

Sermon for Harvest Thanksgiving (04/10/2026)

The upheavals and revolutions which brought to an end East European Communism now seem a long time ago; and as a result, the daily realities of living under that system may be starting to fade from our collective memory. But I recall, shortly before those events unfolded, a visit to this country by some Romanian exchange students. As part of their experience of the British way of life, they visited a local supermarket .

Half-way through, one girl started screaming uncontrollably. All efforts to calm her down failed, and she was swiftly removed by the group's Romanian minders.

But not before it became clear what had so distressed her. She'd suddenly realised that, all her life, she'd been lied to. Government, Party officials, the media, her teachers, had all constantly assured her that it was only thanks to the benevolent oversight of the Party that she or her mother or siblings could hope, after much queuing each day, to acquire maybe a loaf of bread and some slightly sad-looking vegetables.

Even her own parents, who must have been old enough to

know the truth, had presumably participated in the lie. No doubt partly from fear, but also, perhaps, because they saw little point in telling their daughter the truth and so stoking resentment against a system from which there was no hope of improvement and which would ruthlessly crush any signs of dissent. Far better that she should believe the propaganda: that the fact that they (usually) had at least something to put on the table was the best that life had to offer. And it was all thanks to the wise actions of their rulers – unlike in the capitalist West, where it was only the people with shiny top hats, monocles and big cigars who ate well, while the ordinary workers starved.

And then she came to Britain and saw the most everyday types of people (not a top hat or monocle in sight) wandering around a huge building stuffed from floor to ceiling with every imaginable kind of food, acquiring it with no difficulty at all, and going home laden with the kinds of goods that only the élite Party *nomenklatura* could get in her own country. And she'd realised that everyone, from her nearest and dearest to the highest in the land, had systematically lied to her for fifteen years.

I've often thought of that girl since. What became of her after the 1989 revolution? Did her experience in Britain make her an ardent supporter of the democratic movements, or did it disillusion her about politics in all its forms? And did the end of Communism bring about the kind of improvements to her life that she might have hoped for? I suppose I'll never know.

But why has my mind turned to this particular incident at the time of Harvest Thanksgiving? For two reasons, I think.

First, it reminds us that this occasion is, specifically, a *thanksgiving*, rather than just a general celebration. I imagine most of us here are, like me, life-long urban or suburban dwellers, with little understanding of the processes by which our food is produced, and the vagaries and uncertainties of those processes. Most of us, most years, probably couldn't even say what the harvest has been like – this year may be different, as we'll all be aware that the exceptionally hot and dry summer has had a negative effect on food production – though all we're likely to do about it is complain about the resulting price rises. In spite of the best endeavours of Clarkson's Farm, we're likely to remain largely in ignorance of how farming

communities at home and abroad actually work.

The fact that so many of us are isolated from awareness of the production process is probably a bad thing in itself.

But it's a sign that we live in a society where, actually, by and large, we don't need to worry on a day-to-day basis about these things. For all that we're supposedly in the midst of a never-ending cost-of-living crisis, our world is one of unprecedented wealth when it comes to the kinds of things which people down the ages have been most anxious about: food, clothing, shelter, the irreducible essentials of human life. And however blasé that may have made us about other things – relational, moral, spiritual – which are also essential to being fully human, it's surely in itself a matter for thanksgiving.

And the second point from the story of the Romanian girl is that it reminds us of the essential human element in the harvest. Harvest Thanksgiving isn't best understood as simply a celebration of God's gifts to us – as if they just came to us out of the blue. We're deeply involved in the process. And unless people are prepared to set aside their own short-term advantage and blinkered perspective, and collaborate with other people of different occupations,

different social positions, different nationalities, they won't reach a position where there's a harvest to celebrate at all. The tragic irony of the Communist system was that, far from encouraging a high degree of social co-operation, it produced a society in which there was no incentive to bother about anyone other than yourself and your family.

And in this way, Harvest Thanksgiving teaches us a lesson about all human enterprise. To be fruitful in any field, we have to learn that we're all part of one another, and we all have responsibilities one to another. Harvest is properly a celebration of our ability to work together with each other and with God's created order for the good of all. And above all, it's a time to set aside the lies and cynicism by which we tacitly acquiesce in an imperfect world – and instead, in openness and truth, to work for that vision of the Kingdom which is the true goal of all our endeavour.