

## Year A Harvest Festival

Deut 26: 1-11

2 Corinthians 9:6-15

Luke 17:11-19

May the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable to you, O LORD, my rock and my redeemer.

We don't often get lectionary readings from the book of Deuteronomy, the fifth and last book in the Torah, or Pentateuch. Deuteronomy means 'second law' and has been understood from a Christian perspective to be a book that, amongst other things, sets out a revision of the laws given in Leviticus. It also contains history and the final chapters of the book relate the death of Moses, and leads into the Book of Joshua, the leader appointed by God to lead the Israelites across the Jordan in to the promised land.

And this is why in our reading from Chapter 26 today, we read instructions for how those who farm the land will treat it, how they will give thanks for the fertility of the land by offering their 'first fruits of the earth' to God in the temple, and then shall celebrate the earth's fertility – a land flowing with milk and honey. A land flowing with milk and honey is such a wonderfully poetic metaphor that we can all conjure up a picture of what it might actually mean. It is a phrase used time and again in Exodus, Leviticus and Numbers to describe the Promised Land. In verse ten we read 'So now I bring the first of the fruit of the ground that you, O LORD, have given me.'

This verse is important for at least two reasons. First, it is part of the Jewish story that this parcel of land was given to them by God, from which much of the present day tensions in Israel/Palestine arise, and secondly, that the land was given from the LORD, and if misused could just as easily be taken away.

When we look at the world today, I hope we can all agree that we have abused the land 'given to us'. It may well be that our continued abuse of the land will result in it being taken away from us and humankind will die out; but in the process of our decimating the planet, poisoning the air and soil, we shall also cause many other aspects of creation to be swept away. At one level, if we

make the earth unproductive and unsuitable for human habitation we only have ourselves to blame. But, and it is a big but, in the process of greed, self-interest and living in the short-term, with no regard to our children's children's future, we destroy the planet for most of the rest of God's creation.

Over the last four sermons, I have focussed on God's creation and the climate emergency. Global warming is a fact. 250 years of converting fossil fuels into heat energy with CO<sup>2</sup> as an inconvenient by-product, and increasing methane in the atmosphere by 250%, has led to a gradual warming of the atmosphere. Humankind has changed the composition of the upper atmosphere such that it now resembles a blanket that lets in the sun's rays but lets far less of the heat escape into space than used to be the case.

So, as we celebrate the fruits of the land, the harvest being safely gathered in across Scotland, the cereal crops that will become flour, or will be converted to alcohol for a splendid whisky, the pulling up of the tatties, what has all this to do with us? And how is it relevant for a Harvest Festival service?

It is nearly five years since the destructive floods along the River Dee, Ballater under water, the A92 washed away etc. Floods don't just happen in far away places any more. They happen on our very own doorstep. Our neighbour is certainly a peasant farmer in Bangladesh, a person with a paddy field full of rice in Nepal, but it is hard for some of us to relate to them, to be motivated to change our behaviours based on monsoon rains far away. Even the pictures of places familiar to us being inundated with water seldom impact on us. We do not easily empathise from a comfortable chair in a warm house, wearing our t-shirt and joggers. And what can little old me do? How will my changing a lightbulb, walking to the shops rather than driving a short distance by car, by turning down my central heating one degree and putting on a jumper, by insulating my loft space or putting a draught excluder on a door, by choosing vegetables in season grown in the UK, not grown in a heated greenhouse in Holland, do to impact on the environment?

Well, let us turn it around the other way, what if you don't change? How can you ask others to change? How can you expect the world to become a better place, where the climate is more predictable and less damaging for all of creation? Where your children's children won't be suffering flood, drought,

harsh extreme winters (because global warming doesn't mean we won't get cold winters, in fact we may halt the gulf stream and have very cold winters in the UK, just remember the winter of 2010...).

If we each took one small action to reduce our carbon footprint then it does start to have an impact. And if that one small step wasn't too difficult to make, and after two months it becomes a habit, we are more likely to be motivated to take another small step. We can change, one small step at a time, but we do have to start taking those steps otherwise we may have no choice and we will be forced to change – and rapidly.

And at Harvest Festival we celebrate the safe gathering in of the crops and food that will sustain us through until the next growing season provides us with food. Harvest Festival is a timely reminder of humankind's deep connections with the earth, with the productive soil of God's creation, a creation we are charged to be stewards of and maintain. It reminds us that healthy soil is required to grow healthy, bountiful crops. If the climate changes too much we will not be able to grow nutritious food. Our Harvest Festival isn't a celebration in isolation; it is a celebration that includes thanksgiving to God, for the bountiful nature of the planet, and for God's provision for us.

I want to finish on a look at the gospel reading – when I read it I couldn't initially understand why this gospel story is an allocated reading for a harvest festival. What has the healing of lepers got to do with harvest?

The most obvious is that this gospel passage reminds us that we are to thank God for God's provision to us, the fertility of the earth and the produce of honest labour. And this is important. We must appreciate what we have, we must not take it for granted. Anything taken for granted soon loses value and we do become careless with it.

But, I think there is a second lesson for us in this short reading. It is the simple act of faith and healing; a reminder that despite being outcasts the lepers had faith and asked for healing. And the one who turned back to praise God and give thanks? He was a Samaritan, someone the Jews thought inferior and excluded from God's grace. The others were Jews who we should reasonably expect would worship and give thanks to God for their healing, but no, they just went on their way back home.

As we reflect on our behaviours that harm the health of our planet, we can ask for healing; healing that takes us closer to God's acts of creation, healing that helps us see that creation anew, its wonders and beauty in a simple blade of grass as much as in the grandeur of a mountain, healing that spurs us on to take some small steps to change our individual impact on the environment.

So, let us celebrate a successful harvest in our local area giving thanks to God for the bounty of his creation here. And let us individually commit to taking one small action to reducing the harm we cause to God's creation, so that our neighbours, across the world can also gather in their harvest in due season, rather than suffer from drought or flood and see their harvest fail.

I invite you today, on St Francis' Day, to reflect on the creationtide sermon series, and to commit to changing one aspect of your life that will improve the environment; taking one small step, committing to taking one small step on your own personal journey to walking more lightly through God's wonderful creation.