



GRAY'S
INN

Sermon at Gray's Inn Chapel on Sunday 8th October 2023 – Harvest

Revd Stephen Baxter

Text: Luke 12: 16-30

The Harvest Festival as now celebrated in many churches was designed by the resourceful and eccentric Rev Robert Hawker, a colourful vicar serving at Morwenstow, Northern Cornwall around the middle of the nineteenth century to celebrate the communal relief of gathering in the harvest on which survival depended. You may know his story.

Previously, as a student at Pembroke, Oxford, Hawker got a message to say that his father could no longer finance his studies. Hawker promptly cycled to Cornwall and proposed to his wealthy godmother who was 21 years older than him.

She accepted and they cycled back to Oxford, honeymooning at Tintagel. He continued his studies with substantially better resources. God had provided.

Rev Hawker was an intriguing figure who spent most of his ministry serving seafarers – rescuing or burying victims of shipwrecks and trying to prevent his parishioners stripping wrecks.

He loved colourful clothes, apparently at some point dressed up as a mermaid and excommunicated his cat for mousing. His wife died at 81 and Hawker married again a year later – this time to a woman 40 years younger.

The essence of harvest is the celebration of fruits of the partnership between God and his beloved people – the cycle of provision - the fruitful cultivation of the abundant resources God provides in his lavish generosity. Here in the midst of this

this great world in a city as the previous bishop of London used to love saying – here harvest comprises:

1. celebrating and expressing thanks for the provision of what physically sustains us,
2. expressing thanks for the fruits cultivated by this City and
3. expressing thanks for the privilege and responsibility of being called as partners with God in nurturing and preserving the creation in which he delights and which in those wonderful words of Manley Hopkins is charged with God's grandeur.

We need to stop and consider the access that most of us enjoy to a staggering array of food and drink produced for us by chains of providers who face challenges and concerns from which most of us are largely immunized – the vagaries of weather, uncertainties due to climate change –intense competition, unjust distribution of profit and risk across different components of the supplier-chain.

And here today we also give thanks and pray for the work and harvest of London and for its stewardship of God-given resources...for all businesses great and small. Looking at the Square Mile alone It's estimated that 587,000 jobs are based in the City – up 8% since pre-pandemic 2019; with an increasingly diverse, international workforce that contributes £85 billion of gross value added to the UK economy.

I have much to learn about the legal world but I know how crucial the legal industry and judicial system are to attracting international business to the City. As a recent KPMG report points out how English law is so prominent in international commercial agreements governing 40% of global corporate arbitrations

And of course much of the crucial and precious textures and inspiring distinctiveness of life in this City come from the small businesses, the restaurants, bars and shops and I like to think the churches and their musicians that support the banking, insurance, legal and financial businesses.

The Creation accounts in Genesis emphasise that we have been created to work in partnership with God – a principle reaffirmed in the covenant established by God with Abraham...all the earth will be blessed through Abraham and his ancestors. Our part in providing this blessing is to tune into the patterns of God by using what we have been given, our resources, talents, time.

In Luke's gospel, Jesus warns us against excess storing up in barns for ourselves...use what we have for the work of God...don't worry; live in the moment; God will provide through his cycle of provision – God working in partnership with us.

A critical aspect of this work has to involve an urgent, prioritised focus on combatting climate change and the necessary reduction in consumption.

As this country led the world in industrialisation, so we now must lead in decarbonisation – which has to involve taking tough decisions urgently to develop and finance technology and provision of sustainable energy and transport systems and also critically support for those in regions most affected by the ravages of climate change.

There is a demonstrative risk that politicians will fail to take the courageous longer term decisions and will continue to be short-termist, will continue to defer, prevaricate and exacerbate the challenges for future generations. The messages from scientists are increasingly consistent and frighteningly clear and irrefutable.

Protection of creation after all has been one of the five marks of mission of our church since 1984 but one that has often been woefully understated:

To strive to safeguard the integrity of creation, and sustain and renew the life of the earth

This is an essential part of our discipleship. It was a fundamental responsibility given to us at creation.

Being thankful makes life easier. Being thankful is always the starting point...as we started this service – come ye thankful people come - harvest was a matter of life or death for our predecessors – as they were thankful, so we must stop, every day, to reflect on what we have, food drink and an overwhelming abundance of other resources; thanks for this City; and thanks for being called to partnership with God in his cycle of provision.

Brother David Steindl-Rast a Benedictine monk & scholar astutely explains that it is not happiness that makes us grateful, it is gratitude that makes us happy.

And we have the God-given mechanics to help us. Biology is oh so not a specialty of mine – I attended a northern boys grammar school with probably 10 classics masters and 1 biology teacher...I never had any biology lessons and much of biology is still uncharted territory for me. However, I understand that gratitude may stimulate the hypothalamus which manages stress in brain and also the ventral tegmental region which helps produce pleasure in the brain. We are wired to be grateful. Be thankful every day.

I am very thankful to Michael Doe for his kind support, time and wisdom over the past few weeks. It is indeed daunting following him as Preacher. The size of the task was further emphasised when I saw all the photos of his various roles in Miscellany...including dressing up as Mick Jagger. In serving, Michael used his extensive resources and talents. I have been loitering around the City in various guises since the mid-80s and I have been loitering around the church for 60 years, so I hope I have some resources of relevance. I very much look forward to serving the chapel and its community and I look forward to discussing with many of you on how I can best serve...and I will keep working on my Mick Jagger impression.