

6th October 2024 – Morning Service

Harvest Festival

Martyn Filsak

Call to Worship - Psalm 65:11-13

You crown the year with your bounty and your carts overflow with abundance. The grasslands of the desert overflow; the hills are clothed with gladness. The meadows are covered with flocks and the valleys are mantled with corn; they shout for joy and sing.

StF 125 – Praise and thanksgiving

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| 1) Praise and thanksgiving, Father, we offer,
For all things living you have made good;
Harvest of sown fields, fruits of the orchard,
Hay from the mown fields, blossom and wood. | 3) Father, providing food for your children,
Your wisdom guiding teaches us share
One with another, so that, rejoicing
Sister and brother may know your care |
| 2) Lord, bless the labour we bring to serve you,
That with our neighbour we may be fed.
Sowing or tilling, we would work with you;
Harvesting, milling, for daily bread. | 4) Then will your blessing reach every people;
Each one confessing your gracious hand.
When you are reigning no one will hunger:
Your love sustaining fruitful the land. |

Albert Frederick Bayly © 1986 Oxford University Press

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Prayers of Adoration and Confession

Lord our God, all creation gives glory to you. The world echoes your goodness. The trees of the fields clap their hands in praise. Be exalted, O Lord, above the heavens. Your faithfulness reaches to the skies. You are our helper and provider. All that we have comes from you.

At the beginning, you spoke and all things came into being. You made space and time, particles and elements and stars and galaxies and planets. Your Spirit brooded over the great deep. You provided the spark that made life arise. There were plants and trees and animals and people, and you provided for all of their needs.

When sin arose, you provided the means for forgiveness. You sent your Son to be the Saviour of the world, that all who believe may become the righteousness of God and receive the Holy Spirit. Lord God, Father and Creator, Son and Saviour, Spirit and Helper, we give you the glory and praise. **Amen**

Loving God, when we look at your creation we are filled with wonder and reminded of your perfection.

We are also aware of our faults and shortcomings.

Because of sin the creation suffers.

Because of human greed the world's resources are depleted.

Because of our selfishness, relationships are damaged.

Because we are inwardly focused, our fellowship with each other suffers and the world fails to see your grace.

Lord, forgive. Lord, help us. God, transform our hearts, that we may shine forth your gospel of grace, that humanity and the world are restored to your original plan.

Hear then the words of grace: our sins are forgiven. **Thanks be to God. Amen.**

StF 124 – For the fruits of all creation

- 1) For the fruits of his creation, thanks be to God;
For his gifts to every nation, thanks be to God;
For the ploughing, sowing, reaping,
Silent growth while we are sleeping,
Future needs in earth's safe-keeping,
Thanks be to God.
- 2) In the just reward of labour, God's will is done;
In the help we give our neighbour, God's will is done;
In our world-wide task of caring
For the hungry and despairing,
In the harvests we are sharing,
God's will is done.
- 3) For the harvests of his Spirit, thanks be to God;
For the good we all inherit, thanks be to God;
For the wonders that astound us,
For the truths that still confound us,
Most of all, that love has found us,
Thanks be to God.

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God gave to the Hebrew people through Moses a number of feasts that were to be kept when the people had entered the promised land. One of them is a harvest festival called Sukkot, also known as Tabernacles or Booths. This feast is described in our reading.

Reading: Leviticus 23:39-44

“So beginning with the fifteenth day of the seventh month, after you have gathered the crops of the land, celebrate the festival to the Lord for seven days; the first day is a day of sabbath rest, and the eighth day also is a day of sabbath rest. On the first day you are to take branches from luxuriant trees – from palms, willows and other leafy trees – and rejoice before the Lord your God for seven days. Celebrate this as a festival to the Lord for seven days each year. This is to be a lasting ordinance for the generations to come; celebrate it in the seventh month. Live in temporary shelters for seven days: all native-born Israelites are to live in such shelters so that your descendants will know that I made the Israelites live in temporary shelters when I brought them out of Egypt. I am the Lord your God.” So Moses announced to the Israelites the appointed festivals of the Lord.

One of the features of Sukkot as celebrated by the Jews in recent history was to pray for rain, so that there would be a good harvest in the year ahead. Israel is a land that is quite arid in parts, and so the provision of rain was then, and is now, important. Our song reminds us of the One who meets our spiritual thirst, just as the rain meets our natural need for water.

StF 544 – As the deer pants for the water

- 1) As the deer pants for the water,
So my soul longs after You.
You alone are my heart's desire
And I long to worship You.
- 2) I want You more than gold or silver,
Only You can satisfy.
You alone are the real joy-giver
And the apple of my eye.
- Ch) *You alone are my strength, my shield,
To You alone may my spirit yield.
You alone are my heart's desire
And I long to worship You.*
- 3) You're my Friend and You are my Brother,
Even though You are a King.
I love You more than any other,
So much more than anything.

