My Father is a Farmer: Bible Studies for Agricultural Workers in Village Churches

Edited by
Rev Dr R Daniel Premkumar
Director, Synod Diagonal Concerns
CSI Centre, Chennai
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Bible Studies for
Agricultural Workers
in Village Churches

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Advent, 2013


Dear Friends,

Advent Greetings!

I am happy to acknowledge the role of Synod Diocesan Ministry in bringing the concerns of the Village Church to the centre stage. We deeply appreciated the Department when it came up with Agricultural Workers Fellowship.

Now we are more than happy to place in your hands a book My Father Is A Farmer : Bible Studies for Agricultural Workers in Village Churches.

We realize this is a pioneering work not only in CSI but in India as well.

I sincerely hope that the future leadership would take this forward and make it available in four regional languages.

I congratulate the work of Rev. Dr. R. Daniel Premkumar, for taking up this unchartered path.

Sincerely,

M.M. PHILIP
INTRODUCTION

Personally speaking, it nearly took 40 years of ministry among Dalit Congregations in Rayalaseema and elsewhere to bring Agriculture with in Faith Perspective. Earlier, I had tinkered with land issues and farmer's movements but never felt the need to wrestle with issues of Agriculture as a matter of faith. When I joined Synod Diaconal Ministry three years ago, it became clear to me that the only way to tackle rural poverty and caste oppression is by enabling agriculture should yield an honorable living for daily wage earners and small farmers. The present mode of Agriculture drives many village Christians to other metros in India on seasonal migration. It also coerces many small farmers to abandon agricultural and seek alternative sources of livelihood. The crisis in agriculture is precipitating rather than bringing respite and comfort to millions who know no other option in life.

The second biggest challenge is to address a total disconnect between Faith and Agriculture. The only time Pastors come nearer to farming is at the time of Harvest Festival. Bible, which the villages hold in sacred esteem remains a closed book to inspire and motivate people to continue in the sacred profession of feeding the hungry.

The third dimension which ropes in the posh city dwellers to the rustic agricultural workers is the serious business of producing safe food. Since Agriculture is such an important domain that it is all the more important that we look at farming with eyes of faith.

So, our journey began with organizing Agricultural Workers Fellowship across the Church of South India. It became evident that when we spoke about the Bible and Agriculture it was like music in the ears of Agricultural Workers across the four Southern States of India. Our search also led us towards sustainable and eco agriculture with less external inputs into farming activity. Thus began our journey as Pastors and Bible Pundits to visit Organic Farmers and become a "Listeners Group" rather than a preaching band. The present Bible Study themes were chosen in one such organic farm run by Dr. Narayan Reddy at Maralavenahalli, Bangalore Rural District, Karnataka.
In the above consultation it became evident that we should also initiate production of Agro Bible addressed to one and all concerned with production and consumption of safe food.

We also tried our hand in bringing out Liturgy with Agricultural Themes. The present Bible Study project should have led us to translation of the same in four Southern languages which we could not accomplish for lack of time. Never-the-less, we believe strongly that the present initiative is the work of the Holy Spirit which hovered on earth during creation.

The cover design is based on the words of Jesus – “My Father is a Farmer” (John 15:1) and we assume that Jesus as a Carpenter may have produced agricultural tools.

Rev Dr R Daniel Premkumar
Director, Synod Diaconal Concerns

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

We deeply acknowledge the following contributors to the present Bible Study Project who took time to be with us from its earliest stage down through various processes. We especially acknowledge the contribution of Dr. George Zachariah, Rev. Dr. Dexter Maben, Rev. Victor Joshua, Rev. Praveen P S Perumalla, Rev. Vedamuthu, Rev. Dr. Chilkuri Vasantha Rao, Ms. R. Dhavamani, Rev. D.G.A Thomas, Rev. Devanand Sub buddy, Rev.Dr.B.J.Premiah and Farmers who came down from CSI Thoothukudi Nazareth Diocese to interact with Dr. Narayana Reddy and the group.

We are also grateful to Sarah Wolcott for publishing her interview with Dr Daniel Premkumar through a e-journal called: Sojourner. We thank Professor Mammen Varkey, Editor of People’s Reporter for providing us with the highlights of the crisis in agriculture which appears on the pages of inner cover.

We are grateful to EMS for providing us with the necessary funds for printing of this book.

