

Sermon Notes



Use these sermon notes to help prepare your Harvest of Hope sermon on a range of suggested Bible passages.

Deuteronomy 8:7-18

'Take care that you do not forget the Lord your God...'

- Self-reliance is often viewed as a positive quality in our society. We describe people as 'self-made' and admire those who have pursued and achieved success without appearing to depend on others.
- Independence and self-determination are important. Being able to have our own hopes and ambitions and having the freedom to pursue those is part of what gives us our human dignity.
- In this passage there is a lesson about what happens when our ideas about self-reliance go too far. We forget both our dependence on other people and - more fundamentally - our dependence on God.
- In the Christian faith dependence is not a failing. It is an essential part of who we are as creatures. Dependence does not have to mean we lose our autonomy or become helpless.
- Instead, by embracing our creatureliness (and with it our limitations) we enter into the fullness of life that comes from reliance on God. If we have only ourselves to rely on, we must hold tight to what we have. We must protect ourselves from failure. We may even see other people's needs as a threat to our independence. By contrast, recognising our dependence on others and on God can liberate us. We can live more generously and co-operatively, knowing that we are not alone in life.
- Our dependence on God helps us to see how all human beings, indeed all creatures, are connected through the love of our Creator. We are all in need of God's tenderness and we all need each other's support. How can this shape our view of our relationship to our global neighbours?
- Who have we depended on for this year's harvest? Where has our food come from? What would we do if we did not have many of the sources of food we take for granted? And how can we show in the good times as well as the hard times that God is at the centre of our lives?



2 Corinthians 9:6-15


'... for God loves a cheerful giver.'

- Today's reading encourages us to move into the space of blessing that God holds open for us. This is a place of abundance; specifically, a place of abundant giving and sharing. By stepping into this place of abundance we are equipped to become 'cheerful givers' who share what we have, especially with those experiencing poverty and marginalisation. As Paul writes (quoting Psalm 112) those who 'scatter' what they have and 'give to the poor' are among the righteous.
- It can feel hard to be a 'cheerful giver' when our resources, time and energy are stretched. But this passage holds good news. Developing this kind of generosity is part of our formation as Christians. We are formed as Christians by God's action in us and for us: God's 'indescribable gift'. We can trust that God is working to help us become 'cheerful givers' by blessing us and inviting us into divine abundance.
- It is worth noting that Paul had a very specific purpose in mind when writing this letter. He was not talking about giving in general but about a collection for the Christians in Jerusalem who were in need of support. It's not just congregations today who are asked to fundraise!

- This harvest, let us consider how can become more joyful givers by receiving the gift of God's grace and blessing.
- Why not share Anok's story from our Christian Aid's Harvest Order of Service to show how a gift to our global neighbours can make a transformative difference?

Luke 12:16-30

'So it is with those who store up treasures for themselves but are not rich towards God.'

- There's a wonderful children's book by the author and illustrator Oliver Jeffers entitled *The Fate of Fausto*. Taking his cue from the story of Faust, Jeffers tells the tale of a man who not only wants to own everything in the world but claims that he already does. He tells the trees they belong to him, the flowers and the mountains. He is very angry if nature tries to answer back. Finally, he boards a boat and tries to claim ownership of the sea. When it resists he stamps his feet on it in rage, with predictable consequences.
 - The parable of the rich and foolish man tells a similar story. Notice how the man regards the crops as his entirely his own, though it is unlikely that he has been the one harvesting them. His barns are his own, his grain and his goods. His soul is his own - or so he believes: 'I will say to my soul, Soul, you have ample goods laid up for many years; relax, eat, drink, be merry.'
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Luke 12:16-30 (cont.)

