

# Salford Methodist Circuit



**Harvest - 4th October 2020**

**Rev Clare Stainsby**

Good morning everyone, welcome to our harvest festival. I'd like to begin with some words from Psalm 126

## **Reading: Psalm 126**

*When the Lord brought back the exiles to Jerusalem, it was like a dream!  
We were filled with laughter and we sang for joy.*

*And the other nations said, "What amazing things the Lord has done for them."*

*Yes, the Lord has done amazing things for us! What joy!  
Restore our fortunes, Lord, as streams renew the desert.  
Those who plant in tears will harvest with shouts of joy.  
They weep as they go to plant their seed,  
but they sing as they return with the harvest.*

I seem to remember using those words in a service some time back in March or thereabouts, and thinking of how we'd rejoice when our exile was over, of how we'd celebrate when we were back together and what a joyful time that would be! But we are still nowhere near that kind of normal that we have known all of our lives. The world is still an alien and unfamiliar place. We're still largely exiled from one another, from our families, our friends, our church families. And the year is moving on a pace. Here we are in October, with the seasons turning, and autumn beginning to colour the landscape. Here we are in this time of harvest celebrations, but unable to make our displays in our churches and to bring our thank offerings to God, unable to see what our gifts of food can do to benefit those in need around us. But today - here - in our virtual service - we celebrate our harvest festival together.

Looking back at Psalm 126 - it talks about everything being like a dream, filled with laughter and joy. That time is not yet for us. Yet there is so much for us to be thankful about: we are alive; we are secure in our homes; we have food on our tables; and we are surrounded by the presence of the God of love and hope; and the harvest that will feed us continually is now home.

So let's celebrate that harvest in a hymn of thanksgiving: Come, You Thankful People, Come.

## **Hymn: Come, You Thankful People, Come**

*Come, you thankful people, come, raise the song of harvest home!  
Fruit and crops are gathered in safe before the storms begin:  
God our maker will provide for our needs to be supplied;  
Come, with all his people, come, raise the song of harvest home!*

*All the world is God's own field, harvests for his praise to yield;*

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*Wheat and weeds together sown here for joy or sorrow grown:  
First the blade and then the ear, then the full corn shall appear -  
Lord of harvest, grant that we wholesome grain and pure may be.*

*For the Lord our God shall come and shall bring his harvest home;  
He himself on that great day, worthless things shall take away,  
Give his angels charge at last in the fire the weeds to cast,  
But the fruitful ears to store in his care for evermore.*

*Even so, Lord, quickly come - bring your final harvest home!  
Gather all your people in, free from sorrow, free from sin,  
There together purified, ever thankful at your side -  
Come, with all your angels, come, bring that glorious harvest home!*

And now a prayer, let us pray:

God our maker, you provide for us, year after year and generation after generation. You love us, your people, and you give us food and shelter. You give us people to care for us and to be cared for by us. You give us community, and you call us to play our part in the community of this world. You enrich our lives with so much that is good. And you give us our Lord Jesus Christ, your own being here on earth, as Saviour and friend, guide and example, showing us how you intend life on earth to be. We worship you.

*[Silence]*

God of harvest, you have given us everything we need, yet we are ungrateful. We often live oblivious to our own selfishness. We live in a world where the gap between rich and poor grows ever wider. We need your forgiveness, and we need your guidance to help bring change in this world. We long for the day when all are fed, when all return full of song, carrying the sheaves, and when you return this world to the glory you intended for it. We pray for that day and we will work with you for it.

At this time of harvest we come with thanksgiving before you, and offer our prayers and ourselves for your purposes, in the name of Jesus, as we share in the prayer he taught us.

*Our Father in Heaven, hallowed be your Name,  
Your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as in heaven.  
Give us today our daily bread.  
Forgive us our sins as we forgive those who sin against us.  
Save us from the time of trial and deliver us from evil.  
For the kingdom, the power and the glory are yours,  
Now and forever. Amen.*



This year has been like no other that we have ever known.

It seems like a long time ago, but back in March and April, some things were in very short supply in our shops. You could walk to a supermarket, and find huge gaps on some shelves. Many of us don't remember times like that from the past, though I know some of you will have been reminded of wartime shortages and rationing. But for all of us, in those early days of lockdown, there was evidence all around us that the food chain which supplies our nation can be fragile.

For many us, lockdown was a time of enforced slowing down in life. And perhaps that has led us finding more time for cooking and baking, and for working in the garden - for planting and growing things. Perhaps this time has made us more conscious of the food we eat, and where it comes from.

