

**ST STEPHEN'S HOME SERVICE**  
**SUNDAY 3<sup>rd</sup> OCTOBER 2021**

**INTRODUCTION**

Harvest is a celebration which pulls together many different threads.

*We thank God for the harvest of our gardens and allotments, our fields and farms, bringing food to our tables and meeting many of our physical needs. We celebrate all that is seasonal and local, as we enjoy the fruit of the earth in due season. We give thanks for the fertility of the earth and the creativity of our hands in finding new ways to adapt and change in challenging times. We remember any who struggle to put food on the table, who go hungry when the harvest fails, who suffer from extreme and unseasonal weather due to climate change. And we thank God, too, for the harvest of our community, our common life together, the harvest of our own deepest selves, our growing towards maturity and wisdom.*

Pause for a few moments to reflect on what Harvest means for you, and to offer this time to God so that He can make you even more fruitful in His service.

**A SONG OF PRAISE AT GOD'S AWESOME DESIGNS**

O Lord my God! When I in awesome wonder  
consider all the works thy hand hath made,

I see the stars, I hear the mighty thunder,  
thy power throughout the universe displayed;

*Then sings my soul, my Saviour God, to thee,  
how great thou art, how great thou art!  
Then sings my soul, my Saviour God, to thee,  
how great thou art, how great thou art!*

And when I think that God, his Son not sparing,  
sent him to die – I scarce can take it in  
that on the cross, my burden gladly bearing,  
he bled and died to take away my sin:  
*Then sings my soul...*

When Christ shall come with shout of acclamation  
and take me home – what joy shall fill my heart!  
Then shall I bow in humble adoration  
and there proclaim, 'my God, how great thou art!'  
*Then sings my soul...*

**CALL TO WORSHIP**

Blessed are you, Lord God,  
Creator of heaven and earth.  
Your Word calls all things into being,  
and the light of dawn awakens us to life.  
May your wisdom guide us this day  
that we may cherish and care for your good creation,

and offer to you the sacrifice of our lips,  
praising you, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

**Blessed be God for ever.**

### **TURNING AGAIN TO GOD**

As those who know the generosity of God,  
let us confess our sins,  
and pray for the harvest of the Spirit in our lives.

*Silence*

Death is – fear, lies, hate, envy, avarice, greed, lust, pride  
destructiveness, violence, cruelty.

Save us from death.

Lord, have mercy,

**Lord, have mercy.**

Life is – love, truth, courage, laughter, giving, creativeness,  
tenderness, humility, kindness.

Give us life.

Christ, have mercy.

**Christ, have mercy.**

Forgive us when we choose death instead of life.

Lord, have mercy.

**Lord, have mercy.**

May God forgive us all;  
May we forgive ourselves,  
And one another.

**Amen.**

### **NEW TESTAMENT READING – Galatians 5:16-18,22-25** **(NRSV)**

Live by the Spirit, I say, and do not gratify the desires of the flesh. For what the flesh desires is opposed to the Spirit, and what the Spirit desires is opposed to the flesh; for these are opposed to each other, to prevent you from doing what you want. But if you are led by the Spirit, you are not subject to the law. By contrast, the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. There is no law against such things. And those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires. If we live by the Spirit, let us also be guided by the Spirit.

Thanks be to God.

### **GOSPEL READING: Matthew 13:1-9 (NRSV)**

Hear the Gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ according to Matthew.

**Glory to you, O Lord.**

That same day Jesus went out of the house and sat beside the lake. Such great crowds gathered around him that he got into a boat and sat there, while the whole crowd stood on the beach. And he told them many things in parables, saying: 'Listen! A sower went out to sow. And as he sowed, some seeds fell on the path, and the birds came and ate them up. Other seeds fell on rocky ground, where they did not have much soil, and they sprang up quickly, since they had no depth of soil. But when the sun rose, they were scorched; and since they had no root, they withered away. Other seeds fell among thorns, and the thorns grew up and choked them. Other seeds fell on good soil and brought forth grain, some a hundredfold, some sixty, some thirty. Let anyone with ears listen!'

This is the Gospel of the Lord  
**Praise to you, O Christ.**

### **REFLECTION (by Andy Todd)**

Our garden in Yorkshire was perfect for wildflowers.

Or so I thought.

There was an area at the end of it, sloping gently down towards the little stream which marked the end of our plot. I'd usually run out of energy to cut the grass by the time I got

to that part, so it always had a slightly unkempt look about it. What could be better than a nice patch of wildflowers to give a splash of colour and interest?

I bought a few packets of seeds with sufficiently impressive pictures on the front, scattered them liberally, and waited.

And waited.

And waited.

