

St Mary's, Dorchester, Sunday 28th September 2025 i.e. Harvest Festival

Deuteronomy 26:1-11

Revelation 14:14-18

John 6:25-35

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Today we're celebrating our Harvest Festival. In many communities, especially rural ones, a church's Harvest Festival is straightforwardly joyful. It's natural to celebrate the gathering in of our produce, the end of another summer on the land. People have been celebrating this sort of thing for as long as people have practised agriculture. We have an example of an ancient harvest festival in our Old Testament reading today: the law about the Festival of First Fruits in the book of Deuteronomy. That festival, and others like it, place the gift of productive land at the heart of the economy.

It's good to celebrate harvest. In recent years the Church of England has encouraged a change in our liturgy that makes Harvest a bit more emotionally complex. The Church has started marking the period from the beginning of September until the beginning of October as "Creationtide". In this time we can express emotions to do with land that go beyond simple celebration. In the current climate thinking about Creation as a whole, and our place within it, naturally leads us into lament and even protest.

So Harvest is becoming more complex. Some will say that inventing a new liturgical season is unnecessary and unjustified. But in making that change the Church is faithfully reflecting a set of ideas that have been linked since ancient times. Not only the joy of harvest, but the lament that comes with land-loss, and the resolve to work more faithfully with the land. There's even a name for that complex collection of ideas: it's called "agrarianism". The word "agrarian" comes from the Latin word for "field"; it applies to all communities that depend on farming for their existence. Agrarians understand how dependent they are on the land. They may have experienced land-loss, either because of warfare, or the spoiling of productive land, or climate change. Agrarians know how risky some behaviour is, and they don't want to take land for granted.

So it was in ancient Israel. The first five books of the Bible describe how after a very long journey Abraham's children finally come into possession of land of their own. Then, as now, the experience isn't straightforwardly happy: they flee slavery in Egypt, and after only a short time they consider

turning back. At another point they are too afraid to enter their own promised land, so it takes them another forty years to get there. Once they do finally take possession, they forget the commandments of the God who brought them in, and so they end up losing it again.

And so on. All of that is predicted to some extent in three chapters at the end of the book of Deuteronomy. We read a bit of one of those chapters a few minutes ago. It sounded very positive – the festival of First Fruits is a lot like our harvest celebration. The next chapter – chapter twenty-seven – is less positive; it contains twelve curses against forbidden actions. The Ten Commandments feature heavily in these curses, so there's a curse against idolatry [27:15] and another against dishonouring one's father and mother [27:16]. But alongside those curses you have another against “anyone who deprives the alien, the orphan, and the widow...” [27:19]. And just as relevant to a Harvest Festival: “Cursed be anyone who moves a neighbour's boundary marker...” [27:17]. There's no indication here that moving a boundary marker is any less serious than breaking the Ten Commandments – the penalty for both is the same.

To a modern Western Christian audience it might seem strange to compare the seriousness of idolatry and moving a boundary marker. I would argue that that's only because we have largely forgotten how dependent we are on land. We've also chosen to compartmentalise our moral life; we imagine that the way we act in one place is disconnected from the way I act in another. But that's a myth: the way I treat the person whose land shares a boundary with mine is connected to the way I treat the resident alien; it's connected to the way I treat my father and my mother; it's connected to the things I worship, or fail to worship. None of these choices sit in isolated compartments in the world; they are woven together in real ways, whether we understand it or not. The biblical writers are more conscious of this than we are, so they have much to teach us.

One lesson that comes up again and again is about faithfulness. Our understanding of how natural systems work, and our how actions affect them, is growing but still inadequate. We are learning about soils, roots, mycelia, bacteria, invertebrates, vertebrates.... We are just about learning why industrial agriculture is so bad for the earth, and we express it in scientific terms – we talk about sustainability, for example. What we call sustainable practice, the biblical writers call covenant faithfulness. In the story of the Manna in the wilderness we learn that taking more than we need is an act of unfaithfulness to God, who gives abundantly to everyone. Moving a neighbour's boundary marker is unfaithful to the God who calls us to love our neighbour. Whether we express it scientifically or theologically, the lesson is remarkably similar: when you are faithful God will make the earth fertile; when you are unfaithful the earth will yield thorns.

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This all might seem a long way from Christianity. And in fairness, Jesus doesn't seem particularly interested in land. But he was all about “the neighbour”, he encouraged us to show love through active service, and as I've said, these things are all connected to each other. If I'm getting my vegetables from Chile and my fruit from South Africa, it just means that I'm increasing the number of possible answers to the question, “Who is my neighbour?” And all of this stuff about agrarianism might also make me ask new questions: “Is the land my neighbour too? And if so, how do I love it?”

There are plenty of agrarian thinkers active today. By and large they don't want us all to abandon our suburban lifestyles and become farmers – that would be chaos. But they do want us unlearn some of the bad habits our economy teaches us.

Agrarians are not generally interested in what's happening “over there” somewhere. It's important to think about what's happening in the world at large, but only a few of us will have the opportunity or the skill to do that well. Agrarians are more interested in the local and the particular – what biblical writers call the *nahala*, or the ancestral inheritance [e.g. 1 Kings 21] – the place where I have been, where I am, where I am going to be. Even if I don't own land, I can still live as though land is important. So what am I doing with the portion of land that I see regularly or walk past every day? Am I interested in it? Do I notice the ways it changes, through the seasons and over time? Do I try to get to know the people who manage it, and learn about them? Interest and affection in a specific piece of land and the people connected to it; that's what love looks like, from an agrarian perspective.

Another way I can show love is by choosing to be an amateur. As I pay more attention to the land around me, hopefully I will care about it more, and become more curious. So I'll end up asking questions that I don't have an answer to. Is the tree at the bottom of my garden healthy? That's a question that I have to ask; the tree doesn't belong to anyone else. I might not know the answer, but a tree surgeon might; and I'm sure they would be delighted if, when I call them around, they have a chance to show off how much they know about trees. I might learn something new; I might learn about them. And the same goes for anyone: local farmers, County Council gardeners; the people who come to rod my drains... Every one of these people has a piece of the picture that I lack; I can love them by admitting how little I know, and trying to know more.

We don't exist in a vacuum. Our life depends on land and on the people who look after it. And so ultimately it depends on the God who gives more than we can ever ask or imagine; to whom be the glory, now and in eternity. Amen.