While life has been challenging for us all this year, our farmers have had a particularly difficult time. One aspect of this has been the weather. It may be right off your radar by now, but last autumn and winter were both mild and wet. Some winter crops were destroyed by flooding, and the planting of the spring crops was delayed by the weather conditions. Then came the bit we all remember - the glorious dry warm spring. While we were being thankful for the lovely weather that took the sting out of being locked down, the farmers were watching their crops struggle from the lack of rainfall. Grazing food was in less plentiful supply than usual, but animals still needed to be fed. And add to that the issues caused by our departure from the EU, and the need to negotiate new trade deals, which presented a lack of clarity for the way forward for farmers in particular - an uncertainty that continues, and will do so for some time to come.

These things were affecting farmers without factoring in the pandemic at all. But one aspect of Covid-19 has been the loss of so many migrant workers who come to this country year after year to help bring in the crops. This year with travel restrictions in place many have not been able to make that journey. So getting in crops has been a challenge. And many farmers have over recent years diversified into other ways of making a living, like farm shops, and holiday lets, and other activities to help boost their income. All of those have been hit hard by the limitations of the last few months.

In spite of all these challenges, farmers continue to work to produce all that is needed for our lives. And at this time, in this season of harvest, one of our main focuses in our harvest festival needs to be to give thanks for those who labour to feed us. Of course, much of our food is imported from other parts of the world, but there too farmers are at the heart of its production, and have experienced a similarly challenging year.

Today we give a big shout out to farmers who feed us, and pour out our gratitude to God at the heart of processes of growing and feeding.



Let's offer that gratitude in a very traditional way as we sing, "We plough the fields and scatter", which reminds us that God relies on human labour - and on a vast network of people to work with his powers of nature to feed us, the people of this world.

## **Hymn: We Plough The Fields And Scatter**

*We plough the fields, and scatter the good seed on the land,  
But it is fed and watered by God's almighty hand;  
He sends the snow in winter, the warmth to swell the grain,  
The breezes and the sunshine, and soft, refreshing rain.  
All good gifts around us are sent from heaven above;  
Then thank the Lord, O thank the Lord, for all his love.*

*He only is the maker of all things near and far;  
He paints the wayside flower, he lights the evening star;  
The winds and waves obey him, by him the birds are fed;  
Much more to us, his children, he gives our daily bread.  
All good gifts around us are sent from heaven above;  
Then thank the Lord, O thank the Lord, for all his love.*

*We thank you then, O Father, for all things bright and good:  
The seed-time and the harvest, our life, our health, our food.  
Accept the gifts we offer for all your love imparts,  
And, what you most desire, our humble, thankful hearts.  
All good gifts around us are sent from heaven above;  
Then thank the Lord, O thank the Lord, for all his love.*

## **Reading Leviticus 23 verses 39 to 44**

*When you have harvested your fields, celebrate this festival for seven days, beginning on the fifteenth day of the seventh month. The first day shall be a special day of rest. On that day take some of the best fruit from your trees, take palm branches and limbs from leafy trees, and begin a religious festival to honour the Lord your God. Celebrate it for seven days. This regulation is to be kept by your descendants for all time to come. All the people of Israel shall live in shelters for seven days, so that your descendants may know that the Lord made the people of Israel live in simple shelters when he led them out of Egypt. He is the Lord your God. So in this way Moses gave the people of Israel the regulations for observing the religious festivals to honour the Lord.*

Amen

When children of Israel were putting their lives in Egypt behind them, and looking to find their way in their new life of freedom, the laws that Moses

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received from God put structure and order into their chaotic lives. And worshipping God was at the centre of the law. The rhythm of their lives gave God a central place. Of course we know, they didn't always remain close to God - the Old Testament is a catalogue of all that went wrong in the people's relationship with God, which lead eventually to Jesus and the possibility of a new relationship. But for the Jewish people the law was so important, because it was through the law that they found their connection with God

Now, Leviticus makes dry reading for us if we tackle it as a whole, but there is much in that can help us to draw closer in our own relationship with God, and I think this passage we heard may be one of those bits. It gives the children of Israel, and perhaps us too, a pattern - a template - for celebrating the harvest. In a year when the rhythm of our lives has been so disrupted, perhaps we can find a new rhythm in way we centre ourselves in God, at this harvest time, and perhaps at other times too. I want to suggest 4 Rs that come out of this passage from Leviticus.

The first R is for **Rest**.

The Law stated that the celebration of harvest should last eight days, and that the first and last days should be days of rest: days when the busyness of life was set aside and God became focus of all attention.

