

Read the Archbishop's sermon at General Synod in London this morning.

***Leviticus 25:2-7***

If we look back to the Old Testament reading, we might ask the question: if the land should have a holiday, then should robots have holidays?

I can see you are puzzled. Quite rightly. This is the wrong question to be asking. It's a mechanistic response to that passage from Leviticus. This isn't really what the passage is driving at. It is not primarily about the mechanics of farming. Rather, it is about who we are as human beings, and how we relate to the world within which we exist. It's about what we value, and what matters to us.

Here, the people have entered the promised land. They have a bright new future ahead of them. They are full of hope and expectations. They were once slaves, tilling the fields for others to benefit. Then they wandered in the desert, with only manna and quail sent from heaven. So when they got into the Promised Land it must have been so tempting, as they looked out on their farms, to say "This is mine, and I will make the most out of it. I will take it and work it and till it and never be hungry again." Echoes of the parable of the rich fool.

And of course, there is nothing wrong with working hard, and providing. The Bible is utterly pragmatic and realistic about human need. The people need the produce of the land. Giving land a rest makes good economic sense; we know this from agronomics. In the verses that follow, God tells the people how they will eat in the year of Sabbath. But here, on the threshold of the Promised Land, God reminds them of one of the enduring aspects of sin: the temptation to reduce the land, and people around them, to their economic value. (I'm sure you won't be surprised if I say economics is good. I love to live down to my stereotypes.) Economics is good; farming is good. But the people need to remember the bigger picture.

First, the land belongs to God, and is simply entrusted to them - to us. If the people lose their sense of direction, stop following God, then the land will 'vomit them out'. Quite a scary prospect, and a reminder that the land and the environment are not simply inanimate, insensate things for us to fashion. They have life within them and they can reject us as we can reject them. In a fragile ecosystem, human actions and choices have consequences that are felt both in interpersonal relationships, and in the relationship with our environment, the ecosystem.

Archbishop Winston (Primate of Aotearoa, New Zealand and Polynesia) speaks often at Primates' Meetings of living in a part of the world where rising sea is a consequence of the ill-treatment of the environment - and not by their fault, but by principally the global North's, the sea will vomit them out of the land. It's a reality.

Second, the people depend on God, now in the Promised Land, just as they had in the desert. No different. If God could feed them in the desert, then God can feed them now. There is no need to overwork - perhaps a lesson for some of us here - or oppress the land, or one another; another lesson. The land is a partner for the people: it's not simply to be used, but to be respected, cared for and enjoyed. As human beings, we are always part of something bigger than ourselves: family, society, economy, the natural world - and in redemption, the people of God, the priesthood collectively that points the way to God. A holy nation, to declare the wonderful words of him who called us out of darkness into his marvellous light. This passage invites us to think about how we choose - *choose* - to relate healthily, in a way that goes beyond utilitarian or determinist concerns.

Now today we may not live in an agrarian society. At least, we may not. Archbishop Thabo (Primate of Southern Africa), Bishop Humphrey (Moderator and Primate in the Church of Pakistant) and Archbishop Winston know what an agrarian society looks like. It's that of half the world. And very few of us here - though some - have control over farming, crop rotation or choices over how to deal with the land around us; though in many parts of the Church of England we work constantly among those who do. We live with them and hear their pains and their sufferings. We seek to serve and love them. And it is a major challenge for our country: how do we treat the land? And as we face Brexit and coming out of the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) this is a once in a generation - two generation, three generation - opportunity, going perhaps back beyond the First World War, beyond the point where farming was to oppress the land to the necessary point because we couldn't import because of submarines, or because to treat the land in different ways because of the CAP. This is a time for reimagining - and reimagining in hope.

But this passage begs us to go beyond the land. For them, the land was the primary locus of the economy, of creativity and productivity. Thinking of today, what are the other things that we can think of, that we use as tools or servants rather than partners with whom we can work? The economy, industry, human intelligence, artificial intelligence (AI)... Bishop Stephen Croft is doing astonishing work on a select committee in the House of Lords on AI. I hope you will have the benefit of hearing from him at some point because it is one of the most consuming challenges of the next forty or fifty years.

I read a fascinating article last week about automation and advances in artificial intelligence. It is easy to feel a great sense of doom at the thought of increasing what is done by machines, better and faster. But that is not what was fascinating. What was fascinating, was the reflection on what cannot be done by machines, because some things do not benefit from being done faster, or on a bigger scale. There are many things in life for which faster is worse. Where quality means more than productivity, where time, rather than quantity or money is the primary currency. So, for instance, the provision of social care. Automation would never help. Doing more, and faster would not help. Slowing down is what is needed, because it brings the dignity of the human person to the centre.

I heard this wonderful story from a colleague recently. One of her parishioners, Mary, was 103 years old, and quite an extraordinary lady. She was full of joy, with a wicked sense of humour, and a great observer of people. She was blind, mostly deaf, and very frail, but still lived on her own, with no family around. After a bout of pneumonia, the local hospital insisted that she could only go home if she agreed to have carers come in. Mary was not impressed, but bowed under the pressure and agreed to carers coming in to help her wash and dress and so on. With immense pressures on the care system, as we all know, the carers only had a very short amount of time, and so Mary decided to do care her way.

Every morning, she set up her alarm, and got herself up, washed and dressed before they arrived. She put the kettle on, made a cup of tea, and sat down for a chat with the carers, morning and evening. She could have done with practical help, but what she needed most was companionship time, and the space to feel that she could contribute to someone else's welfare too. And so the carers benefited – by having a rest in a busy day, and being loved as people. Slowing down and focusing on the bigger picture enabled Mary and her carers to discover something more precious about each other – to build relationships, to enjoy one another, and create something valuable between them.

It is easy for us, for each of us here, for the whole Church, to be drawn into the urgency of the world in which we live, and its constant demands to engage with deep, pressing and essential issues. It was easy for the Israelites to ignore the need for relationship with the gift of the land, and the God therefore who had gifted it.

Yet the call of God is to always look deeper, and assign things to their proper place. We see this in the encounter between Jesus and an unnamed woman with an alabaster jar, in the Gospel of John. The woman anoints Jesus with perfume so expensive it would have paid someone's salary for a year. The disciples are rightly outraged. How could she not see the monetary value of the perfume? Did she not think about those around her, in need of help? Jesus unexpectedly diverts the disciples thinking away from utilitarian thoughts, however justified and worthy. Instead he points them to the deeper meaning of his encounter with a woman. He gives her dignity and worth. And he points to the way in which she has given him dignity and worth, and performed something deeply meaningful, even though it was not quantifiable or useful. Quality and relationship were what mattered.

And so we come full circle, back to Leviticus: God's call on us to partner with the world around us, to go beyond relationships dictated by need or control or fear or party, and ask ourselves: what do we value most? How do we develop quality in our interactions with one another, and with the world in which God has made our home? How do we follow in the footsteps of Christ, who modelled complete engagement with the world and people around him, yet never let his imagination, vision and action be constrained or diminished?

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