

Harvest festivals celebrated in farming communities around the world, have one thing in common: people wish each other, prosperity and abundance. We city folk don't exchange such greetings; we take for granted, the food on our tables, three times a day!

Among the many such wishes exchanged, most of which are culture specific, I remember two: *may the sweetness of molasses linger in your mouth* (may not very appealing to diabetics, but in cultures where molasses is used instead of sugar, the greeting makes sense); the second greetings I remember is, *May the cool warmth of Bonn Fire remain with you forever* (not sure how *cool* and *warmth* go together, and how Bonn got mixed up in the greeting!)

In east Malaysia, the twin provinces of Sabah and Sarawak celebrate the rice harvest in late May and early June. Communities work together in their rice fields, gathering the stalks by hand, using a special knife whose carved handle is said to appease the rice spirit. According to their beliefs, the spirit of the paddy plant is revered as the creator, the source of all life and all existence. The rice spirit is, therefore, revered in the rice plant, the rice grain and the cooked rice, all very important to a nation which believes, *without rice, there is no life.*

Like all harvest festivals the world over, merry-making is incomplete without consuming copious quantities of some form of fermented and distilled grain, the peoples of Sabah and Sarawak serve home-made rice wine, along with traditionally prepared chicken porridge, eggs and meat, served without any green vegetables which is a sign of disrespect to the guests - my kind of country!

Across the world, harvest and religion go together, and this creates the problem of syncretism, the amalgamation of religion and culture, mixed in for good measure, with intellectual thought, especially if the intellectuals have some kind of local roots.

Jesus comes addresses this kind of syncretism. As Jesus got deeper into the purpose of His mission on earth, he encountered increasing opposition from the leaders of a very well-established religion with religious practices. The problem was, the Law was intended to serve God's people, not for people to serve the Law; the law was intended to protect people and provide guidelines how they could live and enjoy life and **not** fall into the trap we talked about last Sunday, for which Jesus taught us to pray, ***do not allow us to be led into temptation by following laws which pervert your Truth, and keep us away from the evil one whose only intention is to do just that.***

One Sabbath day, when the grain harvest was ripe, Jesus and his disciples, walking from one place to another, passed through a grain field, ready to be harvested. His disciples were hungry and began to pick and eat some heads of grain. When the Pharisees (who were always following Jesus to catch Him out) saw this, they said to Him, "***See, your disciples are doing what is not lawful to do, on the Sabbath.***" The Pharisees where accusing Jesus of not teaching His disciples, that plucking wheat-grain off the stalk and eating it, was the same as harvesting, and harvesting is work, which the law said, people should not do on a Sabbath, because it is a day of rest!

I wonder why, having accused them of the work of harvesting, the Pharisees did not go further and ***insist*** they start the harvest celebrations with all its merry-making, food and drink! Having caused them of "harvesting", they might as well start the celebration!

There is nothing wrong with merry-making, and food and drink, and music and dance, but this is where Syncretism begins to create havoc in our relationship with God.

Instead of worshipping Creator, Life-Giving and Life-Supporting, Almighty God with thankful hearts and minds, expressing to Him, our gratefulness

for the abundance of the harvest, our hearts and minds are distracted to thank **the earth** for its abundance, to worship the rice god, the wheat god, the kitchen god in Hongkong, and other such gods, that **these gods** have the power to bless us and should **not** stop blessing us with the harvest, which provides our daily need.

As we begin to examine Jesus' prayers, and learn from His example, the first thing we discover is the centrality of prayer in His life, a commitment to prayer with God, to keep His focus on God, and not get distracted. Jesus often went away from the hustle and bustle of life, either to a mountain top, or to a lonely place to pray, where He could focus His heart, mind and soul on the person of God.

At the start of His ministry, Luke says, **Jesus often withdrew to deserted places and prayed.**¹ Jesus placed great value on His time alone with God; after all, He did leave the comfort of His Father's house, and His relationship as one with the Father. We know the feeling of loneliness when we are separated from a person (or people) we love, be they family, friends, a spouse or partner; Jesus told His disciples, **My Father and I are one**², describing the perfect, abiding, intimate relationship with His Father, one in mind and one in spirit, one in plan and one in motive.

If **we** experience loneliness when separated from the one we love, imagine the loneliness Jesus experienced when separated from His Father.

So it would be quite natural for Jesus to find secluded places, away from people, to fellowship, to spend time with His Father and converse with Him. And what better time, Mark says, **Very early in the morning, while it**

¹ Luke 5:16

² John 10:30

was still dark, He got up, went out, and made his way to a deserted place; and there He was praying.³

We all need to find a place, where we can be alone with God, a place without distractions, where we can focus on our relationship with Our Father in Heaven, where we can say to Him, ***May your Holy Name be honoured at all times, by all people in all places; May your kingdom on earth come sooner rather than later, and let Your Kingdom on earth, be exactly as it is in heaven, a place where we can be still and know You are God!***

At one time, I travelled with a colleague, who had a habit of kneeling beside his bed to pray, morning and night. He explained, when they were first married, he and his wife prayed sitting up in bed and found they often fell asleep; kneeling by their bedside kept them awake and focused.

The geography, the place of prayer is very important, a place without distractions, where we can focus uninterrupted on our relationship with Our Father in Heaven.

Uninterrupted focus is necessary if we want to hear what God has to say, before we tell Him what we think He should hear.

Following the incident with the Pharisees on the matter of the disciples ***harvesting*** grain while walking through a field, ***Jesus went out to the mountain to pray, and all night He continued in prayer to God. When day came He called His disciples and chose from them, twelve whom He named apostles....***⁴

Before taking the significant step of selecting twelve from among all the disciples, and anointing them to be apostles, Jesus spent the entire night in prayer, conversing with God, to make sure He was doing right by the

³ Mark 1:35

⁴ Luke 6:12

Father. ***Of all the people I have called to follow me, of all the people who of their own will are following me, whom have YOU planned, My Father, to carry the message of redemption and salvation to the peoples of this world?*** The supreme authority of God is established in our relationship with Him, as we spend time alone with Him, a place without distractions.

In a world of fake news, conflicting ideas and confused values, where Truth is relative, and opinion is presented as fact, we need to cultivate the habit of going to a place to be alone with God, to know Him more and worship Him, to hear His plans and actions, and let Him guide us to do what is right by Him.

Eight little words, are a powerful protection from being misguided and misled into wrong ideas, thoughts, actions and behaviour: ***"Be still, and know that I am GOD."***

Eight little words hold the secret for a victorious life, the secret for keeping our priorities in line, the secret for a balanced life, the secret for a life of peace and contentment, the secret for a life that blesses others and brings glory to God.

Eight little words, ***"Be still, and know that I am GOD"***, remind us, the bounty of the harvest, the abundance from the fields and orchards and gardens and rivers, lakes and the sea, all come from the hand of God.

God who created the earth and all that lives on it and in it, who gave us all plant and animal life said, ***Every moving thing that lives, shall be food for you. As I gave you the green plants, I give you everything.***⁵

God who gave us everything to eat has also said, ***As long as the earth remains, seedtime and harvest, cold and heat, summer and winter, day and night, shall not cease.***⁶

⁵ Genesis 9:3

⁶ Genesis 8:22

No rice gods, no harvest gods, no spirits, none of them are responsible for the harvest.

Let be and be still, and know (recognise and understand) that I am God. I will be exalted among the nations! I will be exalted in the earth!⁷ He is, after all, the Lord of the Harvest.

AMEN.

⁷ Psalm 46:10