If you have so much as a green finger-tip, it will not surprise you that none of the seeds grew, only more grass. It surprised and disappointed me. I checked that the seeds were not out of date (they were not); I checked that the birds were not eating them (they were not); and I checked that I had planted them at a sensible time of year (I had – more or less). So I made some enquiries of learned friends and discovered that my mistake was a fairly fundamental one.

I had done absolutely nothing to prepare the ground to receive the seeds. The seeds were good, but they never stood a chance.

In our Gospel lesson, we saw Jesus at the end of the honeymoon period of his ministry. He had been riding a wave of popularity, but now things had begun to hit the buffers. Opposition from powerful people was increasing. Some of the crowds of followers were turning away, confused by his

teaching or struggling with his demands. His closest friends were starting to get worried: was his grand project getting into difficulties? they asked.

Jesus' response was like something out of Gardeners' Question Time – a story about seed landing on different soil types. Where the ground is suitable and has been well-prepared, the seed does its job; where it doesn't, it cannot. His point is clear: there is nothing wrong with the message which he has come to announce: but some people simply cannot receive it. Their hearts and minds are hard-baked, or shallow, or overwhelmed by other concerns.

Jesus told his parable to encourage those working for the spread of God's kingdom: their message is the right one. But of course it also invites you and me to reflect: what sort of soil (or soils, for we are often complicated) are our lives when it comes to receiving God's message? In particular, Jesus makes it clear that God's intention is for our lives to be **fruitful** for Him. St Paul spells out what that fruit might look like. "The harvest" – the fruit – "of the Spirit, is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control".

It's all too easy to hear those words as: "God wants me to be a really nice person – kind, patient, gentle, and all the rest." But I think it means so much more than that. God's intention for you is that your life should embody His own character more and more. That in your quiet moments and when you are in

company; when you are shopping as much as when praying, you should find – perhaps to your surprise – that the life of God is somehow taking root in you, and bringing forth love, joy and peace. Not through an effort of your utmost willpower, straining not to slip up, because trying too hard to be perfect can be as damaging as not trying at all. We need to be patient with ourselves, just as God is. All you or I can really do is simply to prepare the ground of our hearts and keep it as free from weeds as possible, and allow the Spirit to do his work.

This applies as much to our life together as a community of people gathered around Jesus as it does to us individually. Our life together should flow with love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. There will be weeds and other things needing clearing away here, too. We will need to be generous with one another.

Today, by bringing together our celebrations of Harvest and the Dedication of this Church, we are giving thanks for God's fruitfulness in our lives as individuals and as a Church. We thank God for the ways in which this Church community and those who have gone before us have made real the qualities of love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control in the communities which we serve. We celebrate the gift of creativity in navigating these difficult times. And we thank God, too, for the harvest of this community which we share, our common

life together, the harvest of our own deepest selves, and our growth towards maturity and wisdom.

In case that sounds for a moment like “motherhood and apple pie”, unobjectionable and anodyne, then reflect for a moment on the cost of living those values, those fruits of the Spirit, in a world where violence and intolerance and apathy are everyday realities. You might find it shocking to ponder what “fruit” meant for the writer of this short prayer. (You may recognise it, as I have quoted it before: it was found in the infamous Ravensbruck concentration camp on a piece of wrapping paper next to the body of a dead child.)

*O Lord, remember,  
not only the men and women of good will,  
but also those of ill will.  
But do not remember all the suffering  
they have inflicted on us;  
remember the **fruits** we have borne,  
thanks to this suffering:  
our comradeship, our loyalty,  
our humility,  
our courage, our generosity,  
the greatness of heart which has grown out of all this,  
and when they come to judgement,  
let all the **fruits** we have borne be their forgiveness.”*

We may never see the fruits of our labours or prayers. But in God’s economy, nothing is ever lost or wasted.

Preparing the ground of our hearts and minds, and of our common life together, to receive the seed of the Spirit is no trivial matter. The process of clearing away rubble, weeds, all that crowds out the voice and life of God, is a never-ending process which demands our best efforts. But it is the only way to allow God’s fruitfulness to be at work among us, as it has been in the past, yielding a harvest of good for us and the world.

### **CELEBRATING GOD’S GENEROSITY**

“Great is Thy faithfulness,” O God my Father,  
There is no shadow of turning with Thee;  
Thou changest not, Thy compassions, they fail not  
As Thou hast been Thou forever wilt be.

*“Great is Thy faithfulness!” “Great is Thy faithfulness!”  
Morning by morning new mercies I see;  
All I have needed Thy hand hath provided—  
“Great is Thy faithfulness,” Lord, unto me!*

Summer and winter, and springtime and harvest,  
Sun, moon and stars in their courses above,  
Join with all nature in manifold witness  
To Thy great faithfulness, mercy and love.

