

RE-ENCHANTING HARVEST

St. Michael, Cornhill

Harvest Thanksgiving

Sunday October 23rd 2016

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Attending church at St. Peter's, Vauxhall, just south of the river, has its bonuses. It is a lovely building, one of the architect, John Loughborough Pearson's earliest, least expensive, yet still stunning buildings. One tiny downside, on occasion, was the immediate presence – bang next door – of Vauxhall's urban farm. Offering a welcome green space, and occupying part of the site of the eighteenth century Vauxhall Pleasure gardens, the farm is currently in the heart of London. Pigs, sheep, cows, horses and donkeys jostle with each other alongside some modest arable cultivation.

The farm was a positive innovation, but the donkey was often the downside. At the most solemn moments of silence in the eucharist, this fine specimen would break out into an unconstrained procession of loud *eeyores*. Irritating as it was, this animal, a descendant perhaps of he who took Christ into Jerusalem, came famously into his own at harvest time. How could this be, you may ask? Well, it relates to the *un-enchanted* nature of great cities. What do I mean by that? Well, take Lambeth and Vauxhall as one example. Lambeth Walk, immortalised by the old music hall song, is no longer a *jaunty way*. Instead it's a miserable parade of shops, now mostly closed and shuttered entirely after closing time daily. Similarly, Lambeth High Street has no shops, no houses, perhaps one pub and is overshadowed by tall and largely faceless buildings.

So, at harvest, the donkey is just one reminder of the farm, which is itself a reminder of our dependence on the earth and on the elements. Listen again to our first reading from Joel:

'Fear not, you beasts of the field, for the pastures of the wilderness are green; the tree bears its fruit, the fig and vine give their full yield. Be glad, O sons of Zion, and rejoice in the Lord, your God; for he has given the early rain for your vindication, he has poured down for you abundant rain, the early and the later rains as before.'

Both Old and New Testaments are rich in imagery from the land, for the cultures from which they issued, over a period of well over one thousand years, were Agrarian cultures. When our Book of Common Prayer was compiled and re-edited in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, much of this still applied. There, in the Prayer Book, immediately after morning and evening offices, Mattins and Evensong, amongst prayers and thanksgivings are collects for rain, for fair weather, in praise of abundance, for avoidance of dearth and famine. God was in it all. So this continued for some three hundred years.

So, when did people perceive of the radical changes in landscape and daily life? When did it seem that dependence upon God for food and fair weather moved well beyond an arm's length away? The answer lies crucially in the nineteenth century. One of the clearest literary weather vanes, pointing to this change in the weather of the Spirit, was the poet and novelist, Thomas Hardy. It stands out most sharply, perhaps, in one of his greatest tragic novels, *Tess of the D'Urbervilles*. The story blossoms idyllically with Tess' love of Angel Clare. At this point, both Tess and Angel work in the rich loams and pastures of the Frome valley, what Hardy calls 'the Vale of the Great Dairies.' It is an enchanted world.

As the novel progresses and Clare deserts Tess, so alongside this, and with the collapse of her family, she is penniless. She's left to the mercy of farmers in the far less fertile uplands of central Dorset. Here on the chalky and flinty 'starve-acre' ground of Flintcomb Ash farm, Tess scrapes together a living. The work is tough, the rewards poor and the weather cruel. The atmosphere is soul-less. Still later on, when she's pursued once again by her *nemesis*, the ne'er do well Alec D'Urberville, we encounter the black smoke from a steam threshing machine replacing human labour. The symbolism of the black smoke is powerful – it points to the evil of

Tess' tempter, but it captures too the dark clouds presaging a very different feeling in the changing nature of the countryside. Enchantment is well on the wain.

In *Tess*, in *Far From the Madding Crowd*, and elsewhere in his novels and poetry, Hardy sees very sharply this great shift in European culture which happened earliest here in England. Initially, of course, it's a picture of mechanisation of the landscape, of increasing rural poverty and depopulation. But something deeper is presaged too. For as this all advances, as urban life replaces rural life, as food is mediated rather than harvested from the next field, so it becomes easier to forget our dependence on God.

Hardy was himself a classical example of this, fluctuating between faith and fatalism all his life, and yet, to the end never giving up on the power of belief. In the year he died he was still cycling over to attend Evensong at Stinsford where he'd been a musician alongside his father in the church choir. For all his uncertainties, Hardy yearned always for a re-enchantment of his world.

Towards the end of that passage from Joel is a piece which resonates with this very strongly:

'And it shall come to pass afterward, that I will pour out my spirit on all flesh; your sons and daughters shall prophesy, your old men shall dream dreams, and your young men shall see visions.'

There is an echo of the promise of *re-enchantment*.

It's fascinating too, that today's harvest gospel is about the bread of life. John's gospel is the most reflective and conceptual of all the gospels. Yet all its images are rooted still in nature – living water, the bread of life, the light of the world and so on. In Jesus, John sees our world, riven by the same agonies known to us, both as God, but also incarnate as one of us. Our dependence now is as unavoidable and essential as ever. Even in the heart of this great city, as we all are now, still the Incarnation of God in Jesus Christ, means a re-enchantment and none more so than in this eucharist. Harvest remains a unique opportunity each year to remind ourselves and all God's people of a world ever enchanted by his Spirit, a Spirit without which all humanity is as nothing.

Amen.

Readings

Joel. 2. 23-end.

Philippians. 4. 4-9.

John. 6. 25-35.