

Harvest Morning Prayer (St Edmunds & St Matthews October 2020)

Isaiah 25 1-9, Philippians 4 1-9

In the Name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit, Amen

Rejoice in the Lord always, again I will say rejoice. It's harvest time, things are being safely gathered in and all's right with the world. Or maybe not. It's not been an easy year so far, and there is perhaps reason to believe that it isn't getting any easier. It's easy to think that there is something missing, our friends, our loved ones in different ways, time to spend with others in regular events. It's not easy to rejoice in the autumn of 2020, whatever Paul says.

Harvest is traditionally a time of getting in the food and crops that will keep us going through the winter. Where we have lived in the past that could mean huge fields of crops being harvested, picturesque scenes of people working in the fields, and everywhere harvest suppers, like George's fish and chips. Or whatever.

When we got married everyone assumed that it was only a matter of time before Peter became a Baptist minister, and I earned the money. For our wedding presents we got huge flan dishes, (I think they're called quiches now) serving bowls and lots of cookery things. To be fair, I did used to cook a lot - I learnt to cook at Cambridge when Emma Thompson and Steven Fry were planning a takeover of the world of entertainment a few colleges away. I was discovering the difference between green peppers and garlic. My first job was cooking for twelve people in a care home at weekends. It was fine when I had phoned my mum to ask how you roasted a chicken. The amount of potatoes I learnt to peel lead to my husband not resembling our wedding photographs for long ... I cooked a lot when our three teenagers used to bring their pals home to our centre of town house, and there was always a cupboard of super noodles for emergencies. Now Hannah has a ninja cooker thing that roasts a whole chicken in half an hour, while probably suggesting three recipes for gravy for all I know.

We have an interesting relationship with food after all, one we share with people in both the Old and New testaments. In our reading from Isaiah today the Lord is going to provide quite a feast for his people on the mountains, of well matured wines and food filled with marrow, which was apparently a good thing. At harvest time we think of our food, perhaps not in terms of a huge display of produce this year (though our redoubtable flower ladies (any men?) have achieved great things), but in what we can literally bring to the table.

Gone are the days when people in the countryside would compete to bring the biggest marrow to church for proud display. I am not too sad about that - when Peter had seven churches each one would feature marrows in their displays, then would present a selection to me to cook for our hungry children at the Vicarage. Challenging times! I still cannot quite face a marrow to this day.

Now we think of food a bit differently. We have seen empty shelves in supermarkets this year, maybe even very recently, as people worry about what they will eat if they cannot get out to shop, deliveries are difficult to get, and friends and families may be prevented from bringing food around. Food is an obsession for many, especially when it is in short supply.

Today we collect for those who struggle to get food at any time, but especially now at a time of uncertainty. While we are collecting food stuffs today in this church, you can leave food at any point in the shed at the Vicarage. It will be taken to centres where it can be distributed to those who really need it. The other day Peter shared online how he had received a phone call from someone desperate for a food parcel, and several people immediately offered to help. Isaiah spoke about his listeners who have been a refuge to the poor, a refuge to the needy in their distress, a shelter from the rainstorm and a shade from the heat. Certainly something to think about.

Both Isaiah and Paul have a lot to say about the struggle to live. In Old Testament times there were enemies, other people who had to be fought and defeated, sometimes it seemed with the encouragement of God.

Paul wrote of those who struggled alongside him against those who were opposed to the spread of the new Christian message. And it would have been a struggle. There were problems for this tiny church, for individuals who were risking everything because they believed in the stories and witnesses to Jesus. They had to cope with danger and threat, if only because what they were coming to believe threatened others with vested interests in keeping things as they were. The rich wanted to safeguard their money and position even when they saw suffering and shortages around them. People who had little were in danger of losing what they did have, with jobs and even homes being on the line.

We live in confusing times. Of rules, guidance and advice. Of disparity in society as a tiny number have so much, and many are struggling with inadequate housing, limited food and no job security. What can we do about it? Paul had much to say in his letter. Whatever is true, honourable, just, pure, pleasing and commendable is what we must do, he says. Paul writes that if there is anything worthy of praise, we must think of these things. Keep on doing, he says, those things that you have learnt and received and heard and seen in me, and the God of peace will be with you.

In times when we are missing things, people and opportunities, when times seem unsure and confusing, we have promises from both the Old and New Testament to read for ourselves. The Lord God will wipe away all tears from all faces, says Isaiah, and there are times when we just have to hold onto that thought, and the peace that Jesus offers. Not only at this time of harvest, but in all the days and nights to come. Amen.