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| **Harvest Festival 2009**  **Mark 9, 38-50** | | |
|  | May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all of our hearts be acceptable to you, O Lord, our strength and our redeemer.   Amen.    It really is something of an honour to be occupying the pulpit on such an auspicious occasion as Harvest – especially for me as I feel in some small way vaguely qualified this Sunday.  For those of you who don’t know, I have a degree in Agriculture which I managed to procure at great expense to my parents exactly 30 years ago.    It’s a degree that I don’t have much direct application for in my current line of work but one which I thoroughly enjoyed and which does, at least, give me a fairly direct rooting in the countryside.   I actually specialised in grassland management and I bore my wife occasionally as we walk the dogs by dredging the recesses of my memory for the Latin names of some of the more common grasses that we pass on our rambles.   Apart from that, much of what I learned had receded so far into my memory banks that it’s lost and gone forever.    I have, however, found in the past couple of years more of my university memories coming back to me and the reason is that my elder son, Charlie, decided to follow in my footsteps and has been studying for the very same degree at the very same university some 30 years later.   It was something of a shock for me to discover that we actually share some of the same lecturers – although I assume that they have updated their notes once or twice since 1979.    The thing that struck me most though is how little has actually changed over that 30 year period – to the extent that Charlie has actually used some of my old textbooks and they are still relevant.   I suppose this shouldn’t be that much of a surprise given that Agriculture is one of the oldest sciences known to man and so my editions of “The Nature & Properties of Soils” or “The Anatomy & Physiology of Farm Animals” are still going to be broadly sensible given that soils haven’t changed and a Holstein cow is still a Holstein cow.    That got me thinking about this continuum in agricultural knowledge.   There is no doubt that there have been some great leaps forward in agriculture over thousands of years.   Back in 1701, a man called Jethro Tull invented the seed drill so that the age old activity of planting seeds could be done more accurately.    In 1856, an Augustinian monk called Gregor Mendel started experimenting with breeding peas and over the following 10 years laid down the work that founded the modern science of genetics which has allowed us to develop new and more vigorous crop varieties and massively increase the yields that we can get from the same patch of land.    In 1926, an Irish engineer by the name of Harry Ferguson came up with an ingenious new mechanism to attach implements to the backs of tractors.  His three point linkage was the key that unlocked the great leap forward in agricultural mechanisation that we see today.    All of these and many more sit like milestones along the developmental road of modern agriculture and can lull us into a false sense of our own importance brought about by our ability to control nature.  Of course, as any farmer will tell you, no amount of ingenious machinery or clever plant breeding can allow you to beat the fundamental principles that govern agriculture.    Those principles are as true today as they were in Palestine 2000 years ago.  No matter how advanced your wheat seed is, it will not grow on rocks.   No matter how well you’ve ploughed, drilled and sprayed a crop, you can’t stop a hailstorm flattening it.   No matter how well you’ve cared for your cows, an epidemic of foot and mouth will devastate them.  That’s what is so amazing about agriculture – we can use all our human ingenuity to try to protect ourselves from nature but at the end of the day, God will determine whether we succeed or fail.    And that is why we’re here today.   We’ve come to celebrate the harvest home – a tradition that has endured throughout the centuries.  We’ve come because we see and acknowledge the hand of God in the fruits of the land.   Now I’m not saying the efforts of the farming community should go unrecognised.  I’m sure you’ve all heard the old story about a farmer who purchased an old, run-down, abandoned farm with plans to turn it into a thriving enterprise. The fields were grown over with weeds, the farmhouse was falling apart, and the fences were broken down.    During his first day of work, the vicar stops by to bless the mans work, saying, "May you and God work together to make this the farm of your dreams!" A few months later, the vicar stops by again to call on the farmer. Lo and behold, it’s a completely different place.    The farm house is completely rebuilt and in excellent condition, there are plenty of cattle and other livestock happily munching on feed in well-fenced pens, and the fields are filled with crops planted in neat rows. "Amazing!" the preacher says. "Look what God and you have accomplished together!" "Yes, reverend," says the farmer, "but remember what the farm was like when God was working it on his own!    So it is easy for us to imagine that all of our hard work and the sweat of our brows is what brings us to a successful harvest.  But no amount of hard work will produce 3 or more tonnes of wheat an acre if the sun doesn’t shine or the rain doesn’t fall.   We are blessed in this country by a relatively benign and temperate climate.  We’ve only to look at the impact of droughts in Africa or floods in India or even dust storms in Australia to see how dependent we are on God’s good grace for a successful harvest home.    And I suppose we can all get our heads around that because of the obvious relation of man and nature that occurs in agriculture.  You don’t need a degree in Agriculture to understand that crops don’t grow without sun and moisture.   We can all understand that our role in creating this harvest bounty is only part of the story.   We can all acknowledge that God’s loving touch is the key to the productivity of the land that we tend.   