

Oct 1, 2023 – Online – Gleaning the harvest with Vicki Clarke, Gravesend Hub Manager
Bonni-Belle Pickard

Pre-service music:

We plough the fields and scatter – StF 130

For the fruits of all creation – StF 124ii

Praise and thanksgiving – StF 125

Give Thanks – StF 78

When I needed a neighbour – StF 256

==ORDER OF SERVICE==

Call to worship – Isaiah 55:1 –

 Come, all you who are thirsty, come to the waters;

 and you who have no money, come, buy and eat!

 Come, buy wine and milk without money and without cost.

We plough the fields and scatter – StF 130

Prayer

Reflection: Harvesting and gleaning

Interview with Vicki Clarke: who do you work with – who needs the gleanings to survive?

For the fruits of all creation – StF 124ii

Intercessions – for those who need us to be good and right and true

Praise and thanksgiving – StF 125

Benediction --

When I needed a neighbour – StF 256

Prayer

Thank you, God, for the colour of tomatoes and beetroot,
For the different colours and shapes and fragrances of flowers,
For grubby potatoes and funny-shaped carrots –
For the goodness of the earth itself.

Thank you, God, for the taste of apples from the tree—
Of blackberries picked straight from the hedgerow;
For the glossiness of conkers and acorns...

Thank you, God, for the smell of baking cakes and real coffee.
For the smell of wood smoke and damp leaves;
And for the lights of home on a dark evening.
Thank you, God, for the kiss of a dog's wet nose
And for the purring contentedness of a cat.

For all these ordinary wonderful things – thank you, God.
May we never forget to give thanks to you,
Maker and Giver of all.
Amen.

■ Richard Sharples in *Heart for Creation*

We often use our Harvest services

To thank God for all the gifts that have been given to us so generously –
And so we should! And we come to share what we have – And so we should!

But for many years as I've led Harvest services, I've shied away

From using the hymn we've just shared about 'ploughing the fields' –
As very few of us actually come in contact with actual 'ploughing of the fields',
It seemed a bit far-fetched as a metaphor.

Indeed, I remember going to a school Harvest assembly many years ago

And taking a piece of bread – and asking the children where it came from.

The answer I was looking for was that it ultimately came from God –

But when I asked the children, they said it came from ASDA.

I smiled and said, "Yes, but it was made out of flour – where did the flour come from?"

ASDA.

I tried going through all the steps of bread production –

Flour comes from wheat, which comes from a seed planted in the ground...

But each time I asked where something came from, the answer was ASDA!

I realised then and there how very far our society has come

From understanding what a Harvest is literally about.

Though I didn't grow up in a farming family,

My father was an itinerate Methodist minister,

so sometimes we were assigned to rural churches

where the whole of life focussed on farming and agriculture –
about the realities of 'harvest'.

When we lived in farming areas,

The weather report was no longer about whether we should take an umbrella to school

But whether there would be enough or too much rain for the crops.

School holidays were not about going somewhere to relax

But about the reality of having enough workers available

To get the crop harvested when it was ripe and ready.

Since moving to Kent, I've heard many tales of 'hop-picking' 'holidays'

When whole families came from to the countryside from the city for such...

Weekends were not for sleeping late as the cows still had to be milked

Or the livestock fed or the eggs gathered.

Farming is about ensuring that there is enough food for everyone to eat.

And about 70% of the land area of England is used for agriculture.

That's huge!

Over the past several decades there have been huge changes in how farming is done –

The Green Revolution of the 1970s and 80s was a powerful movement

For increasing food production around the world –

I was living in India at the time, and saw massive changes implemented.

More recently, we've realised that some parts of the Green Revolution

Were actually harmful to the environment as a whole –

And now those involved in agricultural research

are actively exploring ways to maintain food production

AND protect the natural environment.

There is much that can be said and much that must be done

about preserving the natural environment for ourselves and the future.

But there is another concept related to harvest that has captured my imagination recently
And that is 'gleaning'. Not 'cleaning' but 'gleaning'....

It's a word that I'd heard from childhood –

I knew it had to do with farming and harvesting,
but I wasn't quite sure what it really meant.

I've learned that it actually refers to the practice of 'collecting leftover crops
From farmer's fields after they have been commercially harvested
Or from fields where it is not economically profitable to harvest.'

I have another vivid childhood memory when I was about 7 or 8 –

We lived in central Florida then and there were huge fields of tomatoes nearby.
One morning Daddy got a call to say that one of those fields was about to be ploughed under
As the crop was now over-ripe so could be transported to market,
But that the church folk could have all the tomatoes they could gather...

The call went out, and a dozen or so cars soon showed up at the field,
Mostly full of women and children as the men were at their offices in those days,
And we set out with our baskets to gather up all the huge ripe fruit we could manage
With the gigantic mechanical thrashers churning up everything in their path
Right across the field...

We would fill our baskets, run back to the cars and dump the tomatoes in the boot,
then return for more.

It was hot, sweaty, dusty work; I distinctly remember getting sunburned!

But we were determined to salvage what we could
Before those mechanical beasts caught up with us!

When the station wagons could bear no more weight,
We piled in whatever seats were left and drove to a church member's house.

I remember there was a large kitchen instantly filled with steamy pots
Where the women set to work blanching the fruit
and filling up all the glass jars that had materialised from everyone's storerooms.

