

Harvest Festival

30 9 12

I urge that petitions, prayers, intercessions and thanksgivings be offered for everyone... 1 Timothy 2 v1

Although Harvest Festival does not appear on any official calendar of the Church Year, it celebrates and sums up the essence of religious life and faith. We celebrate and give thanks for all the blessings we receive and the great things the Lord has done for us: the corn and new wine and oil, the green grasslands which feed the abundant sheep and cattle which surround me where I live in Wales, and the spirit of the Lord's goodness which is poured out on all mankind. As Joel tells us (in our Old Testament reading – Joel 2 v28), the joy of harvest shall cause your old men to dream dreams and your young people shall see visions of goodness and glory. The prayers of the Church which are part of every Eucharist can be offered with confidence to our risen Lord who encouraged us all to “ask and it shall be given”.

But as I celebrate the fiftieth anniversary of my ordination, I am led to my first problem. When I was a school chaplain in a boarding school in Surrey, I used to say Evensong each evening before school supper. Usually I was alone or with one or two masters, occasionally the headmaster and perhaps the occasional boy. But as the “O” and “A” level examinations approached, the numbers grew, often with the most unlikely worshippers. I used to try to point out that the purpose of praying is not to manipulate history and bend it to our will, not to change God's

mind about us, but to change our minds about God's work. God wishes us to receive things in accordance with our prayers so that we may recognise them as gifts.

And this I believe is the real point of praying – to pray for things and to receive them as gifts. This puts our prayers into the real world which we celebrate – the world which is created and upheld by God at every moment. To pray for things to happen is to recognise how things are. In our public and private prayer, we may pray for the poor and the destitute. And if we are serious, we find ourselves stretched to realise we are God's children and so we become involved in the realisation of his will by giving and doing what we can to help those in need. And through our prayers, we become actors in the history of humanity. We may pray for peace in Afghanistan or Syria or Libya but even then we are not attempting to twist God's arm but through them we are involving ourselves in God's providential government of the world. And we can trust that God will not create in us desires which will ultimately be frustrated.

Mind you it is not always easy to see this. There is a story from one of the most northerly villages of Canada in which everyone is an Anglican. It is a good village. Everyone went to church and a few years ago, they even invited the Archbishop of Canterbury, Robert Runcie, my old tutor in Cambridge University, to come across and baptise their latest born children. And then one day a new man arrived in the place and opened up a bar which became the focus of all sorts of wild behaviour, drinking and dancing and, who knows, perhaps even sex. The good Christians prayed that the bar would be closed. They besieged heaven and sure enough, six

months later, the pub burnt down. The pub owner demanded compensation from the Church. The Christians denied that they were responsible. What had they done? He replied, "Am I the only person around here who believes in the power of prayer?"

Of course in our public formal prayers in Church, we rightly pray for the great causes of our nations and planet. We may find ourselves praying for all the families of the Church and town, whereas what actually bothers us is a particular family or our own. At harvest, we pray for the starving while our own stomachs are rumbling for Sunday lunch. But when we get caught up in the larger concerns which God has for this world, we then find that prayer heals our desires of fantasy and puts them in touch with our fundamental aspirations and destroys our empty ambitions.

It is important to pray as we can and not as we feel we ought to. And when our prayers are answered we may grow in confidence in God the giver of all good things and ultimately of Himself. And sometimes our prayers are answered and we don't even notice.

So back to our Canadian village. There was a man in the newly restored bar, getting drunk. He says he is finished with God. He was out hunting moose and his plane crashed. He was buried in deep snow, dying. He prayed to God to save him but he did not. He felt totally let down. The barman says, "But you are here. You were saved." "Oh, that's only because some old Eskimo came along."

In this wonderfully created and astonishingly complex world, at harvest and throughout our lives, we do well to abide by the advice given by that great medieval divine, Meister Eckhart, to all who wished to pray: “When you learn to say Thank-you sincerely, you have said all the prayers you ever need say.”

Preached at the Eucharist by the Revd Dr Alan Charters

St Bartholomew's, Dinard

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