Harvest Year C – St Michael and All Angels', Abingdon
5 October 2025

Philippians 4.4–9 / John 6.25–35

'What must we do to perform the works of God?'

 In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit – *Amen*

HARVEST SUNDAY brings our minds to cornstalks, wheatsheaves, pumpkins, scarecrows, cornucopias — reminders of a life vividly coloured and flavoured by agriculture, by agricultural labour, and by the seasons and weather that support, or sometimes devastate, the crops we depend on. Fewer and fewer of us actually live or work on farms, though allotments give some of the experience of farm work, but Harvest Sunday lingers like the scent of garlic bread after a big pasta dinner. There's no deep theological rationale for observing Harvest Sunday — no dramatic martyrdoms, no stunning revelations, no marvellous miracles. It's tacked onto our church calendar, a liturgical bolt-on that we honour for our forebears who worked in the field, for our contemporaries whose hard graft we *need* in order that we have our daily bread, but that doesn't evidently have any intrinsically Jesus content.

Well, that's not exactly true. I mean, it's true that Harvest Sunday doesn't fit *organically* into the calendar of saints and seasons, but it's not true that there's no Jesus in it. Obviously, Jesus talked a *lot* about fields and farms and fruits, but it goes beyond that. For one thing, our observance of Harvest

draws us closer to the people of Judea and Galilee, who observed the yearly festival of Sukkot *partly* in commemoration of their escape from Egypt, during which they lived in tents, *sukkot*, as they took their very scenic route from the Suez to their entry into the Land that God had promised them; but they observe it also *partly* as reapers slept in tents in the wheat-ripe fields, or as pilgrims slept in tents when they came to celebrate the harvest festival. The theme from Exodus and the theme from Harvest don't square very well *themselves*; planting crops doesn't work out especially abundantly when you're nomadic people, wandering from oasis to oasis. But the yearly observance of Sukkot immersed the people of Israel, *including Jesus*, in the world of their ancestors, of our sisters and brothers among God's many children.

But while Harvest opens our imaginations to a *past* we share with Moses and Joshua and Rahab and Deborah, Harvest doesn't *only* reach *backward* to bring us into continuity with the wilderness generation, or with the settlers who covered the fields of their own green and pleasant land with stalks, with sheaves, with vines and fruit trees. Harvest also lies in our *futures*, in the days to come when we will stand before our Holy, Eternal, and Merciful Judge. Jesus couches a tremendous amount of his teaching about how we should conduct our lives in terms drawn from agriculture, *especially* harvest time: in the Parable of the Wheat and the Weeds, he reminds us that the field's owner tells his servants 'Let both the wheat and the weeds grow together until the *harvest*; and at harvest time I will tell the reapers, Collect the weeds first and bind them in bundles to be burned, but gather the wheat into my barn.' He frequently compares us to fruit, encouraging us with the words, 'You did not choose me but I chose you. And I appointed you to go and bear fruit, fruit that will last.' And St Paul chimes in to warn us, 'God is not mocked: for whatsoever a man *soweth*, that shall he also *reap*.' When we observe Harvest Sunday, we look toward the *past,* to our wilderness days, our planting and pruning days, and we look *forward* toward the day that we will

join our forebears, beloved grandparents, mum and dad, our famous and obscure ancestors, and also the generations of children, nieces and nephews and godchildren who will come after us in one vast, glorious sucession of all people of good faith, when all that we have sown will be gathered in and presented before the Lord.

And *that* means that Harvest time embraces our *present* as well, the time of our sowing and cultivating, our tending the vines so that we may indeed offer to Jesus good fruit, as tenants who will give him the produce at the harvest time, a people that bring forth the fruits of the kingdom. So with the crowds who followed Jesus in this morning's gospel lesson, we may ask 'What must we do to perform the works of God?' The prospect of bringing humble gifts before God raises *in the most urgent terms* the challenge to make those gifts — rough-hewn and eccentric as they're likely to be — the *finest* humble gifts that we can make, with the supporting assistance of the Holy Spirit. In the words of the Apostle, 'Therefore I urge you, sisters and brothers, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God'; and in this morning's epistle reading, he reassures us with the guidance and the promise, '*whatever* is true, *whatever* is honourable, *whatever* is just, *whatever* is pure, *whatever* is pleasing, *whatever* is commendable, if there is *any* excellence and if there is *anything* worthy of praise, think about *these* things. *Keep on doing* the things that you have learned and received and heard and seen — and the God of peace will be with you.'

There is one other harvest that it would be remiss were I to neglect. On Thursday, we will release Father Paul from his licensing vows to pray for us, to lead us in worship and service, and to encourage us in our witness to the Gospel of Jesus Christ in the power of the Holy Spirit; and we bear witness now and on that occasion to the profound harvest of goodness and grace

that Father Paul's ministry has cultivated among us. As we acclaim his faithful service, as we wish him every blessing of comfort and refreshment in his new home, as we look forward in cautious hope for what, and who, comes next, we may honour Fr Paul's harvest of goodwill and earnest service by *continuing* it, by *amplifying* the kindness and patience with which he has glorified God among us, and by *continuing* his self-offering as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is our spiritual worship —

 In the Name of the Father, and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit —

Amen