

Deuteronomy 26: 1-11 Our First Fruits

When was the last time you paused to reflect on the work that you do— on the fruit that results from your labours? We all work in some way, whether it's paid, voluntary or in the home. Perhaps some of us work with teams and projects and there might be a moment when the job is complete and you can stand back to think about what you've achieved together. Others of us might work with our hands - creating, cooking or fixing things, and when we're finished we might look down at what we have done with pride or gratitude. Others of us work with people— caring, nurturing, instructing – and there comes a moment when you can suddenly see the difference you have made to someone's life. Yesterday I was talking to a nursery teacher who said that she's always amazed at how the children in her care develop in the space of one short year. But I suspect for many of us, in our busy world, it may be that we rarely, if ever, pause to reflect on how our work bears fruit.

Harvest time has traditionally been the moment to do just that. In days gone by when most ordinary folk worked on the land, Harvest time was when you stopped work, took stock of all that you had achieved and celebrated. This was the moment of joy when the long months of sowing, tending, watering, pruning and protecting are at last complete.

So in our harvest service today, that's what I'm inviting us to do – to pause and think for a bit about the fruit of our labours. The good we often don't stop to think about, that comes from what you and I do Monday to Saturday in our daily lives when we're away from church, just doing what we do. The work we all do, whether in paid employment or not, which serves God in the circles in which we move – what we have often called our 'frontlines'.

Some of us have already brought forward symbols of the things we do, our work and I hope that just by bringing those object forward and thinking about what they represent, will help us to pause and reflect a bit on the fruit we produce for the kingdom of God day by day.

Our passage from Deuteronomy 26 is all about the Jewish festival of Weeks, also called Firstfruits or Pentecost. Practically, it involves taking the first fruit of whatever you have harvested and placing it before the Priest in Jerusalem as an offering to God. This is joyful occasion, a great celebration for all that God has done. And we have experienced some of that ourselves during this service – symbolically bringing some of the fruits of our work, our lives, before God and celebration his goodness and provision.

But the other thing about the Festival of First Fruits is that it encourages us always to remember the story of our faith. In the Hebrew tradition, each worshipper recites what at first sight seems to be really odd prayer:

'A wandering Aramean was my ancestor; he went down into Egypt and lived there as an alien, few in number, and there he became a great nation, mighty and populous. When the Egyptians treated us harshly and afflicted us, by imposing hard labour on us, we cried to the Lord, the God of our ancestors; the Lord heard our voice and saw our affliction, our toil, and our oppression. The Lord brought us out of Egypt with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm, with a terrifying display of power, and with signs and wonders; and he brought us into this place and gave us this land, a land flowing with milk and honey. So now I bring the first of the fruit of the ground that you, O Lord, have given me.'

What on earth is going on here? Simply that the Israelites are being asked to remember their story. Their ancestor was Jacob, also called Israel – the wandering, homeless Aramean. God provided for Jacob and his offspring in Egypt's, but then after a while they began to be persecuted. This story tells of God's saving work in bringing them out of Egypt, through The wilderness, and into a land of plenty.

The danger of this good and plentiful land is that the Israelites might begin to forget their story. They might forget their total reliance on God, how he's provided and guided, how he's saved them and established them as a nation. They might even begin to mistreat other nations, as the Egyptians mistreated them. So this harvest liturgy is designed to remind them of who they are, what their story has been, and to keep them on track in following God's ways.

We tell stories so that we can remember. In a few moments we'll be telling our story as Christians, together, in this service. In the communion part of the service, when I read for us the communion prayer, I'll be telling, on our behalf, the story of all that God has done for us through the life, death and resurrection of Jesus and what that means for us. And we'll respond, in words and in action as we come up to the rail to receive the bread and wine. We do this because it keeps Jesus alive in the memory of our church family community. This is what good memory-making is all about. We tell the story. We think about it. We "do" the memory – we act it out. And then we go to live it out in our work and our relationships.

And then there are the ways in which some of us might remember our own stories. You might keep a journal from which you can see, looking back, how God has acted in your life. Or there might be a favourite hymn or worship song, a favourite bible passage or a symbol which helps you personally to remember your own story of faith.

We tell stories so that we can remember. Remembering leads to thanksgiving and thanksgiving leads to a loving response. Those who love God, those who recognize the generosity of all that God has given us in his love for us, will want to give all they can of themselves. In doing so, they're simply making a natural response to the love and grace which God has first shown them.

Today we're pausing to remember the fruits of our lives and work. We're pausing, too, to remember all the great love and goodness God daily pours out for each of us. And God invites us to respond. Because the drama of Holy Communion in which we will soon be engaged, not only tells the story of God's goodness to us, helping us to remember and give thanks, but it also carries us towards God in an action of response. As we go up for communion, God is inviting us to give him our first fruits. Those may be the first fruits of our time, our money, or talents, but overriding all these things, God asks for the best of ourselves. "Never mind bringing me your material first fruits, says God....actually *you* are the firstfruits.

At this harvest time, God invites us to celebrate and enjoy all the good things he's given us. How do we express our love and gratitude back? By going out as his disciples to live and work to his praise and glory – to lead fruitful lives for him, in whatever it is that you do, each day, every day. As you come back from communion today, if you brought up a symbol of your daily life and work, please pick it up again and as you carry it back to your seat, let it remind you of the place where God wants to work with you in the coming week. And if you don't have a symbol to pick up, don't worry – just know that God goes out with you too onto your front line, whatever that is, outside the walls of this church, Monday to Saturday.

However mundane we may think our lives and work to be, God has a purpose for you in the everyday. We can all show something of his love and join with him in his work of renewing the world. Remember that you have a story and it's a story worth telling because it carries the assurance that we can all have a hope and a future which is secure. So send us out, Lord, in the power of your spirit, to live and work to your praise and glory. Amen.