Finally we thank Mr. Raja Singh and his team for working on the manuscript and delivering us the printed copies on time.
Emerging Hermeneutic of the Landless Tiller

In every age and region people of God engaged in struggle to usher in the Rule of God in their context have encountered the need to re-interpret their Christian faith and Bible in the emerging contexts. This process in a way ushers in the arrival of Emerging Hermeneutics. Today our context too demands similar exercise. Issues pertaining to Primacy of Rural Church, Present Non-viability of Agriculture, Hazards of Chemical Farming, Small Farmer encountering Global Seed Giants and Global Fertilizer Giants like David facing Goliath, commitment towards production of ‘Safe Food for All’ are issues that are real and no more concern of humble farmer. These issues also challenge everyone who is concerned about low carbon farming and securing safe food on their dining tables. Good News of Jesus mandates fullness of life for all. This is the challenge Emerging Hermeneutic of the Landless Tiller addresses while engaging in ecologically compliant agriculture. Thus challenge of sustainable agriculture is emerging as site today for the Emerging Hermeneutic of the Landless Tiller.

a. Landless Tillers and Small Farmers - Only Hope of Eco-agriculture

Agriculture is the main source of livelihood for millions of landless tillers and small farmers in India. They constitute 80% of farming community. Big farmers and landlords do not mind gambling with agriculture as they have their interests tied up with far more attractive occupations. But choice before agricultural labourers and small farmers is limited- fight or flight. Either they stay on the land and eke out a living or quit and join teeming masses of unskilled laborers in Metros. For landless tillers both options are like choosing between the devil and deep sea. For, the present chemical based agriculture has proved no-viable for famers with small land holdings and it prefers market compliant large estates. Further, landless tillers and small farmers and their families who are directly exposed to chemical sprays administered in farming and have no health cover as well. Government seems to have abandoned

Rev. Dr. R. Daniel Premkumar,
Director - Synod Diaconal Concerns
Primary Health Centers instead through their populist programs support corporate hospitals instead. Consequently, millions of landless tillers and small farmers are desperately looking for viable agriculture and hazard free farming. For millions of workers tied up with agriculture any change in the mode of agricultural production amounts to life and death question. No wonder then that they need to be thoroughly convinced about Eco-agriculture, an alternative to the present universal mode of farming. One good thing about eco-farming is that it brings farm animals back into agriculture tagging along with it occupation for countless number of laborers. As a silver lining, the landless and small farmers see this as a positive sign.

FMSAI - Faith Movement for Sustainable Agriculture in India has been initiated at Malapalle village in Adoni Revenue Division with small farmers belonging to four surrounding Mandal (Revenue Units). Efforts are also being made to unfold resources and best practices concerning eco-agriculture in Sacred Scriptures of living traditions zealously practiced by small farmers and landless tillers. More on FMSAI see below.

b. Agricultural Workers in Village Churches- the Invisible Entities for Churches and Seminaries

Both mainline and independent churches may claim large number of agricultural workers on their rolls but generally consider village churches as unwanted baggage. Seminaries share similar value judgment of churches and ignore 600,000 villages as a reality. Theological colleges teach trainee pastors about Bultman and Cullman but not teach them the spirituality and wisdom of kisan, the farmer. Our theology and ethics departments wrestle with sustainable energy, digital foot-prints and carbon trading but have not focused on concerns of 700 million agricultural workers. Members of village churches are neither seen nor heard. Church councils concern themselves mostly with towns and cities. In my 42 years of ministry having served at different levels in CSI, I have never experienced a separate session for agricultural workers of village churches at any level of church administration.

c. Globalization and Corporate Farming

Global giants in seed, pesticide and fertilizer sectors have taken roots in the Indian soil like fish to the water. For the global merchants of death India provides unlimited market potential and hence supports all repressive structures that keep populations at bay. Global corporate institutions wield enormous control upon economic and political policies that decide the fate of millions. Like in Philippines where Multi Nationals have purchased islands after islands for pineapple cultivation and similar feature is repeating in India. Giant private companies in India are also competing to take over large tracts of land for corporate farming. Tiller here is reduced to daily wage earner engaged in producing produce she will never taste. As more and more small farmers are driven out forcibly out of their small holdings and pushed out into overcrowded slums in Metros. Emerging Hermeneutic of the Landless Tiller questions such blatant modes of exploitation.

