

We sing the song of harvest home

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Harvest has taken on a new importance in the church calendar. No longer a rose-tinted retrospective of a long-dead agricultural age, harvest festival this year takes us to the heart of the environmental crisis and reminds us that it's good to get our hands dirty!

One unexpected impact of the pandemic was, for many of us, an instinctive return to the soil to grow our own food. The Radio 4 programme *Gardeners' Question Time* noted a huge increase in novice gardeners listening in for tips on vegetable growing, partly because lockdown meant that people had time on their hands and partly because shortages in the shops led to a sense of uncertainty. Harvest festival took on a new relevance for many wanting to give thanks for the simple pleasures of the garden and developing a new awareness of the trials of the farming community, wrestling with difficult weather conditions and unstable supply routes to market. This reconnection with the source of our food could not have come at a better time, coinciding with the awakening of our awareness of climate change and the need to adapt our lifestyle and consumption if we are to protect the delicate balance of our environment. Harvest comes this year to remind us to grow locally, to eat more vegetables and fruit, and to be aware of seasonality and the carbon cost of shipping winter strawberries and green beans halfway around the globe.

So we have an opportunity to do something different. How can we celebrate harvest festival in a way that encourages us to rediscover the path of our food from field to fork? Can we allow our faith to inform our growing, our choosing, our impact on the planet? Could we involve people from the wider community who share a concern or an interest in these issues?

Could we make harvest a missional opportunity to invite visitors to come and see what God has to say about the changes we are all facing?

One familiar liturgical structure that might help is a harvest version of a carol service, a blend of readings, well-known hymns, anthems and prayers, often involving people from the wider community in reading a lesson. Carol services do not demand a high level of commitment to or knowledge of faith or church: they allow a visitor to take part, with the liturgy flowing around them. Instead of a sermon, the carol service itself can tell the story. In preparation you might like to reach out to interest groups and individuals such as allotment groups, climate action groups, gardeners and growers, local shopkeepers, bakers or anyone locally who might connect with the harvest and its impact on our climate. An early invitation to bring their experience to bear on the service, to take part in some way, can mean that a much wider cross-section of the community can be involved. You may like to create a central focus for worship using symbols of the harvest and celebrating local growers and products: bread, wine, cheese, vegetables, fruit and preserves. You may like to ask each reader to bring up a symbol of their harvest. There are nine sections that follow, and you are invited to choose those appropriate to the local groups that you are involving. You may even choose to interview each reader briefly, asking about their group, before they read their lesson. The service could involve three sections: for example, 'Soil – Seed – Growth', 'Gathering – Abundance – Offering' or 'Sharing – Feast – Bread', each starting with the welcome or introduction and finishing with the Lord's Prayer and final blessing.

A harvest carol service

Gathering Music: *Appalachian Spring: II Allegro* by Aaron Copland

Welcome and Introduction

We come to sing the song of harvest home, to 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 difficult 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. 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. Through hymns and anthems, readings and prayers, we raise the song of harvest home.

Hymn: *Come, ye thankful people, come*

Soil

Introduction

Harvest begins with the soil. With increasingly sophisticated tools and machinery and with the use of fertilizers and chemicals, our attention can be deflected from the core vitality of the soil. We need to rediscover a respect for the soil as the basis for sustainable farming for the long term.

Reading: *Matthew 13.1–9*

Jesus invites us to reflect on different kinds of soil, noticing the fertility of the ground and our readiness to hear his word.

Prayer

God the Sower,
may the good news of your love for us
find the good soil of our hearts,
that we may embrace the changes needed
to care for your creation
and for one another.

May our harvest be sustainable,
some a hundredfold, some sixty, some thirty.
Let anyone with ears listen,
as we follow in the footsteps of your Son,
Jesus, Lord of the Harvest.

Amen.

Anthem: *O Christ, who holds the open gate*

Seed

Introduction

In the face of the environmental crisis, we sometimes feel the problem is too vast for us to make a difference. As individuals we can easily feel overwhelmed, powerless to bring about change. But each of us can make an impact, from small beginnings, from small changes in approach. And a handful of seeds reminds us that great things can grow from tiny seeds. What an encouragement to allow the seed of hope to take root and grow in our lives!

Reading: *Mark 4.26–32*

Jesus reminds us that even the smallest of seeds can produce a large harvest.

Prayer

God of the mustard seed,
from tiny beginnings you bring abundant blessing.
Give us wisdom to use your gifts well,
to understand the impact of our farming.

Give us courage to take even small steps in the face
of climate change.

Give us generous hearts to share with those who
go hungry,

as we follow in the footsteps of your Son,
Jesus, Lord of the Harvest.

Amen.

Hymn: *Above the moon earth rises*

Growth

Introduction

Water is essential for growth; it is the vector for all life. In recent years we have seen our climate changing, with a devastating effect on the impact of water – from scarcity to deluge. Times of drought have led to failed crops; times of flood have seen homes inundated where we have built houses on flood plains. Ezekiel's image of the water of life speaks of restored balance, of enough for all, of abundant life – God's vision of a climate in balance, where wounds are healed.

