

On the Harvest

A Talk by Fr. Philip Tolbert
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*Except a grain of wheat fall into the earth and die,
it remains alone; but if it dies, it bears much fruit.*

Gospel of St. John 12:24

The cultural history of all peoples includes annual observances connected with the seasons, such as seed time and harvest. This is true even of nomadic peoples and the so-called “hunters and gatherers” who did not plant crops, but who followed the seasonal changes in the growth and ripening of foodstuffs both for their animals and for themselves. All manner of festivals and celebrations connected with planting and harvesting around the globe testify to this shared human experience. Some church feast days with harvest themes that come at this time of year include:

The Feast of the Prophet Elijah (July 20). Perhaps you think this is early for harvest, but those who live in the wheat belt of the United States know that June is the month for harvest, starting first in the south and moving northward. According to an old Russian folk saying, “Elijah ends the summer, he reaps the grain; it's the first sheaf, the first feast of autumn!” For centuries, Elijah’s day has been celebrated as the time of grain harvest in Russia. No work was done in the fields on this day, but after the Liturgy, a special blessing of cattle took place.

The Feast of the Lord’s Transfiguration (August 6) is celebrated to this very time throughout the Orthodox Church worldwide with a special blessing of the first newly harvested grapes and apples.

The Nativity of the Theotokos (September 8). In many regions of central and eastern Europe, the Feasts of Mary the Mother of God in August and September are associated with harvest, fall planting and thanksgiving. In the wine-growing regions of France, for instance, September 8th is affectionately referred to as “Our Lady of the Grape Harvest.” On this day grapes are brought to the local church for blessings. In certain regions of the Alps, this day also signals the beginning of the “down-driving,” when cattle and sheep are led from their summer pastures, down the mountain slopes to their winter residences in the valleys and stables.

The Feast of the Icon of the Theotokos, *She Who Ripens the Grain* (October 15). This icon was commissioned by St. Ambrose, Elder of Optina in the late 19th Century. In doing so he remarked that it is the Theotokos who helps bring to fruition our spiritual efforts as well as the ripening grain in the fields.

For the Orthodox Christian community here at Holy Dormition Church, our fall harvest festival arises from this same fertile ground. For us this is a time of taking stock of the past year, of giving thanks to our Heavenly Father for His bounteous blessings, and of celebrating our community life together with our neighbors and friends.

All the more fitting then, that we should take a few minutes to reflect upon this common and universal human practice, and to consider it in the light of the spiritual realities which our faith confesses.

It is one of the most profound truths of human existence that spiritual life is “pinned” to the life of the body and to the natural cycles of life on the earth. This truth is manifestly embodied in our Orthodox Christian faith, and yet, it is rarely talked about in these terms.

The Lord Jesus Christ Himself pointed to this truth, albeit in a figure, when He said: *“unless a grain of wheat falls into the ground and dies, it remains alone; but if it dies, it produces much fruit.”*(John 12:24).

He is, of course, speaking of the spiritual fruit His death upon the Cross will bring for the whole human race. Indeed, this is much more than a simple metaphor; it is an apt and exact description of the process of spiritual life. It is the way in which a human being is brought from bodily death into spiritual life, for, as St. John the Evangelist reports: *“as many as received Him, [that is] to those who believe in His name, to them He gave the power to become children of God.”*(John 1:12). And furthermore, *“...that believing you might have life through his name.”* (John 20:31).

St. Paul spoke about this quite openly and at length, when he was asked to describe the type of body a human being will have in the Resurrection. It is worth quoting him at length:

Now someone will say, "How are the dead raised up? And with what body do they come?" Foolish one, what you sow is not made alive unless it dies. And what you sow, you do not sow that body that shall be, but mere grain--perhaps wheat or some other grain. But God gives it a body as He pleases, and to each seed its own body. ... So also is the resurrection of the dead. The body is sown in corruption, it is raised in incorruption. It is sown in dishonor, it is raised in glory. It is sown in weakness, it is raised in power. It is sown a natural body, it is raised a spiritual body. There is a natural body, and there is a spiritual body. And so it is written, "The first man Adam became a living being." The last Adam became a life-giving spirit. However, the spiritual is not first, but the natural [comes first], and afterward the spiritual. The first man was of the earth, made of dust; the second Man is the Lord from heaven. As was the man of dust, so also are those who are made of dust; and as is the heavenly Man, so also are those who are heavenly. As we have borne the image of the man of dust, we shall also bear the image of the heavenly Man. Now this I say, brothers and sisters, that flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God; nor does corruption inherit incorruption. Behold, I tell you a mystery: We shall not all sleep, but we shall all be changed – in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet. For the trumpet will sound, and the dead will be raised incorruptible, and we shall be changed. For this corruptible must put on incorruption, and this mortal must put on immortality. So when this corruptible has put on incorruption, and this mortal has put on immortality, then shall be brought to pass the saying that is written: "Death is swallowed up in victory." "O Death, where is your sting? O Hades,