Church in India is also a big landlord. Like the uncomfortable teachings of Jesus, Emerging Hermeneutic of the Landless Tiller shall continue to raise disturbing questions to the church leadership.

d. Scourge of Being Dalit in Casteist Agricultural Scenario

The blatant oppressive social structure namely- caste rules every sphere of public life including agriculture. Caste reflects land holding pattern in the country as most landless agricultural workers are from Dalit background. When someone has no land holding she is rated as not credit-worthy and considered as persona-non-grata. Farmers belonging to higher castes call shots not only in economic realm but also in political leadership. Could caste equation be re-structured? Not in this life! While major living religions have blindly accepted caste, church too is transformed by it. The Emerging Hermeneutic of the Landless Tiller challenges faith communities to strive for transformative agenda of justice and equity for all by declaring freedom from the stranglehold of caste.

e. India and Bharath

We have on one hand India - the emerging economic power, IT giant, technically advanced work force, claiming world’s largest number of billionaires and exhibiting dizzy shopping malls and on the other hand, we have ‘Bharath’ representing six hundred thousand villages where there are no street lights, no drinking water, no toilets and no health facilities etc. Emerging Hermeneutics demands that 700 million people of ‘Bharath’ be given their share of importance.
Official church is equally guilty like the State. Though 80% of congregations in each Diocese belong to the rural villages, church’s priority has been riveted with the concerns of the urban church. Emerging Hermeneutic questions such lopsided loyalties.

f. Marginalization and Pauperization of Large Segment of Indian Population

The Economic Policies of the government are such that large segment of the Indian public is excluded from the gains of such a system. Economic Restructuring has benefited a few and excluded large segment of the population. Moreover, though claimed by the government that poverty levels are coming down, in fact the opposite seems to be true. Education nor health nor legal protection is accessible to many. As per the diktats of the global financial institutions the welfare basket is shrinking every year. Agriculture which is the main occupation of 70% of the populace is not the priority sector for the rulers of the country. Global corporations have made India a huge market for the rich to become richer. Emerging Hermeneutic critiques such a demonic oppression. For Nelson Mandela observes- ‘Overcoming poverty is not a task of charity, it is an act of justice. Like slavery and apartheid, poverty is not natural. It is man-made and it can be overcome and eradicated by the actions of human beings.’

g. Religious Polarization and Abuse of Spirituality

Development Mantra is so inviting that today even right wing religious outfits harp on it. Rising nationalism and religious fundamentalism join development ‘Mantra’ resulting in a deadly mix of anti-poor and anti-people conglomerate. Religion and spirituality are no more matters of personal piety but have become one with Mammon controlling public domain and political power. In the name of religious Trusts large tracts of land has been encroached by dominant castes for generations. Emerging Hermeneutic of the Landless Tiller raises alert on such naked abuse of religious faith and institutions.

h. Stirring of the Spirit: Birth of the Emerging Hermeneutic of the Landless Tiller at Maralenahalli village, Doddaballapur Taluq, Bangalore Rural District

A Listeners’ Group consisting of agricultural workers, pastors and Biblical teachers, as part of a workshop on ‘Bible and Agricultural Workers,’ organized by the CSI Synod Diaconal Concerns in July, 2012 at Maralenahalli, Doddaballapur Taluk, Bangalore Rural District, about 50 km from Bangalore city in the organic farm developed by Dr. Narayan Reddy. Dr. Reddy vividly explained the productivity in his land increased many folds by not using chemical fertilizers and inorganic pesticides. Work on the farm is carried out by his family members and Dr. Reddy himself, the philosophy being that each family works on land and sustains itself.

It is here that the seeds for Emerging Hermeneutic of the Landless Tiller were sown. However, there were precursors to the Emerging Hermeneutic like initiating Agricultural Workers Fellowship in CSI, efforts towards producing Agro Bible: Addressed to all Associated with Eco-Agriculture and Safe Food etc.

i. Good News to Agricultural Workers in Church of South India

Church of South India comprises of more village congregations than city and town congregations. All most all village congregations are entirely dependent on agriculture. However, faith of the village Christians which they so zealously hold and nourish remains totally unrelated to agriculture. No serious efforts are made to bridge this ever widening gap. But, agriculture remains village Christians’ chief source of livelihood. What more, villages serve as the rice bowls of entire nation. If that is so, should we not interface faith with agriculture? If so how?

Bible & Agriculture Workers

Bible is central to Christian faith. Opening verses in the Bible begins with the creation of land, water, animals etc. Elsewhere in the Bible, there are innumerable occurrences on agriculture related commandments ('If only you had paid attention to my commands your peace would have been like a river, your righteousness like the waves of the sea'). Bible speaks on farm practices at length. God’s judgments and promises are also extensively clothed with land and agricultural imageries (Isa 35).

