

# ***Sermon***

***11 October 2015***

***West Kirk of Calder & Polbeth Harwood***

***By: Rev Dr Jonanda Groenewald***

***Text: Deuteronomy 16:13-17 & John 7:37-38***

***Harvest Thanksgiving***

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It's Harvest time again. That time of year when the roads are filled with tractors and trailers with huge hay bales on them. That time of year when I have to get up a wee bit earlier in the morning, so that if I get stuck behind one of these tractors and my journey time here to West Calder or Polbeth doubles, I still won't be late!

But I think that if it wasn't for the fact that we lived in an area surrounded by farms, we probably wouldn't even have noticed that it was harvest time! Because differently from in 'the olden days', we don't live off the land anymore. We buy all our food in the shops, and we can get anything we want, any time of year. Even the things that can't be grown here in Scotland are imported, so we are spoilt for choice.

This makes it quite easy for us to forget where all these things come from. But if it wasn't for farmers all over the world, planting and harvesting, we wouldn't have had anything to buy to eat!

Because only a very small percentage of people live on farms these days, the question has been asked whether we as a wider community,

should still celebrate Harvest Thanksgiving? But to be quite truthful, I think the fact that we are *less* aware of where our food comes from today, makes it even *more* important to celebrate the harvest.

Because at some point, those things we buy in the shops, were harvested on a farm somewhere; and ultimately, it comes from God, and it's important to remember that.

Celebrating the harvest and giving thanks to God for what we have to eat, is a tradition we've been keeping for at least 4000 years.

Our first reading this morning came from Deuteronomy. In this part of Deuteronomy we find lots of instructions given to the people of God, about how to live a life suited to someone who believes in God.

In Deuteronomy 16 we read about the Feast of the Tabernacles, also called the Feast of the Booths, or the Feast of the Ingathering; or literally, in Hebrew: "Sukkot". This feast is the origin of our harvest festival.

At harvest time, when the crops were gathered in, the Israelites spend a whole week saying thank you to God for the harvest. It was a festive time, full of joy and celebration, singing and dancing, because they knew that without a harvest they would literally not be able to live.

They were thankful that after working very hard to gather in the harvest, they now had a week to rest and to give thanks to God for everything they gathered in.

They even had a saying in those days: “The man who has never seen the joy of the night of this feast has never seen real joy in all his life.”

The reason why it's called the Feast of the Tabernacles/Booths, is because during this festival the Israelites stayed in wee tent-like huts they made out of branches and mud. This had a double significance – during the harvest the men would stay in wee huts like these to be able to spend as much time as possible near the fields to get all the work done, but it also needed to remind them about the time they were rescued from Egypt and had to live in tents in the desert.

God gives us everything we need, not only food, but also freedom. If we need rescued, He'll rescue us, if we need a new place to live, He'll lead us there. But we need to stay faithful to him, like the Israelites learned the hard way all those many years ago in the desert.

Just like we do to this day, bringing a gift if we are invited to a party, they all brought gifts to this festival, in proportion to the way the Lord had blessed them.

And that is why we still bring food to church on Harvest Thanksgiving Sunday – to share what we have with those who have less, as a token of our appreciation to God for blessing us in abundance.

So that is why we are gathered here today – to say thank you to God for everything he gives us; to remember that everything we have, are gifts from him; and because it is so very easy to take things for granted.

I once heard this story about a pilot who always looked down intently on a certain valley when he flew over it. One time his co-pilot asked:

"What's so interesting about that spot?"

"See that loch?" he answered. "Well, when I was a kid I used to fish there. Every time an aeroplane flew over, I would look up and wish I was flying... Now I look down and wish I was fishing."

Now isn't that just exactly the way we are? Sometimes, even though we do get what we want, we're still not satisfied. Everyone wants more.

So, very easily, we start demanding things from God and in the process don't always realise when our prayers are answered, and in the process we forget to say thank you too.

Here I think we can learn a wee lesson for the Israelites of old.

Because they had a completely different attitude towards life.

They had this Sukkot festival every year – *even* when they didn't gather in a good harvest. They were not so much thankful FOR what they had, but rather they were thankful IN whatever situation God allowed them to be in.

They had an *attitude of gratitude*.

To be thankful was a way of life for them.

If we change our perspective on things and focus less on everything we *don't* have, we might be able to realise, like the Israelites did, how much we *do* have, and that actually we never have a reason *not* to be thankful, even if things are not working out the way we were hoping they would.

When we had just moved to Scotland, I had to deliver my very first sermon in Carrick Knowe Church in Edinburgh and I was very nervous when I went to bed the night before. I was well prepared. I had written my sermon and I knew it off by heart, but the congregation also had a slot for a 'contemporary lesson' in the order of service, and I just felt as if I didn't have it right. I was planning on reading a newspaper clipping that sort of linked in with my sermon, but I wasn't sure at all if that was the right thing to do.

So when I went to bed, I prayed and asked God to please help me say the right things in the morning, and to also please give me a good night's rest so I wasn't tired when I get into the pulpit. Henro was just over a year at the time and still quite often woke up through the night, but I was hoping that *that* night he would sleep well – after all, I asked God to help me and everything...

But about one a clock in the morning the baby started crying. And I was so annoyed. I was doing God's work in the morning and all I asked was for a good night's rest so I could do it well – why wasn't He helping me? But when I walked through to Henro's room, there was a big fat spider sitting on the wall next to his cot, and while half-asleep I was trying to settle Henro back to sleep and catch the spider, I was all of a sudden wide awake – because looking at that spider sitting there on the wall reminded me of something which had happened to me in SA – a story that would work perfectly as a contemporary lesson!

So all this time God was not ignoring my request, he was actually answering my prayer!

We can be thankful in all circumstances, because God knows what he is doing.

When Jesus was on earth, like all his fellow Jews, he attended the Feast of the Tabernacles at the temple. Although this feast had lots of different aspects, one of the most memorable parts was the water festival.

On each of the 7 days, priests drew water from the Pool of Siloam and carried a golden pitcher full of the water to the temple and then around the altar with the high priest leading the way. As the priests neared the water gate, the shofar was blown, and then the psalms of praise and thanksgiving were sung to God for the harvest.

While all of this was happening, Jesus stood in the temple and said: “If anyone is thirsty, let him come to me and drink. Whoever believes in me, as the Scripture has said, streams of living water will flow from within him.”

Just as the people at the festival realised how very dependent they were on water for the harvest and for physical survival, Jesus pointed out that, on a different level, but in the same way, they are dependent on *him* for the living water.

God doesn't only give us what we need physically; he also gives us what we need spiritually.

And the latter is even easier to obtain than the first. All we need to do is believe in Jesus.

If we really believe in him, with all our heart, we will never experience a spiritual dry season. And we will be able to produce love in abundance, in quantities large enough for everybody around us to harvest.

So let's thank God today not only for food, but also for the living water. And let's not only do that *today*, but every day.

Let's change our way of looking at life, and always have an attitude of gratitude.

Amen