- The rich man has failed to use what he has for the only truly worthy purpose: being 'rich toward God'. To be rich towards God is to seek God's Kingdom (v. 31), to sell what we have and give to those in need and to value the treasures of heaven more highly than anything the world has to offer (v. 33).
- Commentators Barbara Reid and Shelly Matthews propose that Jesus' story of the rich man and his call to consider the ravens and the lilies are intended to show 'images of improper and proper relationship to Earth and its bounty'. They suggest that the rich man objectifies Creation, where Jesus calls his listeners to attend to it as a place of God's action and blessing. (*Wisdom Commentary: Luke 10-24*, 2021).
- In South Sudan, the climate crisis is worsening conditions for farmers already battling against floods and droughts. What is our responsibility here? We may not feel that we are rich but are we more focused on shoring up our own security than thinking of our global neighbours in need? How can we practice attention both to the wonder of Creation and to the reality of life for those feeling the greatest impacts of climate change?
- Explore this passage further with Christian Aid's All-Age talk 'How much is enough?'

Other suggested readings

Deuteronomy 26:1-11

'So now I bring the first fruit of the ground that you, O Lord, have given me.'

- Biblical scholar John Goldingay reads this passage as a text that imagines what it is like to move from insecurity to security, displacement to home, fear of shortage to rejoicing in abundance. The reading looks ahead to the fulfilment of God's promise for the Israelites.
 - Consider what it means today to live with food insecurity and uncertain harvests. More than half of households in South Sudan are experiencing acute food insecurity. There is a risk of famine in a number of areas. (Source: United Nations). 14% of UK households experience uncertainty about where the next meal will come from (Source: The Food Foundation). How can we unite to create a different vision, more like the vision of plenty in Deuteronomy?
 - This passage turns our attention to God as the source and provider of all that we have. The Israelites offer to the Lord the 'first fruit' of the 'ground' that the Lord has given to them. As it says in Psalm 24: 'The earth is the Lord's and all that is in it', or in other translations 'the fullness thereof'.
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Deuteronomy 26:1-11 (cont.)

- How are we bringing our experiences of abundance back to God? What gifts have we received that we can turn into offerings to our creator?
- Christian Aid's worship song 'Everything is Yours' offers a way to reflect on creation belonging to God and the need to honour our creator.
- Note that in the verses immediately following this reading, the Israelites are called to set aside a portion of their harvest for those at risk of marginalisation including orphans, widows and those from other countries living amongst them (vv 12-15). This offering to those in need is commanded by God.

Philippians 4:4-9


'As for the things that you have learned and received and heard and noticed in me, do them, and the God of peace will be with you.'

- This short section of the Epistle speaks both of the actions of those who have faith and the unfailing closeness of God. Paul counsels the faithful to rejoice, to practise gentleness and prayer. All of this is possible, Paul says, because of the Lord. 'The Lord is near' (v. 5).
 - It is the Lord's presence that brings peace in the midst of anxiety, that kindles our joy and nurtures our gentleness.
- There are many undeniable causes for anxiety in our world. Our global neighbours in South Sudan and elsewhere struggle with hunger, disease and the impact of the climate crisis on a daily basis. Paul was acutely aware of what it was like to live with worry and fear, including fearing for his own life and the lives of fellow believers. His advice does not mean we must ignore the very real issues that can cause anxiety, whether those are persecution, injustice, or poverty.
 - We are encouraged instead to centre our attention on God, bringing our worries and needs to God first. It is by rooting ourselves in faith that we will be empowered to respond to the causes of our worries.
 - Paul invites the recipients of his letter to model their behaviour on him as someone guided by faith. A few verses later Paul underlines that he is able to do what he does because of his faith in the Lord: 'I can do all things through him who strengthens me' (v. 13)
 - During this Harvest of Hope, what can our faith empower us to do? Whatever worries and challenges we face as we stand together with our global neighbours, 'the Lord is near' and will give us the strength to respond.
 - Have a look at Christian Aid's Harvest of Hope All-Age talk 'The Worry Jar' for another way to respond to this passage.
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John 6:25-35

'Jesus said to them, "I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never be hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty.'"