Teaching of Jesus about prayer is case in point. Our understanding generally tends to be human centric, unlike the tribal world view which is earth centric. May be that is why we have not fully understood that
part in Lord’s-prayer which states – ‘Let your will be done on earth’ with its full import. ‘Earth’ here not only refers to ‘people’ equally refers to a world of human activity that transpires around land. We are asked to pray that God’s will be done in the agricultural world as it is in heaven. Further, when hundreds and thousands of farmers are committing suicide in India, Jesus’ declaration that - ‘My father is a farmer’ (John 15.1) should challenge us today even more! Lastly, Bible culminates with a grand finale, namely, New Heaven and New Earth.

**Pentecost & Agricultural Workers**

Church came into being at Pentecost (Acts 2). Ordinary people who assembled on that day on whom the Holy Spirit descended were able to do acts beyond their abilities. We are told that they were able to speak in tongues unknown to them and were able to share their worldly goods with those who did not have. The same Pentecostal Spirit is ready to descend on those in the Farm world today as well. Take for example speaking out the inner groans of those farmers who have committed suicide, airing out the dejection of women farm workers who receive lesser wage than their male counterparts for same labor, or, to echo the cry of dereliction of the landless in the corridors of Parliament, or, try and demand for those who suffer silently because the life giving irrigation canals never reach their lands. Such Pentecostal speaking of tongues in today's farm world is most essential and urgent. Secondly, Farm Workers Fellowship also earnestly pursues Pentecostal sharing of worldly goods like land and water with those who have none. For time immemorial blood has been split, murders committed, wars waged for possession of land, while Pentecostal experience calls for sharing of land with the landless or return the lands to the rightful claimants whatever the costs involved. This is a tall order, but it is a Pentecostal mandate the Agricultural Workers Fellowship shall strive to follow.

**Agricultural Workers Fellowship** enables CSI Village Churches to experience such Pentecostal experience.

We also need to address extremely critical issues that affect the entire nation like viable agriculture, food security for all, organic practices in farming etc. That is why we need strong advocacy group joining the campaign for pro-farmer agriculture policies both in the State and Centre. Let us hope and pray that CSI village Christians shall carve out a niche for themselves as State and National players in spearhead such a role in future.

**j. Agro Bible Addressed to All Associated with Eco-Agriculture & Safe Food**

Agriculture today is in crisis and has become non-viable. Alarming number of farmers are abandoning agriculture for more lucrative livelihoods.

Millions of village Christians across the country share similar uncertainties besetting farming community across the country. All the same, these tillers of land love their Bible and zealously hold on to their Christian faith. However, Bible rings out with most powerful message teaching us how to overcome most ills impacting agriculture today. Bible is farmer friendly and is replete with agricultural imageries. It has elaborate sections on agricultural ethics teaching us how to treat the orphans, widows and the strangers in sharing the produce. The organic world view Bible propagates addresses the root of the problem in agriculture today.

There is urgent need to produce Agro Bible which could serve as a faith resource to overcome critical issues plaguing agriculture today. Agro Bible serves not only Christian farmers but people of all faiths desperately looking for perspectival solutions to crisis in agriculture today. Agro Bible addresses not only rural populace associated with agriculture but millions of city dwellers concerned with food availability. UN Food experts claim warn that there is going to be severe food shortage in by 2020. Thus, Agro Bible serves as inspiration to all those toiling towards Food Security.

Agro Bible shall primarily include the voices of Agricultural workers, their faith, anxieties and dreams. Panel also include a sizeable number of women agricultural workers their specific issues as well. Bible pundits, Pastors and subject experts on the panel shall play that of facilitator role. Women and men agricultural workers, Bible Pundits and subject experts who shall serve on Agro Bible are being finalized.

**Expression of Interest by BSI and PROK, Korean Church:** Bible Society of India has expressed its interest in joining the project. So also, PROK
has expressed her interest to participate in this process so that such an initiative becomes Asian response to eco-agriculture.

k. **Fruit of the Spirit: Grounding of Emerging Hermeneutic of the Landless Tiller through Faith Movement of Sustainable Agriculture in India (FMSAI) at Malapalle, Adoni Revenue Division**

**Agricultural Workers’ Testament**

We, Agricultural Workers, individuals and movements concerned about safe food drawn from diverse churches and denominations affirm sustainable eco-agriculture. In the name of Jesus, Son of greatest sustainable farmer (John 15.1) we strive to adhere to the Ten Commandments below -

**Ten Ground Principles**

1. Thou shall as confessing believers in Jesus, be committed to sustainable eco-agriculture and be engaged in producing life – giving food without traces of poisonous chemicals.

