

Sermon on Sunday 9 October 2022

by Geoff Oates, Lay Reader

(Reading: Deuteronomy 26. 1-11)

A ramble through the theological autumn leaves of Deuteronomy 26.

My Father was a wandering Aramaean...

In our reading from Deuteronomy, we discover one of the most ancient liturgies of the Hebrew world. It describes how all the people are to bring a basket of the produce of their fields to a place of communal worship, hand it to the Priest who in turn will place it before God's altar.

As he does so, each worshipper recites a formal acknowledgement of God's goodness: 'My Father was a wandering Aramaean...' The reference is probably to their ancestor Jacob, but it harks back also to his grandfather Abraham; men who had no home, no land of their own, but wandered with their flocks and tents through lands that are now Iraq, Syria and Jordan, from river to river and spring to spring.

The worshipper recalls how their descendants fell upon evil times and were enslaved in Egypt, but were led by their God to a promised land – a homeland, with the emphasis on Land. Canaan was a fertile place where wheat and barley, grapes and olives grew bountifully, where they could settle and work the land.

And through this liturgy, this form of commemorative worship, God reminds his people that this land is his gift to them. It is far more than thanksgiving for this year's crops.

In many Old Testament stories, we often see a tension between the early pastoral lifestyle of the patriarchs and the later settled, agrarian ways of the Kingdoms of Judah and Israel. The ancient fable of Cain and Abel may have its roots in the conflict between the shepherd and the ploughman – an older, nomadic way of life and a newer one of farms and vineyards.

Perhaps it is indeed easier for a shepherd to feel trust and gratitude for a God who provides green pastures and still waters, whilst a farmer might begin to feel that the bounty of the earth was the produce of HIS land and HIS hard work.

I'm reminded of John Betjeman's poem, 'Harvest Hymn' – not the one about the Church Mouse, but a gentle parody of 'We plough the fields and scatter' with the Chorus:

'Concrete sheds around us, and Rovers in the yard, the TV lounge and new deep freeze are ours from working hard'.

The old liturgy gently reminds us that no matter how hard we may have laboured, we still owe an immeasurable debt to our maker. My father was a wandering Aramaean... his God has brought us to this land of milk and honey.

The liturgy demands that we bring a share of the first portion of the harvest to God, the 'First Fruits'. This is significant. This is not a celebration of Harvest Home, the end of the harvest. The gifts are offered at the beginning of the harvest. As well as the first of the grain and fruit harvests, the Old Testament commandments required that the first-born lamb or calf of every ewe or cow is offered to the Lord.

It's quite a challenge. What if a late storm ruins the last few acres of the wheatfield, or the grapes turn out to be mildewed?

Isn't it better to wait until all the corn is gathered in, until all the fruit is picked, until all the winter's lambs have made it safely through the first risky weeks, and then see if there's enough left over to offer to God?

The giving of the First Fruits is a sign of gratitude to God, but it is also a sign of faith. The people are challenged to trust that their God will continue to show his generosity, and that the later stages of the harvest will be as bountiful as the first.

In our current times of anxiety, when throughout the world our basic needs for food, fuel and shelter are threatened by war and drought, and a measure of that distress reaches even to our own communities, we are challenged to sustain both our gratitude, and our faith.

And what does Jesus have to tell us in these anxious times? 'Do not worry about your life, what you will eat; or about your body, what you will wear. For life is more than food, and the body more than clothes... God knows that you need these things'... and our God has given us a bountiful world. Give the First Fruits of all we have – our produce, our labour, our energy, our creativity, our compassion, our affection - and all that He gives will be more than enough for the needs of His children. He likes blessing us.

My Father was a wandering Aramaean...

In our age there are few who look back at how they came to hold land. Many more of us reflect on how we left the land behind us. My grandfather was a Yorkshire farmer, but 70 years have passed since the farm passed out of the family's hands. This afternoon, as on many autumn Sunday afternoons each year over the past 20 years, I will visit our old friend Fiona, with a fellowship of

old and new friends, of all ages and often of many nations, to harvest her apple orchards.

We will enjoy the privilege of gathering the fruits of God's creation with our own hands, will enjoy the privilege of labouring together and the challenge of reaching or climbing into high boughs. Most of the harvest ends up as apple juice, a small portion I will take home and stew, and through the darker nights and shorter days my senses will give me constant reminders of harvest times. And I will remember that all this is the gift of my God, who has blessed me with a home in a fertile land.

Amen

