affected when the weather brings too much rain or temperatures too cold. They see themselves in a continuous line of succession down the centuries, and all the way back to the ancient Hebrew writers of the Psalms, and other works, where God is thanked and praised as the Provider of all good gifts. So there is something very basic, and quite satisfying, about harvest time.

Who are we giving thanks to? Well, God, obviously. But what are we giving thanks for? Is it, as the harvest hymn says: All good gifts around us? There’s that bit in the communion service which we will come to very shortly that says: for everything in heaven and on earth is yours – all things come from you….

But are all the things that we are giving thanks for good? …

When I was a child we had both school and church harvest festivals, much as we in South Weald have today. The school Harvest service is tomorrow morning at 9.15. The difference is that, fifty years ago, people brought along flowers, fruit and vegetables from their own gardens and allotments. Much of this produce was pretty much organic (with the exception of maybe a few slug pellets or similar), potatoes often still had soil on them, onions came plaited together by their tops, and flower-wise, I remember above all dahlias. There was hardly a tin or a packet of processed food in sight. We were giving thanks to God for the produce of our very own labours on and in His earth.

But stop and think about the produce that we give thanks for today. Please know, first of all, that I am in no way denigrating the generous gifts of anything and everything that people have given and will give today and tomorrow. Particularly when these are the things that the foodbanks ask specifically for. But there is food for thought in learning more about the detail.

Potatoes – our shop-bought potatoes have usually been sprayed with chemicals several times. First the seed potatoes are sprayed to stop mildew or fungus affecting them in storage. Then, once planted they are sprayed with herbicide to keep the weeds down. They are sprayed for blight control – the diseases potatoes suffer from. And then, before they are harvested, they are sprayed with something that removes the leaves and then the stems to make it easier to pick just the edible bits.

Then there’s wheat: there has been a huge increase in the number of people who are intolerant of wheat and we give it the blanket term: gluten intolerance. A cynic might think otherwise. According to my research, for the past thirty or forty years, there has been a growing trend for drenching wheat and barley fields with sprays containing glycophosphate in the run-up to harvesting. Applied in large amounts, it will eventually kill the plant but before it does, it causes the plant to release more seed. You can see how that benefits the producer. This glycophosphate is increasingly being linked with disruption to the functioning of beneficial bacteria in our guts, weakening our systems and making us more vulnerable to other damaging chemicals and toxins in our environment.

Once harvested most wheat is used to make white flour, a process that removes much of the wheat germ and bran – the most beneficial parts of the wheat. Traditional bread is made from flour, yeast, water and salt and involves allowing the yeast lots of time to work on the flour. Most of the bread that is made from this wheat is made using a method that depends on high-speed mixers, chemical oxidants, and a load of other stuff that I can’t even pronounce, along with solid vegetable fat, lots of commercial yeast, and water, which produces a loaf of bread from flour to sliced-packaged-and-ready-to-go in about three and a half hours: a loaf of bread with an extended shelf life which varies from several days to several weeks.

Then there’s Palm Oil – palm oil is an edible vegetable oil. In total, 50 million tons of palm oil is produced every year, which accounts for more than 30% of the world’s production of vegetable oil. This single vegetable oil is found in about 40-50% of household products: everything from baked goods, confectionery and ice cream to shampoo, cosmetics, cleaning agents, washing detergents and toothpaste. And because it flourishes in hot, wet areas, rainforests are cut down to make room for growing more palms for oil. Areas which previously had high biodiversity become areas of monoculture that supports very little wildlife.

I could carry on - talking about vegetables, fruit, flowers, the clothes we wear, the electronic stuff, packaging, waste… I’ve never been an activist, but so much of what we give thanks for today is the product of an industrial system designed to treat everything as a commodity and us as only consumers. The Earth and everything it brings forth is just so much raw material to push into a mega-factory that then churns out processed ‘stuff’. And the advertising is there to convince us that it is good and wholesome and that we need it and so must buy it.

Each of us is different. We have different needs for ourselves and for our families. And I don’t want us to go backwards when there is so much that is good and positive in the progress humankind has made over the centuries. But at the same time, I see harvest as a time to reflect on what, of the fruits of our labours, is truly good and what is not. Or not for what we in the introduction to the Peace call the ‘common good’ anyway.

Doesn’t matter whether I read the Gospels or the Old Testament prophets, in them I find a God who stands for something special. In God’s story, the rich and the powerful are challenged and changed. And that includes those who asset-strip the world to give us stuff that isn’t nice and doesn’t do us good. God’s is a story of revolution and transformation.

Somebody asked me the other day how much scripture I can quote – or at least recognise from the biblical reference. The answer is actually woefully little, but I do know that Micah, chapter 6, verse 8 says What does the Lord require of us but that we should act justly, love mercy and walk humbly with our God. If we do only that, we will begin to recognise the glorious abundance that God has given us and give Him the thanks and praise that He deserves. **Amen**