

**Sermon for Harvest Thanksgiving, 17 April, 2016**  
**[Rev Bob Eyles ©]**

Harvest Thanksgiving, or Harvest Festival, has been a special day of celebration for the families who have lived in rural areas of our land during the whole time of Pakeha settlement. But as our society has become more urbanized and as fewer people have gardens, these special services have tended to die out.

The ancient Hebrews believed that, after wandering for years in the desert, God had blessed them with the gift of a good land. As we read this morning:

***The LORD your God is bringing you into a good land, a land with flowing streams, with springs and underground waters welling up in valleys and hills, a land of wheat and barley, of vines and fig trees and pomegranates, a land of olive trees and honey, a land where you may eat bread without scarcity, where you will lack nothing. Deuteronomy 8:7-9***

Enjoyment - at last - of the promised land, was part of the covenant God had made with their ancestor Abraham. God promised to bring the Hebrews to a good land; on their part, they would honour God in their worship and keep his commandments. In order to help them keep the covenant they had certain rules to follow; these included set procedures about making an offering to God, thus acknowledging him as the Lord, the source of their life, and the gifts they enjoyed. Later in the book of Deuteronomy, in chapter 26, we read:

***'...you shall take some of the first of all the fruit of the ground, which you harvest from the land... You shall go to the priest who is in office at that time, and say to him, "Today I declare to the LORD your God that I have come into the land that the LORD swore to our ancestors to give us. The priest will take the basket from your hand and place it before the altar of the LORD your God.'***

Our tradition of the Harvest Thanksgiving services follows the ancient practice of offering first fruits as a sign of thankfulness. During the Middle Ages in England there was tradition of having a loaf of bread made from the first of the wheat crop brought to the church on the 1st of August each year. This was offered in the great prayer of thanksgiving in the service of Holy Communion, giving thanks for the new covenant established by Christ; and was then shared among the people in the sacrament.

Historians tell us that this Mediaeval tradition was revived in an 1843 service held in a Cornwall village. By the end of the nineteenth century, the parish celebration of the harvest thanksgiving was being practiced widely in Great Britain and in the colonies.

In the lifetime of most of us, with the advent of refrigeration, of global trade by ship and then by cargo jet plane, of supermarkets, and of pensions, we have become able to buy food from around the world at any time of the year! It is all so easy that we tend to take the supply of food staples and food delicacies, for granted. The dangers of flood, drought, wind storm or fire, that led to real thanksgiving and often sighs of relief for the farmer when his harvest was safely brought in, have largely disappeared for us as suburban consumers!

But not for all of us – we have only to listen to the notices at the beginning of our Sunday morning services as the food bank appeals for donations; we have only to attend our Sunday evening meal in the church hall to realize that some people are struggling. So, one of the key problems we face in our day is that the distribution of wealth is becoming less and less even. God's love knows no limits and no bounds and so part of our mission as the church is to help the poor and marginalized in the name of Jesus.

Our passage from Deuteronomy contains a strong warning:

***Do not say to yourself, "My power and the might of my own hand have gotten me this wealth." But remember the LORD your God, for it is he who gives you power to get wealth, so that he may confirm his covenant that he swore to your ancestors, as he is doing today. If you do forget the LORD your God and follow other gods to serve and worship them, I solemnly warn you today that you shall surely perish. – [Dt 8:17-19]***

In our house group this is a warning that comes up loudly and clearly meeting by meeting, through the articles we read! As technology has improved, as scientific understanding has improved, as economic power has increased, so the temptation to become complacent, arrogant and careless of the land, the soil, the vegetation, the atmosphere and the oceans, increases. Thus we are faced with the complex of environmental problems that characterize our world!

So, let us plant our gardens and window boxes, let us compost our vegetable waste, let us love and nurture the life of the piece of land each of us is responsible for... Let us also be actively concerned for district-wide issues such

as the health of Lake Horowhenua or the spread of noxious weeds. But our responsibility goes much further than that. The ancient Jews felt ownership and then responsibility for what became known as ‘The Chosen Land’ - the land of Israel.

Jesus made a visionary leap beyond this as he said to Nicodemus in John 3.16: **‘For God loved the world so much that he gave his only Son...’** For us, in our time, ‘the world’ – the planetary ecosystem – is our responsibility. And so we need to be actively concerned when corporations and governments ignore environmental issues in their pursuit of money and power!

I have long had a dream that our country of Aotearoa New Zealand, with all its advantages of a temperate climate, of isolation and the protection of surrounding oceans, of a small population and high levels of education... can become an example to the world of far-sighted and sustainable environmental policies. For the church in our country, I believe this should be a key part of our Christian mission!!

Let us pray: Gracious God, whose love embraces the world and all of its life, fill us with your concerns and priorities we pray, so that we can take the thanksgiving for harvests safely gathered expressed by our forbears, to a new concern - planted in the depths of our beings - for the world, the world you love. This we pray in the name of Jesus. Amen.