So how does that relate to us now? One thing about these recent months we've experienced - we haven't suffered from lack of food. Ok - some things were in short supply for a variety of reasons at the beginning of lockdown. And we may have had to adjust our eating habits in small ways, but we never went hungry. So today - as we think about the harvest, the first thing we need to do is stop - to pause - to rest - and to recognise God at the heart of all things - at the heart of all that fills our lives.

Rest in God. In all the strangeness and the challenges of life just now, take a moment to rest in God's presence - and think about the key role God has in providing all that we need in our lives. Rest - in that secure place that is God at the heart of all things.

*[Silence]*

R for **Rest**. The second R is for **Rejoice!**

After the first day of rest, the children of Israel were in celebratory mood, rejoicing in all that the Lord had provided for them. And Harvest festival for us is about recognising God's hand in processes of growing and feeding his people, and about rejoicing in the goodness we have in our lives. Even though life is strange, we, here and now, have so much to rejoice about. We have all that we need to eat and more besides. We have variety and abundance.

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But what if we were celebrating harvest festival in a country where commodities are more scarce, where everything that the people have to eat is earned by their hard labour, where variety is rare, and where the climate and other things can affect the harvest badly; where people often suffer from a lack of things we take for granted. If we were celebrating there - we would still be rejoicing in God, because we are alive and that we have hope in God, the Provider. Places which have seemingly little to us, but where they can rejoice in what they do have, are an inspiration to us, because they know far better than we will ever do, the true value of labouring to feed a family, and the true value of a successful harvest against the odds. And they celebrate with real energy and joy, as did the children of Israel, because they knew too what real hardship meant.

You may not feel much like rejoicing right now. You may be really conscious of all the things you would like to have in your life that are currently missing. I think the key to this, is rejoicing in the good things - in finding a way to focus on the positives rather than the negatives of life. You may be a glass half empty than a glass half full sort of person - you may find it hard to be positive and hopeful right now. But God is with us, and much is positive. When you have nothing better to do, make a list of the good things - the positives in your life. It will help restore your perspective. In fact, why not do it every day, and use it as a way of thanking God.

So let's pause for a moment and rejoice. Let's focus on the good things and give thanks with a grateful heart.

## **Hymn: Give Thanks With A Grateful Heart**

*Give thanks with a grateful heart,  
give thanks to the Holy One,  
Give thanks because He's given Jesus Christ, His Son,  
[Repeat]*

*And now let the weak say "I am strong", let the poor say "I am rich",  
Because of what the Lord has done for us,  
[Repeat]*

*Give thanks.*

So, back to our four Rs - we've rested and we've rejoiced. The third R is for **Remembering**.

For the Hebrew people at the time of Moses, the eight days of the harvest were spent living in tents, not under canvas exactly, they built shelters for themselves. And this was about remembering the time in their history when they were utterly dependent on God, as they wandered in the wilderness, camping wherever they found themselves, using whatever they could find or had carried to make some kind of shelter. We have to remember, these aren't just a handful

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of nomads wandering in the wilderness - this was a whole tribe, a huge nation of people. They were to remember their lack of a home and their lack of the good things in life, and also to remember that when their need was greatest, God provided. He provided water from the rock, manna from heaven, quails came flying in: all things which kept them alive.

Our harvest is also about remembering. In all the challenges of recent months, when we have, at times, felt as though we were wandering in an unfamiliar wilderness, we have done so from the safety of home. We have had food and shelter, and warmth and security. Just not the freedom we usually take for granted in our lives. Perhaps our remembering this year should be about remembering the struggling times we've had. But it should also be about remembering that for many people in this world, a lack of freedom is the norm in their lives. It could be freedom curtailed by poverty, by war, by the way that power is wielded in their nation, by prejudice, by lack of expectation, by lack of food or lack of fresh water. Lack of freedom is something we've all experienced in some degree this year. But within limitations, we have still had much freedom to exist and flourish. Today in our harvest celebration, we remember our own struggles, but we also need to remember those for whom struggling is the daily experience of their lives, as they simply struggle to survive. In remembering, we can also connect with the very real struggles of human beings around this world.

That brings us to the fourth R - **Respond**. When we remember something we can do it as a fleeting thought then let it slip away, let it go from our minds, **OR** we can do something about it.

Harvest festival has always been about bring gifts in thankfulness to God, but also about using those gifts to benefit those whose lives are more difficult than our own. By remembering and rejoicing in our own positives in our lives, we can then respond in a generous way that in somehow reflects the abundant generosity of God towards us.

So how can we do that this year, when we aren't meeting in our church buildings?

How can we do that when no one is passing round a collection plate for us to put in a donation?

Responding at harvest most years is an easy thing. We bring a few things and leave them on a table and then others pass them on to those in need. This year it would be easy to pass harvest by, and say, being generous is impossible.

