

Harvest time has, for many years now, puzzled me: the enduring popularity of giving thanks that we have been delivered from starvation according to the effort of our toil, having been spared the vagaries of weather and natural or man-made disaster. But that is not a serious consideration for the great majority of us here (unlike a significant part of the world's population). So what exactly are we celebrating?

I think there is a large element of giving thanks that we have inherited a rich legacy in our land. Irrespective of the exceptions, there has never been a time of greater safety, common wealth, assistance for the needy and recovery from illness. And who has given us that legacy?

Largely, it was the wealth-generating aristocracy and merchants from medieval times to British Empire. (Doubtless some of you will want to argue that point, but just bear with it for now.) Their scheming, ambition, ruthlessness, profiteering - sometimes, sheer genius - hardly seems commensurate with the good that has come out of it. However, they, like the key social reformers who reacted to it, all had a very clear understanding of life and death - and the inescapable teachings of Jesus, such as when he told a righteous rich man, "You lack one thing; go, sell what you own, and give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then come, follow me."

Unfortunately, they also seemed to kid themselves that they could pay their way into heaven by building churches - and often as big as they could! And we have been left that legacy, too. Only now it costs the Church in the Burnhams over £43,000 a year to fund the operation here - and that's before we even start to maintain our church buildings, let alone bring them up to date.

There's another major problem: the rich no longer seek to buy their way into heaven! Theology has moved on, of course, but so has the distribution of wealth; it has spread out among the people. (Yes it has - I know there are some obscenely rich people in this country but we masses now have the balance of wealth.) So, if we really want to give thanks to God for our inheritance, then it really should be all of us who pay for it - not just the current few.

Of course, the early Church didn't need special buildings; you may think that we don't, either. Well, without funding now, in twenty years' time you won't have them...

Yes, our taxes maintain the harvest of our social history - and that's good. Our church buildings, though: do you really want them? This harvest, why not start a regular contribution? Talk to one of the churchwardens, who will help you with the arrangements. Please.