

THE HARVEST OF LIFE

*[Text of sermon preached at St. Peter's Anglican Church, Edmonton, 11 September 1988,
by J.M.Hattersley, Hon Assistant Priest]*

In my office, I have a drawer full of my old diaries going back to the time I joined my present law firm in 1964. The tale is there of appointments made and kept, cases fought, wrongs righted, and a thousand problems dealt with. One thing that may be a puzzle to you, though, if you look into those appointment books, is a five pointed star, moving forward through the book at a rate of about five days a year. Back in 1964 it was somewhere in early June. This year, the date has crept forward to the sixth of October.

You might have been surprised also, over the years, to see me on the marked days standing by the strip of garden that I have at the side of the house, thoughtfully looking at the state of the crop. In earlier years, I would have seen the lettuce sprouting, the beans growing, the tomatoes ripening, and so on. By this time, I am looking rather at a garden where most of the growing has been done, and whose fruits are already gathered and in storage.

As you may have guessed, the secret of it all is that I have been meditating on the passing of my life. There is a time in life for seeding. There is a later time for bedding out and cultivating what we have sown. There is a time for the harvest. After the harvest, there is perhaps the best time, if we did our earlier work well, when we sit down and enjoy the fruits of our earlier work. It is no accident, too, that these stages in the garden of seeding, cultivating, harvesting and enjoyment, are so similar in nature to the Taking, Blessing, Breaking and Giving that are the basic 'shape' of our service of the Eucharist.

Our lives follow this same pattern. In our childhood, we learn our life skills and our basic education, cultivating the ground in preparation for our careers. Some particular opportunity, talent or skill will likely grab hold of us as we grow up, and we plant the seeds of special devotion to one or more particular interests, that can be the basis of our career. We refine and cultivate those skills as we advance. Then in every case, there comes a point when we can go no further. We have to say goodbye to activities which once were our daily interest, and live from that point on on the fruits of what we have accomplished.

Harvest time, therefore, is a kind of Day of Judgment. The growing season is over. What we have to reap reflects on all that has gone before. The crop we have now reflects on the seeds we planted in our youth - wild oats, possibly, but hopefully something more beneficial. It reflects on our diligence in cultivation - has our seed become choked with weeds, has it been fed and watered, how well have we cared for the soil? Have we gone to the trouble to prune and thin, so that what remains can grow to full size and quality? Our harvest reflects also on God - have we prayed for rain and sunshine at the proper times, and have those prayers been answered? Perhaps we have forgotten how close we came this year to no crop at all, until rains came in June to make the seed germinate. Round about that time, I recall a few column inches in the "Journal" from a clergyman who impressed on us the importance of praying for rain in that spring drought. At any rate, we in these parts of the world can give thanks to God for a very good harvest: a harvest denied to many other places on this continent. How well has God blessed our work and our efforts? How well have we asked Him to? How much have we deserved His blessing?

There is also a skill required in harvesting. Leave the fruit on the trees too long, and it becomes overripe, soft, and a prey to wasps and birds. Leave the tomatoes out too long, and they will be ruined by the first frost. Pick the crop too early, and it may be undersized, bitter, immature. There is a time to sow, and a time to reap. In my own life, I have been more than once surprised how definitely God has

acted to make clear to me that a particular ministry, or pattern of activity, has come to an end - just when it seemed to me so successful, promising and important.

There is also a skill in disposing of the fruits of the harvest. Some part of those fruits are for ourselves. Some parts are to be shared with others. The part that must never be forgotten is that part which is to be the seed for next year's crop. Finally, the plant that we raised with such pride and joy is now no longer needed - we root out the bean plants, the tomato plants, the potato plants, and consign them to the compost heap. Like our bodies in old age, their time is past: they have done their work and can be discarded, because they have now formed the seeds that will be the source of the crop next year - seeds that, many or few, will be able to raise a perfect new crop, because that is the nature of the vegetable world.

Of course, there are times when our growth is cut short. One incident happened in our family the day before Cathy's funeral, at the home of my other daughter, Nancy. The day before the funeral, the sewage pipe from the house to the sewer in the back lane collapsed, and to replace the pipe, the whole garden had to be dug up, so that a backhoe could be brought in and a new pipe laid. There was something symbolic in the family work party that had to be assembled, to pull up the squash, the baby carrots and the lettuce before their time, and to put the tomatoes and strawberries into pots so that their life could if possible be preserved. You will be glad to know that the baby carrots, though small, were wonderfully tasty, and the tomatoes and strawberries have survived very well in spite of the disruption!

On this Harvest festival, my message will come differently to you all depending where you are in your journey through life. If you are young - how are you cultivating your seed bed? What seeds will you plant, or will you leave it to nature to fill your garden with any weeds that may come along? If you are older - how are you tending the plants that are growing: pruning, weeding, thinning, fertilizing, watering? How far are you doing it all yourself: how far in partnership and prayer with God? If you are older - how far are you watching for the right time to harvest? Are you ready to have your fruit plucked - to throw away the plant that is no longer needed? If you are older still, how are you spending the fruit you have gathered. Are you keeping it all for yourself? Are you sharing it with others? Above all, are you keeping sacred the seeds that will be the source of your new life in the world to come?

In the passage of I Corinthians 15 that is so often read at the funeral service, St. Paul talks about this new life:

"But some man will say, How are the dead raised up? and with what body do they come? Foolish man, that which thou sowest is not made to live, except it die. And that which thou sowest, thou sowest not that body that shall be, but bare grain, it may chance of wheat, or of some other grain: but God giveth it a body, as it hath pleased him, and to every seed a body of its own.

"So also is the resurrection of the dead. It is sown in corruption; it is raised in incorruption: it is sown in dishonour; it is raised in glory: it is sown in weakness; it is raised in power: it is sown a natural body; it is raised a spiritual body."

Our harvest thanksgiving comes for the fruit of our work - hard work, coupled with an appreciation that that work would be as nothing, without the blessing God has been pleased to add to it. The harvest of our lives equally much depends on the work we have put into perfecting them, and the blessing God has given to our efforts. As we look forward to the new life in the kingdom of God, that will come out of the seeds we raise from our lives on earth, we can share with St. Paul the conviction that this is all worth while:

"Therefore, my beloved brethren, be ye steadfast, unmoveable, always abounding in the

work of the Lord, forasmuch as ye know that your labour is not in vain in the Lord."

(c) 1988, J.M.Hattersley (jmartinh@shaw.ca)