

MORNING SERVICE

Sunday 4 October, Kilcalmonell, linked with Killean and Kilchenzie

18th Sunday after Pentecost / Sukkot

(St. Francis Day)

Harvest Service

preacher: Rev Martin Grashoff

hymns: Church Hymnary. Fourth Edition (Norwich: Canterbury Press, 2005)

Welcome & Intimations

Opening Hymn : 'All things bright and beautiful' (CH 137)

Children's Talk

Children's Hymn : 'I love the sun' (CH 144)

Prayer & Lord's Prayer

Readings : Leviticus 23:33-36, 39-43 & Mark 10:13-15 (*Good News Bible*)

Hymn : 'We plough the fields' (CH 229)

Sermon

'Thanksgiving for Crops and Labour' – that's what a Harvest Service would be called in The Netherlands. It recalls a world of agriculture and a world of industry. And for those who want to hear it, in Dutch the word for 'labour', like in English, also bears a reference to socialist politics. Both agriculture and industry have lost a lot of the impact they once had on society. Nowadays the world is more absorbed by providing services, international banking or internet enterprise. The power that once was assigned to big farmers, lairds or steel barons, has become confusingly diffused: it's somewhere out there, in the incomprehensible world of global networks and databases.

Still today we gather in church to be thankful. Thankful for our labour and the fruits of it. This year that may have been under pressure of the economic crisis. There may have been all kind of events in our personal lives that make it more difficult to be thankful. Yet, that still is the purpose of a Harvest Service: be thankful and show it.

So, how do we do that?

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First, we should be modest, and know our place. To know our place means, that we do not think too much of ourselves, but more importantly not to think too less. A famous quote from Nelson Mandela says, that we are most afraid of our light, not our darkness. Knowing our place means to shine our light as good as we can, without thinking that our light is the only one or brighter than most others.

I am reading a book by Mark Vernon, called *After Atheism*.¹ It is very interesting. Being a priest in the Church of England, Mark Vernon lost his faith and became an atheist. But not for long he found that atheism is just another form of dogmatic belief, only denying the existence of God. Neither traditional Christian religion, nor atheism offered him a way to engage properly with essential and existential questions of life.

I am still reading, but the chapter he wrote about the ancient Greek philosopher Socrates really got my attention. Socrates did not deny the existence of the gods, or the possible truth of what the Delphi oracle said. He just did not take anything for granted and kept asking questions, looking for answers. Because for human beings their reason and understanding is their major strength. But, most importantly, Socrates also accepted the limitations of our understanding and he chose to simply live with uncertainty. I have not found a more honest way of both taking and knowing one's rightful place as a human being. It might be the best way of being honest to God and people, and thankfully accept your life as it is.

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Now before you think I am trying to lure you into philosophy, we should realise what philosophy actually is. Often it is made into an academic game of words and thoughts we never heard of and of which – a Belgian proverb: – ‘we cannot make chocolate’. But actually the word just means ‘lover of truth’. Truth is not something austere, safely kept at universities, but it is the true face of our own lives. And the more we love truth, the more determined *and* critical we will be in finding it. And we will not let someone pull the wool over our eyes.

Both science and religion are most able to make us believe that the moon is made of green cheese. It may take us quite some time to find out, but some day we will see through the illusions that were presented as absolute truth, both by science and religion. Actually my mother already told me, perhaps unknowingly. When our children were born, she told us, ‘You don't believe everything a doctor says, do you?’

Now this, paradoxically, brings us to acknowledge our strength. We are not strong because we are absolutely right, understand all the world or have a rock-solid faith. We are strong because we dare to accept the whole lot of things we do not understand, the things we actually fear, the uncertainty and vulnerability of our lives. Accepting that is, I would say, an act of faith, but that certainly does not imply that we simply take in a set of religious dogmas. True faith goes deeper, reaches wider and is much more flexible.

Knowing our place and limitations, and accepting our strength in a love for truth are two ways to be thankful. We have a lot of skills. That is how we can do our work, raise our families, build our community. Yet, we cannot make life. And that's good.

¹ Mark Vernon, *After Atheism*. Science, Religion, and the Meaning of Life (Palgrave, Basingstoke: 2007). About the writer, see his [website](#).

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Sukkot,² the Feast of Tabernacles (or rather: Booths), reminds us that, regardless how much or how little power we have, we live in tents, with very limited safety warranties. Sukkot is the feast where whole families will come together each evening and have their meal in a primitive booth outside, with enough openings in the top to see the stars. Thus the Jewish people celebrate their vulnerability and dependence every year again, and they even take eight days to do it properly. But the most important thing is that it is a feast of joy and laughter, especially aiming at the children.

Perhaps children can teach us, with their joy, their hope, their creativity. Children can ask the most philosophical questions. They can replay a full sea battle only using branches and pineapples, and just have fun. If the camp site is actually too far away, and the bicycles are producing flat tyres at a rate of one every 30 minutes, and you are really getting desperate, they will say, 'Oh, but daddy can mend the bikes.' Pure hope overclocking your own despair.

A love of truth, the hopefulness of children and our own ability to ask good questions. That is the basis of our working lives, and the stuff faith is made from. More than enough reason to be thankful.

Amen.

Hymn : 'The earth is yours, O God' (CH 227)

Offering and Dedication
Prayer of Intercession

Closing Hymn : 'God, whose farm is all creation' (CH 226)

Blessing

² More information can be found on the web at [Judaism 101](#).