

Harvest Festivals and other Services for the Agricultural Year

The Harvest Festival is such an established part of the Christian Year, one might be forgiven for thinking it has been with us since time immemorial. In fact, it dates only from 1843, and was the brainchild of the Reverend Robert Stephen Hawker, for 41 years Vicar of Morwenstow on the Cornish coast. Hawker was concerned that his parishioners should give thanks to God the creator for all his generosity. He instigated a festival of thanksgiving, in sharp contrast to the prevailing custom of celebrating the gathering-in of crops ‘in pagan fashion with beer and tumult’ (Piers Brendon, *Hawker of Morwenstow*, p.73). The idea was quick to catch on, with Harvest Thanksgiving being first recognized in the Church of England in 1862, and soon becoming one of the most popular festivals of the Christian Year, with church attendances in some places exceeding those at Christmas and Easter.

In a society which relied heavily on agriculture, a good harvest was essential for the well-being of local communities. This has continued to be recognized and, despite increasing industrialization, the Harvest Festival has remained a significant occasion in rural and urban churches alike. Over time, the emphasis has sometimes undergone a shift: from pure thanksgiving for crops harvested, to a wider concern for the interdependence of all God’s people, and issues of justice and of the integrity of creation.

In creating a new Calendar for the Church of England, the compilers of the *Alternative Service Book 1980* (ASB) began the liturgical year nine Sundays before Christmas, giving the first Sunday of the ‘new year’ a creation focus through its collect and readings. Whilst this had a certain logic, the date fell later than that of established harvest festivals, and it proved rather difficult to celebrate a new year in October / November!

In the *Common Worship* Calendar, the collects and readings of the Second Sunday before Lent have a creation theme. Unfortunately, this is one of those places in the year where the Church of England chose to depart from the Revised Common Lectionary, and so it is impossible to use this day as a universal celebration of creation for the whole church. It looks as though the traditional celebration of Harvest in late September / early October is set to stay!

The ASB offered sets of readings and collects for Harvest Thanksgiving (the first ‘official’ Anglican provision), but no other liturgical resources, a pattern mirrored by the *Book of Common Order* (Church of Scotland, 1994) and *The Methodist Worship Book* (1999). More recently, though, *Gathering for Worship* (the ‘service book’ of the Baptist Union, 2005) provides a range of liturgical material for harvest use, and 2006 saw the Church of England publish a significant range of resources for Festivals of the Agricultural Year, as part of *Common Worship: Times and Seasons* (Church House Publishing, September 2006).

The collection is an immensely valuable resource and includes material for:

- a general ‘creation’ theme to supplement that already found in *New Patterns for Worship*. These are sentences, prayers and thanksgiving that can be used to give a thematic flavour to a Eucharist or Service of the Word.

- **Plough Sunday**

This is traditionally the first Sunday of the Epiphany, though in some communities Plough Monday is kept. Historically it has been a celebration of the first work after the twelve days of Christmas and, in times when winter provided little work, an occasion to look forward to the availability of work later in the year. Some Christian communities have re-introduced Plough Sunday as a focus for asking God's blessing on human labour near the beginning of a new calendar year. It is also a good opportunity to reflect on issues of work and unemployment within a Christian context.

- **Rogationtide**

The Rogation Days are the three weekdays before Ascension Day, with 'Rogation Sunday' being the Sixth Sunday of Easter (Fifth after Easter in the BCP). There is an ancient tradition of petition, in procession, for God's protection of crops, of the including the saying or singing of the Litany and, in some places, the custom of the 'beating of the bounds' of the parish. In more recent times, Rogationtide has been an occasion for offering prayer for the world of work, for responsible stewardship, and for local communities.

- **Lammastide**

Lammas Day is an ancient English feast held on 1 August as a thanksgiving for the first-fruits of the wheat harvest. It focused on the offering of the Lammas Loaf. The material here is for the Gathering rite of the Eucharist. The intention is that the Lammas Loaf (baked by members of the congregation) may be used as the eucharistic bread on this occasion. One of the patterns of readings makes the link with the theme of Christ the Bread of Life.

- **Harvest Thanksgiving.** A bank of resource material is provided for use at Holy Communion or a Service of the Word. Included within this is an Act of Thanksgiving, which may be used to accompany the tradition of bringing to church gifts of fresh produce and other foodstuffs

- **Times of Agricultural Crisis.** The events of recent years have shown that days of crisis for agricultural communities are far from over. Prayers are provided, both for corporate response to a time of crisis and for seasonable weather, thus renewing an ancient tradition familiar to many from the *Book of Common Prayer*.

These texts are available on the Church of England website at <http://www.churchofengland.org/prayer-worship/worship/texts/times-and-seasons.aspx>

Article by Peter Moger

This free online resource is published by the Royal School of Church Music (RSCM) as a supplement to its quarterly worship planner, *Sunday by Sunday*. *Sunday by Sunday* is available exclusively to Affiliate and Individual Members of the RSCM, a Christian educational charity committed to enabling the best use of music in worship, church life and the wider community. To join us, please visit www.rscm.com/membership or call +44 (0)1722 424848. An index of abbreviations can be found at www.rscm.com/assets/publications/sbys/abbreviations.pdf

© The Royal School of Church Music. Revised September 2012. www.rscm.com