We children had work to do as well –

But I also remember there was a swimming pool in the back yard
Where we could jump in when we needed to cool down a bit...

At the end of the day, we were all very very tired – but very pleased as well
Of what we had rescued from the mechanical beasts
And how it would serve us throughout the coming months...

I suppose that was one of my first encounters with 'gleaning'.

The farm owner had decided that he'd done all he could with his crop
on a business level
And so he'd offered it to a local charity (us!).

I still consider myself a bit of a 'rescuer',

Especially at the supermarket where I'm always on the lookout
For the Reduced Price section (Mangoes!)

But my 'rescuing' is primarily about getting for myself –

As commercial 'harvesting' is about bringing in a crop to feed others –
And making a profit.

The ancient practice of 'gleaning' was about ensuring

That there was enough for everyone –
Especially those who couldn't afford the market rates.
Leviticus 23:22 says, "when you reap the harvest of your land,
you shall not reap to the very edges of your field,
or gather the gleanings of your harvest;
you shall leave them for the poor and for the alien: I am the Lord your God."
Other passages from the book of Deuteronomy
say that farmers should not pick up anything which is dropped
or go back to harvest anything they'd forgotten when they'd gone through the field.
What was left behind were the 'gleanings' –
And they were the rightful property of the 'poor and the alien' –
The farmer was not allowed to benefit from the gleaning,
Nor to attempt to frighten those gleaning away
Or to discriminate amongst who could glean ...

Most of you will be familiar with the story of Ruth and Naomi
Who arrived in Bethlehem from Moab just at the time of the barley harvest.
They had travelled far, and though Naomi had come back 'home' to Bethlehem,
She and her daughter-in-law had come back as widows,
So they really had no status in the community –
And no one to support them ...
They would have needed to find a way to support themselves...
So Naomi hatched a plan....

Ruth 2:1-8

Now Naomi had a kinsman on her husband's side, a prominent rich man,
of the family of Elimelech, whose name was Boaz.
And Ruth the Moabite said to Naomi,
'Let me go to the field and glean among the ears of grain,
behind someone in whose sight I may find favour.'
She said to her, 'Go, my daughter.' So she went.
She came and gleaned in the field behind the reapers.
As it happened, she came to the part of the field belonging to Boaz,
who was of the family of Elimelech.
Just then Boaz came from Bethlehem.
He said to the reapers, 'The LORD be with you.'
They answered, 'The LORD bless you.'
Then Boaz said to his servant who was in charge of the reapers,
'To whom does this young woman belong?'
The servant who was in charge of the reapers answered,
'She is the Moabite who came back with Naomi from the country of Moab.'
She said, "Please let me glean and gather among the sheaves behind the reapers."
So she came, and she has been on her feet from early this morning until now,
without resting even for a moment.'
Then Boaz said to Ruth, 'Now listen, my daughter,
do not go to glean in another field or leave this one, but keep close to my young women.'

We also know the rest of the story – that Ruth eventually married Boaz
And became the great-grandmother of King David!...
Which shows one should never underestimate the value of gleaning!

The practice of gleaning continued for millennia --
Even in 18th century England, the village sexton would ring a bell in the morning
And again in the evening to mark the times
When the 'cottagers', the landless residents,
Were allowed to be in the fields to glean.
But gleaning became much more difficult as agriculture became more mechanised
And commercial...
It's much easier and more cost effective to plough a field over
Than to wait for others to pick through it --
In some places, such as Russia, gleaning is illegal!
And so we have huge amounts of waste to deal with --
Even while we continue to have huge amounts of hunger.

I suppose the closest we get to gleaning today is our Food Banks,
Where surplus food is donated by individuals or supermarkets --
Perhaps still the bits that are 'not economically viable' for us?
There are various charities that are committed to modern-day gleaning in fields
And distributing the food to charities which make it available to the poor.

Perhaps the essential bit we've lost is our fundamental understanding
Of the responsibility of each of us to look out for each other --
Particularly for those who can't look out for themselves for whatever reason.

We contribute to Food Banks; we give our no-longer-needed clothes to charity shops.
But we're often doing so more as a concern for managing our 'clutter' --
Our over-abundance of possessions --
Than out of a concern for others.

Perhaps that is because we have organised our society
So that we don't have to come in contact with those who are in need.
Or we leave that contact to charities to do it for us.
And so our giving and receiving becomes anonymous.
Perhaps that is our true sin.

Several of our churches run Food Banks on our premises --
We gather up clothing for homeless charities --
We send money to charities as well.
But we generally leave the personal contact with those receiving to others.

In my own 'gleaning' of scriptures in preparation for this service on Harvest,
I came across this quote from Proverbs 14:4:
*Where there are no oxen, the manger [stall] stays clean;
but from the strength of the oxen comes an abundant harvest. (TLV)*
It made me wonder, how many of us are more concerned with having a 'clean manger'
with keeping our lives -- or our homes -- or our churches tidy
Than with sharing an abundant harvest?
And how might the 'strength' of including those who have been excluded
Help us all attain a more abundant harvest?

Today I've asked Vicki Clarke, who is the Centre Manager

for the Gravesend Methodist Church Hub which works with destitute persons,
to tell us about the work she does on a day-to-day basis
with the people most of us never see or speak to...

**"Where there are
no oxen, the stalls
are clean, but from
the strength of
the ox comes an
abundant harvest."**

Proverbs 14:4 TLV

