

Harvest Newsletter St Bridget

Dear Friends,

In the mid 1980s, I lived in Sheringham on the North Norfolk coast. And one of the things, I vividly remember is that some of the churches decorated their church with the harvest of the sea. There were fishing nets draped around the church and fish and crabs and lobsters. It looked quite spectacular., though thankfully it was not left decorated for long as the smell would have been equally spectacular, if not exactly pleasant!

Over the centuries, celebrations of Harvest Festival have changed to reflect changing times. In the Middle Ages, the festival was at the beginning of the harvest gathering season on 1st August. Farmers made loaves of bread from the new wheat crop and donated them to their local churches. These were used as communion bread in a service giving thanks to God for the harvest. The festival was known as Lammas or 'loaf mass'.

The tradition of celebrating Harvest Festival in churches as we know it, was reintroduced by Reverend Robert Hawker in 1843. He was vicar of St Morwenna and St John the Baptist church in Morwenstow in Cornwall from 1834 until his death in 1875. When he arrived, there had not been a vicar in residence for over a century!

On September 13th, 1843, he put up a notice inviting his parishioners to a special thanksgiving service during which the old custom of making Eucharistic bread from the first corn would be revived. The notice read: 'Let us gather together in the chancel of our church, and there receive, in the bread of the new corn, that blessed sacrament which was ordained to strengthen and refresh our souls.'

The custom of gathering to give thanks for God's provision spread so that Harvest Festival celebrations became widespread. Victorian hymns such as 'Come ye thankful people come' became popular, as well as 'We plough the fields and scatter' which was translated from German. Another custom which expressed this awareness and sense of thanksgiving was the idea of decorating churches with home grown produce from people's gardens and allotments, or as in Sheringham, the produce from the sea.

These all helped to make the Harvest Service a special occasion and gave a powerful sense of God at work in the beauty of creation around us.

Harvest festival is a time to thank God for his rich provision; a time to thank God for his gifts to us; a time also to reach out in prayer and harvest-gifts, to those near and far who are in need, as well as a time to focus on the spiritual harvest of our own lives. When the Rev Robert Hawker, instituted the harvest festival thanksgiving as we know it, some 170 years ago, he was starting a tradition that was to grow and become an integral part of the Church's year.

In our own county of Denbighshire, we see firsthand the grace of God in the beauty of our landscape and in the land being ploughed and the seed sown.

So let us give thanks for the skills and hard work of our farmers in gathering the harvest safely in and let us give thanks to God for his unlimitless grace and love.

Every Blessing

David