

Harvest Festival Service 6th October 2013
Park Street Unitarian Church

Chalice Lighting

Begin by ringing the chime, lighting the chalice and saying the chalice-lighting words:

For the sun and the dawn, which we did not create; for the moon and the evening, which we did not make; for food, which we plant but cannot grow; for friends and loved ones we have not earned and cannot buy; for this gathered company, which welcomes us as we are, from wherever we have come; for our free church that keeps us human and encourages us in our quest for beauty, truth, and love; for all things that come to us as gifts of being from sources beyond ourselves: for gifts of life and love and friendship, we lift up our hearts in thanks this day.

[Based on *Singing the Living Tradition* 515]

HL 272 St George Windsor. We sing hymn number 272 in *Hymns for Living*

Confessions

God blesses us all, but still some people go hungry, still the poor cry out for justice, still we see inequality and oppression in the earth.

The generosity of the harvest is a sign of the generosity by which we can confess our wrongdoings, especially the ways in which we take these good gifts for granted. Let us confess our forgetfulness of the needs of the many, and repent of the ways in which we waste the resources of the world.

We enjoy the fruits of the harvest, but sometimes forget that they need nurture and nature, care and work, and that this is unevenly given by us. We are fortunate to belong to a people who are full and satisfied, but easily ignore the cry of the hungry. We can be thoughtless, without care enough for the world. We store up goods for ourselves alone, as if there were no God and no heaven. We are sorry for the times when we have used these gifts of harvest carelessly, and acted ungratefully.

We confess our lack of care for the world that cradles us, our selfishness in not sharing the earth's bounty fairly, our failure to protect resources for others, and the sins of our society in the misuse of evolved life.

We want justice for those who are suffering and bread to those who hunger. Let those who are bound be loosed and the eyes of the blind opened. Value the stranger in the land and uphold the orphan and the widow.

Let our prayer be heard for forgiveness and moving forward. We must lift up our eyes, and see that the fields are ripe for true harvesting: gather the fruit for eternal life.

Acclamations

The earth has been warmed and watered; it has become very plenteous. Our bodies have been warmed with sunlight; our own ground has been softened with showers.

Crown the year with goodness, and our paths overflow with plenty. The meadows are clothed with sheep; the valleys stand so thick with corn, that they shout for joy and sing. The earth has yielded its harvest, and so now have we; and we are well blessed.

The Harvest is Here! Here are displayed the symbols of the harvest: the cornfields of oats, wheat, rye and barley, the roots of swedes and mangolds, turnips and sugar beet, the vegetables of peas, potatoes, beans and hops, the fruit of pears and apples, berries and grapes, the many herbs, and yes even the flowers. All these are gifts that sun and rain have nurtured. We feed on these by faith with thanksgiving.

Praise God, from whom all blessings flow, praise him, all creatures here below, praise him above, ye heavenly host, praise life, the land and God the most.

May faith inspire you to go out as labourers and ever increase the harvest of righteousness, to bear the fruits of love, joy and peace.

Thanksgivings

Let us give thanks due from of all peoples of the earth. For the colour and forms of life around us and our place within it, we bring our thanks.

For our daily food, and for those whose work and skill bring their good gifts to us, we bring our thanks.

For the gifts and graces inspired in human minds and hearts; for insight and imagination, for the skills of research; we bring our thanks.

For the light and shades of the changing seasons, and their variety and dependability; for new life and growth out of barrenness and decay; we bring our thanks.

For new hope and strength in our communities, especially in this Church and among all who are called to serve, we bring our thanks, good God; whose mercy endures for ever.

For all in whose lives we see goodness, kindness, gentleness, patience and humility, and all the fruit of the Spirit, we bring our thanks.

Blessed is our world that sustains its life; that brings forth bread from the fields and give us the fruits of the earth in their seasons.

Accept our offerings here in front of us, which we raise up, made from the harvest of earth's goodness. Let the display be for us a sign of recognising earth's care.

Blessed is our God, worthy of our thanksgiving and praise.

SF 135 Cradle Song piano. Our second hymn, in *Sing Your Faith*, is Hymn number 135, to the well know tune of Cradle Song.

Readings (All from *The New Revised Standard Version*)

From Psalm 67.6: The earth has yielded its increase; God, our God, has blessed us.

Genesis 8.22: As long as the earth endures, seedtime and harvest, cold and heat, summer and winter, day and night, shall not cease.

2 Corinthians 9.10: He who supplies seed to the sower and bread for food will supply and multiply your seed for sowing and increase the harvest of your righteousness.

