

## YORKSHIRE AGRICULTURAL SOCIETY HARVEST THANKSGIVING

RIPON CATHEDRAL SUNDAY 1<sup>st</sup> OCTOBER 2023

It might seem a little odd to begin an address about harvest with a story about an aeroplane! I was flying from Belfast to Liverpool on a budget airline. Dressed casually I climbed the steps as dark clouds gathered. Once airborne we flew into a thunderstorm. Buffeted about by the turbulence no one was talking. Above their heads thought-bubbles appeared filled with desperate prayers, “O God help us land safely”. Well we did. As we landed at Liverpool’s John Lennon Airport the man next to me, who’d been clutching the armrest throughout, started speaking, “Well, I knew that was going to be a really bumpy flight but I didn’t tell you as I didn’t want to frighten you. You see, I’m airline pilot! And what do you do? “Oh”, I replied, “I’m a priest - but I didn’t tell you because I didn’t want to frighten you!”.

Two reasons for telling that story – firstly, whether it’s getting back to Liverpool by sea or by air or ploughing a field there’s no human activity which doesn’t have an impact on the planet, that’s environmentally neutral; secondly, a friend and a farmer pointed out that an A380 carrying one load of avocados from South America uses over 300,000 litres of fuel in one flight which would keep his 1,000 acre mixed farm going for over 10 years.

These two points highlight some of the challenges facing farmers today. In an article about the future of farming in ‘Country Life’ Professor Sir Dieter Helm wrote that farming now “has to provide food, achieve net zero (carbon) and protect biodiversity and rivers”. Although sustainability is a universal responsibility I wonder if proportionately so much is now being asked of the farming community that the purpose of food production is being marginalised.

Recently 'Farmers Weekly' reported on a survey showing that British Farmers are planning to "reduce food production over the next 12 months". This was picked up by none other than 'Private Eye' who warned that the "UK already imports a staggering 40 per cent of its daily food needs" and that current policies are "seriously jeopardising much of what food production remains in Great Britain."

Well, let me now jump from 'Private Eye' to the Bible!

In the opening chapters of the very first book of the Bible we are given an important scenario. God is presented as the first farmer on the face of the earth who plants a crop in the field of Eden. Then in his image God creates the first human beings with the specific remit to cultivate the land, to be farmers. Farming is humanity's primary profession.

The vegetation has two purposes – quote – "to be pleasing to the eye and good for food" (Genesis 2;9). Here we have it in 10 words – the unequivocal primacy of food production from farms that grace the landscape with beauty.

My own introduction to the world of farming was when I became Bishop of Hull and got to know the farms and villages of East Yorkshire. I then went to Liverpool and although deeply urban the diocese embraced West Lancashire where 75 per cent of the land was Grade One.

10 years ago we returned to Yorkshire and now live surrounded by a family owned mixed farm of about one thousand acres where I've learned so much more about the realities of farming from putting your arm up the backside of a cow to help with her calving to the frustration of trying to harvest against the rain when daily you have to measure the moisture of the crop in a week which has the weather of all four seasons!

To those who might question whether an urban bishop has the authority to preach at a Harvest Service I would offer this perspective.

The real division in our society is not between the urban and the rural. They both share the same issues: the inner city with outer estates and our rural villages experience poor infrastructure, lack of amenities, inadequate transport, difficult access to banks, shops, doctors and schools.

The real division is not between urban and rural but between the urban/rural and suburbia where so many of our decision-makers live. It's in suburbia, remote from the realities of farming, that opinions are formed which can easily overlook the primary purpose of farming to produce food to feed us.

You will have noticed by now that I have studiously avoided some of the buzz words and phrases – such as nature, regenerative farming, environmental land management. It's not that these are unimportant. They are vital to our future. I think that they are implicit in the biblical picture that the land cultivated for food should also be 'pleasing to the eye'.

But for the sake of our society and for your sakes I think it's time to speak up for the priority of food production, not least because in an increasingly volatile world with unpredictable global markets we ignore at our peril the need to be self-reliant in our green and pleasant land. But at the same time that priority has to be balanced by making the public aware that we are all guilty of throwing away and wasting a third of all the food you produce. That has to stop!

It strikes me in this glorious cathedral that your mantra and ours should be none other than that famous line from the Lord's Prayer, "Give us this day our daily bread." Please note that there are not many people who pray that prayer who then find that they themselves are the answer to it!

But have you ever noticed what's missing from that famous prayer? There's no 'thank you'. Because it only means something if it comes from the heart spontaneously, it's left to us say it of our own accord - which is why we have come to this holy place this morning, to say 'Thank You'.

In a moment before the Prayer of Thanksgiving, the Eucharist, the Director will offer up the Bread with these words,

"In this loaf of bread we bring the harvest of the land"

And we will all respond,

"Blessed are You, Lord God ...

For all things come from You

And of Your own do we give You."

Amen

The Right Reverend James Jones KBE