

Harvest Festival 2020

Every religion has something like a harvest festival.

And when you think about it, that is not *at all* surprising. Rejoicing in the fact that there's food, that at least for another year, we're not going to starve is just one of the most basic, universal human things there is. And so is that sense of – what should you call it – appreciation, gratitude, awe, wonder – that from the dark earth springs all manner of good things. As Jesus puts in a parable somewhere, we know not how, but somehow nature – water, soil, sunlight, seeds – come together and let us live. Thanks be to God – and that's one of the basic instincts at the heart of all religion, and all their harvest festivals.

For most religions, *food* is pretty central: what you eat, and who you eat it with. So Jews, we all know, don't eat pork and don't eat bacon. Muslims eat meat that is slaughtered in a particular way, *halal* meat. Catholics – and indeed many Anglicans – used to avoid meat on Fridays. Sikhs are entirely vegetarian, and one of their big things is mass community hospitality: when we lived in Southampton the gurdwara there fed literally hundreds of people every Friday night, with wonderful spicy food. We modern Western Christians are actually pretty odd in that there's nothing that really marks out what we do with food which makes us different from the world around us, and it's worth thinking about that on Harvest Day.

At one level of course, our lack of special rules around food is precisely what the New Testament teaches – all that stuff about clean and unclean, teaches Paul, and indeed teaches Jesus, is over-done. Don't worry too much about eating this, or not eating that, or how you wash the pans: focus on the bigger things of justice and mercy. So saying that we should think more about how we deal with food is *not* saying that we should go all complicated and restrictive about it.

But maybe there are at least two things we could do to handle food better from a Christian point of view.

Number one, and this is what Harvest teaches – we should receive it with gratitude. We live in an age, for most of us anyway, of plenty. The supermarket shelves are full. Our own cupboards, most of us, most of the time, are pretty well-stocked. It is easy, really easy, to take all that for granted and to forget to be grateful. Perhaps the most basic point of a Harvest Festival is *thanksgiving* – and of course, that needs to be more than a once a year thing. I wonder how many of us do say grace before meals regularly now - we don't ourselves in the Waddell household, so this really is a case of preacher heal thyself, but *we should*. It's only a little thing, but like so many little things it opens up into a bigger one. If you don't regularly *say* thank you, the danger is over time you forget to *feel* thank you – you drift into a kind of complacent, presumptuous, hard-heartedness. So that's the number one thing for Christians to do with food: be thankful for it.

Number two, and again at the heart of a harvest festival, is be generous with it. I said a moment ago that for most of us, this is a time of plenty – but for some of us, it's not. The supermarket shelves might be full, but some kitchen cupboards are most definitely not. And we know globally of course that hunger continues to be a major problem. So we need to be in the regular, week in, week out, habit of sharing – and the most simple, effective way to do that is to use the box for the foodbank. I know I've said this before, and I've failed to act on it myself, but wouldn't it be great if every time we came to church we brought with us just one thing, one little thing, for the foodbank box? Little acts of generosity, just like saying grace is a little act of gratitude – all those little acts over time add up to a changed heart, and a changed world.

And then lastly, number three, and something I can't really say Harvest Festival is about – quite the reverse, in fact – but something which will help us be generous, and thankful, and is one thing Christians should be doing which makes the stand out not from the other religions, but certainly from most of the world around us. I'm talking about fasting: that is, in some regular way, maybe quite a small way and definitely *not* a showy-off way, deliberately *not* satisfying our hunger. Deliberately *not* eating and drinking our fill, but going without. Jesus, you might remember, didn't give very detailed instructions about fasting – but he *did* say '*When you fast.*' *When you fast*, not if. In other words, yes, this is something Christians *should* be doing. And that's because it is the most fantastic way of:

- *not being controlled by our appetites
- * remembering that life is about more than satisfying those urges;
- * of remembering that everything comes to us a gift and isn't ours by right;
- * of letting our bodies and spirits rest from over-consumption;
- *of really savouring the fantastic-ness of food and drink when we *finish* fasting;
- *and of being sure that we have enough to share with others. If *I'm* not eating it, after all, someone else can.

There can be few practices as useful in so many ways to one's growth as a Christian than fasting. It doesn't have to be a big deal or terribly difficult – maybe just one day a week, from morning to night, nothing but water and maybe a bowl of soup. That is not too hard. And you might find it transformative. Once again, I'm preaching to myself here – I did use to do that, and have rather fallen out of the habit, and I think falling out of the habit has done me spiritual harm. So I'm going to get started again. That's my Harvest lesson this year.

Gratitude. Generosity. A little bit of fasting. These are things that should mark how Christians deal with food. These are the things that will change us, and change the world. And that, after all, is the point of having a Harvest Festival. Amen.