

Reflection for 22nd October

Autumn: "Season of mists and mellow fruitfulness" (*John Keats*)

Jesus said "I tell you the truth, unless a grain of wheat falls into the ground and dies it remains only a single seed. But if it dies, it produces many seeds." (*John 12, 23-24*)

For as long as I can remember, for me, harvest festival has been the greatest of all festivals. Our village church would be packed as many came for only that one service in the year. It was one of only four occasions when the choir would sing a processional hymn as they entered the church, and the congregation would join in and raise the roof with unabashed delight:

"Come, ye thankful people, come,
Raise the song of harvest home:
All is safely gathered in,
Ere the winter storms begin:
God our Maker doth provide
For our wants to be supplied:
Come to God's own temple come
Raise the song of harvest home.

All the world is God's own field
Fruit unto his praise to yield;
Wheat and tares together sown,
Unto joy or sorrow grown:
Ripening with a wondrous power
Till the final harvest hour:
Grant O harvest Lord, that we
Holy grain and pure may be."
(H. Alford 1810-1871)

Harvest/autumn is a beautiful time of year, as the trees change their leaves in the shortening days to glorious shades of yellow, orange and even red as the reduced hours of daylight stop them producing chlorophyll and the leaves fall. In a wood they make a natural mat to feed the soil and promote new growth. At home we can leave them on the ground or rake them into heaps and pile them up in some obscure corner of the garden to rot down into leaf mould to dig back into the ground another year, So the cycle of natural life goes on.

What of the seed? Some falls naturally into the ground to die, be renewed and produce a new crop, some is eaten by birds, some falls on the hard path and just dies. Nowadays we have seed merchants who grow plants just for their seed. Carrots, for example are left to flower and produce seed which is carefully collected and preserved, then packed in those brightly coloured little bags that grace the seed displays in garden centres and hardware

stores: the seeds we buy to grow our own crops. Or on a smaller scale we can save seeds from this years crop ourselves to sow the following year.

So we rejoice at harvest. When I first went overseas to work, in France, I missed harvest festival more than any other British event. From France, now married and with a young baby, I went to south Texas. There on the Mexican border I again went to local church or Base Chapel and all through September and October found no sign of a harvest festival. But then came November, and the third Thursday, and I discovered American Thanksgiving. This is much more than just a harvest festival. It is the one time Americans want to be home with their families. It is a national holiday. Servicemen could take their families for Thanksgiving dinner in the Mess Hall for the one meal of the year that is the same throughout the States: roast turkey and pumpkin pie being the main features. For this is more than a thanksgiving for that years harvest: it commemorates the Pilgrim Fathers first harvest back in the early seventeenth century. It is a thanksgiving for national life and freedom. And just as the Queen makes a special Christmas broadcast here, so the President gives a special message to the American people that contains nothing of politics. Above all else, be it British harvest festival or American Thanksgiving, it is a time to count our blessings and be thankful.

And so we come back to our first hymn and the challenge to us. "Grant, O harvest Lord, that we, holy grain and pure may be." And so I end todays reflection with the words of another old hymn, the one sung as the recessional hymn at the Readers day service at which I was licensed 45 years ago. Another congregation raised the roof, this time in Norwich Cathedral, as we sang

"Who is on the Lord's side?
Who will serve the King?
Who will be his helpers
Other lives to bring?
Who will leave the worlds side?
Who will face the foe?
Who is on the Lord's side?
Who for Him will go?
By Thy call of mercy,
By Thy grace divine,
We are on the Lord's side;
Saviour, we are Thine."

(Frances Ridley Havergal 1836- 1879)