

Haverhill Methodist Church – Worship at Home
Sunday 4th October 2020

Welcome Message – Revd. Peter Goodhall

Welcome to our Harvest Festival celebration at home. Admittedly, our Harvest Festival today is not the Harvest Festival of recent years. We shall dearly miss our large harvest gathering, the heartily sung harvest hymns, the offering of our Harvest gifts and the feast and fellowship around tables in the church hall afterwards. And yet today we shall still celebrate the goodness of God, hear the call to share God's gifts, alleviate poverty and care for creation. Each and every one of us can still offer our gifts and our lives to God today in worship and thanksgiving.

'The land has yielded its harvest: God our God has blessed us'.
(Psalm 67 verse 6)

Hymn/song

Prayer

Father in heaven all good gifts come from you. You send the sunshine and the rain, and it is through your love and care that we enjoy the harvest time. Thank you for providing so richly for our needs and help us to share the good things we have with those who have little or nothing. Let us confess our forgetfulness of God, our failure to give thanks and the ways in which we have wasted the gifts of creation. We confess to you our lack of care for the world you have given us. We confess to you our selfishness in not sharing the earth's bounty fairly. We confess to you our failure to protect resources for others. Lord, have mercy. May God show us his mercy, restore us in his likeness and give us generous hearts and lives. **Amen.**

Old Testament Bible Reading

Read Deuteronomy chapter 8 verse 10-18

New Testament Bible Reading

'We must not become tired of doing good. We will receive our harvest of eternal life at the right time. We must not give up! When we have the opportunity to help anyone, we should do it. But we should give special attention to those who are in the family of believers'.

(Galatians Chapter 6 verses 9-10 ICB version)

Hymn/song

In a year when much has been interrupted or cancelled, how wonderful to know that Harvest time remained. God's promise is unbroken: 'As long as the earth endures, seedtime and harvest, cold and heat, summer and winter, day and night, shall not cease.' (Genesis 8:22) Spring, summer, autumn and winter are forever unaffected and uninfected by Coronavirus. The power of God's creation is far stronger. On this Harvest Festival we once again say thank you to God for his faithfulness, for providing our daily bread, for life and strength, for family and friends and countless blessings besides.

Harvest thanksgiving turns our attention away from ourselves. This is especially needed today. Why? Well for most of 2020, voices and regulations have encouraged us to be more self-aware than ever before. When out and about we are careful to keep our distance from others. Along pavements we give others a wide berth. In shops and supermarkets our masks hide a friendly smile and our conversation is muffled or suppressed. Communal sharing is discouraged. We cannot share the same space. We cannot share a handshake, a hug, a meal or a party. Pupils cannot share books, pens or sit at tables with their friends. Understandably, all this is for community health and to protect the wellbeing of others and ourselves. It has to be so for now. But not for always I hope. For is there a danger that this change in our pattern of behaviour will become a permanent 'new normal'? Once we have a vaccine against COVID-19, will we ever be able to unlearn these new measures of social distancing? Meanwhile, is there a risk that self-awareness could slip into selfishness? That social distancing leads to isolation? What is God saying to the Church today? What is God's word for us on this Harvest Festival? I believe it is this:

There is much that cannot be shared today, but there is *far more* that we still can and must share. Our Harvest festival brings into sharp focus the inequalities and injustices of our world. Many will go hungry today; many will have no clean water or sanitation. Many will have no place of shelter. Many will go unpaid or underpaid to put food on our tables. We hear the call of God to challenge this unfairness and act to tip the scales more in favour of the poor. Our lives and our futures are interconnected. To underline this truth, I share with you a traditional story from Sri Lanka.

