

## Reflection for **Harvest Festival Sunday** by Jacqueline Kemp (Reader)

Jesus was frequently challenged by lawyers on specific regulations in the Jewish Law. Whilst he often used the enquiry to make a teaching point, he sometimes rebuffed them saying that this detail was a burden to the ordinary Jew and all that was essential was to love God and love one's neighbour and the rest would fall into place. The first reading, three verses from Deuteronomy, has always delighted me. It is so simple, so sensible. When you are taking in your harvest from the fields, the vinyards, the olive groves, don't be too earnest about taking the last scrap. Leave it for the needy who can come in afterwards and glean what is left.

We lived in John's home village, Catsfield, population 700+, with a small stone church whose original foundations had been there when William the Conqueror invaded and fought a decisive battle nearby. Harvest Festival was a joy. There was a wheat sheaf brought in by the church warden (a local farmer), baskets of produce from cottage gardens, a specially fashioned loaf made by the baker we all knew. Flowers were everywhere and the familiar hymns sung in a packed church. In the same week, the village school, started by the church in 1843, had its own Harvest Festival and the gifts brought in by the children were taken by them, in the afternoon, to every elderly person in the village. There was also a harvest supper in the village hall.

But this romantic rural vision, known to many older people, has changed over the years. The reality in modern times is that we collect a harvest of food for our family in a trolley at the local supermarket. The food we eat comes from all over the world. The harvest offerings we bring to church are packets, tins and jars to stock the food bank. This year because of the pandemic we still want to rejoice and give thanks for the harvest but we are not allowed to sing.

And what about harvest in 2020 ? Here in the North East of Scotland we are surrounded by farms. The wheat, barley and potato harvest is largely complete. Cattle and sheep have been sent to market. Winter wheat is already sown. The Covid 19 virus dominates the news headlines and makes radical changes to the way we live. The initial response in March to lockdown regulations was to emphasise the importance of ensuring that the family had stocks of food. Supermarkets were crowded and the shelves cleared. However generosity and neighbourliness flourished too as people became concerned about the welfare of elderly people in total lockdown. Volunteering flourished.

What about the Gospel reading ? Like the farmer, we store food ready for the harsh weather ahead. There are traditional ways to preserve food; salting, smoking, ice houses, pickles and jams. These days we add freezing and other modern techniques. This man had a bumper harvest, too big to store in his barns, so he extended this accommodation and sat back to enjoy the prospect of a comfortable future. But he was not going to have a future. The story was told as a response to a question about inheritance and the importance of possessions. Jesus finished by saying that this man was laying up treasure for himself and was not rich towards God.

So what is the essence of the harvest message ? Firstly we thank Almighty God for the abundant harvest of food. Secondly we share all our blessings with those in need, and that goes far beyond food.

*I want to add this footnote. We have been to Australia several times to visit our daughter and family. On Sunday we go to the service at the local Anglican church. The first time we went, I noticed people putting packets and tins of food into a basket as they entered. Was it Harvest Festival today I asked, no said my daughter, it happens every Sunday and is a widespread practice in Christian churches. Later in the service when bread and wine was taken to the priest at the altar, it was followed by the collection and a large basket of food offerings. Many churches have a food bank and what we would call a charity shop for second hand goods on the premises, some provide family counselling too. Churches are places where people in need can go for help.*