Matthew 9.37,38: Then he said to his disciples, 'The harvest is plentiful, but the labourers are few; therefore ask the Lord of the harvest to send out labourers into his harvest.'

Returning to the Hebrew Bible and Leviticus 23:39-43:

Now, the fifteenth day of the seventh month, when you have gathered in the produce of the land, you shall keep the festival of the Lord, lasting seven days; a complete rest on the first day, and a complete rest on the eighth day. On the first day you shall take the fruit of majestic trees, branches of palm trees, boughs of leafy trees, and willows of the brook; and you shall rejoice before the Lord your God for seven days. You shall keep it as a festival to the Lord seven days in the year; you shall keep it in the seventh month as a statute for ever throughout your generations. You shall live in booths for seven days; all that are citizens in Israel shall live in booths, so that your generations may know that I made the people of Israel live in booths when I brought them out of the land of Egypt: I am the Lord your God.

Music: *Somewhere in Time* by John Barry.

On Sukkot

What, then, about those thatched booths we heard about in Leviticus?

There are two Jewish holidays concerning harvest. The earlier one is Shavuot, or the Festival of Weeks, and the one for now is Sukkot, or the Festival of Booths.

Shavuot is a pilgrimage holiday celebrated 7 weeks after Pesach, when sacrifices of the first fruit were offered in the Temple. The synagogues are decorated with green twigs in order to emphasize the agricultural meaning of the holiday. The holiday also marks the day the Torah was given at Mount Sinai. As the Torah is compared to mother's milk, from which wisdom springs, the tradition then is to eat dairy food, cheesecakes, and pancakes with cream cheese.

However, our harvest festival comes closest to The Festival of Booths, or Sukkot, which is a seven-day pilgrimage holiday succeeding Yom Kippur at 15th-22nd in the seventh month of Tishrei. The holiday is commemorated by building a temporary shelter, perhaps at home or in the synagogue, called a sukkah, symbolising the story of the Israelites wandering in the desert after enslavement in Egypt. Like the Sukkah booth, we are but temporary dwellers within the world. But just as the walls of the hut surround us, so we are surrounded by the constant, protective presence of God. The winds shake and the elements confront, but the shadow of the Sukkah is the shadow of the Divine Presence.

The central theme of this happy season is the pure joy of having a relationship with the Creator. King David is supposed to have taught that this is the epitome of true happiness and true religious experience.

The Sukkot liturgy involves four different plants - the lulav (a palm branch), the etrog (a lemon-like fruit), the hadas (a myrtle branch) and the arav (a willow branch). Just as the etrog has both flavour and fragrance, so there are Israelites who are endowed both with Torah and with good deeds. Just as the [fruit of the] lulav has flavour but lacks fragrance, so there are Israelites who are endowed with Torah but lack good deeds. Just as the hadas has fragrance but lacks flavour, so there are Israelites who are endowed with good deeds but lack Torah. Just as the arav lacks both flavour and fragrance, so there are Israelites who lack both Torah and good deeds.

What does the Holy One do about the difficult Israelites? God does not wish to destroy them. He binds them all together into one group, each atoning for the other.

In the story, the community called Israel enters the land of promise, and from then on Sukkot becomes associated with the Autumn harvest and came to be known as the "Festival of Ingathering" (of the harvest) at the end of the year. Since Sukkot marked the end of the agricultural year, a further holiday called Simchat Torah was added to celebrate the end of the Torah reading cycle for the year as well.

Sukkot is celebrated for eight days in Israel and nine days in the Diaspora. During the first and last days of Sukkot no normal "work" is permitted.

The sukkah booth can have walls of any material, as long as they are sturdy enough to withstand a normal wind. The roof of the sukkah must be covered with material that grows from the ground, such as branches or leaves and should give more shade than sun during the daytime but should allow stars to be visible at night.

Meals are eaten in the sukkah and there is also a custom of inviting "imaginary guests" (ushpizin) to partake, so day one invites Abraham and for each subsequent night is invited Issac, Jacob, Joseph, Moses, Aaron and King David. The prayer in the sukkah is to be reminded to harvest in holy humility, to know good it is to be alive, and how good it is for sisters and brothers to sit, sing and pray together as one.

Our building here, in Park Street, is itself temporary, because next year it will be partly demolished, extended and have a new frontage. So this place now, is like our sukkah, although its harvest will be next year.

We gather in our sukkah, thankful for the days that have been, even for those that have tried our souls; and hopeful for the days that shall be, even those that shall demand of us the best that we have in faith and hope and courage; till we have become one with ourselves and God, in all the seasons to come: from the white wisdom patient days of winter, through the glad renewal of spring, to the life-bursting summer, and to the next autumn days of green and gold and yellow, with harvest.

