**Family Service Talk Harvest 8th October 2023**

**Deuteronomy 8:7-18**

***7For the Lord your God is bringing you into a good land—a land with brooks, streams, and deep springs gushing out into the valleys and hills; 8a land with wheat and barley, vines and fig trees, pomegranates, olive oil and honey; 9a land where bread will not be scarce and you will lack nothing; a land where the rocks are iron and you can dig copper out of the hills.***

***10When you have eaten and are satisfied, praise the Lord your God for the good land he has given you. 11Be careful that you do not forget the Lord your God, failing to observe his commands, his laws and his decrees that I am giving you this day. 12Otherwise, when you eat and are satisfied, when you build fine houses and settle down, 13and when your herds and flocks grow large and your silver and gold increase and all you have is multiplied, 14then your heart will become proud and you will forget the Lord your God, who brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery. 15He led you through the vast and dreadful wilderness, that thirsty and waterless land, with its venomous snakes and scorpions. He brought you water out of hard rock. 16He gave you manna to eat in the wilderness, something your ancestors had never known, to humble and test you so that in the end it might go well with you. 17You may say to yourself, “My power and the strength of my hands have produced this wealth for me.” 18But remember the Lord your God, for it is he who gives you the ability to produce wealth, and so confirms his covenant, which he swore to your ancestors, as it is today.***

As you can see, the grandchildren and I have been conker collecting. A joyful occupation with little people – less so as a parent when you find bags full of mouldy decaying conkers months later when spring cleaning under beds! Children must be like squirrels who apparently collect conkers and then bury them away somewhere rather than eating them. Often, they are only discovered when much later little sapling horse chestnut trees appear! Thankfully, the caches under our children’s beds never got to that stage! Conkers are, of course, poisonous for us to eat and I gather to most animals except deer and wild boar and, in small quantities, squirrels!

What conkers do bring us is the undoubted feeling of autumn having arrived – whatever the weather is telling us one way or another! And there have been so many other clear signs of autumn over the last few weeks ….. the blackberries have been abundant this year but are finally coming to an end; the leaves are usually starting to go brown and fall into great piles that are perfect for rustling through (although this year it is only the diseased horse chestnut trees that are doing that yet); and, of course, the fields of wheat, oats and barley were harvested weeks ago and are now, in some cases ploughed and ready to reseed for next year’s crop. In Kent this week (the garden of England) we saw orchards full of ripe plums and certainly the apples are ready to pick for blackberry and apple crumble! And in the maize fields the plants are way over head high and looking ready for harvest.

So, it is right at this time to think of all the things that our wonderful farmers grow and over the last couple of months have been harvesting. The uncertain weather in July and August did not make for an easy harvest this year but all over the country there is evidence of it having happened, And, of course, the fruits of the harvest have appeared in our shops and markets where we can buy locally grown produce, fresh from the fields and orchards. The harvest is definitely being gathered in!

And as we cook, eat and enjoy all this wonderful harvest, it is so important that we remember to give thanks for all the never-ending hard work of the farmers who have enabled this moment. And, in gratitude, to thank them for the hours of ploughing and drilling and spraying and so much more that ensures the crop has the bast chance of growing well and providing food for us to eat. Our Harvest Festival is definitely a moment to do just that … *distribute chocs to farming families.*

**But,** as our reading made clear, we must do more than that …

The words Nancy read were from the book of Deuteronomy in the Old Testament. Moses was speaking to the people of Israel, preparing them to enter the land that God had promised to give themand he started with a mouth-watering description of how wonderful that land would be – rivers, wheat, honey, pomegranates …. that will produce a great harvest! Now Moses had led the people out of Egypt and then for 40+ years as they wandered in the desert as a result of their disobedience to God. And Moses knew how easily and often they had moved away from trust in, and obedience to, God and he wanted to remind them of the covenant, or promise, God had made to them.

Hundreds of years earlier, God had promised Abraham that, if he went to the land God showed him, God would **bless** him and **make** him into a great nation and **bless all people** through him. God kept repeating this promise and reassuring Abraham that if he stayed obedient to God, then all the blessings and more would be for him and generations to come. In fact, God would be with them and bless them for ever. What a promise!

Even after Abraham had died, God met with and reassured his descendants, Isaac and Jacob that the promises would be kept. And, as time went by, that is what happened, the tribe of Israel prospered and grew and even were kept safe in Egypt when famine struck. Over time however, the Egyptians decided there were too many of them and made them into slaves…. A situation that made the people of Israel wonder what had happened to God’s promise of a land of blessing. Where was God in all this?

But God hadn’t forgotten them and he met with Moses (a descendant of Abraham) in a burning bush and told him the time had come to rescue his people and take them to the promised land – a land that would be flowing with milk and honey.

 As you may know, it took a bit of persuasion by God before Moses was prepared to be a part of God’s plan for the great rescue from Egypt but after various miraculous acts and 10 miraculous plagues, the exodus happened. The Israelites escaped from Egypt by the skin of their teeth due to more miraculous intervention by God and were finally free from slavery and back on the road towards the promised land. On the way, God gave Moses the commandments that the people must obey (the 10 Commandments) – the rules they needed to keep to live in a Godly and good way. But sadly, the Israelites repeatedly disobeyed God’s commandments and as a result had to wander in the desert for 40 more years until all those who had escaped from Egypt had died.

In our reading, the descendants of those who had died stood on the edge of the promised land waiting to go in and experience all the blessings that God had promised over and over to their ancestors. Despite their continued disobedience, God had kept his promises, had been with them and had brought them to the promised land. And at this point Moses, having described the land to them, reminded them of all that God had done for them while they travelled in the wilderness and crucially that they should not forget the Lord their God ….. ~ they should praise him for all the blessings he had given them ~ they should obey his commandments ~ they should acknowledge that their strength came from God (they couldn’t do it on their own!) In other words, God had kept his promise to his people and they must respond in praise, obedience and gratitude.

Now you might ask what this Old Testament book, whose name we can barely pronounce let alone spell, has got to do with us at Stowe at our Harvest Festival in 2023. However, I suspect that, as you listened to the speech by Moses to the people of Israel, there was a sense of, ‘oh dear, Moses could be speaking to us today’ but with slightly different details ….

…. All the produce and goods around us are a reminder of the wonderful land that God has placed each one of us in – have we thanked him enough?

…. Looking back over our lives, each one of us can think of the ways God has been there with us in the tough times and blessed us in amazing ways – have we remembered this enough?

…. Also, there may be many times when we have forgotten God or turned away from him thinking that we could do it ourselves without him. Certainly, there will have been times when we broke his commandments – were we sorry enough?

And yet despite this, more than 3 thousand years on, God has continued to keep all his promises. And indeed, we know that all the promises came together in the most amazing gift of Jesus – the **blessing to all people** promised to Abraham. Jesus, who came to die to take the punishment for all our disobedience so that we can forever be with God in the eternal promised land which will be filled with the light of Christ where there is no mourning or pain and nothing impure can exist. This is the blessing that God promises to each and every one of us who is sorry for their disobedience and believes and trusts in Jesus.

And so, as we meet here for our Harvest Festival service, are we ready to listen to Moses as he says to us today…. ~ do not forget the Lord your God ~ obey God’s commands ~ praise and thank God for **all** the blessings he has given us … including the wonderful abundance that is our harvest this year. Amen