

## **HARVEST THANKSGIVING 2024**

It is good to be in Church today to celebrate Harvest Thanksgiving! I say that with some feeling because if you read the latest 'Woodbridge Flyer', 'In Touch', or 'Fynn-Lark' magazines, there seems to be one word you cannot mention: 'GOD'...

Oooh, controversial, I know, or is it, dear friends, in Christ?

Last Friday's Times newspaper highlighted something I couldn't quite miss, and I quote: "Advent of 'atheist age' as parents fail to keep the faith." Researchers from Queen's University Belfast and Brunel University have pointed to studies in 2008 showing that 35.2 per cent did not believe in God. Within a decade, by 2018, this had reversed, with 42.9 per cent not believing.

Well, make of that what you will – a bit like the furore if you remember it, when Birmingham City Council dared to 'cancel' Christmas and replace it with a 'Winter-val' Festival instead or again, when the Rector of our Benefice replaced Harvest with 'The Feast of the Holy Pumpkin.' .. I'm only joking!

But I want to tell a different story (having already witnessed three different school harvest services which were all completely joyful)...that, behind today's Festival, is a wonderful and loving Creator who has shaped who we are. Let's think for a moment how we can still enjoy what He has made and what can be re-made, if we are caring and passionate enough to respond, as those created in the image of God. Let's really ponder those words we have heard from

the prophet Joel, in a world crying out for prophecy and justice. Let's use our minds and hearts and eyes and ears to listen to the Gospel of the Day in St Matthew. Or is the 'message' of today too difficult or challenging for us so, unlike the Good Samaritan, we 'walk by on the other side'?

The Salvation Army Foodbank in our United Benefice doesn't do that. They go to those messy places and struggling homes which we so often ignore, which is why the Gospel, or God even, can so easily be overlooked or edited out? "If God so clothes the grass of the field, which is alive today and tomorrow is thrown in the oven, will he not much more clothe you – you of little faith?" I suggest to you we don't need the latest 'survey' but rather an honest, open heart and generous response to the One who made us, and who holds all Creation so dear.

Because we are so close to the River Deben and this particular bird is so much a neighbour, I'd like to share this simple rhyme, called 'The Sandpiper':

"At the edge of tide  
He stops to wonder,  
Races through  
The lace of thunder.

On toothpick legs  
Swift and brittle,  
He runs and pipes  
And his voice is little.

But small or not,  
He has a notion  
To outshout  
The Atlantic Ocean.”

Wouldn't that make a wonderful choir anthem...to outshout the Atlantic Ocean, despite feeling small? This sandpiper 'stops to wonder' and that's the spirit and meaning for today's 'Harvest Thanksgiving' and 'Grace'.

I was brought up with hearing and praying 'The Grace' on special occasions when food and community sharing are celebrated, and where our Creator God is the host inviting us to eat and drink the heavenly 'kingdom' baskets: full of bread and fishes! Heaven and Earth we said last week at Michaelmas are melded and united – they cannot be separated. The Harvest of today is the Harvest we shall reap in the life to come. Harvest is the very paradigm of celebrating the beauty of creation and our care for it and the joy of inclusion – as co-creators - empowered to cherish everything that is 'made good.' It seems poignant to end with a prayer from a 10 year old who understands all this and here, there is no place for atheism or, unbelief:

“Lord, you are the God who cares. You send the rain to water the land. You give the sun to brighten our dark days. You care for the frightened rabbit, the prowling lion, the smallest sandpiper and the soaring eagle. Sometimes, Lord, we are careless. We hunt, we trap, we tease, we destroy, we burn,

we pollute. Please Lord, give us some of your care. Make us carers, too.” Amen.