

A SERMON FOR THE HARVEST

Preached at the Harvest Thanksgiving Festival, October, 1943, at
St. Mary's, Wycliffe.

The Lord God formed man from the slime of the earth, and breathed into his face the breath of life, and man became a living soul. . . . And the Lord God took man and put him into the paradise of pleasure, to dress it and keep it.—Book of Genesis, c. 1.

THE Land! The very word strikes a chord in the heart of every true Englishman. It brings to mind a vision of life healthy, in harmony with nature, happy. It makes the heart glow with wonder at the fertile goodness and the mysterious beauty of the earth. It leads the soul to faith in God whose perfect Holiness is reflected and made manifest in the harmony, goodness and beauty of nature.

The paradise of pleasure in which grew all manner of trees fair to behold and pleasant to eat; in the midst of which also grew the tree of life, is no legend. It was a Golden Age at the outset of human history when as God told Job: 'The morning stars praised me together, and all the sons of God made a joyful melody.' Deep down in the memory of mankind, and therefore in each one of us, is the sense of a holiness that was once our happiness, a holiness that was a harmony between man and the earth which God gave him and between man and the heaven God opened to him, a holiness that was a fulfilment of the Destiny God set us. And if this deep memory has left a glow from the past, surely it has also given a hope for the future, a yearning in us all to regain that health, to re-establish that harmony and to recover that holiness in which alone lies our happiness.

That hope lay deep buried and all but smothered under the burden of sin. But it has been given wings, it has become alive and been transfigured in the Birth and Death and Resurrection of our Lord, Jesus Christ. It has been transfigured, but by an abundance of life, not by an emptying of its nature. Our Lord came to bring us Life. He healed those who were sick in soul and in mind and in body. 'Grant us health of mind and of body through Jesus Christ' is the constant prayer of the Church.

Jesus lived his life on earth among village craftsmen, tillers of the soil, fishermen, and women in their homes. He drew most of his examples from their life and work: 'The vineyard,' 'A woman took leaven and hid it in three measures of meal,' 'Behold the birds of the air. . . .' He was always moved by gentle and loving kindness

for the countryman. It was the townsman, dishonest merchant or professional parasite who merited and suffered his anger. And it was they who led the mob to kill him. Jesus wept over the City of Jerusalem, blind to that which could give it peace.

Peace! Peace is the fruit of the right relationship between man and nature, man and man, man and God. It is the reward for reverent service of the earth, our neighbour and God. It is the tranquility of right order. No war and no treaty, no politician and no charter can give us peace. But the community of families in parishes and in towns, dressing and keeping the earth, providing for their common needs by crafts and by calling, worshipping God in the Eucharist of Christ at the altar of sacrifice, these are the things which will give us peace.

The first charge that God gave man was to dress the earth and keep it. God has called man to be His collaborator: He has left us to put the finishing touches to His great work of Creation; He has entrusted to us its final adaptation. It is this mission and calling that gives to work its dignity and its sanctity. Work makes us God's fellow-workers, apprentices of the Master Maker.

God is good. Everything that has real value exists from an overflowing of God's goodness. Whatever can give us health, happiness and holiness comes as a free gift from God. But God regards and respects our liberty and our responsibility; we must want His gifts, and receive them with a good heart, and make full use of them when we have received them. They are like seeds that are planted. If the soil is in good heart and has been well worked, then the seedling becomes well established and grows into a fine plant and gives a heavy yield. But if the soil is poor and has no tilth when the seed is sown, then no matter how good the seed, the crop will be a failure.

To do the will of God does not mean making heroic sacrifices, but it means living and working and loving in that part of God's Creation where He has placed us and according to the example He has set us in His Only Son, our Divine Lord. It is in the humble, self-sacrificing, loving service of others through our work and in our homes for the sake of God that the true Christian spirit shines forth and spreads.

God has provided plentifully for all our needs. He has provided for our needs at our own doorsteps. The real cost of producing food at home for the local market is always less than the real cost of producing it overseas and importing it into this country, and our own home produced food is of better quality than the stale processed commodity that has so long been forced upon us. It is a matter of scientific fact that in Great Britain, once our livestock has been built

up again and fertility restored to our land, we could produce food to feed forty million people without hardship for any. The great fertility of your own Teesdale in these years of war has surprised some of you. Every hundred acres of your good land is giving food and drink to a hundred and more families.

It is because you know that the wonderful bounty of nature and rich return on your labours comes from God that you have come to this Harvest Thanksgiving Festival to show your deep gratitude to God, to offer the first fruits to His Church and to re-dedicate yourselves to His service.

The service of God means obeying the laws of God. We are not free to do with the earth what we please. We must study how God has worked and learn from the pattern that He has set in nature. 'The Lord God made the heaven and the earth, and every plant of the field before it sprung up in the earth, and every herb of the ground before it grew' (Book of Genesis). We must respect the rhythm and cycle of nature and return to the earth all the wastes of life after we have received of her bounty. Fertility is a natural thing and any artificiality which tries to thwart and defraud nature will only bring disease and death. Commercial short cuts to money-making may often tempt the farmer to disregard the ways of nature and the law of return, but he knows that in the long run commercialism will destroy the fertility of his soil and bring sickness to his stock and crops. Such temptations therefore he must resist or fail in his trust to dress the earth and keep it.