Agriculture is so linked to nature that it’s easy for us to see God’s hand at work.    But how relevant is that to most of the people in this country.  Agriculture only employs 500,000 people in the UK – that’s less than 1% of the population.  If you take a very optimistic view that there might be 3 times as many people who live or work close enough to agriculture to have some good understanding of it then you get to 2 million people – still only 3% of the population.    So the powerful message and symbolism of our harvest bounty as a measure of God’s goodness is lost on most of the people in the country.   When Christ told the parable of the sower, everyone would have understood what he was talking about because everyone was either involved in agriculture directly or very closely associated with it.    What parable would Jesus need to tell today?    The biggest single employer in the UK today?   Any guesses?   The NHS employing 1.5 million people – that’s 3 times the number employed in agriculture.   Next biggest?  Local government.    So would we have the parable of the hospital porter?   Or the parable of the highways maintenance technician?   The problem now is that our occupations are so diverse there is little common ground for simple messages.   Our ‘harvests’ can’t be measured in bushels or gallons.    The impact of nature on our lives and on our productivity is not as direct as it is with agriculture.   We’re protected from the vagaries of the natural world.   Apart from one or two extreme days of the year, the fact that it is raining, snowing or sunny will not impact on whether we go to work or on how much work we do.    This distances us from a knowledge and understanding of the role of God in our lives and in our communities.   I think it explains why so many people now fail to go to church.   The latest statistics show that for the first time ever, attendance at Sunday services in the Church of England has fallen below 1 million people.    The last set of data for 2007 shows a Sunday attendance of 978,000 people, down from 1.2 million 5 years earlier.  More and more people are of the view that they don’t need God in their lives.  They are sure that the prime mover is themselves.  They’re not worried about praying for the rain to come to fill the grain or the rain to stop so that they can harvest their crops.    Today is ‘Back to Church’ Sunday a day dedicated to trying to persuade people who used to come to church to return.   If you look at all Christian denominations in Britain, about 3 million people attend church on a Sunday, 5% of the population.  If you allow for religious observance among non Christians, it is safe to assume that there are at least 90% of the population who consider that they have no need for regular church attendance – even though a lot would state that they are C of E.    The Bishop of Reading got quite a bit of press coverage over the past week for saying that he saw part of the problem being that the Church of England had developed a middle class image which was putting people off.    He said that we should shed our ‘Marks & Spencer’ image and attract the Asda and Aldi generation of worshippers!    He said, “Even today, I meet people who think you have to be highly educated or suited and booted to be a person who goes to church.  That’s so frustrating.  How did it come to this, that we have become known as just the Marks & Spencer option when in our heart of hearts we know that Jesus would just as likely be in the queue at Asda or Aldi?    Jesus got us started with church simply.   Sitting us down in groups on the grass telling simple stories.  Not simplistic but certainly not complicated.  All his first disciples were down to earth people who wanted to know what life was all about.”    Now I’m mot entirely sure about this.  It implies a class divide that is probably statistically correct but I suspect is a symptom and not the real problem.   There are many inner city churches that are full and thriving today with people who shop in Asda and Aldi, just as there are many suburban and rural churches that are empty of Marks & Spencer shoppers.   For me it is back to this issue of relevance.    People come to church because they need God in their lives.   In days gone by, everyone went to church because they saw the relevance of God in their lives.   They went to pray for the rain to come.  They went to pray that their cattle would thrive.  They went to pray for healing of a suffering child.   Religion was vital, their relationship with God was personal.  To break from the church would have been like breaking from your family.    Our modern lives have broken that vital link.  Technology and science has woven a web of protection around us to protect us from nature raw.   We can do things that would have been miraculous 2000 years ago – or even 200 years ago.    We have antibiotics that can virtually raise people from what would otherwise have been their deathbed.   We can move from one end of the country to the other in an hour.   We can talk to each other wherever we are and whenever we want.   Who needs God to perform the miracles when we can do it ourselves?    And that is what is so great about Harvest.  It is a reminder to us not to get too cocky.   It is a reminder that God’s hand is at work in the provision of our most critical need – the food we eat.   I suspect that the real reason we don’t have full churches on a Sunday is not because we’ve developed a class divide in worship but it is because we are failing to get people to understand that God is at work in everything we do.    It starts with understanding the fundamental nature of the agricultural harvest but it goes on – to understanding that whatever our personal harvest should be, it is just as dependent on God’s grace as is that agricultural harvest.   If we could get people to understand their dependence on the grace of God, then we could be celebrating a dual harvest on this ‘Back to Church’ Sunday.  A harvest of food and a harvest of souls.    Let us pray  **Tom Crotty** |  |