**A Reflection on an Easter Harvest.**

1 Corinthians 15: 20-28, John 12:24-26.

24th April 2022

Food has become a pressing issue, around the world inflation has driven up the cost of basic foodstuffs, not so long ago a kilo of Edam next door at Countdown could be brought for $10, now you might expect to pay $12. And there are bigger issues than me thinking twice about a cheese sandwich for supper. The war in Ukraine has cut off grain and fertilizer exports from Ukraine and Russia, much of North Africa and the Middle East relies upon these exports and while very high inflation is present now in these countries and is a driver of social unrest, in some of the poorer nations in the region famine is a real possibility.

So food matters, it is a consequential thing, indeed a matter of life and death but when do we think about it in Church? I suppose your mind might occasionally wonder to what biscuits we’ll have with coffee when I ramble on for too long!

One space that churches have made to celebrate and think about food is the Harvest Festival, but they seem to be less and less frequent and this is a shame. There is something endearingly old fashioned about a Harvest Festival, it conjures up images of village life, country folk crowded in to church or chapel with the produce of the land. Like a Spring Flower service it seems picturesque, sweet, but of another time and place maybe.

We stick fairly rigorously to the liturgical year nowadays, these special Sundays don’t sit easily with that and many of my colleagues would look upon them just a little disapprovingly. Where is the theology in piles of pumpkins or pots of daffodils? Where do they fit in the grand narrative of the unfolding church year?

I think there is good theology a plenty if we but look.

There is a case to be made that, as we have become so removed from the cycle of the seasons by how we live today, there is a point to drawing our attention to the cycle of the natural year. To seeing the change of season as a chance to pause, take stock and be thankful. We can easily see how celebrating the harvest would fit in an acknowledgement and reflection on autumn.

We can then say the need to express gratitude for the harvest is deeply rooted in the human condition. No matter our technological sophistication or our cleverness we will forever be dependent upon the harvest, upon the capacity of the land to produce food.

This reliance upon the land takes on a particular texture in New Zealand, we are a paradoxical people; few nations have as high a percentage of their population living urban lives as we do, yet perhaps no other developed nation is as reliant upon agriculture to earn its way in the world. For all our sophistication we are never far removed from the farm.

And here in Otago we have such wonderful produce. From stonefruit to winter vegetables plus good meat and dairy products. We might not have the climate for vineyards or for citrus on the Taeiri but the fruit and vegetables grown in our soil are daily sustenance.

There is a case to be made for acknowledging the bounty of the land, Many in our society, and more so in more densely populated parts of the world, are becoming removed, disconnected from the story of our food, or awareness of the lives most directly reliant upon its production. One survey in the US showed a significant part of the population thought chocolate milk comes from brown cows.

We are absolutely dependent upon the capacity of the land to bring forth a harvest and it is right to express our gratitude for that which sustains us. This is an age old impulse in the history of religion. Experts in the history of religion tell us that some of the earliest ritual emerged as thanksgiving for the harvest and as what is called sympathetic magic, rituals which compel the gods to grant a good harvest.

When we read the *First Testament* we see that the emerging religion of the people of Israel rejected this and any idea that ritual can influence God, any sense that worship is magical and produces desirable results is idolatrous. The prophets refined this further and wrote time and again that the change we should seek through worship is a change in us. That truthful engagement with the story of God in worship should prompt us to be more just and more humane.

Yet while any magical understanding was rejected many Jewish festivals celebrate the cycle of sowing and reaping. Passover – which like Easter happened last weekend – begins a period of thanksgiving for the barley harvest which lasts fifty days and culminates on the day we call Pentecost.

Liberation from slavery in Egypt may have been the beginning of the Passover story, but it was completed by settlement and harvest. So when the first Christians began to reflect upon the resurrection it is perhaps only natural that language of the Earth’s abundance and of harvest should be used.

We have just heard from the Gospel about the grain of wheat that falls to the earth and dies, and in doing so – in a slight mix of agricultural metaphor – bares much fruit. It becomes so much more than it was.

A meditation, I think by the writer of the Gospel on the meaning of resurrection, of how it was being understood and lived.

Echoed in our reading from *1 Corinthians* where Paul describes the risen Christ as the first fruits, the first crop of the harvest of God’s new order being born in the world.

How the seed germinated and took hold, how it processed the nutrients of soil and water were veiled in mystery then. We know such things now in the greatest detail. Perhaps if they had our level of technological and scientific knowledge different language and images might have been used – maybe. But in using the language of growth and harvest these texts continue to speak deeply to us though separated by so much from the contexts in which they were written.

And like the best images it speaks to us not only of something out there, telling us clearly and succinctly what “that” is like. It points us towards a truth within ourselves.

Each of us has experienced our life as barren ground, we have each been in places of emptiness, places which seem harsh, dry, unremitting. Yet thought that patch of our life’s soil has felt so unpromising hope, possibility, new beginnings have sprung up. We have found in our own lives the seeds of resurrection taking hold and growing.

That harvest nurtures us, it feeds that quality of our humanity we call “soul.” Just as the produce of the harvest nurtures our bodies. For both we are profoundly grateful, for we need both of these in order to live.

So let us be thankful for our every harvest, for the miracle of falling seed which sprouts forth into life, both in the soil of our fields and the soil of our hearts. In both we see hints of resurrection. Amen