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Harvest suppers are the feasts that keep on giving

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Last weekend, my rural village church celebrated harvest festival. In a 2019 poll, 67 per cent of parents, from all faiths and none, expressed warm memories of taking part in Christian harvest festivals, saying that they wanted their children to do the same. The perceived benefits were: giving thanks for the good things in our lives, teaching children where their food comes from and showing generosity to people in need.

Harvest is one of our farming village's best-attended services. Even the smallest child can understand. The church is lovingly decorated with flowers and fruit. I organise a choir, to belt out well-loved hymns: *We Plough the Fields and Scatter*, *All Things Bright And Beautiful* and *Come, Ye Thankful People, Come*. The children bring up harvest gifts to the altar, destined for our local food bank.

Sometimes, the church does solemnity better than joy; but harvest exemplifies a palpable sense of community, bounty and shared exuberance. Despite some gloomy modern prayers about our destruction of God's creation, this is a festival and God is good. "Consider the lilies of the field, they neither toil nor spin," as the Bible reading goes. "[King] Solomon in all his glory was not arrayed like one of these" (Matthew, vi, 28-30).

Harvest is more than a nostalgia trip for traditionalists. Certainly, older people revisit happy childhood memories and there is the aroma of apples stored for the winter and smoke from the post-harvest burning of the fields, and people make a corn dolly to take to church. However, recognising the cyclical nature of human existence — “for everything there is a season” (Ecclesiastes, iii, 1) — has what feels like a renewed modern resonance. After 18 months dominated by the pandemic, our human vulnerability to challenges such as disease, weather problems and disruptions to the supply chain feels more relevant than ever.

Our food bank’s stock is running low. News reports of empty supermarket shelves add a poignancy to realising our interdependence, reliance on others and the need for connection, for the supply of our most basic human needs.

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Farmers’ reports at harvest suppers offer insight into lives lived on the land. The TV series *Clarkson’s Farm* has recently engendered a wider respect for farmers and a more sympathetic understanding of the problems that they face every year. Their livelihood is dependent almost entirely on the weather and other factors beyond their control. No prayer is perhaps more heartfelt than a farmer’s prayer for rain — or for it to stop raining.

Small rural churches often seem rather marginalised, treated in diocesan league tables like “failed” urban churches. They cannot apply for strategic development funding from the Church Commissioners, whose own bounty is used to try and improve attendance in urban areas. Yet harvest allows countryside communities a big moment of celebration.

It is well deserved. The underappreciated rural church pulls its weight in terms of percentage attendance. On an average Sunday, 40 per cent of bottoms on Church of England pews are in rural areas, although they contain only 17 per cent by population. At Christmas, 50 per cent of churchgoers are rural. Figures for donations suggest that rural churches also punch well above their weight in that regard.

Harvest conveys a feeling of handing on the baton to the next generation. I have so far failed to pass on my Christian faith to my own children, who accept the common social attitude that religion is the cause of war. However, in my own life, Christianity has been nothing but a source of comfort and joy. The author John Buchan said that an atheist was a man who had “no invisible means of support”. I hope that small rural churches will stay open long enough for my children to return to them if they ever want to do so.

Harvest suppers showcase the glories of nature, coming to terms with not being in control, looking after the hungry and needy and the wonderful reading from St Matthew about the lilies of the field, advising against worrying about what to wear. They add up to a message that the nation’s mental health problems could be addressed if we looked not inwards but upwards and outwards, with gratitude at all the good gifts around us.

Emma Thompson is a freelance writer and a member of Save the Parish