According to his position a countryman has special responsibilities. The landlord has the duty to be the leader in good husbandry and in co-operation. There is surely no room or moral justification for the landlord who lives away from his land or only visits it for sport, and still less for those who hold land merely as an investment and take no interest in it other than financial. But the good landlord who does well by his land and is keenly interested in his tenants is in many ways the key to the future, and he deserves to be relieved of many of the burdens that have been unfairly laid on him.

However, it is the ordinary farmer, whether tenant or owner-occupier, who forms the great army of God's busy workmen. It is they who have carried on in foul weather as in fair, suffering injustice and deceit, facing hardship and often despair. But in their hearts they have known that if they look to their land and serve it well, the day will come, if not in their time, in their children's time, when the land will come into its own again, and when the whole nation will begin to rebuild on the foundations which they have

kept intact. We owe a debt that can never be repaid to our farmers; by their dogged perseverance in the long years of injustice and by their valiant efforts in the time of need they have saved the nation from defeat and disgrace.

But if we owe so much to the farmers, how much do they not owe to their farm workers. The farm worker, or 'hind,' as you still call him in the North Riding, is no mere wage-earner or 'hand.' He is a skilled man and a trusted friend of the farmer. He has always been as ready to share in bad times as the farmer is anxious to share with him in good times. He has suffered more than anyone else from the wicked neglect of our land. The landlord too often has not been able to provide him with a cottage worthy of his dignity and the needs of his family. The farmer has not been able to pay him a reward in accordance with the value of his skill and labours. And worst of all, he has not been able, no matter how great his skill nor how good his work nor how high his ambition, to achieve independence and a holding of his own. He has a right to this, if his character and his skill merit it. The ownership of property whether a holding or a business is the only real basis and guarantee of freedom. 'Freedom,' said one of the greatest friends of the English farmer (Wm. Cobbett), 'is not an empty sound; it is not an abstract idea; it means—and it means nothing else—the full and quiet enjoyment of your own property.'

There is one other person on the land who is all important—the farmer's wife. No word of mine can do her justice. I will echo the words of the Prophet: 'From far and of the utmost bounds is her price . . . Strength and beauty are her clothing; and she shall laugh in the latter day. She hath opened her mouth to wisdom; and she hath looked well to the paths of her house and hath not eaten her bread idly. Her children have risen up and called her blessed; her husband, and he hath praised her.'

If God's first command to man was to dress the earth and to keep it, His second command was 'to increase and multiply.' There can be no need to impress upon you the importance and joy of a large, healthy, happy family. You are indeed fortunate as it is a very great deal easier to have a true and Christian home-life in the country than in the noisy, dirty industrial towns. The farm house or cottage can form a real home upon which the life of the whole family centres, not just a place where members of the family occasionally meet and eat and sleep when released from mass work or mass leisure. Growth of affection, of responsibility, of skill and of mind is natural and inevitable in the country home. The present Pope has said: 'As a general rule, only the stability which has its roots in land privately

owned makes a family the most perfect and fertile living cell of society.'

Land and the family : here you have the two foundations of peace and prosperity. It is because we have allowed our land to become derelict and our homes to be broken up that we are faced with such chaos and foreboding. Any material plan that is not based on the revival of our agriculture, and the restoration of the peasants and yeomen of England, and any moral plan that is not based on the primacy and the sanctity of the home, is but plaster on a wooden leg. You, countrymen and countrywomen of England, are the hope of England. It is in your homes that the future of England will be made. Don't let the cheap glitter and empty glamour, the easy money and the vulgar idleness of life in the modern town deceive you. Yours is a better life, richer, fuller and more worthwhile.

And now to end I would say this : to be happy a man or a woman must *work*. Each one of us is called by God to bring some added perfection, some further completion and fulfilment to His Creation. Work is painful : in that it helps redeem sin ; but it is also glorious. Work in a spirit of Faith.

And to be happy a man must normally find a *partner*. God has made men and women for each other to come together and in His Name to pro-create. Remember how close marriage brings you to God, and cherish your offspring as the very sons and daughters of God.

And to be happy married people need a *home*, and if possible a homestead. A home is to the family what soil and light and air are to the plant. Let your homes be like Nazareth, bathed in simplicity and beauty and love where your children will grow in wisdom and in grace.

And above all to be happy the family must have an *altar* around which all the families can gather and bring their bread and their wine and offer it up to God through Christ in token of the offering of themselves, their work and their homes, their hopes and their fears, their sorrows and their joys. And Jesus will come and take their bread and their wine and make it into his very Self and dwell with them for ever. Amen.

BERNARD GOODE, C.F.