I can assure you it really isn't impossible!

Many of our churches support the Irlam and Cadishead foodbank at harvest. Our foodbank and others like it are going to really miss the influx of generous gifts at harvest this year. So perhaps we can do something about that. A few people have agreed to be collection points for gifts for harvest this year. Their names



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and contact details were in the weekly circuit mailing this week, and will be again next week. Perhaps you could collect a few goods as you usually do, and make the effort to get them to one of our collection points. Or ring someone else up who might help you to do that. In this way we can be of practical help to those in our own community who are struggling.

Many of our churches also take a collection for a particular cause at harvest. Can I suggest that you might put some money in an envelope for All We Can. This can be dropped off with the harvest goods too, or you could send some money directly to the All We Can harvest appeal. Again the details for doing this are on the weekly circuit mailing.

Let's not let our lack of freedom and normality prevent our generosity this year.

This year's All We Can harvest appeal is particularly focused on Uganda, and funds are being used to support families in poverty, by supplying bikes for young people to get to school, and have the education they desire and need. This will in turn help them to support their families more effectively.

Now our prayers.

When I say the words, "God of all life", can you respond..... **"give us a Spirit of generosity."** Let us pray.

God who has given the world, and life itself to us.

We bring our prayers to you for those who live in poverty, around this world, where life is more challenging than we can imagine. We pray for those we saw in the video, which was just a brief window for us on the lives of others. Help us to remember the struggles of people around this world, and to be generous with all we have, so that organisations like All We Can are able to make a difference where it is most needed.

God of all life ..... **give us a Spirit of generosity.**

We bring our prayers for those living in poverty in our nation. At a time when many are finding themselves without jobs, and many are finding it increasingly difficult to feed themselves and their families, through no fault of their own, we pray for the work of food banks in our community. We give thanks for those who give time and energy to this vital work, which is a lifeline for so many. May we never forget that the little we do in support of this work, actually makes a difference.

God of all life ..... **give us a Spirit of generosity.**

We bring our prayers for farmers around this world, and farmers of our own nation. We give thanks for their commitment and dedication which puts food into our shops and onto our tables. We pray for their well-being at this challenging





time. And for the strength for them to meet any challenges ahead through the changing seasons. May we never forget to appreciate the good things we have in our lives.

God of all life ..... **give us a Spirit of generosity.**

And as the struggles of life continue for many people at this strange time, we remember those who struggle with physical and mental illness, those who find the loneliness of life unbearable, those dealing with sadness and loss, and all who long for a return to life as it was.

We remember the words of Psalm 126 with which we began our service -

Those who plant in tears will harvest with shouts of joy.

They weep as they go to plant their seed,  
but they sing as they return with the harvest.

Give us patience as we wait for that day when this world is liberated from the threat of Covid 19, knowing that that day could still be a long way off. And give us generosity of love and care, patience and understanding for one another, as we wait in the confidence - the confidence of your endless, generous Spirit.

God of all life ..... **give us a Spirit of generosity.**

God of life, give us a spirit of generosity in all things. And at this harvest time, may we rest, rejoice, remember and respond in you. May that be the rhythm of our lives, this day and always. Amen.

So have a good week, everybody. We may be apart but we are still God's church, wherever we are. We end our service with a song of rejoicing: Bless The Lord O My Soul.

## **Hymn: Bless The Lord, O My Soul (10,000 Reasons)**

*Bless the Lord, O my soul, O my soul, Worship His holy name,  
Sing like never before, O my soul, I worship Your holy name.*

*The sun comes up; it's a new day dawning, it's time to sing Your song  
again,  
Whatever may pass and whatever lies before me,  
Let me be singing when the evening comes.*

*Bless the Lord, O my soul, O my soul, Worship His holy name,  
Sing like never before, O my soul, I worship Your holy name.*

*You're rich in love and You're slow to anger, Your name is great and  
Your heart is kind,  
For all Your goodness, I will keep on singing, 10,000 reasons for my  
heart to find.*

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*Bless the Lord, O my soul, O my soul, Worship His holy name,  
Sing like never before, O my soul, I worship Your holy name.*

*And on that day when my strength is failing, the end draws near and my  
time has come,  
Still my soul will sing Your praise unending, 10,000 years and then forever  
more.*

*Bless the Lord, O my soul, O my soul, Worship His holy name,  
Sing like never before, O my soul, I worship Your holy name.*

**May God help us to steer our lives towards him,  
May he use us to break the cycle of poverty,  
And keep the wheels of transformation turning.  
May Almighty God bless you and guide you on your way.  
Amen**

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