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The context of these verses is set out earlier in the chapter when we can read that Jesus was in Jerusalem for the feast of Tabernacles.

Reading: John 7:37-39

On the last and greatest day of the festival, Jesus stood and said in a loud voice, 'Let anyone who is thirsty come to me and drink. Whoever believes in me, as Scripture has said, rivers of living water will flow from within them.' By this he meant the Spirit, whom those who believed in him were later to receive. Up to that time the Spirit had not been given, since Jesus had not yet been glorified.

Sermon

Sukkot was one of several harvest festivals, held throughout the year in ancient Israel, which are still celebrated today. It represented the final gathering of crops in the year. It also served the purpose of reminding the people of their journey from Egypt to the promised land through the wilderness, when they did not live in permanent homes but only temporary shelters. It was a time of great joy. I love the idea that according to our reading the people were commanded to rejoice! Here's a wonderful thought: rejoicing can be commanded! It's not simply a response to our feelings. It's a decision. Our emotions may catch up later on. The apostle Paul echoes this in the book of Philippians, which has often been described as the epistle of joy. He even says it twice, to make sure that we get the message: *Rejoice in the Lord always. I say it again, rejoice* (Philippians 4:4). Given that the "epistle of joy" was written from a prison cell, this is remarkable indeed!

Back to Sukkot...This is still celebrated by Jews worldwide today, and is a time of joy. The festival begins this year on the evening of October 16th, and runs up to and including the 24th. One of the key features of this festival that Jews observe is the building of booths. In Hebrew the booth is called a sukkah, plural sukkot, hence the name of the feast. Jewish tradition has made certain rules about its construction. It is a temporary structure that is built outside of a person's home, perhaps leaning up against a wall of the home or free standing. It can be built in a garden, courtyard or balcony, in short anywhere under the open sky, with nothing overhanging it. The roof is made of vegetative material such as bamboo sticks, evergreen branches and reeds. The roof must provide some shade but also the sky must be visible through it, so it will be by no means waterproof. Jewish families will use the sukkah for meals, and perhaps spend the nights in it as well. This works well in Israel, where the dry season extends from April to October and the weather is still warm during Sukkot. It doesn't quite work in the UK, especially if the weather is like it has been recently, but then the command was intended to be fulfilled in the promised land of Israel.

For the purposes of the main point of this message I must introduce one further custom, not commanded by Moses, but which developed later and would have been known to Jesus. It is called the water libation ceremony. In the ceremony, on the first seven days of the feast, the priests would use a special golden pitcher to draw water from the Pool of Siloam. They would then walk from the Pool of Siloam, through the Water Gate, up to the Temple, a distance of about a third of a mile, accompanied by a crowd of worshippers. As the priests arrived, shofars (trumpets made of a ram's horn) would be sounded. The priests would then pour the water upon the great altar, along with wine. This symbolises the people's prayers for rain, leading to a good harvest next year.

When the Romans destroyed the Temple in AD70, the ceremony ended as well. However, it was reintroduced from the year 2014, though of course adapted because there is no Temple.¹

Isaiah 12 echoes this ceremony: "*Surely God is my salvation. I will trust and not be afraid. The Lord, the Lord, is my strength and my song. He has become my salvation. With joy you will draw water from the wells of salvation.*" What is remarkable is how Jesus uses this event as the dramatic backdrop to his great statement in John 7:37-39. This was given on the eighth day of the feast.

Whether or not the libation ceremony was performed on the eighth day (which scholars debate) Jesus puts a spotlight on his message. Just as water had been poured out at the Temple, so Jesus points to himself as the source of living water. The thirsty one may come to him and the Holy Spirit would become in that person as streams of living water. If the ceremony did not take place on the eighth day then arguably the impact is even greater as Jesus implies that even if the source of water at the Temple is no longer there, he is the eternal source. The invitation is to anyone! No conditions are placed on the availability of living water except that the person receiving it must believe in (trust in, rely upon) Jesus. Methodist doctrine going back to the time of the Wesleys expresses this universal invitation as “all can be saved”.