So close to the elements, people sit in contemplation. This vulnerable sukkah, open to life's ever-changing natural transitions like hurricane, fire, flood, or, for us, as sukkah-living: fatality, fanaticism, divorce, death, or any one of a million maybes. So our fragile sukkah surrounds but flimsily the life story we each call our own, that brings who knows what, where, why, or why not. All one can do is live with the unfolding of the blessing and the curse and choose life as well as we are each able.

NB 009 Veni Emmanuel piano. Our next hymn is from the sheet and about Shlomit - her name means 'Peace' - building a special sukkah.

Shlomit, she builds a tempor'y sukkah,
Full of light and such glowing greenery.
That's why today she's very busy.
But it's not simply a standard sukkah!
Full light, within, and such bright greenery -
Shlomit, she builds up a sukkah of peace.

She will not, today, forget to lay out
The lulav and the myrtle leaves on show,
And add a branch of still green willow,
A pomegranate contained in its leaves,
And yes, the fruits, the lovely autumn crop,
All with the fragrance of ripe orange groves.

And when our maker Shlomit says to us,
'Look! It is already quickly finished!'
Yes, something wondrous will happen now:
All local neighbours: they will come and see,
And come, they will, at speed and in a swarm -
and there will be room here for everyone!

At night, up through the roof of branches high,
There's a bright glow falls as a diamond.
She'll spot the star, it saying and loud:
Shalom, shalom, this wondrous sukkah yours,
How fine, how fine, and how pleasing it is -
Shlomit, she did build a sukkah of peace.

[After Naomi Shemer]

Intercessions

God of compassion, we rejoice in the unity that is systemic from evolution; let the land be healed, and be delivered from famine and war. We wish for such moderate rain and showers and favourable weather. We sit in prayer before the most holy for all who are suffering, so grant that light may shine in their darkness, and that we may bear one another's burdens and so fulfil the law of love. Amen.

God of the harvest, humankind is blessed in having responsible dominion over the earth: we pray for the task, to live in reverence for what is in harmony with one another.

God of the harvest, we pray for the community in which we are set, for one another and for ourselves, that we may bring forth the fruit of the Spirit in love and joy and peace.

God of the harvest, the people have a rich land, yet by misdeeds we have made a world of suffering and sorrow: we pray for those who bear the weight of affliction, that they may come to share the life of wholeness and plenty.

O God we see that the fields are ripe for harvesting and so we pray for the churches and the faiths, that they may be ready to gather their fruits.

The harvest of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. Amen.

Your sheet shows when you may want to join in with the intercessions.

Let us offer our prayers into God for the life of the world and for all people in their daily life and work. O God, we offer our prayers that in us and in all the people your will may be done with wise and loving purposes.

God within all life: **hear our prayer.**

We pray for all through whom we receive sustenance and life; for farmers and agricultural workers, for packers, distributors and company managers. Knowing that we depend upon each other, enable us by your grace to seek the well-being of others before our own.

God within all that has evolved: **hear our prayer**

We pray for all those engaged in research to safeguard crops against disease, and so to produce abundant life among those who hunger and whose lives are at risk. Prosper the work of their hands and the searching of their minds, that their labour may be for the welfare of all.

God within all wisdom: **hear our prayer.**

We pray for governments and aid agencies, and those areas of the world where there is disaster, drought and starvation. By the grace of the Spirit, touch our hearts and the hearts of all who live in comfortable plenty, and make us wise stewards of earth's gifts.

God of all justice: **hear our prayer.**

We pray for those who are ill, remembering those in hospital and nursing homes, and all who are known to us. We pray for all who care for one another. Give skill and understanding to all who work for each individual's well-being.

God of all compassion: **hear our prayer.**

We remember those who have died, whom we entrust into eternal love.

God of all peace: **hear our prayer.**

We offer ourselves to godly service, asking that by the Spirit at work in us others may receive a rich harvest of love and joy and peace.

God of all faithfulness: **hear our prayer.**

God of grace, fulfil your wise and loving purposes in us and in all for whom we pray, that with them and in all that lives, glory may be revealed and the whole earth give praise. Amen.

Music: Meg Barnhouse sings *Mango Thoughts in a Meatloaf Town*, a song about Unitarian Universalist congregations, and a reference to foods, here with the sound of a congregation in the background.

Sermon

The political conference season has just passed. In the poverty of modern-day politics, we have heard a simple economic view of people, production and consumption. Each person is a cost and a productive unit.