An old man was dying, so he called his two sons and told them: 'I am going to leave you everything I have, but you must be sure to share it between you'. In his will he left them a cow, a tree and a blanket. The brothers decided that they should exactly share all three. The older brother had the front half of the cow; the younger brother had the back half. The older brother had the bottom half of the tree; the younger brother had the top half. The older brother had the blanket by day; the younger brother by night. But things did not work out the way they planned. The older brother found he was spending all his money feeding the cow; the younger brother was getting all the milk. The older brother was putting all his effort into watering the tree; the younger brother enjoyed the fruit. The older brother spent the day washing and drying the blanket; the younger brother kept warm under it at night. The older brother asked for a meeting and explained to the younger one how unfair he thought it was. But the younger brother announced that he had no intention of changing anything because he liked the deal he was getting very much. So the older brother grew more and more despondent. Eventually he couldn't see the point of feeding the cow any more, so he stopped. The cow died. Then he couldn't see what use it was watering the tree, so he stopped. The tree withered. Finally he lost the will to wash the blanket any more. The blanket got covered with mildew and was too filthy to use. When the younger brother realised that he wasn't getting any milk or fruit, and that he was shivering at night, he demanded to see his brother. He was furious with him for stopping work. But the older one didn't see it that way at all. He was livid with his brother for not sharing the good things that the cow, the tree and the blanket could do for them. The anger grew into a ferocious quarrel. And then the brothers and their children and their grandchildren argued for 100 years.

A harsh ending and no 'happily ever after' in that story which reminds us how the lives and futures of rich and poor are forever interconnected. We must not socially distance ourselves from the poor. Our self-awareness must never be shrunk to selfishness. As our New Testament reading urged us 'When we have the opportunity to help anyone, we should do it'. Just like Jesus. In conclusion, there is much that cannot be shared today, but there is *far more* that we still can and must share.

So today on our Harvest Festival we dedicate to God the best of our labours, the gratitude of our lives, the love of our hearts and we commit ourselves to share God's gifts and never tire of doing good until there is a harvest for everyone. Amen.

Hymn/song

Harvest Prayers of Intercession

Lord of the harvest, the time of sowing and the time of reaping are yours. The time of weeping and the time of singing are yours, too. Thank you for the time of sowing and the time of reaping. Let there be harvest in your world. We pray for those places in the world where the crops have failed and for those where poverty is the result of human aggression and human greed. We pray for REACH and our local Foodbank and all who benefit from its services. May our harvest gifts be an expression of our love and concern. And we pray for those who reap a bitter harvest, for victims of war and refugees. We pray for a harvest of peace and plenty in our world and we promise to work with you for it, both reaping and sowing. Let there be harvest in the hearts of children, women and men. We pray for those who are spiritually starved, who long for meaning in their lives and who need to belong. We pray for a harvest of faith and of lives transformed by the good news of Jesus and we promise to work with you for it, both reaping and sowing. Let there be harvest in our own lives, and in the lives of those we know and love. We pray for those who are sick or troubled, for those who are lonely or who have suffered loss...

We pray for ourselves, that, whatever difficulties we face, our lives may be grateful and joyful. We pray for a harvest of deepened love, more faithful discipleship, and we promise to work with you for it, both reaping and sowing for the harvest of your kingdom.

We make our prayers in the name of Jesus Christ our Saviour the Lord of the Harvest. **Amen.** Unite your prayers with the whole church as you pray The Lord's Prayer. 'Our Father...'
Hymn/song

The Blessing

We offer our lives and our gifts to the Lord.
God the Father, who created the world, give you grace to be wise stewards of his creation.
God the Son, who redeemed the world, inspire you to go out as labourers into his harvest field to win others for Christ.
God the Holy Spirit, whose breath fills the whole of creation, help you bear his fruits of love, joy and peace. **Amen.**

Coffee Time Conversation

- What meaning does Harvest have for you this year?
- What do you miss sharing with others?
- What has God given you to share with others this week?

Suggested Hymns and Songs

More Traditional Music:

We plough the fields and scatter

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ha628Pj_Rns

Jesus is Lord, creation's voice proclaims it

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8HHYt40whHQ>

Come ye thankful people come

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=t3n7IUCdqAM>

Bringing in the sheaves

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uYPIdChzC9Q>

More Contemporary Music:

Beauty for Brokenness

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=D81ZD1NDPyE>

Who is there like you?

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AYkce-EhNuQ>

Here I am wholly available

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PIRfem9kCKE>

Keep social distancing.

But never distant from God!

Keep safe.

Keep communicating.

Keep trusting in God and standing on his great and precious promises.

All in the end is harvest.

God bless you and keep you until we meet again.

My prayers are with you.

With love,

Peter