

**Lent 4: Refreshment and Thanksgiving      Deuteronomy 26:1-11, Luke 6:43-45 [MW19-13]**  
**Sermon preached by Rev Wayne Thornton at Mangawhai & Wellsford, Sunday 31 March 2019**

The people of Israel in Bible times were living in a largely agricultural society. Everything depended on a good harvest. Without a good harvest, the people would go hungry. This is difficult for us to understand today, when we can buy imported food from all over the world, all year round; and enjoy fruit and vegetables out of season.

The people of Israel were dependent on the seasons. There were no clocks to indicate the time and no alarm clocks to wake people up in the morning. They worked while there was light and slept while it was dark. Modern men and women have lost this contact with nature by working during the hours of darkness. Sometimes at the cost of insomnia and mental problems.

Many churches, even in the towns and cities, have a Harvest Festival. This is understandable in an agricultural society, where a farmer's livelihood is dependent on a successful and abundant harvest. It is God who gives the harvest, and it is God who deserves our thanks and praise. In fact one of the earliest promises in the Bible concerns the seasons and the harvest. In Genesis 8, immediately after the Flood, God gives this promise to Noah: "As long as the earth endures, seedtime and harvest, cold and heat, summer and winter, day and night will never cease." This is a promise for the whole of humanity, not just the farmers who plant the seeds and harvest the crops. Without seeds there will be no harvest and without the harvest there will be no food. Without food, there will be no men and women on the earth. So whether we are farmers or not, we are indebted to God's promise of regular seasons and regular harvests.

The idea of harvest time and thanksgiving is present throughout the Bible. The Old Testament feasts are often connected with harvest. Jesus' parables, for instance the Parable of the Sower, are often connected with harvest, and Jesus in fact told his disciples to pray that God would send out workers into HIS harvest. "The harvest is plentiful but the workers are few. Ask the Lord of the harvest, therefore, to send out workers into his harvest." They understood well the need to gather in the harvest before the crops were destroyed by the autumn rains and left to rot. This is a Bible text that is often used to encourage Christians to leave for foreign lands as missionaries, but if you think about it, farmers did not leave their own land and harvest someone else's fields, they stayed at home and harvested their own crops. The question is, then, where is God's harvest? For some the harvest will indeed be in foreign lands, but for the majority of us the harvest is on our very doorsteps. This harvest is usually thought of as human souls, the need to save people for the Kingdom of God, and this is part of it. But we perhaps need to think of the harvest in terms of every good thing that God has prepared for us.

The benefits of Jesus' life, death and resurrection are the basis of this, and the basis of our thanksgiving. So we give thanks for new life and forgiveness of sins. There are many other things, such as reconciliation, healing, peace, edification, etc. that result from Jesus offering of himself.

So when we thank God for the harvest, we think also of the spiritual harvest in the Kingdom of God. This is relevant to all of us, not just farmers and country-people.

Let's just have a brief look at the biblical roots of this harvest thanksgiving.

In Leviticus 23 we read of the festival of the first-fruits. When the harvest was gathered in, the first-fruits were devoted to God. These were not just the first fruits to grow but the pick of the crop: the very best, top quality fruit, grain and vegetables. Rotten or damaged, undersized or deformed crops were not acceptable; just as the lamb was also to be without defect. The lamb, of course, leads us to think of the perfect Lamb of God, sacrificed for us. So too the first-fruits represent our "sacrifice of praise and thanksgiving". Only the very best for God! But this also means remembering the poor and the foreigner or stranger. Some of the crops were to be left for the poor and needy. This is what is recorded in the story of Ruth. The book of Ruth tells how Ruth, the great-grandmother of King David, who was from Moab, collected the leftovers of the harvest in Israel. Ruth was both poor and a foreigner; a stranger in a strange land.

This is what we are taking the opportunity to do today, on "Refreshment Sunday". We remind ourselves of all that we have to be thankful for. We thank God that he has given us our daily bread, our daily food, and that we have enough to share with the poor and the foreigner and the stranger. Most of us here today have enough and more than enough to eat, but even in our little community there are some who are struggling. So our offerings from our Harvest Thanksgiving will go to them. And we are also reminded and encouraged to share our blessings further afield, even to those beyond our area. Just as in the biblical feast of the first-fruits, the recipients of the crops that are left in the fields were unknown, so too we can help strangers with our surplus.

The Old Testament festival/thanksgiving of the first-fruits is referred to in the New Testament, in I Corinthians, where Paul calls Jesus the "first-fruits of the resurrection". He is referring to the first-fruits of a harvest. This being the resurrection from the dead. God's harvest is to raise the dead to eternal life in the Kingdom of God. And Jesus is the first-fruits - the first example of the resurrection; but also the best, perfect and flawless example. Just as the first-fruits represented a good, abundant harvest, so the resurrection of Jesus is the guarantee of an abundant harvest.

Remember Jesus' parable of the fig tree - the one we considered last Sunday? I came across this in relation to that parable and showing a "harvest" in our lives:

This parable reminds us of two things about God - first, that He is a severe God. He will cut down and destroy fruitless trees, fruitless people and fruitless churches. But He is also merciful - He delays the judgment so that we have a second chance, for many of us, a third, fourth or fifth chance. And furthermore He delays His judgment in response to the prayers of his servants, the gardener in the parable.

These days I think we need to be constantly reminded of all the good things - both spiritually and materially - that our God offers to His people. That was behind the feasts and festivals of the people of Israel. They were opportunities to thank Him not only for the provision of a sufficient harvest, but also for the fact that their God was constantly acting in their best interests - that His love for His people could look beyond all the bad things that they did, all the times that they strayed from following Him sincerely, and still provide for their needs.

For this reason I am going to place on the altar a glass of water - to remind us of the spiritual food without which we could not function as effective Christians. For it was the gift of the living water, the Holy Spirit, to the believers in Acts that was the starting point, the birth, of the church, and without which we wouldn't be sitting here and singing hymns of thanks to God for his love for us.

Today let us be reminded of all the good things that our God has given to us, and for which we can too easily become complacent. And while we're saying thanks for the food we eat, what about the gas and electricity that is used to cook the food, the petrol that gets us to the supermarket, the homes within which we eat - there are so many things in our lives that we are to be grateful for.

So I invite you to take a moment to do just that – to consider some of the many things we enjoy in life, and thank God, the source of all our blessings.

[space for reflection]

### Prayer

*Accept, O God, our thanks and praise for all that you have done for us.*

*We thank you for the splendor of the whole creation,  
for the beauty of this world, for the wonder of life,  
and for the mystery of love.*

*We thank you for the blessing of family and friends,  
and for the loving care which surrounds us on every side.*

*We thank you for setting us at tasks which demand our best efforts,  
and for leading us to accomplishments which satisfy and delight us.*

*We thank you also for those disappointments and failures  
that lead us to acknowledge our dependence on you alone.*

*Above all, we thank you for your Son Jesus Christ;  
for the truth of his Word and the example of his life;  
for his steadfast obedience, by which he overcame temptation;  
for his dying, through which he overcame death;  
and for his rising to life again,  
in which we are raised to the life of your kingdom.*

*Grant us the gift of your Spirit,  
that we may know him and make him known;  
and through him, at all times and in all places,  
may give thanks to you in all things.*

*Amen.*