

God the Farmer

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Psalm 65:9-11

Matthew 6:25-33

God is a farmer. The Bible often portrays God doing the work of a farmer. He plants orchards and vineyards. He irrigates and prunes. He sows grain, he waters it, he reaps abundant harvests. But, sometimes, he's disappointed: he waits for the fruit but it doesn't come, and so he removes the fig tree (as it might be) and plants another. The Bible is bursting with agricultural imagery, and of course it comes from societies in which most people were farmers and everyone lived close to the soil, even those who lived in towns and cities. The image of God doing all kinds of agricultural and horticultural work was very vivid in biblical times – and, indeed, for most people in most places for most of subsequent history. I think sometimes the language we use of God is rather impoverished. The Bible has such a rich store of images it deploys to enrich our understanding of God (especially in the Psalms and the Prophets) and farming images play a big role in that.

When I was younger (living in the predominantly urban culture of 20th century Britain) I guess there was a tendency to avoid this agricultural language in our prayers and sermons because we thought of ourselves as modern urban people for whom farming seemed alien and irrelevant. An urban culture cut off from the land is what produced children, they say, who think fish fingers grow on trees. The food chain for us went no further back than the supermarket shelf, where the packaging of meat, for example, entirely disguised what part of an animal it came from. Often, if we did look at the labels, we found it came from distant parts of the world, grown in circumstances we knew nothing about and never supposed was of any concern to us.

But things have been changing a lot. Here I can only draw on my knowledge of the UK and leave it to you to draw parallels with your experience here. First it was the organic movement, when some people began to care about how their food was grown. Then there was the revolt against GM foods, which in the UK was a really major groundswell of popular opinion that has largely kept GM foods off our supermarket shelves. Then there was the fair trade movement. Then there were farmers' markets and a sense of the importance of buying locally grown food. All of these things have made people think about where food actually comes from, reconnecting, at least in our minds, with the soil and the people who work it, whether in the British countryside or in the tea plantations of India.

Another key development is the revulsion against the cruelty to animals in factory farming that most people feel once they're aware of what actually goes on. One of our leading supermarket chains, well known for its own brands, now guarantees that none of its food products have involved cruelty to animals. But I

have to add that, as with organic food, there is a problem, especially in economic recession, as to whether people can actually afford to make such ethical choices when they are still more expensive. Then, of course, also the environmental movement has raised a whole raft of other questions about where our food comes from, giving us, for example, the concept of food miles. Transporting food all over the globe, especially by air, contributes seriously to global CO2 emissions. Trawling the ocean floors for fish is ravaging the ecology of the oceans, turning them into oceanic deserts. I could go on. Even the most urban people now have many reasons to think about where their food comes from and how it's produced. And increasingly people in towns and cities are reconnecting with the soil even physically, growing stuff in their back gardens (you call them yards) or on allotments, which in Britain are plots of land people can rent very cheaply for growing fruit and vegetables. Allotments have not been so popular since the Second World War, when British people were exhorted to dig for victory. Now they are digging – for what? Often people who grow their own stuff, on however small a scale, will say that as well as a financial benefit, there's something really good about getting involved with the soil and the processes of nature that we all depend on so absolutely. God created Adam and Eve to till the soil in the orchard God himself planted in the beginning. Working the soil is a very profoundly human activity.

So we come round and about back to those biblical images of God himself as a farmer. For many of us urban people they have begun to come to life again. Quite a lot of that imagery is about what God does for us humans: we are the seed he plants and nurtures until we grow into beautiful trees bearing much fruit – like the green olive tree in the temple of God that the psalmist dreamed he was, trusting in the steadfast love of God in the way that trees have to trust in the nourishment they get from the rain and the soil. We, the church, are God's orchard where he walks in the cool of the evening, cherishing his trees, looking to see how well the fruit is coming on.

But sometimes when the Bible portrays God as a farmer, it's literal trees and crops that he nurtures. Listen again to Psalm 65:

You [i.e. God] visit the soil and water it,
 you greatly enrich it;
 the river of God is full of water;
 you provide the people with grain,
 for so you have prepared it.
 You water its furrows abundantly,
 settling its ridges,
 softening it with showers, and blessing its growth.
 You crown the year with your bounty,
 your wagon tracks overflow with richness.

