

Sunday 4 October – Harvest Festival

Sermon by Reverend Canon Janet Nicholls Rural Adviser and Agricultural Chaplain

Due to illness, the sermon text below is from the Diocesan website on harvest, and it is based on Psalm 95 and Matthew 13.1-9, 18-23. It can be watched at chelmsford.anglican.org/publications/weekly-sermons/weekly-sermon-for-harvest-with-the-revd-canon-janet-nicholls. Due to holidays, an audio recording of the actual sermon from St Luke's may be available after 18 October at [Sermons \(tk-tiptree-braxted-benefice.org.uk\)](https://sermons(tk-tiptree-braxted-benefice.org.uk)).

“An Attitude of Gratitude”

I have a favourite spot where I like to watch sunrise. It's just a few metres from my home, an agricultural landscape overlooking a river valley, the place where the words of the Venite dawn in my heart:

*Let us come into his presence with thanksgiving
And be glad in him with psalms.*

I stand on a wide field-margin, left uncultivated for wildlife. In the spring and early summer, I watch skylarks over the wheat from here.

Now, following the harvest of the wheat for flour and the straw for bio-mass heating, I watch hares playing on the stubble and too many deer. The hedgerow behind me has yielded berries for several weeks, providing free breakfast blackberries: my daily boost of vitamin C and antioxidants. The northern boundary of the field has recently planted trees. The eastern boundary is the River Pant. It has a wide watercourse buffer-strip to protect water quality from any agri-run-off.

It also manages flooding, and boosts biodiversity along the riverside. I've watched a barn owl hunting over it.

It's here that an attitude of gratitude is awakened in me, setting me up for the day ahead. Gratitude for the gift of Creation, for those who work with it, for a new day dawning and all the possibilities it holds.

It's the perfect place to contemplate this year's Harvest Thanksgiving services. After all, Harvest Thanksgiving has gratitude at its heart. It's the festival that invites us all to pause, to give thanks for God's good creation, for the land entrusted to us, for those who work with it, for the countryside

they manage to sustain wildlife and for the food they produce to sustain us. This work is life-giving and lifesaving.

As I look out over the field, I'm mindful of the challenges woven into this landscape.

The farmer works incredibly hard here providing superb environmental stewardship alongside growing our food.

This year, I suspect that the income received for the grain and straw won't even cover the costs of growing it. It's a story I've heard often.

This harvest, the illustration that Jesus employed in the Parable of the Sower, has been lived out on every food-producing farm in the Diocese. We've just experienced an unprecedented drought. Wheat and barley yields in thin light soils which didn't retain spring rain have been low. Where yields have held up it's been on the deeper, heavier clay soils that retained some moisture. They brought forth some precious grain. With great care, investment and perseverance, "The earth has yielded its increase". Once again, some crops grown in our Diocese will be contributing to the food provision for our growing global population of 8.3 billion. My attitude of gratitude for our food-producing farmers deepens further as I contemplate these issues: global population is rising, climate change is reducing the agricultural potential of land world-wide, the importance of producing life sustaining crops on our good soil is even more vital.

Farming is full of dedicated people, deeply committed to their way of life. It's also highly complex and it's costly: mentally, physically and financially. Each of the "Farm For Sale" boards in our Diocese has a story behind it. Some represent the final harvest of a lifetime of farming.

To those farmers.... Please hear our gratitude for your years of hard work and commitment, for the life-sustaining food you produced and for being custodians of the countryside. May our gratitude be woven into your story of farming, your harvest.

This year's Harvest Thanksgiving Services take place against a backdrop of an uncertain agricultural future. How comforting to know that in our Harvest Festivals, our farming community will find our prayers, our gratitude, our appreciation of their commitment. It's my prayer that amidst

our harvest worship and in the good soil of God's kingdom, our farmers may also sense a renewed hope and inspiration for their life-saving work.

Food produced in the UK is of vital importance, but the present challenges are pushing farmers towards reduced food production on our good, fertile soil, increasing reliance on imports. At present we import nearly half of our food but as the climate warms, our traditional places of import will diminish. Their droughts are more significant than ours. Increasingly, food imports will be environmentally costly, subject to global politics and economics, and from countries with less rigorous animal welfare and food-safety regulation.

I just can't imagine our God of Creation declaring "This is good. This is very good."

As this sermon closes, I'm imagining those first listeners of the Parable of the Sower, inspired by the image of the Kingdom of God likened to good, rich, deep soil.

I wonder if their eyes were on the ground as they left the lakeside. Did they look at the coastal path, the rocky ground, the thorny ground and then the good deep soil? I wonder if anyone stopped, stooped down and took a handful of the good soil, to feel it, to rub it in their fingers and smell it. Farming employs highly sophisticated scientific and technological innovations, but nothing can replace the directness of good soil in your hands. Jesus often stooped low to the ground in difficult situations. Remember the woman caught in adultery, and the mob who wanted to stone her. Jesus, facing this difficult ethical conundrum said nothing for a while. He stooped low and put his finger in the dusty soil. He drew attention to the ground. All became "grounded" if you like. It diffused a ferocious argument.

Throughout the Diocese, we've been exploring and responding to our urgent environmental challenges, including food security.

Many researchers, academics and theologians have assisted in our deliberations. In moving forward together I sense the need for some stooping low, some humility before God, some openness to each other's concerns and a respect for the wisdom of those who are close to the soil, our farmers.

Human (our species), humus (the earth), humility (being down to earth) are all intrinsically bound together in God's good soil.

And so, this Harvest Festival season, with an attitude of gratitude, you might like to imagine yourself standing with me overlooking agricultural land of our Diocese. For a few moments your feet are connected to this good soil, this place of mutually supportive environmental stewardship and food production.

And you might like to join me in the words of the Venite

*Come let us worship and bow down and kneel before the Lord our maker.
For he is our God; we are the people of his pasture and the sheep of his hand.*

Amen