



The Church of England  
in Essex and East London

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Diocese of Chelmsford

## **Harvest 2024**

John 6. 3-14; 25-35

September 2024

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The 'Feeding the Five Thousand' is a well-loved account of Christ's generous transformation: from hunger to nourishment; from scarcity to abundance; from observation to participation. It all began with one young boy offering his simple lunch of five barley loaves and two fish. Jesus welcomed this gift of basic, local produce. He gave thanks to his Father for it, he blessed it and then, miraculously, he shared it with everyone who'd gathered. It became one almighty, amazing picnic. So astonishing was the abundance that the penny began to drop. As verse 14 describes, the people began to say, 'This is indeed the prophet who is to come into the world'. Jesus wasn't recognised in an eloquent, persuasive theological argument. He was seen in accepting and multiplying basic local fare, in a huge joyful harvest picnic!

The starting point was one youngster, willing to share his barley rolls and fish. Many would consider this an embarrassingly poor lunch. Barley makes great beer but poor bread flour. It is of course, ground wheat, with its strong gluten-forming protein, that produces good bread flour. Perhaps the wheat harvest had been particularly sparse that year or the wheat was more valuable to sell than to eat for this family. But the tough little barley loaves weren't embarrassing to Jesus, his thanksgiving and blessing elevated them to the top table!

It appears that this simple fare wasn't embarrassing to the boy either. Time and place would indicate that the fish were caught in the Sea of Galilee, and the barley harvested from the fields around them. In all likelihood, his dad had caught the fish and his mum had worked some kitchen magic with their barley. It doesn't surprise me that the boy readily shared his food. As a child I was incredibly proud of what we produced on my family's farm, sometimes in adversity. I loved it when our produce was enjoyed far and wide.

Jesus, standing amongst the farmers and fishermen of Galilee, welcomed this gift. After all, the God of Creation, had blessed Galilee with living waters and fertile land. Jesus didn't seek anything grander than this food which God had created and local human hands had brought forth. He multiplied it, ensured it was enjoyed by all and made sure none was wasted. Their food was, and our food is, a precious gift. Jesus gently demonstrated how sinful it would be to waste it. In our times, the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change estimates that food waste contributes up to 10% of total human-made greenhouse gas emissions. If food waste was a country, it would be the third largest emitter, after China and the US. Perhaps that image of Jesus and his disciples collecting every left-over crust, might motivate us to work towards the UN's Sustainable Development Goal of halving food waste by 2030.

It's with John, chapter 6, before us that we give thanks for the harvest of our land. Our diocese has some of the most fertile agricultural land of the country. The growing of wheat for bread production stands in a long and respected tradition here. But as we welcome farmers and producers to our churches, we're mindful of the present challenges. Land-use is a political and commercial hot-potato. In our populous diocese, land that's been feeding our people for centuries is now contested. Land-owners are called to balance the need for conservation, fuel production, fuel transportation, housebuilding and hard-infrastructure with food production.

Additionally, last autumn, winter and spring brought exceptionally wet weather. Many agricultural fields earmarked for wheat and barley production were waterlogged for weeks, causing severe delays to sowing and growing. Hopes weren't high for this year's grain harvest.

And yet, the earth has yielded its harvest.

It was a year that required perseverance and resolve, but, right at the end of the growing season, the weather came good; long warm days did their stuff. Yields might not be great, certainly some wheat-protein levels aren't as high as farmers and millers would like, but once again, the prayerful amongst us recognise, "The earth has yielded it's harvest; God, our God, has blessed us".

When I stand at altar steps receiving sheaves of corn and loaves of bread from the hands of our farmers, my thanks will be deep and sincere. I'm receiving the harvest of their work, trust and commitment, in addition to the harvest of God's good creation.

On 29<sup>th</sup> September, the County Harvest Festival in our cathedral will especially celebrate the wheat harvest. Even in the trying weather conditions of this year, lighter fertile soils have yielded milling-wheat of global importance here. Wheat provides 20% of the calories and protein in the global human diet, a greater contribution than any other crop (Shiferaw et al. 2013). In the UK, wheat flour is in about a third of all grocery products on supermarket shelves, providing much of the fibre, calcium and iron consumed in the UK. The wheat grown in our diocese is a precious commodity.

Jesus gave thanks for 5 small loaves of bread, he shared them, and all who ate were nourished. This wasn't top quality bread but it was given generously, received generously and shared generously. The bread formed the basis of a great celebration. This year, the quality of our grain might not be of the highest standard, but in our cathedral we'll recognise the gift of our farmers' work to global food resources, we'll receive it with joy and we'll share it.

Shared bread will form the basis of our harvest celebration, thanks to the huge team who contribute to the whole field to fork process. This year our thanks especially extend to our local millers, Marriages, as they celebrate their bicentenary. For 200 years, Marriages have been milling local wheat in Chelmsford, just a stone's throw from the cathedral. They produce high quality flour, the key ingredient of nourishing, sustaining bread.

As we give thanks for the sustaining potential of all the food produced in our diocese this harvest, we trust that the life-force at the heart of our faith may sustain and nourish all who gather in our churches. After all, Jesus, the one recognised as the prophet in the midst of a harvest picnic was also the one who described himself as 'The Bread of Life'. May the blessings of the one who offers to sustain and nourish us all, multiply richly this harvest season and beyond.