*where is your victory?" The sting of death is sin, and the strength of sin is the law.
But thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ.
(1 Corinthians 15:35-38, 42-57)*

What is the meaning of all this, and how are we to understand it? We are to understand that the first door to life eternal is birth into a life on earth. All who are born on earth are born with the possibility of eternal life. I say "the possibility" because, although eternal life is a gift from God, just as earthly life is a gift from Him (you did not earn it or even ask for it), eternal life does not come automatically to everyone born on earth. It is an option, to use modern terminology. You must choose to exercise your option for eternal life. It is a divine gift, but it must be activated by an act of your human will. What act is that? To believe in the Giver of eternal life and to commit your earthly life to live in accordance with His will for your spiritual flourishing as a genuine and fully human being. There are obvious implications contained in this spiritual teaching and strong motivations to be found here for not denying to others, especially to those not yet born, that most fundamental of all human rights: the right to life.

The Lord chose to speak in parables. He explains why in Matthew 13:10-15. That's worth reading too, but I will leave it for you to read on your own. Many, although not all, of the Lord's parables are couched in agricultural terms. Only yesterday, in the Orthodox lectionary [Friday of the 17th Week after Pentecost], we read one such parable that interestingly enough touches upon the topic of harvest:

And he began to speak unto them by parables. A certain man planted a vineyard, and set an hedge about it, and digged a place for the winevat, and built a tower, and let it out to husbandmen, and went into a far country. 2 And at the season he sent to the husbandmen a servant, that he might receive from the husbandmen of the fruit of the vineyard. 3 And they caught him, and beat him, and sent him away empty. 4 And again he sent unto them another servant; and at him they cast stones, and wounded him in the head, and sent him away shamefully handled. 5 And again he sent another; and him they killed, and many others; beating some, and killing some. 6 Having yet therefore one son, his wellbeloved, he sent him also last unto them, saying, They will reverence my son. 7 But those husbandmen said among themselves, This is the heir; come, let us kill him, and the inheritance shall be ours. 8 And they took him, and killed him, and cast him out of the vineyard. 9 What shall therefore the lord of the vineyard do? he will come and destroy the husbandmen, and will give the vineyard unto others. 10 And have ye not read this scripture; The stone which the builders rejected is become the head of the corner: 11 This was the Lord's doing, and it is marvelous in our eyes? 12 And they sought to lay hold on him, but feared the people: for they knew that he had spoken the parable against them: and they left him, and went their way.

(Mark 12:1-12) [Cf. Isaiah 5:1-7]

Some might suppose the agricultural element in this parable is an example of the Gospel message being culturally limited to that long ago time and place, and therefore evidence of its inability to speak to the majority of people in our time and culture.

There is a hint of truth in that notion – the majority of people alive today live a decidedly non-agricultural lifestyle – but at root the assertion that they cannot understand agricultural imagery is false. It is true only insofar as for a scriptural parable to work – that is, for it to communicate meaning – it must connect with something the hearer can understand merely by virtue of being alive. It begins with something it is possible to know from life upon earth, but a parable doesn't end with a knowledge of this world. The purpose of the parable is to explain something otherworldly, through comparison with earthly things; something which it is not possible for us to know without divine revelation, because it is outside all earthly experience. To speak plainly, the purpose of all parables is to convey an understanding of divine things and of the otherworldly experience of those who live with Christ in the heavenly realm to those of us who are still living within the confines of this earth.

So, while it is possible that a human being living today may know next to nothing about agriculture, a parable based on agricultural images remains valid precisely because the images relate to things of this world of which they are a part, specifically by virtue of things that are innate to human nature and to our experience as created beings. This remains true whether the individual is aware of it or not. Even in cities, people are conceived, born and die; the sun rises and sets; the round of the seasons continues whether we participate in planting and harvesting or merely observe them as a change in the clothing we wear or in the sports we enjoy – winter means skiing; summer means baseball..., and so forth. Pause for a moment and consider. I think you will agree that nearly any human being is able to identify the main ideas presented in these parables, regardless of how indifferent or insensitive that person may be to the natural cycles of planting and harvesting.

Granted, there has been a concerted effort over the past few decades to sever this intuitive connection with nature – take, for instance, the effort to separate sexual acts from procreation that is inherent in the arguments promoting modern birth control methods and gender identity politics – but the connection is there nevertheless. I regret to say that yet once again we must leave a provocative aspect of our subject until another day and instead continue to contemplate the central element of today's harvest theme; namely, our human nature's connection with the created order of this world.

In a very real sense, this connection may be seen as the framework on which the whole of the Scriptural narrative hangs. It is, as the saying goes, “a red thread” that runs through all of the Divine Scriptures, from beginning to end, from Genesis to the Apocalypse.