When there was no compulsory education, children were seen as assets. Families had lots of children, and they could soon be put to work. When compulsory education came in, children were costs, and people had fewer children. People also had fewer children because medical standards grew and more stayed alive, and education for women also reduces numbers of children.

But humans are also costs because we need food and warmth to stay alive, and we cost more the more we regard as a necessity to survive.

If we have a good number of people alive, then an extra few don't cost that much more. So many fixed costs are already set down, and variable costs keep rising. Therefore marginal costs of extra people start to fall.

What makes our costs bearable is indeed that we have utility. We are productive. We educate, we train, we put something back in, we hope, if the system works.

It costs to produce things: to make a harvest takes effort. We might go back to hunter-gathering, which is to take what is available, but even that takes effort and cost. Better to organise and farm and manufacture, which is very costly to set up and run but, with quantity, more efficient.

What we do when we farm and manufacture is deliberately add value. But anything poking out of the ground and growing, or an animal growing, adds value. It is adding value that meets a cost of being, and then more, so we hope to progress.

The added value so produced that keep us from poverty and makes life worth living we call utility. Utility starts by being basic and necessary and then is psychological - what gives you or me pleasure. Utility rises rapidly

when we enjoy something for the first time, but as we have more of them each item is a little less beneficial. Imagine having an ice cream on a warm day - lovely, and two is great too, but three and four are less welcome. Each one offers that bit less. Of course you'd buy something else instead because that offers greater utility. You have decreasing marginal utility and you balance out the consumption of utilities.

Existing and living costs, and cost can be assessed according to money. Utility gives benefit, and it can be assessed according to price. Money, ah money, what's that: well it represents the value of all goods and services. It has no value in itself; it really doesn't. We have guaranteed money by using scarce items like gold, but money can be nothing more than changes in electronic symbols. Money is always symbolic of utility.

Economists tell us that we should produce and consume where marginal utility falls and meets marginal cost. In a perfect world that happens at a place of sufficient profit for reinvestment, whatever the level of overall productivity, but in an imperfect world it leads to surplus profits and uneven market and even political power. There's greed and poverty.

In a perfect world it leads to market demands and supplies or distributions between goods and services based on their comparative advantages. Across the world trade leads to ever more efficient supplying of needs from productive resources. In an imperfect world awkward transitions lead to poverty and need, structural problems are never resolved, and some people lose out.

It is all open to diagrams and mathematics, and is humanistic, but it not a very human understanding. Indeed, when you do the more advanced economics, it involves what are called indifference curves. "Indifference" gives the game away, and this is where religion needs to come in.

Religion understands ritual and symbol, and ritual is interactive. The ritual of exchange is like in a market economy, of passing money for utility, but there is a better understanding of surplus, for not only is a surplus an immediate and material benefit, but ritual offers a spiritual benefit.

And sometimes, just sometimes, there comes an unexpected gift. In religious ritual, as a form of oversight, we make a material offering and hope to receive a spiritual gift. But the gift can happen in life itself, as seen from a religious perspective.

So the harvest is something that's not just an economic utility that keeps us going and gives us pleasure, finding out how the indifference curves interact across what grows and is made, but represents something better understood. Life itself is a gift, it is its own miracle: that life and pleasure is even possible at all. We are far from being 'indifferent' about what we are and what we need and what gives pleasure.

And this is why we do worry about what gives pleasure. What sort of pleasure? Is it the narrow politician's repetition that all but the richest capable people should 'keep busy'? Is it a drunken pleasure of excess? Or is this about a deeper, better understood, joyful pleasure? The more the utility received is better understood, understood as a worthwhile exchange and even a gift - that it is joyful and richer in a deeper sense - the more we see that we and life itself are not actually a cost at all, but something to treasure, and to fill with joyful utility, and it's why we celebrate harvest.

And something else follows on. Greed, poverty, inadequate resources, lead to conflict. Harvest, when its gift is so far from indifference: when it is well distributed, when resources are rich and fair to all who 'cost', then it is also a harvest of peace. Shlomit, she knew, was building a sukkah of peace. And peace isn't just the absence of conflict, but something also deeper and so closely related to joy, properly understood as being in a different dimension from - even if still related to - those economists' diagrams of marginal cost, marginal utility and indifference. We are all much more than these.

Collection and Notices

SF 090 Stowey Choir. Hymn number 90 in *Sing Your Faith*, 'Let us Give Thanks and Praise' to the tune of Stowey.

Benediction

As you, O Autumn, take pleasure in your great bounty,
Let me also take delight
In the abundance of the simple things in life
which are the true source of joy.
With the golden glow of peaceful contentment
May I truly appreciate this autumn day.

[Edward Hays]