A bumper harvest, then, and the psalm goes on to describe the rejoicing that goes with a good harvest. Farming communities have always *celebrated* harvest, but in this case the earth is being imagined as God's farm and so it's the fruitful earth itself that puts on its party clothes and sings the jolly songs of harvest home:

the pastures of the wilderness overflow,
 the hills gird themselves with joy,

the meadows clothe themselves with flocks,
 the valleys deck themselves with grain,
 they shout and sing together for joy.

God has given us a world that provides abundantly for human sustenance (and that of other creatures too, but that's another story). He blesses it and it produces. Notice that in the psalm the human farmers (though they are obviously involved) are actually not mentioned at all. The psalm was to be sung by farmers celebrating harvest in the temple – when their whole concern is to praise and give thanks to God. They know that all the back-breaking work they put in only produces food because God is the ultimate giver, the source of all nature's processes and abundance. I talked about how urban people have been reconnecting with the soil and those who work it, but the psalmist goes, if you like, further back in the food chain: to God the generous creator and sustainer, who blesses the earth extravagantly with produce to sustain us.

The psalm in this respect connects quite closely with those well-known words of Jesus where he tells us not to waste worry on our food supply: 'Consider the birds,' he says, 'they do not sow or reap, they have no barn to store their food, yet God feeds them.' The point Jesus is making, I think, is that even farmers (most of his original audience) can forget where their food comes from. Preoccupied with all the *human* work of farming, they can forget that the ultimate and indispensable source is God. The birds can teach us because they don't do any of that. They have to look for food, but then, there it is – ready and waiting for them. In their case it's much more obvious that God provides for them. But really it's God who provides for all of us.

Jesus' advice about not worrying can easily seem wildly impractical, even irresponsible. But one thing that's usually neglected is that Jesus was speaking to Jewish people and could take for granted that, if they lived by the commandments of Moses, produce would be shared with those in need. When God provided his people with generous provision for their basic needs he also commanded them to be generous in sharing it with the poor and the resident foreigners, the people who had no land of their own. Jesus presumes that God's generosity will overflow into human generosity.

But let me tell you another little bit of my own experience. I have an allotment that I've had for just three years. Last year I grew enough potatoes to last me through the winter. This year there was potato blight around in the neighbourhood, and, because I was away, I acted too late to save much of my crop from the blight. So I've already eaten all the potatoes I grew this year. This is a trivial set-back. I'm not going to suffer through having to buy potatoes. But it made me think what it must be like to be a farmer when things much worse than potato blight occur – when for example the extreme weather events we've had so many of in the last few years strike. In Britain this summer we have had too much rain and bad harvests as a result, while you have had the worst drought for 56 years, so I read. This kind of drought in America doesn't just drive up food prices here, it reverberates through the world, conspiring with a bunch of other factors that are making for a world food crisis. What has happened, we may wonder, to

that bounteous provision for human life that God the Farmer makes, according to the psalm?

It is not, of course, God's provision that is lacking. Rather, to put it in Pauline terms, the earth is groaning under human abuse. Forgive me if I make just a few points in specifically American terms. Is there not something wrong when Americans throw out 100,000 tons of edible food every day? Or, to use a different statistic, when 40% of food produced in the USA never gets eaten? Is there not something wrong when America's prodigious demand for cheap energy means that much prime agricultural land is given over to growing biofuel? Does not the epidemic of obesity suggest there is something wrong with America's food culture? When we remember that proportionately far more of the earth's resources go into producing beef than into growing cereals, what about the very high percentage of meat in the average American diet, compared with many other countries? The looming world food crisis raises hard questions not only for Americans but for all of us in the so-called developed countries – and maybe we now consider being a developed country is really rather more like being a society addicted to excess.

God made Adam from the earth to till and to keep it. Not so many of us now actually work the soil, but we all do by proxy. We are no less earthy than Adam, earthy creatures that depend on the bounty of the earth and depend on God for it. We cannot escape Adam's connexion with the earth – nor our share of Adam's responsibility for keeping it.

Most of us give thanks for our food every day. We acknowledge that the food chain actually goes all the way back to God the Farmer. But if we expect God to accept our thanksgiving for our daily food, we also need to think about where it comes from on its way from God to us. We must try to see that we are honouring God in how we make our choices about the food we eat.