

## HARVEST

‘As long as earth lasts, sowing and reaping, cold and heat, summer and winter, day and night shall cease no more’.  
Genesis 8: 22

These words form the climax of the story of Noah’s Ark. The reason for the flood, given at the beginning of the story, was that God had decided that there was so much corruption on earth that he would destroy everything he had made and begin again, saving only Noah, who was a righteous man, and his family and of course the animals who went in two by two. Having made a clean sweep of all creation and having saved Noah and his wife, his three sons, Shem, Ham and Japheth and their wives, and of course all the animals, God gives the great promise of security for ever more, ‘As long as earth lasts, sowing and reaping, cold and heat, summer and winter, day and night shall cease no more’.

For the religious believer, the world of nature is uncomfortably ambiguous. In some seasons and climates, nature appears to be friendly to human beings and it is easy to accept the promise made at the end of the Noah story as reliable. Life in a pleasant temperate climate could easily persuade us that God was indeed in full control of the elements of his creation which exist for our benefit. It looks somewhat different for people at the moment who have suffered the rages of the hurricane Floyd in the United States of America or for the millions of people who have been made homeless in Turkey and in Taiwan as a result of

the earthquakes there. We could not blame them if they were somewhat cynical about the message of the Noah epic. To many people throughout the world, nature appears to be malevolent and inhospitable to human life. Hence both Geography and Climate obviously have their role in determining the nature of religious beliefs.

People living in an urbanised technological society can go for a long time without walking in real fields or seeing cows being milked. They do not understand the problems faced by the farming community in today’s economic climate. They are naturally lulled into believing that nature has now been ‘mastered’ by modern scientific methods of farming and human dependence on nature has been radically reduced. To some extent modern methods have succeeded in improving the productivity of the farming industry.

But just when it would appear that such a mastery of nature is just around the corner, natural disasters on an enormous scale serve to remind us that nature remains enigmatic and unpredictable. Similarly the recent economic problems of the so called ‘tiger’ economies serve to emphasise the old truth that human life is in reality insecure and fragile.

In times of insecurity and confusion human beings have often turned to some sort of magic which offers a way of manipulating the powers of nature to one’s own advantage. One of the attractions of astrology is that it offers daily and weekly reassurance that fate is on our side.

It is also possible to debase prayer and use it as a magical way to manipulate God as if he were a genie at the end of a lamp. I sometimes wonder what is going on in our minds when we ask God to bless the fields at Rogation-tide. Certainly if any unbelieving people were looking on at this ritual they would be led to believe that we were in the business of manipulation or superstition.

So how do we deal with the ‘changes and chances of this mortal life’. There is no avoiding the fact that built into God’s creation is an element of chance which no one can control. Hence when things go wrong – when the harvest is poor, or when market forces frustrate any attempt to increase production, how are we to react? When ill health comes upon us or our loved one’s – when innocent people suffer or are killed by mindless terrorists – how do we react?

I have been on retreat at Wydale Diocesan Centre this week and heard the Archbishop of York speaking very movingly of his experience of the Lambeth Conference this year. He said how much he appreciated living in England when he heard some of the experience of Bishops from Africa and other parts of the world. He told of one Bishop in Ruanda who witnessed the shooting of his wife and child. He told of three young men who had been confirmed who were caught as they walked home and had their ears cut off and were forced to eat their ears before they were released. How do people deal with such suffering?

Our dignity as human beings forbids us to shut our eyes to these things. We may be tempted to curse the world, which God has made, and curse God for making it so. But there is an alternative. We can adore it by seeing the God of our Lord Christ within it sharing its suffering alongside us as he dies on the cross. We can persist in stubborn faith and repeat the hallowed words ‘This is my Body – This is my blood’. All the things in life which fill us with dread, all the things in life which filled the heart of Jesus on the cross; all, in the last resort, are appearances of the same sacrament.

At harvest time we do indeed have much to give thanks for – now thank we all our God with heart and hands and voices, who wondrous things hath done, in whom the world rejoices. But this is not magic or superstition – this is not a pagan celebration because yet again we have worked the oracle by appeasing an angry God. We thank God for our creation, preservation, and all the blessings of this life; but above all for his immeasurable love in the redemption of the world by our Lord Jesus Christ, for the means of grace, and for the hope of glory.

AMEN