

After harvest



This was the original title given to the well known harvest hymn “Come, ye thankful people, come” written by Dean Henry Alford (1810-71).



For some time he was the vicar at Wymeswold, the next village to ours and the hymn obviously draws on his understanding of life in a rural community. I can imagine him watching the work on the land through the seasons and penning down the first drafts of this hymn as he saw reapers working and laden carts being drawn by sturdy horses towards the barns.

It is a hymn of thankfulness but also it epitomises other aspects of harvest: workers can look forward to the coming months in the knowledge that everything is safe in the barns, that there is food for them and their families, food and bedding for their livestock, and surpluses to be sold. At that time the harvest had to provide for everyone and everything – there was little provision for the poor and destitute then, the sale of surpluses funding goods they could not grow or make themselves. The whole village would have watched the weather at harvest. Local tradesmen and shopkeepers would know that a good harvest meant a good income for the farmers and their workers, money that would be spent in their establishments. A poor harvest would have meant everyone tightening their belts, perhaps even starving.

In a society that has become used to overflowing supermarket shelves throughout the year it is easily forgotten that it is only those born since the end of the last war that have never known hunger in this country. As our population has become more and

more urbanised and even those who now live in the countryside know little of farming, harvest is something that is taken for granted. It is just a nice idea and an opportunity to decorate the church for so many people. But the fact remains that without a harvest there would be no food. Increasing food imports mean that we are reliant on harvests from the other side of the world as well as in the UK, weather, natural disaster and war permitting.

It is said that Henry Alford said grace at the end of meals rather than before them as it was his way of thanking God for all that He had provided. We need that same spirit of thankfulness ourselves, not just at harvest but at all times. Climate change is impacting on world food supplies and this year, for the third time in eleven years, grain supplies will be tight. There will be no technological fixes for the world’s climate as some would like to believe. It is God who provides the harvest. People need to appreciate that, in spite of all the modern machinery, it is still a time of long hours of hard work for those who bring in the harvest. If those facts were truly appreciated then once again it will be truly thankful people coming to praise God for the harvest. ■

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