



ST STEPHEN'S ANGLICAN CHURCH

11856 MAYS CHAPEL RD., TIMONIUM, MD 21093

Harvest Festival, Sunday Trinity XV, September 24th, 2017

**✠ In The Name of The Father and of The Son
and of The Holy Ghost. AMEN ✠**

Steam power in the 19th century transformed an agrarian economy that had existed largely unchanged since the Middle Ages into the modern industrial society.

But despite the sweeping nature of the changes steam power wrought, the vast majority of Americans were acutely aware of the role agriculture played in the maintenance of their standard of living. And because of this they were no less acutely aware of God's vital role in providing their daily bread.

But the technological advances that have taken place over the past 100 years have far outpaced those of the previous century. Innovations such as electric power, the internal combustion engine, nuclear fission, computers and the like have combined to create an industrial and commercial infrastructure way beyond the imaginings of earlier generations.

Men who fought Indians in the 19th Century lived to fly in passenger jets. People who had been driven to school by horse and buggy drove their own kids to school in automobiles. Bookkeepers who had painstakingly kept corporate accounts in fat ledgers saw themselves replaced by mainframe computers, while the mainframe programmers in a scant two decades later were edged aside by kids with personal computers.

Not unsurprisingly perhaps, each new advance, each new invention, each new industrial process has taken us further from the land. If, for instance, in springtime at the turn of the 18th & 19th centuries, you paid a weekday call on Bishop Samuel Seabury, America's first Anglican bishop, chances are you would have found him plowing his glebe land. That's how clergy earned their stipends in those days – on parish land.

But back then almost everybody in America, except the residents of a few large cities, relied for at least part of their living on what they could grow.

It wasn't until the mid-20th century that the industrial sector replaced agriculture as the nation's primary employer. Yet, even as the industrial sector took over, substantial numbers of families particularly in rural areas still supplemented their budgets by growing their own vegetables and even raising their own chickens, geese, ducks and livestock.

One September morning many years ago, when I was a boy, a friendly neighbor – an elderly lady whose husband worked for my grandfather – asked me if I would like to see her Christmas dinner. I was utterly beguiled by the notion of gazing on table laid out for Christmas dinner more than two months ahead of time.

I was even more surprised when she led me to a shed in the back yard. “What a strange place to have Christmas dinner,” I thought. But all became clear when she threw open the door and there, in a hutch, stood a big white rabbit with pink eyes.

It wasn’t just country folk who raised their own poultry and grew their own vegetables. City people were just as eager to supplement their budgets with home grown produce and eggs from their own chickens. Those that didn’t have back yards rented patches of publicly owned land for vegetable gardens.

A prime example of this was a friend’s father – a rarified intellectual and a Professor of Philosophy at Humboldt University in Berlin. He was so highly regarded and so well liked, he had survived the war despite being a known anti-Nazi, protected by his friends on the faculty.

The 1945/46 was a desperate time for the people of Berlin, but my friend’s father was determined the family should have a merry Christmas. To this end, he acquired a gosling – that’s a baby goose – which the reared on the balcony of the family’s bomb damaged apartment.

Against all odds, the beast actually thrived and by Christmas she had grown into a bird that promised fine eating. It occurred to the professor, however, that he had no idea how to kill the creature. So he took the matter up with the university’s science faculty.

They advised him the most humane way to dispatch the bird would be to chloroform it and sent him off home with a small bottle stuff. The chloroform was duly administered to the unsuspecting creature. Its feathers were plucked and it was set on a platter ready to be roasted next day.

Early the following morning, the whole family was awakened by a hideous honking and hollering. Upon investigation, they found the bird had awakened, outraged at its

nudity and protesting the affront to its dignity in the loudest possible tones.

My friend told me the family sheepishly admitted they were all much relieved. They’d grown attached to the bird and the notion of eating it made them all feel like cannibals. My friend’s mother unpicked an old sweater to knit the creature a union suit to keep it warm until its feather grew back. And his father went out to buy a can of Spam on the black market for their Christmas dinner. As for the goose, it lived on as a much-loved pet for many years.

“You know,” said my friend, “Despite the Spam, it was the best Christmas ever.”

If the intellectuals of 60 or 70 years ago were ignorant of the basics of agricultural life, today’s industrial technology and factory farming are moving us further and further from the source of our food supply.

And in moving us further from the farmer, they are also moving us further from God. Or at least, they are moving us further and further from our appreciation of God’s vital role in providing our daily bread.

Fifty years ago the Harvest Festival was one of the most important of all the church festivals. Indeed, it occupied an even more important place in many people’s hearts than Christmas or Easter because a bountiful harvest made the difference between a bountiful Christmas and Easter and a hard winter.

Today we live in an age of abundance – an age that regards obesity as a health problem rather than, as in the past, a sign of good nutrition. This abundance tempts even the most pious of us to write off the Harvest Festival as a quaint holdover from a bygone era. But no matter how little we’re aware of it, we are no less dependent on God’s open-handed bounty than we were centuries – or millennia – ago. It’s time to give credit where credit is due. *AMEN*