**Wassailing and Apple Tree Blessing**

We aren’t sure how far the practice of Wassailing goes back but the word seems likely to be derived from a Saxon greeting Waes Hael . good health. This phrase is Saxon but post Norman in etymology which may suggest an early medieval origin, but some think it goes back much further. Most of our ‘traditional’ folk customs are to do with seasons in the agricultural year and came into recent expression within the context of the Christian faith. We ask for blessing on crops and livestock from God who is the source of all life and we give thanks to God for harvest and food for the same reason. Most of our wassailing customs belong to the 18th Century when there were two separate Wassail traditions, both associated with the Christmas season.

One of these was house visiting for food and drink and this lies behind the carol ‘we wish you a merry Christmas’. This is very similar to harvest customs associated with the end of the harvest at All Hallows when the apple harvest had finished, and the poor went from house to house seeking food to store for winter. The other comes from Cider producing areas where Wassailing happens traditionally on 12th Night the 5th of January or on Old Twelfth Night, the 17th of January which was the date prior to the introduction of the Gregorian Calendar in Britain in the 16th Century. In a traditional Wassailing ceremony, the apple trees were decorated with ribbons representing prayers and pieces of toast representing the harvest before the Wassail drink was poured at its roots and God’s blessing was invited for the crops.

The Wassail drink was often a mulled drink of Cider or Ale or a mixture of the two, and also sometimes cream and eggs making a hot posset and often topped up with port or sherry, designed to be warming in winter. But as it was apple trees that were traditionally blessed cider or apple juice is also often used. In this way some of the fruit of the trees was ‘given back’ as a sign of God’s harvest blessing.

**A Wassailing prayer**

God of the seasons, of seed sowing and harvest reaping

Of blossom and bud and fruit and leaf fall,

We thank you for the gifts of creation and ask you to bless them in the year to come.

We thank you for the gift of these trees, fruit to eat and drink to share.

Bless these trees and bless those who tend them and bless all in our world in need of food and drink.

(as the trees are blessed by pouring a little drink at their roots a song like ‘Jesus Christ the Apple Tree’ or other music could be sung. If ribbons and or toast are used to decorate the trees people can be invited offer prayers for the planet or those in need of food either silently or out loud as they are hung on the tree. Toast can eb left to feed the birds but ribbons need removing unless quickly biodegradeable)