Nothing that the earth can supply will quench the spiritual thirst that a person has. Jesus, however, is the source that can satisfy. Not only that, but the living water will overflow, because Jesus describes how streams of living water will flow from within a person. Therefore this is not only about receiving but also giving. What flows in also flows out and becomes a blessing to others! This is important to bear in mind as we seek to be a blessing to our neighbourhoods. We believe. We receive living water. We dispense living water to others. Water is the means to bring life into ourselves and our society. No political system can be a substitute for this. No economic system can be a substitute for this. No religious system can be a substitute for this. No set of rules or behaviours can bring the same result. No psychological system can compete with the true living water. No amount of education, or wealth, or status, or fame, or empty pleasure can bring that level of life-transformation. Only Jesus can satisfy. Only Jesus can bring life and abundance. Only Jesus can transform the dry places into fruitful places, in our lives, our churches and our world.

As we give thanks for the crops this year, let us remember the water that enabled it to grow, and let us remember Jesus, the source of living water that satisfies us and flows out as a blessing to those around us, bringing life and abundance.

Song - Let your living waters

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| 1) Let your living water flow over my soul.
Let your Holy Spirit come and take control
Of every situation that has troubled my mind.
All my cares and burdens onto you I roll. | 2) Come now, Holy Spirit, and take control.
Hold me in your loving arms and make me whole.
Wipe away all doubt and fear and take my pride,
Draw me to your love and keep me by your side. |
| Ch) <i>Jesus, Jesus, Jesus.</i>
<i>Father, Father, Father.</i>
<i>Spirit, Spirit, Spirit.</i> | 3) Give your life to Jesus, let him fill your soul.
Let him take you in his arms and make you whole.
As you give your life to him he'll set you free.
You will live and reign with him eternally. |

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Prayers

Lord of sowing and reaping, you have planted your word in our hearts. Grant that we bear in our lives the fruit of righteousness. Thank you for the gift of eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord, and for the Holy Spirit, our guarantee that your promise will be fulfilled. **Amen.**

King of all nations, enthroned in the heavens, we bring to you a world shaken by conflict, in Ukraine, in the Middle East, and in many other places. We look forward to the reign of Messiah when all people and all creatures shall dwell together in harmony. Until then, send out the gospel of peace by your servants. Lord of the harvest **send forth workers into your field.**²

God of our land, we pray for our nation, where many are adrift for want of knowledge of your love and care. We ask for wisdom, love and courage for those who govern us, that they may work your will in order that all may know their worth and live in peace and prosperity. Lord of the harvest **send forth workers into your field.**

Lord of the Church worldwide, we pray for all those who give their allegiance to Jesus. We think especially of people who are persecuted for their faith. May they be strong and bold. Uphold them by your love and grace. Bless our churches and Circuit as we seek the path by which you are leading us to love and serve our communities, and may the truth of the gospel shine out from us and transform our world.

Lord of the harvest **send forth workers into your field.**

Saviour of the world, may your salvation touch the lives of people who have particular needs of healing, comfort, wisdom or resources. We pray for people in our church fellowships and those outside. Let your power and riches flow into their lives meeting every need. May the gospel of truth bring life to their innermost being. Lord of the harvest **send forth workers into your field.**

Merciful Father, accept these prayers for the sake of your Son, our Saviour Jesus Christ. **Amen.**

The Lord's Prayer

Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name; thy kingdom come; thy will be done; on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread. And forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us. And lead us not into temptation; but deliver us from evil. For thine is the kingdom, the power, and the glory for ever and ever. **Amen.**

Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name, your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as in heaven. Give us today our daily bread. Forgive us our sins as we forgive those who sin against us. Save us from the time of trial and deliver us from evil. For the kingdom, the power, and the glory are yours now and for ever. **Amen.**

StF 130 – We plough the fields and scatter

1) We plough the fields, and scatter
The good seed on the land,
But it is fed and watered by God's almighty hand;
He sends the snow in winter,
The warmth to swell the grain,
The breezes and the sunshine,
And soft refreshing rain:

*Ch) All good gifts around us
Are sent from heaven above;
Then thank the Lord, O thank the Lord,
For all his love.*

2) He only is the maker of all things near and far;
He paints the wayside flower,
He lights the evening star;
The winds and waves obey him,
By him the birds are fed;
Much more to us, his children,
He gives our daily bread:

3) We thank thee then, O Father,
For all things bright and good:
The seed-time and the harvest,
Our life, our health, our food.
Accept the gifts we offer
For all your love imparts,
And, what you most desire,
Our humble, thankful hearts:

Matthias Claudius translated by Jane Montgomery Campbell

Blessing

Lord of all provision, send forth your Holy Spirit into our lives that we may overflow with love and hope, blessing others around, so that the glorious gospel may transform our world. **Amen.**

The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with us all, now and evermore. **Amen.**

¹ This remarkable event was recorded in video and can be seen via the following link:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oK4GDsDuOSA>

² Luke 10:1-2