

## Harvest Sunday 2025

Revelation 14.14-18

John 6.25-35

*I am the bread of life: he that cometh to me shall never hunger; and he that believeth on me shall never thirst.*

Among my more academic responsibilities is the privilege of commissioning and editing a series of small books for Cambridge University Press, called *Elements in the Psychology of Religion*. These are little paperbacks, always under 100 pages, on various topics in my field of research. There is already, for example, a book on divination, the attempt to seek knowledge via supernatural means; and one on how moral and religious beliefs shape one another. Any day now, a new volume is due to be published, by two scholars working in the United States; and their book is simply titled

“Religion and Food”<sup>1</sup>. It covers all kinds of interesting research on the topic, from fasting to feasting, from metaphor to morality.

It is clear, from the diversity of religious traditions covered in the book, that Christianity is hardly the only religious tradition to put food—and its eating and drinking—at the heart of our belief and practice. Still, I think, there is nothing quite like the Eucharist in other traditions, ancient or modern, in which the faithful can be said *literally* to be eating God. There was a time when scholars speculated that the Egyptian and Graeco-Roman worship of gods like Osiris and Dionysius involved something a lot like the Christian Eucharist: but these views have fallen out of favour, due to the scantness of the evidence.

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<sup>1</sup> [https://www.cambridge.org/core/elements/religion-and-food/FBFE4101D85210CE4B4C73581B70C155?utm\\_campaign=shareaholic&utm\\_medium=copy\\_link&utm\\_source=bookmark](https://www.cambridge.org/core/elements/religion-and-food/FBFE4101D85210CE4B4C73581B70C155?utm_campaign=shareaholic&utm_medium=copy_link&utm_source=bookmark)

Harvest Sunday is, like so many things we take for granted as part of our British patrimony, a Victorian invention: the Reverend Robert Hawker, 1843, Morwenstow in Cornwall. But of course, it is not Anglicanism's—and before it, Western Christianity's—only agricultural festival.

There is also Lammas Day—from the Anglo-Saxon for “loaf mass”, celebrated on August 1st, and for which loaves were baked from the first of the wheat harvest. This is likely a Christianised version of a pagan Gaelic celebration that I cannot pronounce (*lughnasadh*).

More ancient still are Rogation Days—from the Latin, *rogare*, “to ask”, which arose in the 5th century and arrived in Britain in the 7th. Christians in late antiquity had much to ask for, I'm sure, but they mainly asked for good crops. Rogation Days, celebrated around the Feast of the Ascension in spring, involved processions, including the “beating of the bounds”, still practiced now: the faithful walk the parish boundary, whacking bushes with branches. Some historians believe that Rogation Days replaced the

pagan Roman festival Robigalia, which involved sacrificing a dog to the eponymous deity of agricultural disease. This practice has gone into abeyance.

In the days before industrial agriculture, global food supply chains, supermarkets, and online shopping, it is easy to see why so much religion was dedicated to farming. People ate more or less what they and those close-by could grow: or they didn't eat at all. Say what you like about the evils of the industrial revolution, but before the 19th century, serious famines occurred roughly every decade in Britain. And indeed, just 2 years after that first Harvest Sunday in Cornwall, the Great Potato Famine began in Ireland. No wonder that our liturgical predecessors seem obsessed with praying for clement weather and healthy crops and abundant harvest; and giving thanks for the same. The precarity and thus potential scarcity of food was very obvious to them. Harvest liturgies are, in that way, historically and fundamentally, liturgies of scarcity, predicated on anxiety.

There is nothing wrong with this. The Christian commitment to truth dictates that we are honest about what we need and what we want; what our motivations are, even if the better angels of our nature would consider them base or crass. The best advice I have ever heard about prayer is that we should not pretend to be nobler and more selfless than we are; this would be futile anyway, for God knows us even better than we know ourselves. Clement weather; a plentiful harvest; a better job; perhaps even specifically a better paying job. These are all perfectly acceptable things to pray for simply because they are honest things to pray for. They reflect who we are by expressing what our concerns and desires are.

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If Harvest Sunday and other agricultural liturgies are our response to scarcity, then the Eucharist is, if not quite its opposite, then certainly a response to its psychological underpinnings.

*I am the bread of life: he that cometh to me shall never hunger; and he that believeth on me shall never thirst.* Jesus himself invokes the vocabulary of scarcity here: hunger, thirst. But his claim about it is audacious to the point of absurdity. In praying for the harvest, we never think to ask for infinite abundance: for all our crops to miraculously become perennials, never needing replanting and unceasingly harvestable.

This is the clue that he is not starting from scarcity, but rejecting it altogether, and the morality and politics and economics that it engenders, which just happens to be the morality and politics and economics of our secular age. We have never been wealthier, but nor have we been so insecure, which manifests itself in how closely we guard our purse strings, both personal and national, and our borders too.

In response, Jesus does not warn us against praying for wealth—that is, after all, what praying for the harvest really amounts to in our industrialised consumer economy: material success, every which way. What he does instead is

to offer his own body to us, even to eat, and his blood, even to drink; and what he says is that this eating and drinking is infinite abundance itself, the antidote against scarcity and the mindset it produces.

The Eucharist is not the opposite of Harvest Sunday, and is perhaps more than just a response to the motivations behind it, and all such liturgies of rogation. It also redeems them, transforms them, just as the bread and wine are transformed. Many people think that the Eucharist is a special sort of meal, and they're not wrong; but we too easily forget that the Eucharist has also changed all meals in its own image, given all meals new meaning and purpose and power.

Just as the incarnation has forever transformed all humanity, infusing it with the divinity that is also in Christ; so too the Eucharist has forever transformed all eating and drinking, infusing every meal with that same Christ's own audaciously abundant offer of himself, given once and for all, and made available every time we take the bread and eat it, the cup and drink of it. Every

time we sit down and sup together; every time we do that most human thing, we are also doing a most divine thing.

The Eucharist has changed every meal, and that should change how we think and feel about meals, the food and drink before us, the people who prepare it, those with whom we share it, and those with whom we don't, even won't. How?—well, you'll have to come back next time for that. Treat this homily as an appetiser.