

The tradition of celebrating Harvest Festival in churches as we know it today began in 1843, when the Reverend Robert Hawker invited parishioners to a special thanksgiving service for the harvest at his church at Morwenstow in Cornwall. Victorian hymns such as "We plough the fields and scatter", "Come ye thankful people, come" and "All things bright and beautiful" helped popularise his idea of harvest festival and spread the annual custom of decorating churches with home-grown produce for the Harvest Festival service.

Harvest Festival is a celebration of the food grown on the land.

Thanksgiving ceremonies and celebrations for a successful harvest are both worldwide and very ancient. In Britain, we have given thanks for successful harvests since pagan times. We celebrate this day by singing, praying and decorating our churches with baskets of fruit and food in a festival known as 'Harvest Festival', usually during the month of September.

Harvest Festival reminds Christians of all the good things God gives them. This makes them want to share with others who are not so fortunate. In schools and in Churches, people bring food from home to a Harvest Festival Service. After the service, the food that has been put on display is usually made into parcels and given to people in need. In our case they are collected up and given to Vaughan House in Guildford, a hostel for homeless men and women...

Harvest festivals are traditionally held on or near the Sunday of the Harvest Moon. This is the full Moon that occurs closest to the autumn equinox (about Sept. 23). In two years out of three, the Harvest Moon comes in September, but in some years it occurs in October. Unlike the USA and Canada, the UK does not have a national holiday for Harvest Festival.

In many churches, as we today sadly did not due to lack of interest, Harvest Lunches and suppers are held as a way of bringing the parish or community together to celebrate the safe delivery of the Harvest by tasting some of the produce, mainly fruit and crops that the farmers have produced. But more importantly it is an opportunity to get together to celebrate our lives together.

So as the history of the Harvest festival has progressed from days in Cornwall in 1843, so today we use Harvest festival as an opportunity to consider not just the thanksgiving of the harvest that guarantees that we will eat for another year. It gives us the opportunity to consider the implications that harvest festival has on a local and global scale.

On the local front we should be thinking today about the problems that exist in our own society. There has been a mixed reaction to the news that a food bank was being established in the Cobham area. Whether we like it or not there is a real need in our local area for a food bank. There are leaflets at the back of the church which will give you all the information you will need to see how, as individuals and as a congregation, we can support this very worthwhile local charity. The Cobham area food bank, through its affiliation with the Trussell Trust, has both local and national accreditation so it is being established on proven organisational lines and is not just the whim of some local philanthropists. Indeed, we have one of our congregation, Hugh Bryant acting as one of the trustees and manager of the food bank and we as a Parish will be donating a generous sum of money to help with the running costs. I am also involved as Chair of Trustees. At this Harvestide I would urge us all to think about how we can contribute to the food bank, not just by bringing cans and toiletries to place in the box at the back of the church but also by possibly donating not just money but our time as well by acting as a volunteer helper.

You do not need me to remind you of the situation globally where people are starving because of the inefficiency or lack of political concern for those who starve because of inefficiency or corruption or both. We cannot allow ourselves to be lulled into a false sense of security by asking the question, "What can I do to change things?". Perhaps we might like to ask our MP what the Government is doing to make our contribution to aid to the emerging world more appropriate. For example, I cannot see how we can justify sending millions in aid to a country where over 40% of the population live without electricity or running water but see that its government is pursuing a nuclear weapons programme. All we can really do is to hope and pray that things will change. I am also uncertain how the new benefits arrangements of Universal Credits will help those who are in need.

The parable of the sower talks about the seed being thrown on both the good and the bad soil. About how sometimes the seed flourishes and sometimes it is choked by the fact that it is not given the opportunity to prosper. There are social as well as theological aspects to this story which Jesus told to encourage his listeners to think about their personal faith. It is about the church and how we live out the Gospel in a world where materialism is rampant and we are faced with a more divided nation and world than ever before.

Harvest festival has changed from the vision of Robert Hawker in rural Cornwall. What do we know about Robert Hawker?

Romantic poet, professional eccentric, a compassionate clergyman with a penchant for opium; the Reverend Robert Stephen Hawker was a diverse, free character quite unfettered by Victorian social attitudes. In a life crammed with the unconventional, his reputation spread far beyond the North Cornish parish where he spent most of his life.

Robert dressed oddly. Sober clerical garb wasn't for him and it was said his only black clothes were his socks; he loved bright colours. Often, he wore a long purple coat or a yellow poncho he'd fashioned from a horse-blanket, and underneath a fisherman's blue jersey. Crimson gloves, brown or red trousers, and dark sea-boots added to his strange but cheerful appearance and he enjoyed hats, either broad-brimmed or a more flamboyant fez. But he did leave us the tradition of Harvest Festival.

It serves as an opportunity for the Church to remind its followers that the world has changed but that some things have not changed- we still have poverty, need and the frightening reality that poverty and hunger are not just in the emerging nations but here on our own door step- literally. The challenge of Harvest is to ask the question – what are we going to do about it?

Amen.