

**Sermon by Roger Morris, Bishop of Colchester: County Harvest Festival Service  
Chelmsford Cathedral - 4 October 2015**

When I was here last weekend I was reminded of an advert that used to be on television back in the 70s. At least it was where I was growing up. It was an advert for Whitbread Welsh Bitter, and at the end of the advert the voiceover would say 'Never forget you're Welsh'. Poor Bishop Stephen last Sunday found himself surrounded by people who not only didn't forget that they were Welsh but they made a very obvious and public display of remembering the fact.

For me, raised on a diet of Max Boyce and the Treorchy Male Voice Choir, by a mother whose name is Eirwen, and having been visited every other Saturday by some of my Welsh relations including my Mamgu (which is Welsh for Grandmother), my Welshness felt very much to the fore. But remembering our origins, remembering who we are, is really important.

As well as being three quarters Welsh, I have spent most of my time living and working in the countryside. But, much like foxes, I have now ended up living somewhere with street lights and proper pavements. So today is a great reminder for me of my rural origins. My ancestors on my father's side (the non-Welsh part of the family) were all dairy farmers in Leicestershire and much of the milk from their farms was used to make Stilton cheese. And back in 1960 my mother was a student of agriculture at a time when women were actively discouraged from studying it. After training as a teacher in Worcester my mother then spent much of her time teaching rural science to the sons and daughters of farmers and farm workers. So I have grown up with agriculture and farming always being there in the background.

Incidentally, one thing that I've learnt from all this exposure to farming is that, quite frankly, there are easier ways to earn a living. Pope John 23rd was from farming stock and, as a cardinal, he spoke once about his father's life struggling to make ends meet on his little farm. He said 'there are three ways of ruining yourself: wine, women and farming.' 'My father,' he said, 'chose the most boring.' But agriculture, farming, and the countryside is in the blood. It is part of who I am and need to never forget our origins.

When Moses addressed the people of God, and it was part of his speech that we heard in our first reading, when Moses addressed the people who were just about to enter the Promised Land, his message to them was just that: never forget. Never forget the journey you have been on, never forget where you've come from and never forget that it's God who has brought you to where you are now.

Even just to call us human is to be reminded of where we've come from. The word, 'human' - and even the Greek 'homos' - as in 'homosapiens' comes from the word for earth - for soil. The first book of the Bible says that we are made from the earth and, at a funeral, we remind ourselves of this when we say, 'earth to earth.' That is: you came from the earth and to the earth you now return. Earth to earth, ashes to ashes, dust to dust. So just to say that we are human is to say that we are people of the soil. And from that same word we get words like humour and humility; which is, quite literally, being down to earth. That is what we are. So when say, which we do every year on Ash Wednesday, 'Remember that you are dust and to dust you shall return,' we are saying to our fellow humans, 'never forget your origins,' 'never forget that you are a person of the soil.'

But you know, for people of the soil (which sounds good and agricultural), we've strayed a long way from our origins. About three years ago the charity LEAF, who organise 'Open Farm Sunday,' surveyed two thousand young adults and found that a third did not know that bacon comes from pigs and 40%, that's nearly half of them, failed to link milk with an image of a dairy cow. 7% linked it to wheat. Two thirds of them were able to link eggs to an image of a hen but 11% (that's more than one in ten) thought they came from wheat or maize. Do you know, it's no wonder that our dairy industry is on its knees. People have forgotten where this stuff comes from. They've forgotten its origins.

How else can it be that a litre of milk that costs the farmer 32p to produce nets them just 24p, a loss of 8 pence per litre? It's because we cannot value what we do not know and for many people, if you asked them where the milk came from, they'd name the supermarket. We've lost the connections, the relationships. We've forgotten that we are people of the soil and that this sort of thing is important. Now one of the adjustments that I have had to make in coming to Essex is that there's a lot more arable around and a bit less livestock. But the same things are true for arable farmers.

My alarm goes off at five to six every morning and that means that I just catch the end of 'Wake up to money' on Five Live and one morning I found myself listening to Guy Smith the NFU vice-president talking about the challenge facing wheat farmers when a tonne of wheat costs around £130 to produce and he's watching the price dip below £100 a tonne. It's the same problem. So 96% of the solid ingredients that make up my loaf of bread 96% is wheatflour and yet the farmer gets just about 10% of what I spend on it. We've lost the connections, the relationships. We've forgotten that we are people of the soil and that this sort of thing is important.

I was at the Tendring show this year - which was great - and it was a hot day so I went in search of an ice cream and I can't tell you how delighted I was to find someone selling Bennetts Ice Cream. You see, I knew where the milk had come from: it had come from Chris Bennett's herd of around 200 Holstein/Friesians that he keeps on his farm in Worcester. I was in Worcester before moving here and worked a lot with Chris who was chair of our Chaplaincy for Agriculture and Rural Life. Many a meeting we've had when Chris has had to leave early to, as he used to put it, see to his girls. And there, in a freezer at the Tendring Show, was ice cream made using milk from his girls. For me it was a connection. I remembered the relationship and that's how it's supposed to be.

Never forget your origins. Never forget that you are people of the soil. And part of what we need to do is reconnect people where that connection is broken. And actually, that is part of what Janet is here to do as we license her as the Diocesan Rural Officer and Agricultural Chaplain. And it's really important that it's a diocesan job, for her work is as crucial in Barking as it is in Bardfield. It matters as much in West Ham as it does in West Bergholt. Because we need to be reconnected, we need to remember, and never forget, that we are people of the soil; dependent upon agriculture for the milk in our tea, for the butter on our crumpet, and for our daily bread.

Never forget. That's what Moses said. Never forget the journey you have been on. Never forget where you've come from. And... never forget that it's God who has brought you to where you are now. That it's God, ultimately it is God, who has brought us into a good land; a land with flowing streams, with springs and underground waters welling up in valleys and hills, a land of wheat and barley, of vines and fig trees and pomegranates, a land of olive trees and honey, a land where you may eat bread without scarcity, where you will lack nothing, a land whose stones are iron and from whose hills you may mine copper. Never forget that it's God who has brought you to where you are now.

Why? because ultimately we are his and he is our Father and he delights to give us good things. Ultimately we belong to him; he made us, lovingly created us, and we are his people. That is the most important connection of all. That is the connection that ultimately broke down. The connection between us and God. And that is the connection that Jesus came to repair; coming to earth as a human, as a person of the soil.

Jesus lived among us and in his dying and in his rising to new life he took our soiled humanity and raised it back up to heaven, re-connecting us, restoring our relationship with God, reforming us in his likeness. Never forget the journey you have been on. Never forget where you've come from. And... never forget that it's God who has brought you to where you are now.

You are God's precious precious people and as we give him thanks for all that he gives us; for the fruit of the soil and the work of human hands. Let us also thank God that in his love he has sought to reconnect us with the earth, with ourselves, with each other, and with him. Never forget you're his.

Amen.