

# **Sermon on Sunday 10 October 2021 (online) by Geoff Oates, Lay Reader**

## **Harvest**

There's an old sermon anecdote you may have heard before. It goes like this.

At the edge of a pretty village green, a patch of land lay untended, overgrown with thorns and weeds. Nobody remembered anymore who the land belonged to, so when an elderly man from the village took it upon himself to tidy up the site and make himself a little allotment, nobody minded – in fact, they were glad to get rid of the eyesore.

When the first flowers were blooming brightly in the new garden the following Spring, the vicar strolled past and called cheerfully, 'You and the Lord have made an excellent job of that.' 'Maybe,' grunted the small-holder, straightening his bent back and looking up, 'but remember what it used to be like, when the Lord had it all to himself!'

This anecdote was used to illustrate the point that when God and man work together, great things can be achieved. And that is a fair point. But as years have gone by, I have learned to see this little story in a new light, as we have begun to understand that uncultivated land, unproductive land, is every bit as vital to the welfare of God's creation as the swaying golden cornfields and fruit-laden orchards that we sing of at harvest time.

Whether it is the vast rainforests of the Congo or the Amazon, or the copses and hedgerows in our own countryside that have escaped the rival claims of mechanised farming and suburban

sprawl, we have begun to understand (or perhaps have learned again) how forests keep our atmosphere in balance, soaking up our carbon emissions; we have seen how much the great variety of our English wildlife has been driven from the farmers' fields, and has to cling on to life in the most unpromising of places, like motorway embankments, disused quarries, and Church graveyards.

Our language has gained a beautiful new word: 'Rewilding'. Deliberately letting pieces of land return to an untended condition.

This is not just about having pretty unspoilt countryside for weekend outings or lonely wildernesses for adventure holidays – it is about the survival of our planet as we know it. We have had to rethink what we understand by 'productivity'. Not everything is more useful just because it has been harnessed to mankind's direct exploitation. Some things are better left the way God made them. Their harvest cannot be brought to Church for harvest festival, but their harvest is priceless.

Of course, there is a spiritual lesson for us here as well. Though we are each called to work with God in shaping our world into His Kingdom, if we believe that God's grace can only express itself in the busy activity of organised religion, we are wrong. God's grace flowers where it will, and bears fruit that we cannot, and do not need to measure, or comprehend, or label as our own.

I remember learning in my history lessons at school about mediaeval farming in England. Perhaps they still teach about the three-field system, where each field was planted in turn with wheat or barley in the first year, with beans or turnips in the second year, and in the third year it was left unplanted – returning to meadowland – to help it recover its fertility for the next cycle. Just like us, the land needs to rest. It cannot be

productive all the time. After decades of overuse, of artificial fertilisers and pesticides, the popularity of organic farming is a sign that we are beginning to remember this.

After all, it's in the Bible. Leviticus 25 v 3-4: 'You shall sow your fields, prune your vineyards and gather your crops for six years. But the seventh year is to be a year of complete rest for the land, a year dedicated to the Lord. Do not sow your fields or prune your vineyards.' Just as God ordains for mankind a day of rest from



work every seventh day – the Sabbath day – God proclaims the seventh years as a year of rest for the land. And it is the year of rest, not the years of productivity, that are specially dedicated to God!

The harvest of rest is acceptable in the sight of God. Think again about how we understand 'productivity'.

The words of Jesus rightly come to mind. 'Come to me, all of you who are weary and heavy laden, and I will give you rest'. Rest that is so much more than enforced passivity, and so much more than a mere pause to catch our breath.

In our Church buildings this week we are remembering, through the creativity of our congregations and our fellow townsfolk, the impact of Covid 19 on our lives. How varied have been our perceptions of this time. For some it has meant isolation, frustration, grief and lost opportunity; for others, the exhaustion of long working hours in stressful environments. Yet others have discovered in these times a slower and gentler pace of life, and have freed themselves from some of the pressure to fill their days with busyness.

We will all take different lessons from these unusual times, but I hope we will all understand that rest is as much a blessing as activity is. A hot-housed life is not truly a sustainable life. There is room in most of our lives for some spiritual rewilding.

Some of you will know that I'm a big fan of the Sabbath. Not the old rules about what you can and can't do. The Sabbath was never meant to be a list of 'Thou shalt nots'. On the seventh day, after God had completed his Creation, He rested. Sometimes I'd like to retranslate that because it all sounds too passive. On the seventh day, God created rest. Rest which should never be mistaken for wasted time, for fruitless time, for unproductive time, but rest which bears a harvest of its own, a harvest that we cannot, and should not measure or comprehend, or label. And our harvest of rest is a very acceptable offering to our God.

Amen