

What's the point?

I've fairly recently discovered and begun to make use of an innovation that has transformed my life. What's that I hear you ask? It must be something amazing. It must be something quite fantastic to have transformed your life. Well yes it is! Internet food shopping. And any of you who have ever food shopped with young children will probably agree.

No longer do I fight my way round the supermarket with whinging children pulling at the trolley, being asked every two minutes for sweets or a visit to the cafe. Instead I sit down at my computer for ten minutes with a cup of tea, click a few buttons and two days later a van draws up outside my house and a very nice person brings my shopping right up to the door – all courtesy of Mr Sainsbury. My life is transformed!

But one thing that internet food shopping has done that's not so good is cause me to become even more detached from the source of my food- the place where it comes from. Because never mind knowing where it was grown, I don't even see it on the shelves of the supermarket now. It's just tiny little icons on my computer screen.

I would hazard a guess that not many of us here this morning know where our food comes from. We don't see it growing in the ground or running around in a farm yard, or chewing the cud. Instead carrots come ready washed in neat bags, chicken in handy portions on polystyrene trays, and milk from a plastic bottle with a red, green or blue top depending on how fat conscious we are.

And what about seasonal food? It's possible these days to have pretty much any food any time of the year, because we can fly food around the world so easily.

(Before you think this morning that I'm on a mission back to the good life, and that I'm about to have goats in my back garden and never set foot in a supermarket again, let me reassure you that I like the convenience of nice packaging and round the year produce as much as everyone else!)

But this distance – this gap- between what farmers grow, and what we put on our plates forces us to ask a question this morning – and that's this - what's the point of celebrating harvest? What's the point of having a harvest festival where we display produce as we have this morning, and collect food, and sing songs about ploughing and scattering seed and being thankful people when really we don't know what it's all about?

Some of my favourite books are the 'Miss Read' books. Written mainly in the 1950s and 60s, they describe the life of a country school teacher. Miss Read is the head mistress of a small primary school in a sleepy Cotswold village. Nothing much ever really happens in the books, but they describe a gentle way of life that for most people has long gone. Miss Read describes a time when people were much more in touch with the production of their food. When she could see and hear Mr Roberts tractor working in the field across from the

playground. When the local harvest had a direct significance on the community. If the crops failed there wasn't as much to eat. If the garden produce was successfully pickled and stored there was plenty for the winter. And when the highlight of the village year was the women's institute competition where magnificent marrows and enormous onions were proudly displayed on black velvet, causing envy and discussion for weeks.

Harvest festival was an important celebration in the life of the church and the whole village. Miss Read writes that the children spent hours practising harvest songs and were marched up to the church on the day with faces and hands scrubbed pink.

Perhaps you remember times like that with fond memories. Perhaps like me, you've never known anything like that and internet shopping is the reality for you.

But harvest is about more than saying 'look at this food', (wherever it came from) its about more than remembering a tradition that makes us feel nice and nostalgic. Harvest is a time when we remember to give God thanks for all that he provides for us – however we receive it. As the words of our first song this morning said 'God our maker will provide for our needs to be supplied' You see however sophisticated our methods of ordering shopping become, it is still God who provides for us. We are all of us dependent on his goodness – and so that's why we still have a celebration at harvest. We may not have ploughed the fields and scattered the seed ourselves, but we're acknowledging and thanking God for all that he has done in the last year.

The story that I read from the Bible a few minutes ago is one of the most famous stories about Jesus – where he takes the lunch belonging to a boy (a few bits of bread and fish) blesses it and feeds five thousand men with it (plus we assume women and children too).

And there's even some left over at the end. A miracle!

Perhaps you listened to that story this morning and it makes you ask the same question that we've asked about celebrating harvest – what's the point? It's a good story, a great story even, but what *is* the point? What was the point of Jesus performing that miracle at that time?

Well, without getting too bogged down in the detail this morning, Jesus performs this miracle, provides for all those thousands of people, to show that everyone is included in God's love. It is a powerful demonstration that no-one is outside of God's care. The people who had come to hear his message were hungry, and so he gave them food – all of them, without exception- the young (with dreams) and the old (with no dreams left) the rich (with good jobs) and the poor (struggling to make ends meet) those from the in-crowd (with everything going for them) and the outsiders (from ethnic minorities fighting prejudice and discrimination).

Those of you who received a postcard as you came in, if you take time to look at the picture later you'll see that its by an artist called Eularia Clarke. This is a modern interpretation of the feeding of the five thousand. The people are sitting down on the grass eating, and if you look closely you'll see that all kinds of people have been depicted. This is one artist's way of saying 'look, all these people matter to God. He loves them all.'

Jesus was showing in this miracle that there is no partiality to his love and grace. It's available to all. In fact he describes himself just a little bit later in John's gospel as the 'bread of life'. I am the bread of life. Anyone who comes to me will never be hungry again.

Jesus provided for the people that day in two ways. He fed their spiritual hunger (as he taught them about God's kingdom) and then he fed their physical hunger too with real solid food. He didn't tell them to go away with empty bellies. And he makes the same offer to feed us, each one of us here, today.

Harvest is a time to pause and acknowledge God. To remember that all that we have ultimately comes from him. It's a time to come as thankful people. To thank Him for everything that he has given us, including the food we've been able to buy. And its a time to remember that God invites us all to be fed spiritually by him, whoever we are. None of us is outside of his love and care.

House group notes for Harvest & Back2Church Sunday

What's the point? John 6:1-15

We are very disconnected from the process of food production these days with supermarket packaged products, internet shopping and long distance transportation.

In days gone by a poor harvest directly affected the local community, and therefore a good harvest was the subject of much celebration and the focal point for thanksgiving. But what about now? Is celebrating harvest still a relevant and appropriate thing to do in an age when we are so distant from the source of our food?

A Harvest celebration is about more than saying 'look at this food'. It is about remembering that God is the source of all that we have. As the hymn says: God our maker will provide for our needs to be supplied. And so although we may not have ploughed fields or scattered seeds ourselves, harvest is still an important opportunity to acknowledge God's provision.

John's account of the feeding of the five thousand may cause us to ask the same question as we have asked of harvest. What is the point? Why does Jesus perform this miracle and what relevance does it have for us today?

Jesus performs this miracle to demonstrate that no one is outside of God's care. All are included. The people who came to hear him were hungry for spiritual food (teaching about the kingdom) but also they became hungry physically too. Jesus met both needs, and he offers to meet our needs today saying 'I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never be hungry again.'

Harvest is a good opportunity to thank God for his provision in the last year and to remember that he is the source of all we need, both physical and spiritual.

For discussion.

- Do you find Harvest a helpful celebration? Why?
- Is there a Christian response to purchasing food? How can we buy ethically and fairly?
- The feeding of the five thousand is recorded in each of the four gospels. (Matt 14:13-21; Mark 6:32-44; Luke 9:10-17). How does John's account differ from that of the synoptic gospels? How is it similar?
- The people who listened to Jesus were hungry. What are you hungry for?
- The whole of John chapter 6 is dominated by the theme of Passover and that God fed the people of Israel during their wilderness wanderings with 'bread from heaven'. Jesus then declares that he is the 'bread of life'. What does this mean?