Pardon for sin and a peace that endureth,  
Thine own dear presence to cheer and to guide;  
Strength for today and bright hope for tomorrow,  
Blessings all mine, with ten thousand beside!

### **RESPONDING TO THE WORD**

Let us affirm our faith in Jesus Christ the Son of God:

**Though he was divine,  
he did not cling to equality with God,  
but made himself nothing.  
Taking the form of a slave,  
he was born in human likeness.  
He humbled himself  
and was obedient to death,  
even the death of the cross.  
Therefore God has raised him on high,  
and given him the name above every name:  
that at the name of Jesus  
every knee should bow,  
and every voice proclaim that Jesus Christ is Lord,  
to the glory of God the Father.  
Amen.**

### **PRAYERS**

In peace let us pray to the Father, through the Son and in the power of the Holy Spirit, who make, sustain and renew all things.

Loving God,  
Thank you for the many ways in which you provide for us:  
Food, family, friendship,  
Housing, health, happiness,  
And ways to use our time and talents.  
We lift to you also the ways in which we remain in need of these things.

*Silence*

God of generosity,  
**May your kingdom come.**

We pray for all the people whose work sustains our lives,  
For farmers and agricultural workers,  
For packers, distributors and retailers.  
As you have ordered our lives that we depend on one another,  
Help us by your grace to work for the well-being of others.

*Silence*

God of generosity,  
**May your kingdom come.**

We pray for people in our community and beyond  
Who are facing unemployment, ill-health, isolation or money  
worries at this time,  
And especially for those who are unable to afford enough to  
eat.  
We pray for supportive relationships, practical provision and  
real hope.

*Silence*

God of compassion,  
**May your kingdom come.**

Thank you that you call us to play our part,  
Working with you and with others to bring about change.  
We pray for political decision-makers and leaders:  
Give them courage and insight to develop policies and  
systems that support the flourishing of all,  
So that even in challenging times, no-one goes hungry and  
everyone has dignity.

*Silence*

God of justice,  
**May your kingdom come.**

Thank you for those who are serving and caring for others,  
In churches, in charities, and public services,

In our neighbourhoods, in our homes, and in many other  
contexts.

Would you give them strength, rest and perseverance.

As they work to support others, we ask that they too would  
receive all they need to thrive.

*Silence*

God of love,  
**May your kingdom come.**  
Amen

We pray for those who are ill,  
Remembering those in hospital and nursing homes,  
And all who are known to us,  
Among them Susie Cottrill, Bryan Plester, Brenda Hulland, Paul  
Burston, David New, Anna Clements, and Adrina and Alan  
Price.

Give skill and understanding to all who work for their well-  
being.

We give thanks that Miriam and Hattie Windows and Sue  
Gething are now back home, and pray for a full and speedy  
recovery for them.

*Silence*

God of generosity,  
**May your kingdom come.**

We remember those who have died,  
Whom we entrust to your eternal love; among them Chippy Swindon.  
And those whose anniversaries we cherish: Geoff Stroud, James Shutt, Frank Hemmings, Beryl Plester, Horace Jarrett, Mary Trow-Poole, Doris Hutton, Libby Alexander, and Reg Hill.

*Silence*

God of generosity,  
**May your kingdom come.**

Lord of creation,  
whose glory is around and within us,  
open our eyes to your wonders,  
that we may serve you with reverence,  
and know your peace at our lives' end,  
through Jesus Christ our Lord. **Amen.**

We pray as Jesus taught us, saying:

**Our Father in heaven,  
hallowed be your name,  
your kingdom come,  
your will be done,  
on earth as in heaven.**

**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 today our daily  
bread.  
Forgive us our sins  
as we forgive those who  
sin against us.  
Lead us not into  
temptation  
but deliver us from evil.  
For the kingdom, the  
power,  
and the glory are yours  
now and for ever.  
Amen.**

**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.**

Merciful Father

**Accept these prayers  
For the sake of your Son,  
Our Saviour, Jesus Christ. Amen.**

**PRAYER FOR GOD'S BLESSING**

**God of the harvest,  
bless the labours of our hearts and hands,  
bless the fruits of our cooperation and community,  
bless the gathering of neighbours and strangers.**



**Awaken us to your longing for a different world, where all are welcomed, valued and appreciated. Give us grace to discern your presence in one another and in the invitation of your Son, Jesus Christ, So that, together, we may come to the eternal harvest of your grace.  
Amen.**

### **ENDING**

May God, who clothes the lilies of the field and feeds the birds of the air,  
who leads the lambs to pasture and the deer to water,  
who multiplied loaves and fishes, and changed water into wine,  
lead us and feed us,  
and change us to reflect the glory of our Creator  
now and through all eternity,  
and the blessing of God,  
Father, Son, and Holy Spirit,  
be with you now and for ever.  
**All Amen.**

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