

Rejoice O Land

Great Yorkshire Show

All Saints Silkstone

Sunday 27 September 2009

Let me begin with George Orwell. Now Orwell may seem a strange person with whom to start at a Harvest Festival; a declared agnostic, perhaps even atheist, he was mainly associated only with urban landscapes – hence his book titles, *The Road to Wigan Pier* and so on. But Orwell still had an acute religious sensitivity and nowhere more clearly than in his novel *A Clergyman's Daughter*. Dorothy's father was a dry, crusty and irascible priest.

Here we go:

'The Rector had, as Dorothy ought to have remembered, a perfect abhorrence of Harvest Festivals. He had even lost a valuable parishioner – a Mr Toagis, a surly retired market gardener – through his dislike, as he said, of seeing his church dressed up to imitate a coster's stall.

Mr Toagis, *anima naturaliter Nonconformistica*, had been kept 'Church' solely by the privilege, at Harvest Festival time, of decorating the side altar with a sort of Stonehenge composed of gigantic vegetable marrows. The previous summer he had succeeded in growing a perfect leviathan of a pumpkin, a fiery red thing so enormous that it took two men to lift it. This monstrous object dwarfed the altar and took all the colour out of the east window. Wherever you stood in church, the pumpkin, as the saying goes, hit you in the eye. When the Rector saw the pumpkin he was seriously angry and ordered 'that revolting thing' to be removed at once.

Mr Toagis had instantly 'gone chapel', and he and his heirs were lost to the church for ever.'

Now undoubtedly the Rector would get no marks for pastoral tact nor many for care for his flock. Also he was too obsessed, perhaps, with aesthetic matters.

But underneath all this there was one truth, hinted at by Orwell that the Rector had grasped about harvest. It was not purely about decorating the church. Mr Toagis, he believed, had 'lost the plot'. He had forgotten entirely what Harvest Festivals are about. For, in essence, this is the supreme moment to glory in and give thanks to God for his generosity in his creation. So, we salute God and pour out our hearts for his abundance.

Ancient Israel knew this so well. This truth about praise dwelt within the hearts of both individuals and the whole nation. Listen for a moment to that marvellous piece from the prophet Joel:

'Do not fear, O soil. [In fact it is better translated in other versions: 'Fear not, O *land*'].

Fear not, O land, be glad and rejoice, for the Lord has done great things ... he has given the early rain ... and the later rain. The tree bears its fruit, the threshing-floors are full of grain, the vats overflow with wine and oil. O children of Zion, be glad and rejoice in the Lord your God.'

Israel knew that the land, and sun and rain in due season, were the difference between life and death, plenty and starvation, gushing streams and drought. Indeed '*the land*' stands at the heart of Jewish religion. Theological books have endlessly been written about it, even the terrible conflicts of the Middle East still hinge on *the land* and on a sufficiency of *water*.

Our world has lost most of this. All our food is ‘mediated’ to us – through distributors, supermarkets, even the internet. Of course, our lives are made easier by this but we lose that proper sense of dependence upon *the land*, upon the farming community, and ultimately upon our God. That marvellous writer about the countryside, Ronald Blythe, captures it perfectly in the present day – in his case in Suffolk:

‘Harvesting goes on in the village. The buzz of it is constant. People remark on the early ploughing as they always do. It fetches the gulls in from the seaside to make their wintery complaints. But it is full summer all the same, with columbine, ragwort and thistle-down, straggling blackberry and swaying hogweed filling the ditches. There are kingfishers by the millrace, the fastest blue on earth. There is a kind of August ennui and lassitude along the main road where the cars keep their paces.’

Even the towniest towny ought to be able to resonate with this. The lush abundance reminds us of our Creator.

Indeed for many, if you asked them what are the three great Christian feasts, they’d probably not reply ‘Christmas, Easter and Whitsun’, but rather ‘Christmas, Easter and Harvest.’ Even school assemblies smell of apples, pears, potatoes and cabbages. As a child I loved harvest, and I used to experience it twice a year – at school and at Sunday School.

Perhaps those who say that the three great feasts include harvest are not *so* far off the track, for God’s abundance and generosity is at the heart of Jesus’ life too. We saw that with the feeding of the five thousand - the gospel which was read to us a few minutes ago. The *land* and its fruits are at the heart of Jesus’ ministry. Again, Ronald Blythe captures the essence in another piece of reflection:

‘At harvest festival the village children troop towards me, half obscured by their good gifts. There are baskets of brown eggs, green grapes, russet apples, and tins of this and that to prove that we are aware of Tesco’s part in the annual drama of Providence.

[Apologies to Ken Morrison, next year’s show president, sitting just near me now! I must ask Ronald for a revised *Morrison’s* version!]

Blythe continues: ‘They glow on the altar like a divine version of the farm-shop counter.’

This brings us to the very heart of our life and our existence. This ‘annual drama of Providence’ with ‘the divine glow’ of produce provokes us as it did the Israelites of old to offer praise and thanksgiving:

‘Fear not, O land.’ Or, as in that wonderful Robert Bridges hymn we have just sung: ‘Rejoice, O Lord, in God thy might ... Glad shalt thou be with blessing crowned.’

So we empty out our praise to God, our great Creator, the father of Jesus Christ – and we offer thanks too for all – farmers, shopkeepers, agriculturalists, supermarket staff – everyone who makes life possible through this wonderful harvest.

Amen.

Readings:

Joel 2. 21-27

Mark 6. 30-44