Harvest Festival

Background to the celebration

Harvest festivals have been celebrated by many rural communities throughout the world since ancient times, and occur in many cultures. The successful gathering of food with which to survive the winter was so important to everyone that a successful harvest was a natural cause for celebration.

However the Harvest Festival as celebrated by Christians and others in Britain today is a relatively recent revival of these traditions. The Reverend R. S. Hawker, at Morwenstow in Cornwall, in 1843 created a special service to celebrate the bringing in of crops, particularly cereals. His parishioners enjoyed it so much that they insisted on having another “Harvest” Festival the following year. The idea soon caught on in the rapidly industrialising Victorian Britain where increasing numbers of people were being cut off from the cycle of nature, as they moved to the expanding cities.

Early records suggest that the celebrations were originally at the beginning of the harvest, on 1 August, the Lammas Festival. Farmers made loaves from the newly harvested wheat and gave them to the church to use as communion bread during a special Mass thanking God for the harvest; Lammas is an Anglo-Saxon word meaning loaf Mass. This ceremony was part of the Catholic church calendar, and when Henry VIII split from this church in the 16th C the custom ended – but not for long. The importance of harvest was so great that a new celebration was set up, on St Michael’s Day or Michaelmas, 29 Sept. This marked the end of the harvest, and the holding of a Harvest Supper at this time carried on into the 19th century. It died out briefly as increasing mechanization changed the communal nature of harvest, but was revived by the Church of England in 1843.

Other British traditions link harvest festivals to the autumn equinox, the time when day and night are equal and the sun crosses the celestial equator (Sept 22 or 23). Pre-Christian festivals were held on the Sunday closest to the Harvest Moon, the full moon closest to the autumn equinox. However in some parts of the country they were held on other days, or on the equinox itself.

Many traditional activities revolved around the last sheaf of corn to be harvested. This was often woven into a figure, known in later times as a corn dolly. It may represent the old tradition of choosing someone to be a special person or Lord for the harvest period, as the corn dolly often had a special role in the festivities. This in turn may be linked to an earlier tradition of making an offering or sacrifice to give thanks for a good harvest. The corn dolly was often kept until next year then ploughed into the ground during the spring sowing, giving continuity from one crop to the next. A variation found in some areas was that farm workers made a corn dolly or a model horse from the last sheaf and tossed it into the fields of other teams who were still harvesting. As each farm finished harvesting they passed it on, and the last farm to finish had to keep it as a reminder of their slow work!

The variety of ways of celebrating the harvest testify to its importance, and remind us how in the days before mass communications each rural community had its own traditions. The changing of the festival shows how changes in religion and industrialisation have affected our traditions and our relationship to the land and nature. Knowledge of these changes can help us to involve people of any faiths, or none, as it is not a festival which belongs to any one religion. The simple celebrations highlight the importance of communal support to achieve an important aim, that of producing our food, the most basic staple of life.
Activities within the woodland setting

In a typical Harvest Festival harvest products, or food generally, and flowers, are brought by everyone into a church or school and blessed, with prayers and singing. The food is then given to the poor or needy. It is a time to give thanks for our food and for the beauty of the world.

A woodland Harvest Festival could focus on the woodland harvest, autumn fruits, seeds, berries, acorns etc, and their importance for wildlife. Guided walks could look at these. Note that there is an old tradition not to pick blackberries after St Michael’s Day (29 Sept), because they have been handled or spat on by the Devil, as he was cast out of heaven by the saint on this day (it may also be that they are going bad by now!).

Ask Christian priests or others to take part and include readings, prayers, songs and hymns such as those below. Consider a Harvest Festival service in a church, which then moves on into the woods for a walk.

Consider practical actions such as collecting seeds from trees and plants and planting them on elsewhere. If there is a need for new tree planting nearby, then collecting appropriate seeds and growing them on can be a cheap source of local provenance trees. Consider linking up with wildlife trusts or other local organisations that may be creating new woodland or hedges. Be aware that not all seeds are viable, and that some need special treatment to germinate.

Timing

As detailed above, harvest festivals could take place at any time around the end of the harvesting period for cereals, often around the autumn equinox, although historically they have also occurred at the start of the harvest in August. Modern harvest festivals tend to be held on or near the Sunday after the Harvest Moon. This is the full Moon that occurs closest to the autumn equinox (about Sept. 23). In two years out of three, the Harvest Moon comes in September, but in some years it occurs in October. In 2008 the first full moon after the equinox is 14 October, and the Sunday after this is 19 October. As climates change we may find harvesting dates changing too.

Other Festivals

The Harvest Festival can be linked with other harvest or autumn equinox festivals, such as Sukkot.

Resources and further information

www.arcworld.org/faiths.asp?pageID=76 is a detailed commentary on ideas behind Christian Harvest Festivals

www.christian-ecology.org.uk/cel-harvest.rtf is a full Christian order of service

www.mrdf.org.uk/pages/harvest_worship.php more ideas for Harvest Festivals, from the Methodist Church

Traditional Christian hymns

‘We plough the fields and scatter’
‘All things bright and beautiful’
‘Morning has broken’, made popular by Cat Stevens/Yusuf Islam

www.forestry.gov.uk
Useful quotations

THE RAINBOW COVENANT

Brothers and sisters in creation,
We covenant this day with you and with all creation yet to be;
With every living creature and all that contains and sustains you;
With all that is on earth and with the earth itself;
With all that lives in the waters and with the waters themselves;
With all that flies in the skies and with the sky itself.
We establish this covenant,
That all our powers will be used to prevent your destruction.
We confess that it is our own kind who put you at risk of death.
We ask for your trust.
And as a symbol of our intention
We mark our covenant with you by the rainbow.
This is the sign of the covenant between ourselves and every living thing that is found on the earth.

Part of a liturgy created by WWF, ARC, Christian and other faith groups to support the EU REACH legislation, requiring toxicity testing for all chemicals.

There is a story from the Jewish commentaries on the Garden of Eden. Adam, master of all he saw, was walking in the Garden and wanted to eat of the fruit. He stretched out his hand to pluck an apple, but the branch moved away from him out of reach. He tried the same with a pear and the same happened again. This went on two or three times. Then a voice spoke. “First water and tend the trees, then you may eat of the fruit.”

Lord, may I love all thy creation, the whole and every grain of sand in it. May I love the animals: thou hast given them the rudiments of thought and joy untroubled. Let me not harass them; let me not deprive them of their happiness; let me not work against thy intent. For I acknowledge unto thee that all is like an ocean - flowing and blending - and that to withhold any measure of from anything in thy universe is to withhold that same measure from thee.
(Adapted from The Brothers Karamazov by Dostoevsky.)

Old Testament. Isaiah 11 Jewish commentaries usually picture Adam and Eve as vegetarians in the Garden – the sense being that eating meat is a sign of the Fall. The picture in Isaiah of all sorts of creatures at ease with each other is a powerful one and reinforces the idea that if salvation has meaning it has to be for all God's creation. The future is not just good for human beings - symbolised here by a vulnerable child - but also for other creatures such as the lamb, the kid and the calf.

Psalm 148 is a praise of creation – not just humans, but the whole of creation, including those manifestations - wild animals, birds and so on - that we are wantonly destroying.

(From www.arcworld.org, the website of the Alliance for Religions and Conservation).

Compiled by Kevin Hand and Luton Council of Faiths, as part of the Faith Woodlands project, with special thanks to the Archdeacon of Bedford and Dr Roland Randall.

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