- What do we need to be nourished? Our diet needs to include a wide range of food to give us different nutrients. When we think of a balanced meal, we will likely include not only different food groups but different textures, flavours and colours. To avoid malnutrition in the long term we need more than bare calories; we need variety.
 - We also need different kinds of nourishment and nurturing besides food. We have other physical needs (shelter, water, sanitation) as well as emotional and spiritual needs.
 - Jesus does not detach himself from situations of physical need. He does not stand back. On the contrary he places himself amongst those who find themselves marginalised by wider society: those who are hungry, displaced and derided. Jesus offers physical healing and comfort. Earlier in this chapter Jesus fed the multitude when the disciples declared it impossible. The contrast between the 'food that perishes' and the 'food that endures' is not, then, between the physical nourishment that does not matter to Jesus and the spiritual nourishment which does.
- Jesus' identification of himself as the bread of life points instead to the diversity of ways in which human beings are in need of nourishment and the unifying of that diversity in the person of Jesus Christ. The crowd who are following him have overlooked this diversity. They seek Jesus only to be fed more physical bread. Jesus responds by saying that he is the bread of life whose desire it is to nourish us in all ways.
 - The bread of life nourishes us in order to transform us into the people we are called to be. We become disciples who put God's love into action. As disciples we further Jesus' ministry, including his ministry to those pushed to the margins and excluded from power.
 - This Harvest we have opportunities to be fed and nourished. Sometimes we are fed physically through a bring-and-share lunch or Harvest supper. Sometimes we are fed by words, songs, and actions of love.
 - What does this Harvest nourishment enable and equip us to do? How can we share what we receive with those who are excluded?
 - Read Anok's story in our Harvest Order of Service to find out more about how your church can support farmers in South Sudan protect themselves and their communities from hunger.
 - You can use Christian Aid's All Age talk 'Life in a Lunchbox' to explore this reading further.
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Isaiah 35:1-2, 6b-7a


'The wilderness and the dry land shall be glad; the desert shall rejoice and blossom.'

- Notice how this passage attributes feelings to the land itself: the land 'shall be glad', the desert 'rejoice'. Isaiah's language draws attention to the vibrancy within the natural world, aside from any human interaction with it. Too often we think of land as functional, considering only what it can do for us.
- The land, the desert, indeed all non-human creation, has its own life and is loved by God in its own right.
- The land and the desert rejoicing connects to a wider pattern we see in scripture of nature speaking up to declare God's glory (e.g. Psalm 19; Isaiah 55). Are human beings adding their voices to this chorus or are we slow to speak up? Are we joining the natural world in glorifying and praising our maker?
- The symbol of water springing up from dry ground and blossoms in the desert is also seen in Isaiah 32. There, Isaiah links the 'streams of water in a dry place' (2) with the arrival of justice: 'justice will dwell in the wilderness and righteousness abide in the fruitful field' (16).

- Likewise here in chapter 35 Isaiah's vision is one of transformation that brings an end to suffering ('sorrow and sighing shall flee away').
- Today the climate crisis is leading to rising temperatures, desertification and drought in many places around the world. Isaiah's link between transforming dry land and changing an unjust society could hardly be more relevant.
- Our global neighbours need support so that they are able to invest in their farms and practise climate resilient agriculture.
- We are called to respond to Isaiah's vision of transformation in which the capacity of the land to be fruitful is a sign of the growth of a more just world.

Joel 2:21-27

'Do not fear, O soil; be glad and rejoice, for the Lord has done great things!'

- Read through the points above on the Isaiah passage. Notice the similarities with Joel's call for the soil to 'rejoice'.
 - Take a moment to contemplate the strangeness of Joel's words: 'Do not fear, O soil.' It's not uncommon for gardeners to talk to their plants to help them grow but how many of us have thought of reassuring the soil that it does not need to be afraid?!
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Joel 2:21-27 (cont.)

