

## Firstfruits – A Sermon for Septuagesima 2009

Isaiah 40 vv 21-31 p724, Psalm 147 I Corinthians 9 vv 16-23 p1150, Mark 1 vv 29-39 p1002

Last week we kept the feast of the Presentation of our Lord or Candlemas. The baby Jesus was brought to the Temple on the 40<sup>th</sup> day because every first-born male was consecrated to the LORD, not only the first-born of human families, but also the first born of their farm animals. We said that this was done because of what happened when God set the Israelites free from slavery in Egypt. The last and greatest of the ten plagues – the one which finally forced Pharaoh to let the people go – was the death of the first born, both of human beings and of animals, throughout the land of Egypt. Only the homes of the Hebrews escaped, the houses the lintels of which were sprinkled with the blood of the Passover Lamb.

Three times a year the ancient Israelites had to keep a feast to the LORD in Jerusalem. The first was Passover/Unleavened Bread. The third was the Feast of Ingathering, our Harvest Home, at the end of the agricultural year. But what was the second great feast of the Jewish year? The answer is another angle on the consecration of the firstborn.

The second great feast of the Jewish year was the firstfruits of the harvest, at the beginning of reaping. It is easy to see why people celebrate the end of harvest. All that hard work is finished. The barns are full. Hopefully there is enough food stored to last through the Winter. But why consecrate the firstfruits? We celebrate Harvest Home even in a mainly industrial and commercial culture. But we have pretty much given up on the English Firstfruits – the Feast of Lammas, which falls on 1<sup>st</sup> August. All that remains of Lammas is August Bank Holiday Monday – the religious origins of which are largely forgotten and completely disregarded!

[Incidentally, in the warmer climate of Palestine, Firstfruits comes much earlier in the year, the feast we call Pentecost or Whitsun – a very significant fact.]

So why celebrate the beginning of the Harvest and consecrate the firstfruits to the LORD? I think it shows more faith than Harvest Home. At Harvest Home, you know what you've got and how much you can spare to give away to the Church or to the poor. At Firstfruits, you give in faith. You offer to God the firstfruits of what you have. There might not be any more. If there are terrible storms, the firstfruits might turn out to be the last fruits. When you give your firstfruits to God, you give in faith. You trust God not to let you down.

Some people don't mind giving God their last fruits – the money they've got left when they've bought everything they need or want and put some away for a rainy day; the time they've got left when they've done everything else they want to do; the things they don't need for themselves – but giving in faith is letting God have the first choice, putting Him first in the allocation of your time, your money and your talents. People who live like that discover that they are strangely blessed. Their lives are based on faith in the omnipotent Deity, Who promises in our Isaiah reading to sustain all those who trust in Him.

St Paul says that offering the firstfruits consecrates the whole crop. If we dedicate to God the first and the best in our lives, the rest follows. Our whole lives are dedicated to God and

we find that we have laid up treasure in Heaven, where moth and rust can't corrupt and thieves don't break through and steal.

When you get to the New Testament, the idea of firstfruits is extended. Jesus is the firstfruits of the Resurrection. He was the first to rise from the dead and the first to ascend into Heaven. His life is an offering made holy to God. But the consecration of the firstfruits consecrates the whole crop. So all those who come to Christ in faith and are baptised in His Name are part of the crop. Our lives are offered to God in Christ and with Christ. We too share in the Resurrection. We too ascend into Heaven.

According to the Book of Revelation, the saints in glory are firstfruits. Dedicated to God in this life, dedicated to God in the life to come, their consecration, consecrates the whole Church.

St James goes further. Those who are Christians now are a kind of firstfruits of the whole creation. Our lives are consecrated to God by our Baptism in Christ and we are redeemed. We participate in the life of the new age. We have eternal life. We share the resurrection and ascension of Jesus. Our consecration as firstfruits is a first stage in the consecration of the whole of creation. We have a mission to proclaim the Gospel of God to the universe and, changing the metaphor slightly, to sow, tend and reap a rich harvest for God. So, like St Paul in our reading from his first letter to the Corinthians, we are bound to preach the Gospel.

We are the people whom Paul describes as having the firstfruits of the Spirit – and that, incidentally, is why it is not insignificant that Pentecost or Whitsun, the celebration of the coming of the Holy Spirit, coincides with the Feast of Firstfruits. The Holy Spirit is God's gift to us, a foretaste of the joys of Heaven, the Spirit of the Risen Christ Who consecrates our lives to God and enables us to play our part in the bringing in of the Harvest.

*Hymn 75: Come ye Thankful People Come.*