

Burton Fleming Harvest Festival (21.10.18)

Joel 2: 21 – 27; Matthew 6: 25 – 33

So, we're celebrating Harvest Festival, and I'm just pleased – so far at least – nothing's gone wrong. Not like the church where they were having the Harvest Festival and all the produce was beautifully laid out at the front; and the vicar asked the children if they could name the produce. And they were calling out Potato, Carrot, Turnip, you name it; and the vicar asked if they could think of one word that covered it all; and one little lad called out "Gravy!"

And then there was the village where the local cricket team had had a particularly good season so they thought they'd celebrate by having a combined cricket and harvest themed service. So they got a pair of stumps and they laid out some artificial grass between the two; and during the service they asked folk to come forward and place their harvest offering on it. There was some lovely produce and it was all laid out

between these two stumps, until a woman came forward with a bag of frozen peas. And the vicar said No, she couldn't put them down. So she went back to her seat and the woman next to her asked what had happened. And she shrugged her shoulders and she said "No peas for the wicket!"

Listen, I've got more!

- Why shouldn't you tell a secret on a farm?
Because the potatoes have eyes and the corn has ears!
- Why did the scarecrow win the Nobel Prize?
Because he was out standing in his field!
- What day do potatoes hate the most?
Fry-day!
- What do you get when you cross a robot and a tractor?

A transfarmer!

I think I'd better stop there: they're getting a bit risqué, aren't they. Actually I'm not the sort of vicar that thinks you've got to start every sermon with a

joke: in fact it's not the way we carry on at the Priory: we take ourselves far too seriously for that. But today is a festival! It's a Harvest Festival! It's a day for simply letting our hair down. I know the potatoes probably haven't quite finished yet, but basically it's all over for another year. After all that starting at dawn and going on way beyond dusk, combined-ing in the head lights, it's all been brought in. And we just pause, give thanks and recognise that a miracle has occurred.

It's a miracle because God provides it; and Jesus says Don't worry, Don't be anxious: God has provided. Now I know it might be a bit difficult to look a farmer in the eye and somehow with a straight face say Don't worry. It a bit like when the village Rector was passing a very well kept garden and stopped to admire the beautiful flowers...."The Lord and you have done remarkable things to this garden," said the Rector to the owner. "Well, thank you Rector",

replied the owner, "but you should have seen it when it was only the Lord in charge!"

I bet there's been plenty of anxiety this year with all that rain early on and then that long, hot, dry summer. And it may be you've not brought in as much as you'd have hoped for at the end of it. Although I guess it's true, all the same, that all the worrying that's been done couldn't have altered anything, one way or the other. And whatever has happened on our farms, in whatever limited way this year, has been a miracle. And it's a miracle because it comes from God. And when you go out into the fields to work the land, you're getting caught up, and implicated, and co-operating with how God blesses the earth. And that's awesome. This is holy ground. That is holy produce. And we should approach with unadulterated reverence and awe and thanksgiving.

Not that Jesus lets us entirely off the hook. He says, even if we're not to worry, we've got to strive for God's

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righteousness. So we can't have a Harvest Festival without addressing some righteousness-like sort of questions as well. We've got to address our minds and our consciences to whether the produce we have gathered in is distributed justly. Not just globally, with the issues of people starving and literally dying of hunger, but even in our own communities there are people simply not getting a fair share and having to rely on food banks to feed their kids.

I've done two school Harvest Festivals this week. And at both of them the offering of food has been given to the Hinge Centre in what's now called the Havenfield Estate off Gypsy Road in Brid. And after the second one I took a whole car load of stuff – estate car, back seats down, completely full – and the woman at the Hinge said she was so grateful and they'd get making it up into food parcels for that afternoon. Now I knew that literally only the previous day they'd had the same again. But that's the level of need in Brid right now. So we need to approach Harvest Festival with a degree

of penitence and a degree of soul searching for inspiration about how we can organise our society a bit more justly.

And then there's the whole hoary chestnut of how we find the balance between profitability and sustainability. And with this new IPCC report out inly this week, reckoning we've only got about 20 years left carrying on as we are until the whole thing just implodes; this isn't just territory for bleeding heart environmentalists to indulge in abstract questions about an imponderable future. If you're farming now, and you're hoping the capital value of your farm represents the pension policy on which you might retire in 20 years' time, you might be in for a rude shock . . . unless we change how we carry on. And yet everybody has a bottom line. But I guess the bottom line is: there won't be a bottom line, if we don't change.

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And when we factor in that we've already realised that this is holy ground; that farming is practical theology; it's applied God-stuff; making sure we have a sustainable future and that we're not mucking up God's blessing for future generations is all the more awesome and something we contemplate with reverence and fear.

And we can't have a harvest Festival without mentioning these things. I'd be in dereliction of my duty if I climbed into this pulpit without doing so. But, even so, we don't need to beat ourselves up about it too much this evening. Because this evening our primary privilege is to celebrate the miracle that harvest represents and, like people throughout the generations, to join with the Book of Joel to "eat in plenty and be satisfied, and praise the name of the Lord [our] God, who has dealt wondrously with [us.]

So, one more farming joke. Who tells chicken jokes? Comedihens! Boom, boom! Amen!