

Sunday 27th September HARVEST – Isaiah 65:17-66:2, Matt 9:9-13 New Creation, new offering

Like everything else this year, it's a strange Harvest season for us. Walk around the fields, as Alise and I did on Friday and the crop has been harvested as usual. Head to the supermarket and you can buy the fruit of the harvest as usual. But we can't celebrate as we'd like to. We're not able to collect large amounts of food donations, we can't share a Harvest Supper together. I'll be having a novel experience this week of preparing a virtual Harvest assembly delivered via Zoom, rather than taking it direct into the schools I usually visit.

But for all that, Harvest still takes us back to some simple but timeless truths, which we can share and celebrate whatever restrictions are placed upon us. First and foremost, we have **the chance to say thank you** for all that the earth provides. Thank you to those who grow the food, thank you to those who prepare and distribute it, and above all thank you to our great God for providing what we need.

We also have **the chance to practise generosity** – we can make financial donations, or we can still put our food offerings in the bins at supermarkets. It is sobering that the use of Foodbanks across the UK increased by over 80% during the spring lockdown, so the need is as great as ever.

Today, though, I just want to put our harvest celebrations into a slightly bigger context, to paint a bigger canvas, if you will. Harvest reminds us of the vast potential of creation, its beauty and fruitfulness. Sadly so often this is scarred by human exploitation, but it remains there nonetheless, and our earth also has a remarkable capacity to recover quickly, to see its life renewed.

It also points us to a deeper truth, which our first reading from Isaiah made clear. This earth is amazing – but one day there will be a new heavens and a new earth. When God's kingdom comes in its fullness, **creation itself will be perfected just as we will be**. And when we use the word 'new', the force of the translation is really 'renewed'. Earth and heaven will join together – I believe it will be recognisably this earth still, but transformed so that the best bits are even better and the flaws are gone. As the passage says, it will be both fruitful and peaceful, the effects of conflict will be eradicated and those who enjoy it will dwell in what we would now call paradise.

Harvest reminds us that, good as this earth is, where we're heading is even better. God's kingdom is not just about saving souls but renewing the life of the earth, seeing creation itself enjoy the glorious freedom of the children of God.

How do we respond to that? Let's take the other side of harvest – our thankful offerings – and put those on a bigger canvas too. It's great to offer tokens of our gratitude at Harvest. I love the Harvest Samba, not just for the Latin rhythm but also because in rhyming 'festival', 'vegetable' and 'best of all' it has probably the best set of rhymes in any song I know. But that phrase *best of all* is significant, isn't it? Harvest is not really about a token thank you: as the song says, we want to share the *best of all* that we've been given.

Ultimately the greatest offering we can give to God is ourselves. Our donations of food and money are pointers to something deeper. At the end of the passage in Isaiah, God makes it clear that those who get to enjoy this perfected creation are those whose hearts are surrendered to Him.

Similarly in our gospel reading, Jesus meets Matthew the tax collector taking other people's offerings and calls him to offer himself to God. The call 'follow me' is really another way of saying: 'Offer all of yourself to me.'

At Harvest, we are invited again to offer ourselves to God – *all of us*, our time, money and talents; our relationships and work; our hearts and minds. We ourselves become offerings given in thankfulness that God not only provides, but is making everything new.

May God grant us grace to hear his gentle call again today, and to offer not just our gratitude but *our very selves* to Him, that we too might join in his work bringing the new creation into being.
Amen.