And God said, Let us make man in our image, after our likeness: and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the fowl of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the earth, and over every creeping thing that creeps upon the earth. So God created man in his own image, in the image of God created he him; male and female created he them. And God blessed them, and God said unto them, Be fruitful, and multiply, and replenish the earth, and subdue it: and have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the fowl of the air, and over every living thing that moves upon the earth. (Gen. 1:26-28)

Here we see, not only the creation of the first human beings, but also hear the first command addressed to mankind: “*Be fruitful [bear fruit; grow] and multiply [become great; increase] replenish [fill; consecrate] and subdue [walk upon; tame] the earth ... have dominion over [rule over; teach] all living things.*” (v. 28)

This passage contains a provocative mixture of themes crying out for further study. Yet, despite this richness, not to be satisfied with a single description of the creation of human beings and of our first vocation, the writer of Genesis goes on to provide a second account:

And the LORD God formed man of the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and man became a living soul. And the LORD God planted a garden eastward in Eden; and there he put the man whom he had formed. And out of the ground made the LORD God to grow every tree that is pleasant to the sight, and good for food; the tree of life also in the midst of the garden, and the tree of knowledge of good and evil. And a river went out of Eden to water the garden; and there it divided, and became four rivers. (Gen. 2:7-10)

... And the LORD God took the man, and put him into the garden of Eden to dress it and to keep it. And the LORD God commanded the man, saying, Of every tree of the garden thou may freely eat: But of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, thou shalt not eat of it: for in the day that thou eat thereof thou shalt surely die. (Gen. 2:15-17)

Thus we see that Adam's original vocation is “tending the garden” (Gen. 2:15), and we also hear a new commandment, this one expressed as a prohibition, the violation of which brings with it a dire consequence. Unfortunately, the very next chapter brings news of a very nasty event: Adam and Eve did not properly fulfill their vocation and violated the prohibition, thus invoking the consequence upon themselves and upon all their descendants even to this day.

And unto Adam [the Lord] said, Because thou hast hearkened unto the voice of thy wife, and hast eaten of the tree, of which I commanded thee, saying, Thou shalt not eat of it: cursed is the ground for thy sake; in sorrow shalt thou eat of it all the days of thy life; 18 Thorns also and thistles shall it bring forth to thee; and thou shalt eat the herb of the field; 19 In the sweat of thy face shalt thou eat bread, till thou return unto the ground; for out of it wast thou taken: for dust thou art, and unto dust shalt thou return. ... 23 Therefore the LORD God sent him forth from the garden of Eden, to till the ground from whence he was taken. 24 So he drove out the man; and he placed at the east of the garden of Eden Cherubims, and a flaming sword which turned every way, to keep the way of the tree of life. (Genesis 3:17-19, 23-24)

Adam's original vocation now becomes the original penance. It is the same vocation before and after their disobedience, but with a key distinction. Before, when they were in communion with God, they did not know it as labor; afterwards, having broken that communion, they are to have new experiences: hard labor, sweating, pain, disappointment in their husbandry of the earth, and worst of all among these new experiences, this strange and frightening thing called death.

If there were more time, we could trace this “red thread” through all the books of the Divine Scriptures – the histories, the commandments, the psalms and proverbs, the parables of the Lord, the writings of the Apostles, and the revelations of the end times given to St. John the Evangelist, but we must reserve that for another day as well. Today, it will have to be enough for us to conclude with a few summary remarks concerning our Harvest Festival:

It is to a large degree, a partial fulfillment of our shared original penance that is being celebrated in the time of harvest each year. It is a foreshadowing of the ultimate fulfillment of all penances to come at the end of the age. As St. Symeon the New Theologian says, those who embrace this original penance willingly will be made better. They will grow and profit spiritually by the healing such willing labor brings to their souls. This celebration also brings us a timely reminder of the final harvest of our own lifetime and of the harvesting at the end of the world when the Lord will send forth His Holy Angels to “gather out of His kingdom all things that offend, and them which do iniquity” (Matt. 13:41); and to “gather together His elect from the four winds, from the uttermost part of the earth to the uttermost part of heaven.” (Mark 13:27)

Another year of fulfilling our common penance brings us just so much closer to the restoration of our life in a fuller communion with our God and Creator. It is in the recognition of these truths that our celebrations of the harvest time find their full appreciation. We are thankful indeed for the Lord’s abundant mercy and His bounteous dealings with us. He has satisfied us with His earthly gifts, but even more so He does not deprive us of His heavenly kingdom. He has provided us a way of return to communion with Him, through the forgiveness of our sins, and to an inheritance of eternal life beyond earthly death by the power and grace of our Lord Jesus Christ.

In a moment we will all return to the festival grounds surrounding our beautiful church, where good music and food and fellowship await us. But before we part, let us conclude our talk with the final words of a prayer that we Orthodox often pray at the end of a meal: “As Thou camest among Thy disciples O Saviour and gavest them peace, come to us and save us!” AMEN