

Reflection for Harvest 2023 by Rev'd Canon Michael Last

Take a close look at the final section of Psalm 65 and what you see is an offering of praise to God for the ebbs and flows of the world that is all around us and the way it provides for so many of our needs. It echoes many of the themes and ideas that surround this season of Harvest, reminding us too of God's power both as a creator of the world in which we live and also as the sustainer of life.

*You care for the land and water it;
you enrich it abundantly.
The streams of God are filled with water
to provide the people with corn,
for so you have ordained it.
You drench its furrows
and level its ridges;
you soften it with showers
and bless its crops.
You crown the year with your bounty,
and your carts overflow with abundance.*

Our modern world is one that is complex, with few if any of us growing or producing a high proportion of what we eat or need for every day life. We are reliant on others and, as a result, it is all too easy to forget or fail to see the hand of God at work as the sustainer of life.

If I am talking with children at this season, I will sometimes share what I refer to as the "five-finger prayer" where you look at your hand and each finger encourages you to give thanks for each step our food takes to come to our table.

1. Starting with God - the giver the sustainer of life
2. The farmer or fisherman who brings in the harvest of land or sea.
3. The food processors who add variety, longevity, and packaging to that harvest.
4. The distributors and retailers who made it available to us in the shops.
5. The person in our household who shops and prepares the food for the table.

A simple prayer and yet one that shows how complex our world is and reminds us of the hand of God behind all things.

Today's Old Testament reading from Deuteronomy, one of the books of the Law, highlights exactly same thing - how the complexity of settled life, and a backdrop of plenty can all too quickly lead us to forgetting the presence of God.

The people of Israel have escaped from Egypt where they were slaves; they have traveled around for many years; they have gone through many hardships. All though that period God has been there for them, not with a great store of food and wealth that they can draw on, but providing just what they need when they need it - manna from heaven, water from the rock, healing from snake bites.

Now, though, they are about to see a change in lifestyle, after a generation or so of living as nomads. They are going to settle down and develop towns and villages, planting farms and vineyards, working on the land, growing wheat, vines, olives and all sorts of other things. But as they prepare to settle down God gives them a warning - do not forget how you got here. It was me that led you out of Egypt, it was me that gave you this land.

As you care for it, as your barns start to fill, bring an offering back to me. Worship me and give thanks, just as we are doing today.

As you look at this section of Deuteronomy and the other Old Testament laws in relation to harvest what becomes clear is that it is not what is left at the end or what you can afford to spare that is offered to God as a thank offering. No - God is saying I want the first fruits.

When it comes to setting your priorities, God wants to be top of that list.

However, when it comes to setting our priorities in a complex modern world how often do we forget God?

Harvest is a time of thanks – yes – but also a time to look at our priorities.

The question it poses is - where does God fit in?

Look back again at Psalm 65 and I think there is also another challenge embedded in its words.

“You care, You drench, You crown” - a clear reminder to us that as much as we may think we own this world it is in fact God’s and we are charged with its care. How are we doing on that front?

Look at the issue of climate change or crisis - the answer is clearly, not very well.

During our recent holiday in Canada what struck me were some of the changes that have taken place over the last 10+ years since I ministered there, and I suspect some of these changes can be traced back to climate change and global warming. Let me give you just a couple of examples.

Firstly, wildfires. They are a natural part of the life in Canada and have been for years, with new life and growth following the fires. Yet this year was different - much bigger, and more intense than normal. The fires were in the Yukon and British Columbia, hundreds of miles from where we were in Saskatchewan, yet even with some of the fires having burnt out there was haze and smoke in the air in a way you could smell and almost taste. Health warnings at times, especially for those who suffer from respiratory issues.

Secondly, winters out on the prairie, although still hard, have not been as bad in recent years. The result - more deer, moose, elk etc. have survived and, with that, wolves have been moving south - something unheard of 10 years ago. The first signs of conflict are there between wolves and local cattle farmers.

We can no longer ignore changes in the climate. It may be gradual but it is making a difference, bringing with it real life changing situations in some parts of the world.

The SEC has its own Net Zero policy and a working group is looking to implement that across our church. Tomorrow, for example, the clergy of this diocese at one of our regular sessions will be looking at this policy and how, in practical terms, it shapes each of our churches in the future.

This though, is not just a challenge for governments and organisations, it is also a challenge for each of us as individuals - to ask how are we caring for and looking after the creation God has placed into our hands. That may well result in us acknowledging our failures and also changing our habits and actions.

This harvest celebration and the creation season that draws to a close as we enter October is a time to give thanks, but it also a time to reflect and act on the challenges that caring for God’s creation brings, both corporately and individually.

As we spend a moment in reflection, the words of Psalm 65 again.

You care for the land and water it;

you enrich it abundantly.

The streams of God are filled with water

to provide the people with corn,

for so you have ordained it.

You drench its furrows

and level its ridges;

you soften it with showers

and bless its crops.

You crown the year with your bounty,

and your carts overflow with abundance.