

St. Ninian's Parish Church
Sunday 7th October 2018

Deuteronomy 8: 1 - 10; John 6: 24 - 35

'You must remember,' said God (commanded God), that road, which I led you along these past forty years through the wilderness. Once you enter the rich land I am taking you to, that land where you will never live in poverty or want for anything; that land of streams, of springs; a land of wheat and barley; of vines, fig trees and pomegranates; a land of oil and honey, you must *remember* what it cost to get you there; where you have come from; and the road that you took.¹

That was our reading this morning from the Old Testament book of Deuteronomy. It was part of the story of the Hebrews journey across the wilderness to the Promised Land. Just before they took possession of it, God said to them, 'you must remember'. Then, in the verses immediately following the ones we read, God says, 'Take care *not to forget* to keep my commandments, laws and statutes...'²

Remember, and don't forget. You only say these things if you are a little bit worried that whoever it is you are talking doesn't always remember and tends to be forgetful. Often, once they think they are out of your sight, they are distracted by whatever fun things are going on.

I know how God feels. How many times have I said, 'Now, remember this or that, don't forget... Remember, your lunch is in your bag, and don't forget your going to After-School Club this afternoon... Don't forget your snack! And remember I'm picking you up today.'

How many times have I said things like that? Why do I say them? Because he is easily distracted; has a memory like a sieve; is forever forgetting and not remembering. That is what I know about my 5-year old son, and it is what God knows about human beings of every age, in every place, at every time.

God was worried. God was worried that once the Israelites entered the Promised Land with all of its prosperity and abundance, they would be distracted and they would not remember where they had come from. They would not remember what it took to get them there. They would forget to look after this Promised Land, and to look after themselves, spiritually, in this Promised Land. Remember and don't forget.

No wonder God was worried. If his people, human beings, have a tendency not to remember and to forget, how much more have they a tendency not to look after what they have been given. 'That was a present; remember. Don't forget it cost a lot of money, so look after it.' That is the kind of thing I have been saying since the beginning of my son's life, and it is exactly what God has been saying to humanity since the beginning of time.

¹ Deuteronomy 8: 1 - 10

² Deuteronomy 8: 11

Here is God right at the very beginning of time, recorded in the Book of Genesis,
*And the Lord God took the man, and put him into the Garden of Eden to tend it and to keep it.*³

There is God, right at the very beginning, not just putting people in to a bountiful garden, but instructing them to look after it. The important word is 'keep' in that sentence. God put the man in the Garden of Eden to *keep* it. The verb is *Shamar* in Hebrew. It means to keep, or to guard, or to preserve: *Vay-ya-nee-ch-ey-hu be-gan eden le-aba-dah u-le-sham-arah*, 'and put him in the Garden of Eden to tend it and keep it.'

God was worried, right from the beginning of time that once people think that they are out of his sight, and they have what he has given them, then they will not remember what it is like not having it, they will forget what it cost to acquire it, and they won't look after it.

That is a message for Harvest Sunday for us in our world today, where we and so many others are so well fed and enjoy so much material abundance. Remember what it was like not to be so well off, don't forget what it costs to achieve this level of prosperity, and look after what you have.

In a world afflicted by Climate Change that can destroy what little prosperity the poorest have; in a world where barriers to trade are being re-erected by the richest countries so that the cost of food in the poorest countries soars; in a world where we take our good fortune so much for granted that we are building walls rather than mending bridges with our closest neighbours, in that world God is worried.

God is worried that we are taking too much for granted; that we don't remember that we weren't always so prosperous; that we are forgetting to look after the world we are living in. Remember; don't forget; take care of what you have been given.

But, there is more to it than that. *Shamar*, the verb to keep in Hebrew, appears again, soon after humanity has found its place in the Garden of Eden. Here it is two chapters later on in Genesis.

Then the Lord said to Cain, 'Where is your brother Abel?' Cain answered, 'I do not know. Am I my brother's keeper?'

My brother's keeper - it is the verb *shamar* again. *Ha-shomer a-chee anochee?* Keeper of my brother am I? God answers Cain, saying, 'What have you done?'

God is worried again. He was worried that human beings would forget to look after the bountiful world that he gave them to live in. Now, he is worried that human beings would forget to look after each other, to keep each other, to guard each other, to preserve their relationships with each other. He is more than worried, actually, he's very angry. It's one thing for me to say to my five year old,

³ Genesis 2:15

'remember', 'don't forget', 'look after it', but when I have to say, 'what have you done' we are beginning a very different conversation.

'...man cannot live by bread alone,'⁴ said God in our reading from Deuteronomy to his people as they entered the Promised Land all that time ago. Centuries later, Jesus had to say it too,

*'I tell you this: the truth is, not that Moses gave you the bread from heaven, but that my father gives you the real bread from heaven. The bread that God gives comes down from heaven and brings life to the world.'*⁵

It is one thing to remember and not forget to look after the world we live in, but the most important thing, if there is going to be life in this world, is to look after each other. When we forget to do that God starts a very different conversation with us - what have you done? - That is why Jesus, God incarnate, was on earth to fix relationships,

'Love the Lord your God... and your neighbour as you love yourself.'

We are commanded to care for this world, but to do that we have to care for one another, and it is just too easy to forget that, and not to remember that we are here to care for each other.

In lovely Corstorphine you will see many beautifully *kept* gardens - you might even have one yourself. These beautifully *kept* gardens bring life to this community, joy, and colour. It is therapeutic to tend your garden, to keep it. And there is a booming trade in gardeners keeping gardens for those who can no longer keep their gardens themselves; money is spent.

That is good. After all it is a commandment from God to keep your garden. And so I want you to imagine God coming to have a look at your garden. People in Corstorphine and in this congregation open their gardens to the public; imagine God turned up. How do you feel?

Now, imagine that God is coming to have a look at how well you are keeping, not the garden that surrounds your house, but the garden of your relationships with others? How have you been doing with the keeping of that garden: the tending of it; the watering of it; the weeding; the pruning even; the planting? How much have you spent on that garden compared to the one that surrounds your house? How do you feel as God wanders the garden of your relationships?

Now, imagine if God visited your country, Scotland, the UK, the United States, wherever it is that you come from, and had a look around at how well that garden that is your home is being kept. How are its relationships with other countries? How beautiful is that garden of relationships? Kept well? Tended? Cared for? Watered? Weeded? How are the relationships between people within your country? If your country is a garden, how beautiful, bountiful, full of joy and colour is it?

⁴ Deuteronomy 8: 3

⁵ John 6: 32 - 33

You see, we don't remember what it took to get us here: to build our friendships, our relationships, our families. We forget what it was like before when there was no one around, or we were fighting, or we were poorer. We think that there will always be enough bread for us, and if there is enough bread for us then everything will be fine. We forget, we don't remember, that this world is a spiritual world as much as it is a material world, and as such we cannot live by bread alone. We are called to keep our gardens holy: the garden of our relationship with the world around us, the garden of our relationships with each other, and the garden of our relationship with God.

Now to the one who can keep you from falling and set you in the presence of his glory, jubilant and above reproach, to the only God our saviour, be glory and majesty, power and authority, through Jesus Christ our Lord, before all time, now, and for evermore. Amen.