

HARVEST FESTIVAL YORKSHIRE AGRICULTURAL SOCIETY

ST MARY BEVERLEY

I cherish fond memories of my time as Bishop of Hull which I became 32 years ago. My first confirmation was on the Wolds in the benefice of Langtoft with Foxholes, Butterwick and Thwing. I was 45 and the churchwarden must have been twice my age and insisted on carrying my heavy case of robes. I objected. He prevailed. “Have you been here all your life?”, I enquired, “Not yet, Bishop!”

There’s a story of another new bishop some decades ago who was also rather young and chairing his first staff meeting. “Now, gentlemen – I’m afraid back in the day there were no women – it’s time to bring this diocese into the 19th Century.” “Cough, cough”, interrupted the Archdeacon, “My Lord, you mean the 20th Century?”. “Mr Archdeacon, one century at a time!”.

This story comes to mind because we are now in October celebrating Harvest in this beautiful church when many farmers brought in the harvest way back in early August!

This changing climate is just one of the many changes that are challenging the farming community. The impact of climate change is global and is already having major consequences for the essence of life – food!

But this is a Service of Harvest Thanksgiving! The readings, hymns and prayers direct our thanksgiving toward God but I want to direct the thanksgiving in another direction – towards you.

You deserve our thanks because you've not given up, because you labour night and day, because you've persevered in spite of political ignorance, because you've campaigned against crippling taxes that will drive family farmers off the land they've worked for generations. You deserve our gratitude.

My wife and I live at the centre of a 1000 acre mixed family farm and I have seen with my own eyes the pressures family farmers face. When Chancellor Reeves introduced Inheritance Tax I took our own farmers into Parliament. I then did a Thought for the Day on the Today Programme about the need for policy makers to listen to farmers and to understand their way of life – I got complaints from critics who seemed to object to anybody owning land. I'm here today to say that I understand why you might feel misunderstood and underappreciated.

I have to say that personally I love listening to the various farming programmes. I notice how many farmers are having to diversify. There's a virtue in diversification but often the story is one of survival. Farmers want to farm because it is in their DNA, but they simply can't make a living from just producing food! Poor harvests, lack of silage, cost of fertiliser, global markets, increasing regulation and punitive taxes drain all profit.

But food is the essence of life! SO why oh why is our world so loathe to pay the true cost of food. Imagine ringing the doctors' surgery for an appointment and being told that no doctor or nurse was available because they were working that day down at Tesco's in order to make a living!

We need a radical mindset change in the media, in education, in commerce, in supermarkets, in politics and in Government.

In the new world that is emerging we must learn to pay properly for our food. And importing 40% of what we eat when we could be self-sufficient is unnecessarily damaging to the environment.

But let me end by returning to our reading from the Gospel. In it Jesus uses a very special word when talking about the earth. Jesus says that the soil produces 'of itself'. The word he uses gives us the word 'automatically'. He tells us that the soil produces food 'automatically'. Interestingly we use the word 'automatic' to describe something mechanical or electrical. Jesus uses it to describe something organic and earthy.

The soil has a God-given power to regenerate automatically and organically! This shone through this year when after weeks and weeks of drought when it looked as if the grass had died forever and the fields would never recover to produce silage to feed the cattle the rains finally came – and the fields started to turn green again and as the ancient carol sings 'the green blade riseth from the buried grain'.

So my friends, we must harness all that agronomy and science can offer, but we must never take for granted what God has provided through nature to feed the world. And let us do so with thankful hearts – thankful to you our farmers for your vocation and thankful to the One who gladdens our souls by making the soil so mysteriously wonderful!

The Right Reverend Bishop James Jones KBE

