

Mrs. Smartt went to church on her own to celebrate Harvest. She was fumbling in her purse for her offering when a large television remote fell out and clattered into the aisle. The curious usher bent over to retrieve it for her and whispered, “Do you always carry your TV remote to church?”

“No,” she replied, “but my husband refused to come with me this morning, and I figured this was the most wicked thing I could do to him legally.”

**Harvest Festival** used to be celebrated at the beginning of the Harvest season on 1 August and was called Lammas, meaning 'loaf Mass'. Farmers made loaves of bread from the new wheat crop and gave them to their local church. They were then used as the Communion bread during a special mass thanking God for the harvest. The custom ended when Henry VIII broke away from the Catholic Church, and nowadays we have harvest festivals at the end of the season.

At the start of the harvest, communities would appoint a strong and respected man of the village as their 'Lord of the Harvest'. He would be responsible for negotiating the harvest wages and organising the fieldworkers. And it was his responsibility to bring the last sheaf of corn back to the farm to officially declare the Harvest safely gathered in before the Harvest Feast started

The end of the harvest was celebrated with a big meal called a Harvest Supper, eaten on Michaelmas Day. The '**Lord of the Harvest**' sat at the head of the table. A goose stuffed with apples was eaten along with a variety of vegetables. Goose Fairs were and still are held in English towns at this time of year.

The tradition of celebrating Harvest Festival in churches as we know it today began in 1843, when the Reverend Robert Hawker invited parishioners to a special thanksgiving service for the harvest at his church at Morwenstow in Cornwall. Victorian hymns such as "We plough the fields and scatter", "Come ye thankful people, come" and "All things bright and beautiful" helped popularise his idea of harvest festival and spread the annual custom of decorating churches with home-grown produce for the Harvest Festival service.

Not so many years ago, in our shops everything had its season. Vegetables tended to be those which you could grow in the garden, greenhouse or allotment - though perhaps delivered a few weeks earlier than you could expect from home-grown produce, and one could look forward with eager anticipation to the first strawberries of summer, or the arrival of the cauliflower, cucumber or tomatoes. This seasonality in the food that we ate meant that each season held its own delights for the lover of fresh food. How abundantly things have changed for us, to such an extent indeed, that for children growing up today the whole concept of a Harvest Festival doesn't mean as much as perhaps it did to my grandparents.

Not so of course in some countries. We've all seen those horrific television pictures of the problems some African countries have had with a total lack of rain. In some cases the seed hasn't even managed to germinate, let alone get anywhere near ripening. What celebrations there must be in such countries when conditions are favourable and sufficient crop is harvested to ensure that the family will not go hungry through the winter months. For in countries such as these, there is little chance of a shortfall being made up for by imported produce - other than and charitable aid which might come after the peoples' plight has reached the eyes and ears of the world's media.

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**Can't we** identify with the rich man in the parable that Jesus tells today? In our own eyes, we have been "successful". We may not have made a "killing" the stock market but in most cases, we have had a good harvest. Our barns are full and we can, most of us, sit back and enjoy fair affluence. We can say to ourselves: *"My soul, you have plenty of good things laid by for many years to come; take things easy, eat, drink, have a good time."* We have worked very hard all these years and this was what we deserve.

It is worth observing, however, that no other people are mentioned in the story. The rich man himself was the absolute centre of everything – nothing else mattered, no one else mattered. The world and all its goods were there purely and simply for him to take hold of and keep for himself. And now there was nothing else to do but to enjoy it all. He may not have died in his sleep, but he was so caught up in his affluence that he missed living altogether. He was selfish and he was greedy. In surrounding himself with

the things of this world, he insulated himself from others. As a result, his life was filled to the brim, but he starved to death because, in becoming independent and self-sufficient, he cut himself off from God.

*“Fool! This very night the demand will be made for your soul; and this hoard of yours, whose will it be then?”*

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**Jesus was** overwhelmed by his love for people, the vastness of the crowds that came to him, the perplexity of their problems, and the sense of urgency in reaching them. The religious leaders of Jesus' day saw the common people as chaff to be destroyed and burned up; Jesus saw them as a harvest to be reaped and to be saved. *“The harvest is plentiful but the workers are few. Ask the Lord of the harvest, therefore, to send out workers into his harvest field”* he would say.

Herein lies one of the great truths of the Christian faith: The harvest will never be reaped unless there are reapers to reap it. Jesus Christ needs men and women to bring in the harvest. Jesus' followers today need to see people as Jesus saw them - as plentiful, precious, perplexed and perishing. What can we do?

**St Paul, in his letter to the Colossians.** *“You must look for the things that are in heaven, where Christ is... Let your thought be on heavenly things, not on the things that are on the earth...”* Not very practical advice, I hear you saying. Paul is not telling us to close our eyes to mundane realities to look wistfully heavenwards. Rather he is urging us to identify our understanding of life, our values, with those of God, which have been communicated to us by the life and words of Jesus.

We can take responsibility for our field. Think of all the people we contact everyday: family, friends, neighbours, work associates, the woman at the cleaners, the guy at the car wash, our tennis buddies, and our sewing club. That is our field. We are responsible for them. We will never have a sense of urgency and priority until we realize that we are responsible for them.

Harvest time is now! John Rice said it well, in one of his heart warming songs:

So little time! The harvest will be over.  
Our reaping done, we reapers taken Home.  
Report our work to Jesus, Lord of harvest,  
And hope He'll smile and that He'll say, "Well done!"

*Chorus*

*Today we reap, or miss our golden harvest!*

*Today is given us lost souls to win.*

*Oh then to save some dear ones from the burning.*

*Today we'll go to bring some sinner in.*

(“So Little Time” by Dr. John R. Rice, 1895-1980).

Have you noticed how we get to play all the parts in the stories Jesus tells about Harvest! We sow the seed, we tend the crops, we labour in the fields and we bring in the Harvest, we as the body of Christ are Lord of the Harvest– indeed, to a considerable extent, we are the harvest itself, for today our souls are demanded of us!

In the movie, Schindler's List, one of the most moving scenes is near the end of the three-hour drama. Oscar Schindler had invested his energy and his fortune in saving the lives of hundreds of Jews who would have otherwise been killed in Hitler's holocaust. Because the war is at its end, the Jews he saved will become free men and women; while Schindler will become a fugitive. He walks to his car with his Jewish friend. The others are around them. Schindler begins to cry. He looks at his watch and knows if he had sold it he could have saved another life. He looks at his car and knows that he could have exchanged it for additional lives. He says to his friend, *"I could have done more."*

I could have done more!

Oscar Schindler knew he could have done more to save Jews from perishing in the death camps. You and I could do more to .....?

We must answer that for ourselves!