

Harvest Festival

Deuteronomy 8: 7-18

7 For the Lord your God is bringing you into a good land—a land with brooks, streams, and deep springs gushing out into the valleys and hills; 8 a land with wheat and barley, vines and fig trees, pomegranates, olive oil and honey; 9 a land where bread will not be scarce and you will lack nothing; a land where the rocks are iron and you can dig copper out of the hills.

10 When you have eaten and are satisfied, praise the Lord your God for the good land he has given you. 11 Be careful that you do not forget the Lord your God, failing to observe his commands, his laws and his decrees that I am giving you this day. 12 Otherwise, when you eat and are satisfied, when you build fine houses and settle down, 13 and when your herds and flocks grow large and your silver and gold increase and all you have is multiplied, 14 then your heart will become proud and you will forget the Lord your God, who brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery. 15 He led you through the vast and dreadful wilderness, that thirsty and waterless land, with its venomous snakes and scorpions. He brought you water out of hard rock. 16 He gave you manna to eat in the wilderness, something your ancestors had never known, to humble and test you so that in the end it might go well with you. 17 You may say to yourself, “My power and the strength of my hands have produced this wealth for me.” 18 But remember the Lord your God, for it is he who gives you the ability to produce wealth, and so confirms his covenant, which he swore to your ancestors, as it is today.

Well, today we celebrate our harvest festival, and as it says in the reading just now, we give thanks and praise to God for the good land he has given us, and we remember how much we have to thank God for. It's a festival that goes back thousands of years where we are reminded of God's spiritual and physical blessings – it is an opportunity to be thankful, not so much for what we have, but rather for whatever situation God has allowed us to be in – whether a lot, or not very much we are thankful.

At the start of the passage in Deuteronomy, we have the context - these words of Moses were expressed before the Israelites had entered the promised land. They are given that marvellous image of a good land, a fertile productive land, a land with brooks, streams, and deep springs gushing out into the valleys and hills; a land with wheat and barley, vines and fig trees, pomegranates, olive oil and honey; a land where bread will not be scarce and they would lack nothing;

But then we get into the meat of the passage (if you'll excuse the pun), there is a reminder that when we have eaten our fill, that we should praise and thank the Lord for what he has given us. There is also a warning not to forget God's covenant, not to become proud and claim it was all through our own (and our current age, our farmers') efforts and not to forget that it is all through the gift of God.

Having led the Israelites out of Egypt and through the rigours of the desert and the wilderness, Moses is seeming to fear that with the coming prosperity of the promised land that the Israelites might forget God and the covenant they have with God and take all the credit for their success. Arguably, this covenant can be simplified as "Do good and worship God and get rewarded; do bad and forget God and get Punished".

But today, we cannot simply turn to these promises of wealth and prosperity and apply them directly, rather we must look at it in terms of the new covenant spelled out by Jesus in the Gospels. The commandments are still the same – love God and love our fellow man but our rewards are not on earth and Christians will face poverty, rejection and persecution (as exemplified in the early Christians, but also even now in some parts of the world).

Prosperity and health may make it harder to depend on God – when we don't have enough materially it may seem easier to respond with gratitude, but when we have enough materially, how often do we respond with gratitude? How often do we also respond with responsibility?

Just think back in your own lives when do you think most about and rely on God – when things are going well or when life is a struggle and things are not going so well? Yes, Jesus is there to carry us when times are hard, as in the allegory of walking with Jesus leaving footprints. But he is also there during the good times.

So, today is a reminder that when things are going well and the harvest is bountiful, that we should be thankful and grateful, that God is the one who causes the good things that are happening.

I'll just end with a short story...

A man was out hunting in the woods when his way was blocked by two big grizzly bears. Knowing his best strategy was to scare them, he aimed his gun into the air and fired... with absolutely no effect on the bears. In fact, they got angry, so now his way was blocked by two big angry grizzly bears and he had no option but to run away. The bears followed and soon caught up with the breathless hunter... He sank down to his knees and for the first time in many years started to pray "Please God, make these grizzlies Christian bears, amen."

The hunter turned around to face the bears and saw that his prayers had been answered. The two bears were kneeling in front of him, front paws clasped together and saying grace "Good bread, good meat, thank the lord, let's eat!"

So, with that, let us pray

"For the gifts of heaven in the fields of the earth, may our souls sing out to the Lord.

For the fruitful lands as they yield their worth, may our hearts give thanks to him.

We may plough the soil, we may plant the seed, But God will make it grow,

And the harvest comes from the tender goodness Of the Father's hand.

As the trade winds blow over thirsty plains, may our souls sing out to the Lord,

And the storm clouds pour with reviving rains, may our hearts give thanks to him.

Every season whispers the mystery, The glorious rhythm of life, Till the harvest comes from the boundless goodness Of the Father's hand.

Amen"

(Prayer based off lyrics by Stuart Townend - "For the gifts of heaven")