- Are we able to echo these words today? What reassurance can we give to the land or to those who depend on the soil for survival? In the UK we may be insulated from some of the most immediate and severe impacts of the climate crisis on our soil and ecosystems. But even we see the affects on food prices and supply chains. Meanwhile many of our global neighbours find their livelihoods and their very lives are under threat.
- In this passage Joel does offer us hope. The Lord has the power to do 'great things' for the healing and flourishing of the world. God desires the wellbeing of the whole of creation.
- The question to ask ourselves is: are our actions in line with God's desires? What are our responsibilities in a world where some of us 'eat in plenty' (26) but others are hungry?
- God has given us a generous provision globally but we have not shared this provision justly. Some of the world's most vulnerable communities have been excluded from our feasting and rejoicing. What can we do to change that?
- Giving up is not an option, even in the face of a challenge as great as the climate crisis. Together we can hold on to our faith in God as the one who has 'dealt wondrously' with us and 'done great things'. We can reflect God's love for creation in our actions.

Matthew 6.25-33

'Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat or what you will drink, or about your body, what you will wear. Is not life more than food and the body more than clothing?'

- Jesus is not saying that material needs are wholly unimportant. This would be an odd message, given his deep concern for the material conditions of the poorest in society throughout his ministry.
 - The immediate context to this passage is the statement that we cannot serve both God and wealth (24).
 - Commentators on this text suggest that Jesus may be speaking about a particular kind of all-consuming 'worry'. This kind of anxiety causes us to focus too much on material things - a sign that money and possessions have a higher priority in our lives than God.
 - As Biblical scholar Leah Schade observes, when we focus only on material wealth and possessions, we find that there is never enough. We end up constantly worrying about the scarcity that may lie around the corner and are unable to enjoy the plenty we have today. We compete with our neighbours for security. We try to guard against future material scarcity by 'storing up treasures on earth' far beyond our needs (verse 19).
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Matthew 6.25-33 (cont.)

- The birds and the lilies do not face the choice of centring their lives around the love of money and possessions versus the love of God. Where human beings try to make ourselves independent, through stocking up on 'things', non-human creation (animals and plants) show us the reality of our dependence on God.
- The birds and plants glorify God simply by being themselves - in their flying and feeding, their growing and flowering.
- There is a vital message for us here: our value does not lie in what we have but in *who we are before God*. We are beloved in and of ourselves. We have worth in and of ourselves.
- This has been a particularly important message for theologians from marginalised communities. When people find themselves devalued and economically excluded by the world, Jesus shows that they remain infinitely important to God. God does not love us because of what we have or do not have.
- How could this passage shape our Harvest celebration? Perhaps we can mark harvest by letting go of our hold on what we have. Whether it's gifts of food, time, money or offering our prayers, we can freely give away what is ours.
- Giving something away may make us anxious. We may feel insecure. But if we take these feelings to God, we will be met with love that grounds and roots us. This love is a more secure and steady foundation than any material possession.

Matthew 13:31-33

'The kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed... The kingdom of heaven is like yeast...'

- One reading of these parables of the kingdom focuses on the power of faith. Jesus is likening faith to the astonishing energy within a seed, that is able to produce something much larger than itself. Likewise small amounts of yeast cause bread to grow greatly in size and provide food for many.
- Jesus' choice of the mustard seed (probably the plant black mustard) is interesting because it is unlikely that 'birds of the air' did 'nest' in this plant in reality (32). Nonetheless, this description points to the role of the plant in wider ecosystem. Jesus' words - like those of Isaiah and Joel - remind us that the natural world does not exist just for human's benefit.
- Nature is full of complex ecologies where creatures depend on one another. Our actions have the capacity to damage and disrupt these ecologies. This is most evident in the devastating effects of the climate crisis.
- When we look at the damage the climate crisis is causing, we may feel despair or 'climate grief'. What could we do to make space in our communities for discussion of our fears and hopes for the future? Could Harvest be a moment to start planning how your church or community could take action?
- There are stories of hope. Share Anok's story from Christian Aid's Harvest Order of Service to show how farmers can develop more climate resilient strategies, with the right support.