

Harvest:

Just as the first day of October arrives, our parish churches are celebrating the festival of harvest. By the time you have read this piece, those Sunday services will likely have happened, but St Swithun's School has yet to have its own celebration in the church. In both of the posts that I have held since I was ordained, there have been significant rural communities, and harvest has been an important time of year. But for many of us, apart from cursing getting stuck behind a tractor, the act of the harvest is both out of sight and often out of mind.

The church has a long history of celebrating its connection to the land; particularly in the much older festivals of Lammas and Rogationtide. But the idea of a harvest festival didn't really take off until the Victorian era, and for that we can thank the Rev Robert Hawker, a priest in Devon, who began these sorts of services in 1843 in the parish of Morwenstow in North Cornwall. He was certainly the first to fill his own church with local and homegrown produce, which is perhaps what we most associate with a harvest festival service. Their popularity spread quickly, not least because the services romanticized a pastoral idyll against the backdrop of the industrial revolution. There is perhaps some parallel with today, as jobs require increasing amounts of automation and people become further removed from the food they consume, harvest services remain extremely popular, both here and across the country.

Harvest offers us many things to reflect upon. God's act of creation being made known to us anew. Our relationship with the earth, and our call to be stewards and custodians rather than those who take and exploit. The seasons of our lives reflecting and dovetailing with the seasons of our year. There are many other sermons which can and have been preached with the harvest in mind. What springs to my mind this year is what the harvest tells us about God's provision. You might recall Jesus's challenging words to his disciples in Matthew's Gospel: "Therefore do not worry, saying, 'What will we eat?' or 'What will we drink?' or 'What will we wear?' For it is the Gentiles who strive for all these things; and indeed your heavenly Father knows that you need all these things." The contrast is between confidence in the abundance of heaven, and the anxiety in the transience of Earth. It's a difficult path to walk; how many of us actually leave the house without clothes on and think that God will provide? Of course, Jesus's words need to be understood in context. The church is the point between heaven and earth, between confidence and anxiety. The good news here is that of course God provides all that we need. The more challenging news is that God does not provide in a way that is exterior to us. We are part of the process, the people through whom God's work is accomplished. We have all the conditions for growth, in our fields and in our churches, but they require skillful and dedicated nurture if they are to come to anything. At harvest we get physical reminders in what has been produced that we're all needed in doing God's work together. In a sense, for those bringing the harvest last month, we see a microcosm of God's relationship with us.

In the words of the hymn, " We plough the fields and scatter the good seed on the land, but it is fed and watered by God's almighty hand". May we be reminded this harvest by our part to play and our need to share in God's work.

— Rob Glenny