

Harvest Thanksgiving at OSM 2011:

Year A Proper 22

Some of us, I suspect, may be feeling that it's slightly incongruous to gather here in a city centre for a Harvest thanksgiving. One or two of you, perhaps, may sow a few seeds, and reap a harvest of runner beans and courgettes, but on the whole we're not into ploughing fields, scattering seed, and gathering the harvest into our barns. Perhaps there remains a nostalgia for Harvest Festivals, prize marrows and sheaves of corn blocking the way to pulpits ...or more profoundly, a deep longing to be close to the rhythms of nature and the cycles of seasons. But whether we're indulging in some sort of romanticism about the countryside and farming, or just feeling a little bit silly about raising the song of harvest home, there is, I'm sure, in these urban Harvest celebrations a double invitation...to thanksgiving, and to responsible discipleship. Thanksgiving first: what should be at the heart of this Harvest celebration is a rekindling of a sense of the God who is infinitely creative, and infinitely faithful...not just through the provision of seeds which will produce prize marrows, but through the overwhelming wonder and complexity of the universe and all that has its being within it. 'At a harvest festival', says Farrer, 'we remember our manners for once, and come to thank God for his faithful kindness all the year'; but we thank him, we might go on, as does the General Thanksgiving in the Book of Common Prayer, above all for his inestimable love in the redemption of the world by Our Lord Jesus Christ, for the means of grace and for the hope of glory'. (And I do give thanks that my mother encouraged me to learn that magnificent prayer by heart). In brief, we thank God that He gives us Himself in all His creativity and love, in His good purposes for humanity and for the world with which He has entrusted us. Yet all our thanksgiving is nothing unless it is grounded in thanksgiving for that inestimable love shown to us in the person of Jesus, in the Sacrament of the Altar offered to us at every Mass...in thanksgiving that we are made the Body of Christ, the new vineyard of the Lord of hosts. Isaiah's commentary on the 'vineyard of the Lord of hosts' which we heard this morning as our OT reading is a proclamation of judgment on a people who were *ungrateful*, failing to appreciate with thankful hearts the vineyard which had been entrusted to them. For they had neglected it, until it brought forth briars and thistles instead of grapes. And so as we find this *Harvest* Thanksgiving reawakening and renewing our sense of *General* Thanksgiving, for the wonder of creation, and for Jesus the Bread of Life, we should be moved responsible discipleship, proper care of what is entrusted to us. This means discipleship in the world, God's creation for which our thanks are so particularly offered to day, and care for it; it means discipleship in the church, the new Israel, and commitment to her flourishing..

The thorns and briars are seen all too clearly in a world of inequality, of hunger and destitution on the one hand and inordinate greed on another...in the bitterness of war and conflict, in the tragedies of broken relationships, and all sorts of shattered lives. Such thorns and briars are a judgement on every one of us. If we say we have no sin, no part in any of this, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us, as the letter of John expresses it. So today we think of the Maggs Day Centre, a work which in one small corner seeks to offer its one small response...to till the vineyard of the world in one particular way, responding to the material and emotional needs of one group of

people. Our offering to that work today is an even smaller part of that little bit of husbandry...but so much more is asked of us, of politicians and voters, of local communities and charities, of individuals in the way we speak and act and use our money. On my holiday in Northumberland last month, I revisited the Rector of Wooler and his wife; she is indefatigable in work on behalf of Christian Aid, speaking to WIs, Church Groups in tiny isolated villages as well as larger towns, and raising thousands of pounds for that charity's particular husbandry among the thorns and briars of our unequal world. If nothing else, our prayers and our mind-set, our thinking and speaking might by God's grace identify with such husbandry and long for its success.

And then the Church...this is our vineyard in a quite specific sense. There has been neglect and abuse in this vineyard over the centuries, just as in the pleasant planting of the house of Israel of which Isaiah's prophecy speaks. The beloved Son has been despised and rejected not just by those who could not bear his message 2,000 years ago, but by many who have claimed to follow him since as members of his body. We are called to repentance for lack of charity, lack of courage, for self-seeking, for the fear which shuts out the boundless love of God. And always, thanksgiving should be the companion of repentance, thanksgiving that despite ourselves we ARE made members of the Body of Christ, that the fruits of the vineyard are always on offer to us...acceptance, forgiveness, a place at the banquet of the kingdom, that Harvest Supper to transcend all Harvest Suppers. But from this must spring a committed discipleship, renewal in prayer, a willingness to look at who we are, and what God is asking of us. Here at OSM, I believe, we have in this very month opportunities to work in our part of the vineyard...continuing to Fan the Flame, next Sunday: giving thought and time and prayer as we gather on October 22nd for our Away Day, coming along, if we're able, to share in 'Seeking the Holy' with our visitors on forthcoming Tuesdays, beginning on Tuesday week...maybe making a commitment to joining in the saying of the Daily Office on one or two occasions in the week (details are in today's pewsheet). For we are the Lord's planting, astonishing as it may seem; here the Lord Jesus has come among us, does come among...so that it is right at all times and in all places to give thanks. Let us, in the power of His Spirit, work with gratitude and love in the vineyard of the world, the vineyard of the church, in which we have been placed, by God's amazing grace.

Fr. Andrew Greany