Reading: *Ezekiel 47.6–12*

God promises fruitfulness and abundant life,
with healing for the nations.

Prayer

God of the growing grain,
of the abundant earth,
you have blessed us with fruitful lands,
providing more than enough for our needs,
with plenty to share.

Help us to honour you in our care for the land,

and in the healing of the nations,
that the earth may continue to be fruitful,
as we follow in the footsteps of your Son,
Jesus, Lord of the Harvest.
Amen.

Anthem: The river flows, the seasons turn

Gathering

Introduction

We are sometimes tempted to achieve the maximum yield for short-term profits, but the long-term impact can be devastating for sustainability and biodiversity. We are beginning to recognize the need to take less, to leave more space for nature to flourish. God calls us to be generous and to look to a longer horizon, as well as to notice what other people need. What is true for sustainable farming is also true for sustainable community and family life.

Reading: Ruth 2.1–7

God calls us to be generous, not focusing on maximum return but being open to sharing.

Prayer

God of the stranger,
we give thanks for the harvest of our community life.
We pray for all who give their time freely to build up
our shared life,
to contribute to the common good.
Help us all to think of others, and to act for future
generations.
May we be like Ruth, working not just for ourselves,
but building bridges of trust that cross the boundaries
of difference,
as we follow in the footsteps of your Son,
Jesus, Lord of the Harvest.
Amen.

Hymn: For the healing of the nations

Abundance

Introduction

Our planet is rich and fertile and we have enormous resources to meet our needs, provided we are willing to share. Yet much of our economic life is couched in terms of scarcity and an underlying worry that there might not be enough to go round. The psalmist reminds us of the abundance of nature's provision – enough for everyone and plenty to share.

Reading: Psalm 65.9–13

The earth can be fruitful if we honour God in our care of creation.

Prayer

Generous God,
in love you have created the universe,
in abundance you have provisioned our world,
in hope you have called us to know you.
Open our eyes to your wonders,
open our minds to your mystery,
open our hearts to your love,
that we may find the path of thanksgiving
as we follow in the footsteps of your Son,
Jesus, Lord of the Harvest.
Amen.

Anthem: Thou visitest the earth

Offering

Introduction

The act of offering comes from a sense of gratitude and of partnership. We offer something to God, and to the wider community, to give thanks for all we have received. But are we losing the instinct for offering? What's mine is mine! In a world of self-made men and women, there can be a sense of entitlement and we can lose sight of the need to give and the need to give thanks.

Reading: Leviticus 23.9–14

We are reminded not to forget God, the source of all fruitfulness.

Prayer

God of our first fruits,
give us thankful hearts in this time of gathering.
Grant us a generosity of spirit,
to provide for those who go hungry.
May we offer you the first fruits of our lives,
the very best that we have,
that we in turn may become a blessing,
as we follow in the footsteps of your Son,
Jesus, Lord of the Harvest.
Amen.

Hymn: For the fruits of all creation

Sharing

Introduction

When is enough enough? The gap between the highest earners and those on low wages or benefits has never been greater. We live in a world of billionaires and beggars. But such evident inequality leads to resentment and social instability. Can there be another way – a way of sharing resources more fairly so that there is enough for all?

Reading: Matthew 14.13–21

Jesus reminds us that God provides enough for everyone.

Prayer

God of abundance and plenty,
where we create scarcity and need
through our narrow self-interest and greed,
break us open,
to find in you a generosity of spirit
and willingness to share,
as we follow in the footsteps of your Son,
Jesus, Lord of the Harvest.

Amen.

Anthem: For the beauty of the earth

Feast

Introduction

God's vision for humanity is not one where some have everything, living with lavish excess, while many go hungry. In God's kingdom, there is provision for everyone, with restoration and healing for all who have been excluded or forgotten. Can we make our harvest festival a foretaste of that kingdom?

Reading: Isaiah 25.1–10

God prepares a feast for all people and wipes away the tears from every face.

Prayer

God of the feast,
give us eyes to see your kingdom in our midst,
a table prepared for all,
rich food and wine,
with oil to gladden the human heart,
where all are included,
where none are left outside,
as we follow in the footsteps of your Son,
Jesus, Lord of the Harvest.

Amen.

Hymn: Fill your hearts with joy and gladness

Bread

Introduction

Jesus shared bread with all sorts of people as a sign of God's acceptance and love. He asked us to remember him every time we break bread. God is in the business of making bread, the bread of community. We are the yeast, the leaven in the lump. The way we live can change the world, if we can dare to believe that God is with us.

Reading: John 6.30–40

Jesus reveals himself as the bread of life.

Prayer

Loving God, you provide enough for everyone:
this earth is fertile, fruitful and abundant,
but we are sometimes greedy, wasteful and selfish.
Many go hungry despite our plenty,
many are left outside while we enjoy a feast.
Lord Jesus, bread of life,
break us open to your promised kingdom,
give us hearts to gather and share,
as we follow in the footsteps of your Son,
Jesus, Lord of the Harvest.

Amen.

Hymn: We plough the fields and scatter

The Lord's Prayer

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,
that, together, we may come to the eternal harvest
of your grace.

Amen.