

Harvest

I love the hymn *Come ye thankful people come*. Partly its because I love autumn and harvest. But its also the profound insight of that hymn. In comparison, that other favourite, *We Plough the field and scatter*, is a piece of populist knock about fun.

Come ye thankful people come is, in a way, quite a shock it its perception. You see, it begins in a fairly obvious harvesty way

All is safely gathered in
ere the winter storms begin.

We may not be at the mercy of the weather as, say, our great great grandparents were in the middle of the C19th when most people worked on the land, but we can appreciate the sentiment.

But in the second verse the emphasis changes

We ourselves are God's own field
fruit unto his praise to yield

And as the last three verses progress it becomes apparent that we are singing not about apples, marrow and carrots but about us. Harvest means death and death means harvest.

And the link works both ways. For some weeks now the process of growth in fields and gardens and allotments has been coming to a kind of climax. All the activity of the summer, both human work and the natural process, is quite literally bearing fruit. And the natural world, having fulfilled its task, begins to die back. Bonfires, associated in England with Guy Fawkes, go back to ancient times. Bonfire in autumn are the inevitable result of the need to dispose of all the dead plants and trees. All those dead plants and trees which have born fruit - or not as the case may be. Because autumn is not only the time for burning what has died but it also involves a conscious process of pruning, removing those branches and plants which though living no longer produce fruit. It is a

time for judgement. A tree which no longer produces apples or pears or plums is no longer useful. It is pulled out and burnt. In practice in the C21st it is more likely to be put in the brown compost bin, for bonfires are no longer politically acceptable - but even I can remember a time when, at the end of August, the countryside was full of stubble fields burning away. The wheat had been harvested and the stubble was of no further use. So, harvest and death go together in the natural world.

But in the Christian understanding human death and harvest go together too. There are many ways of understanding death. For many people death is simply a calamity. Something to be avoided, not to be discussed, not to be anticipated. In that respect I think my children had a certain advantage. They had father whose way of life involved dealing with death on a daily basis. From an early age, when not at school and too young to be left in the house alone, they accompanied me to funerals. Sometimes they sat at the back of church with the verger. Sometimes they sat in the car at the Crematorium chapel. In later years their friends were startled to discover that sometimes I carried caskets of ashes in the boot of my car. Death to them was, I think, just one of those things - something you discussed over dinner.

But a second common approach to death is to play it down, epitomized in the famous poem some people like to have read at funerals which begins

Death is nothing at all.

I have to say I am not at all happy with those sentiments. Whenever I hear it read I want to jump up and say,

Excuse me: you are mistaken.
Death is something very definite!

Death represents a complete change, both for the one who has died and for those who are left. After death, whether your own or of someone you love, you are never the same.

I believe that the Christian approach to death is to look it straight in the eye - and never to underestimate significance.

The significance of death lies not only in the disruption and the complete change of lifestyle it entails. The significance of death lies in the fact that it is a crucial step in the process of judgement. This is the parallel that the hymn draws with harvest. At harvest time we sort out the good and the bad. The rotten fruit and the barren branches we destroy. And that is what God does with us. I am not referring to the possibility that some people go to heaven and some to hell, although that is part of it. More significant, in my view is that in the process of death God prepares us for heaven by removing from each one of us all that is imperfect. It is as if I am myself a field of grain. I am basically made in God's image. I am a person to be valued and celebrated. But mixed in with all that is good there is bad too. There are habits and traits of character that do not give glory to God and do not serve my fellow human beings. And in my death all the sinful, barren parts of me are burnt away or cleansed. It is a process that has been known throughout Christian history as purgatory - quite literally a time of cleansing, refining, being made pure.

And it is quite rightly an awesome process. A process in which I look in God's mirror, as it were, and see myself exactly as I am, warts and all. To describe the process as 'nothing at all' is sheer folly.

But if death is such a serious and terrifying process, how can we endure to look at it all? The answer lies quite simply in the resurrection. When I die I do not have to answer the question, "Am I good enough to go to heaven?" I am glad I do not have to answer that question because the answer would be "No". But that is the wrong question. The appropriate question is not whether I will go to heaven but how I will go to heaven. And the answer to that question is that I will go to heaven on the back of Christ's love for me as revealed in his crucifixion and resurrection. Christ did not die so that I could go to hell. He died so that I could go to heaven. In my death I am harvested. In my death I am collected into the barn of Christ after I have been purged of all that is barren and sinful.

And when we pray for the dead we do not pray that they go to heaven. We pray that their being made ready for heaven may be as gentle and easy as possible.

Death is the most momentous and earth shattering event ever known. But we face it in the knowledge that the God who walks with us through it loves us more than any human being ever did or ever could. And it is because of that great love that we want to offer God the best harvest we can. We want to do for him what we can in this life. We want to share with him what we can. We want to bear those fruits of the spirit that St Paul made so much of:

Love, joy, peace, kindness, generosity, patience,
gentleness and self control

And then we will sing the harvest hymn with all the saints and angels:

Come then, Lord of mercy, come;
Bid us sing thy harvest home;
Let thy saints be gathered in
Free from sorrow, free from sin;
All upon the golden floor
Praising thee for ever more:
Come with all thine angels come,
Bid us sing thy harvest home.

St Margaret
28th October 2018