

Sermon Notes



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

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. 1 in 3 households in Sierra Leone are grappling with severe food insecurity and more than half face moderate food insecurity (Source: World Food Programme). 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'. 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 Sierra Leone and elsewhere struggle with hunger 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.

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.
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John 6:25-35 (continued)


- 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 [Maryama's story](#) in our Harvest Order of Service to find out more about how your church can support communities in Sierra Leone battling malnutrition.
- You can use Christian Aid's All Age talk '[Life in a Lunchbox](#)' to explore this reading further.

Other suggested readings

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.
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- 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?!
- 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.
- Have a look at Christian Aid's materials on [climate justice](#) and [debt justice](#) to inspire you further.

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).
- 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. God loves birds for being birds and grass for being grass!

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- 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.
 - 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? Christian Aid's [Talking Climate Justice](#) small group course could help.
 - Even as we acknowledge the seriousness of the present moment, there are stories of hope. [Maryama's story](#) offers hope for farmers that - with the right support - they will be able to develop more climate resilient strategies.

Matthew 13:31-33

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

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