

Proper 28 B/ In-Gathering Sunday, November 18, 2018

Harvest Song

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You might say Henry Alford was raised by the Church. He was born on October 7, 1810. Because his mother died in childbirth, Henry was raised by his father and grandfather, both of whom were clergymen in the Church of England. Biographers tell us Henry had a loving and happy upbringing. He was said to be a precocious child and well educated. He graduated from Trinity College and went on to become an ordained priest. Although he was a theologian and scholar in high standing known for the commentary he wrote on the Greek New Testament, he also he served as rector in a small country parish where he was loved for his pastoral care and his Sunday afternoon church services that attracted lots of people from all over the area. He had a reputation for making complex ideas understandable to people from all walks of life, so they were naturally drawn to his preaching. Eventually he was given the opportunity to serve at the Cathedral in Canterbury, where he had more time for his scholarly work, but still attracted large groups of people to the Sunday afternoon services he held there. It is said by one biographer that many church leaders considered him a radical, but his good humor and friendliness eventually won them over.

Although Henry Alford was a highly respected scholar and a beloved parish priest, he is still known to us centuries after his death in 1871 for a different contribution he made not just to the Church of England, but to Christianity that is wider than denominational differences. For in Episcopal Churches, Presbyterian churches, Roman Catholic Churches, Methodist churches, Lutheran Churches, 7th Day Adventists churches, and churches of other Christian denominations around this time of year, you can hear all of us sing the same hymn. A hymn written by Henry Alford. A hymn found on page 290 in our own Hymnal in the pew right in front of you.

Come, ye thankful people, come, raise the song of harvest home. – the hymn begins – All is safely gathered in, ere the winter storms begin. God our Maker, doth provide for our wants to be supplied; Come to God's own temple come, raise the song of harvest home.

Obviously, this is a hymn about harvest, written in honor of the harvest celebrations that were part of Henry Alford's world. But Henry, being a priest, a theologian, and a scholar, saw the harvest as more than an ingathering of crops grown to maturity.

All the world is God's own field, - the hymn goes on – fruit unto his praise to yield; wheat and tares together sown unto joy or sorrow grown; first the blade and then the ear, then the full corn shall appear, Grant O' harvest Lord, that we wholesome grain and pure may be.

For the Lord our God shall come, and shall take the harvest home; from his field shall in that day, all offenses purge away, giving angels charge at last, in the fire the tares to cast. But the fruitful ears to store, in the garner ever more.

Even so, Lord, quickly come, to thy final harvest home; gather thou thy people in, free from sorrow, free from sin, there forever purified, in thy presence to abide, come with all thine angels come, raise the glorious harvest home.

We can see in the words of his lovely hymn Henry Alford saw in the harvest an ending that was also a beginning. Harvest is indeed an end to the growing season, which might be why some people see this time of year as a sad one, with no more work to do, and only what has been harvested to be carefully portioned out in order to keep body and soul together until the next harvest they look back to the past with sad longing. And it might be the very same reason others see harvest as a happy time, with the work done, the crops gathered in with thankful hearts, it is a time to celebrate. Henry seems to have seen the harvest as something deeper, something that connects us with the greater reality of God and God With Us. He saw in the concept of harvest a reminder of the future inbreaking of God's world into this one, which was started with the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus, continues with our own witness to the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus and will eventually grow to maturity and become the ending and beginning Jesus referred to at the end of today's Gospel reading.

Today's Gospel is often called the "Little Apocalypse" because of the language Jesus was using, words that some say have a cosmic feel to them and reminds scholars of other books in the Bible that use similar terms like the book of Daniel. It's too bad our modern understanding of the term "apocalypse" is that it means the end of the world, which is usually a rather chaotic end. Because the word apocalypse in Greek doesn't translate to ending. It translates: unveiling, revealing, exposing. The word apocalypse might be better explained as a sort of ending and beginning wrapped up in one. As preacher and teacher William Willimon said, an apocalypse is about growing, especially when we learn something that isn't necessarily new, but it is something we thought we knew and discover whatever it is to be different from what we thought. This kind of learning or maturity requires us to let go of what we thought we knew and accept what is. I think William Willimon explains apocalypse this way because he is a teacher in a theological school. And it is a helpful explanation because it shows us that

sometimes such a realization can be traumatic, depending on what someone has been taught to believe, and learning something isn't what they thought it was can feel like the end of the world, or at least the end of their world. And yet, at the very same time, it is the beginning of a new way to look at, understand, and perhaps even engage the world, a world now made a little bit bigger, wider, and deeper than the person originally thought it was. This experience can be exciting, it can be frightening, sometimes at all once.

In today's Gospel we hear Jesus talking to his disciples about the temple in Jerusalem. Historians and archeologists tell us it was an impressive edifice in its day. Some interpret Jesus' disciples' reaction to the temple as a sort of awe, but others tell us the disciples were expressing the belief that such an impressive building symbolizes a powerful and impressive system and power structure that will crush anyone who dares to oppose it. Whichever view you hold, Jesus responded by saying that everything, even something that seems impenetrable or unconquerable or permanent or stable will not be so forever. Whether it is brought down by the wear and tear of ages, wars, neglect, disaster, anything and everything in this world – be they institutions, power structures, systems, governments, businesses, jobs you name it, it will come to the end of its season. Its harvest time will come. And depending how you see those institutions or systems or people, you might find this message of Jesus one of hope or one of sorrow.

That's why Jesus' words are so important: they tell us that when it looks like the world we've come to know so well we might have started to take for granted, or depend on it for our stability, starts to change and even though those changes might look to us like the end of the world, or at least the end of our world, it is really just change we are experiencing, which means something else is just beginning. When it feels like our world is ending, it can be so frightening that we can forget who we follow and start following whoever promises to restore that which we think we've lost, and that is how we move away from God's love in Jesus. If we were to read further in Mark's Gospel today, we would read that Jesus also says that no matter what passes away, God's love and God's word will remain. Which means we might look at such apocalyptic changes that feel like endings that are also beginnings the way Henry Alford tried to teach us in his hymn: that such times are like a harvest. A gathering in that we can be thankful for, and the hope that the new beginning may be more like the kingdom of God that began with Jesus' ultimate act of love that ended the power of death and began the resurrection inbreaking into this world of God's love that will eventually put an end to sin and the sorrows that can keep us from being close to God. That is why as followers of Jesus our harvest songs are songs of gratitude, of joy, and of hope.

It is worth saying that we here at Church of the Good Shepherd are celebrating harvest too. We'll be celebrating on Thursday, the day set aside for giving thanks, with a Thanksgiving Day service, after which my family and I invite any who wants to join us for dinner to express how thankful our hearts are for all of you and for the life of this parish. These celebrations are very much expressions of gratitude, joy, and hope.

Today, in a few moments, we will all be invited to bring to the altar our gifts of prayer, time, and money to this parish. Gifts we are asked to share in the spirit of the harvest: in gratitude for all that God has given to us as individuals, to our parish, and how we work together to care for our facilities, to provide for our needs, and those of others. Gifts we are asked to share in the spirit of joy for the ways we see and experience the presence of God's Holy Spirit in our fellowship, our ministries, and our worship. Gifts we are asked to share in the spirit of hope, as these gifts are needed to do the kingdom work, continuing to break into the places of loneliness, sorrow, sin and pain by being Christ to each other, to our neighbors and the world. That is the church at its best, – remember the church is the people- the church that raised Henry Alford, that continues to sing his hymn of gratitude, joy and hope so that those words will be more than words, they will be our heartbeat connecting us to God's love for us and the world.