

A few words from the Vicar

'Come, ye thankful people, come, raise the song of harvest-home....' H. Alford (1810-71)

October is upon us and, in a couple of weeks we'll be holding our annual Harvest service.

Harvest celebrations have taken place all over the world since the beginning of time so, whilst doing some research, I was a little taken aback to discover a couple of years ago that the traditional Harvest service in church is not all that traditional. In fact the tradition began in 1843 when the Revd Robert Hawker invited his parishioners in Morwenstow, Cornwall to a special harvest service.



Haymakers using scythes and rakes, from the Grimani Breviary, c. 1510

What I find intriguing about Morwenstow being the birthplace of the Harvest service is that it wasn't a particularly agricultural place. In fact it's on the coast and in 1843 was the haunt of smugglers and wreckers. So maybe Robert Hawker was looking for a way to entice his wayward flock into Church so that he could urge them to turn away from their sinful ways!

Whatever his motivation, the idea soon caught on and many of our favourite harvest hymns date from Victorian times; favourites such as "We plough the fields and scatter" and "Come ye thankful people, come".

By then people had already left the countryside in droves, the Industrial Revolution had been in full swing for decades and people were settling in the rapidly expanding industrial towns and cities of Victorian Britain.

By then this country was the leading industrial power and what William Blake called "... those dark satanic mills" littered the land. So I do wonder why Harvest services caught on at that time in our history. Answers on a postcard please!

Perhaps it was nostalgia. Maybe Harvest services reminded the working people of industrial Britain of a different time; a time when their lives were governed by the rhythms of agriculture rather than the factory clock and the incessant demands of machinery.

Fast forward to 2012 and most of us are even more distant from the land than our Victorian ancestors ever were. For example, before ordination I was an Accountant and for 20 years worked in Financial Services. You can't get much further from agriculture than that, can you?

Indeed, I gathered my harvest at the end of each month regular as clockwork; my salary just popped into my bank account.

So, with so few of us working on the land these days why do we still bother holding an annual Harvest service? Let me tell you what I think.

Just as agricultural societies are at the mercy of poor harvests, modern economies experience a continual cycle of boom and bust. There are lean years and years of plenty, just as there always have been.

And don't we just know it!

However, despite our economic difficulties, as Christians we need to remind ourselves time and time again that our loving God is the source of all that we have and all that we own. We need to remind ourselves that, whether we work on a farm or for a bank, our loving God is in control and provides for all of our needs. So there will always be a place in the Church's calendar to remind us of that fact.

As far as I'm concerned, long may our annual Harvest service continue!

Every Blessing

Dave