2. Thou shall ensure that women agricultural workers are paid just and equitable wages on par with their male counterparts.

3. Thou shall take steps to ensure bio-diversity and preserve seed varieties that are native to your region.

4. Thou shall strive for food security for all (John 10:10) especially with the excluded – the landless and disadvantaged sections.

5. Thou shall network with institutions that promote fair-trade marketing avenues for sustainable eco-agri produce.

6. Thou shall take initiatives and enable all those adolescents and youth who have abandoned agriculture to return to farming and pursue sacred vocation of producing poison free food.

7. Thou shall strive to rejuvenate village crafts, folk-arts and all around development of villages.

8. Thou shall strive to lobby for pro-farmer and pro-sustainable agri policies by the government and if not immediate stoppage demand at least equal share with sustainable farmers in what government doles out to private companies producing chemical pesticides and fertilizers.

9. Thou shall strive to re-vitalize village church and her leadership and enable her to become truly leaven and salt of the village, agricultural land farm animals.

10. Thou shall following the call of greatest sustainable farmer – the Father of Jesus (John 15:1) and join hands with likeminded agri - workers and farmers' movements for achieving sustainable eco-agriculture at least by 2020.

Amen!

**Organization:**

Change over from present chemical farming to sustainable eco-agriculture needs at least a collective of ten farmers and their promoters to come together to arrive at critical resolve and seek to ground strategic initiatives. Such FMSAI - Clusters may net work with **Agro Faith Collective**, Malapalle, Mantralayam Mandal, Kurnool District of AP, 08512-231 448, 094905 20675; <agro.faith.collective@aol.com>
Ideal Bible Studies for Agricultural Workers in Village Churches

A. Bible Studies for Agricultural Workers in Village Churches: Ideal Bible Study Format

1. Introducing the Theme of the Bible study
2. Reading of the text
3. Context of the text
4. Exegesis
5. Context of the agricultural workers
6. Praxis: To understand challenges emerging out of text to context and vice versa
7. Conclusion
8. Questions for discussion

Word limit – 1500-2000 words in A 4 typed format.

B. Bible Studies for Agricultural Workers in Village Churches: Ideal Bible Study Themes

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Rev. Dr. R. Daniel Premkumar
God as the Author of Agriculture

"As long as the world exists, there will be a time for planting and a time for harvest. There will always be cold and heat, summer and winter, day and night." (Gen. 8:22)

God is the source of agricultural wisdom:

God teaches agriculture about ploughing, sowing, threshing and other agricultural work:

"Listen to what I am saying; pay attention to what I am telling you. No farmer goes on constantly ploughing his fields and getting them ready for sowing. Once he has prepared the soil, he sows the seeds of herbs such as dill and cumin. He sows rows of wheat and barley, and at the edges of his fields he sows other grain. He knows how to do his work, because God has taught him. He never uses a heavy club to beat out dill seeds or cumin seeds; instead he uses light sticks of the proper size. He does not ruin the wheat by threshing it endlessly, and he knows how to thresh it by driving a cart over it without bruising the grains. All this wisdom comes from the LORD Almighty. The plans God makes are wise and they always succeed!" (Isaiah 28:23-29TEV)

Thus agriculture is a divine endeavor. The Hebrew word for human being is 'Adam' and the word of earth is 'Adamah' these two words depict the intrinsic relationship of each other. The humanity is to be engaged with the earth. "Then the LORD God placed the man in the Garden of Eden to cultivate it and guard it." (Gen. 2:15).

In Bible there are Laws regulating ploughing, such as: "Do not yoke an ox and a donkey together for ploughing." (Deut. 22:10). Laws regulating harvesting, such as: "When you gather your crops and fail to bring in some of the corn that you have cut, do not go back for it; it is to be left for the foreigners, orphans, and widows, so that the LORD your God will bless you in everything you do." (Deut. 24:19). Laws regulating threshing, such as: "Do not muzzle an ox when you are using it to thresh corn." (Deut. 25:4). God's blessings to a person were centered on a promising agricultural life (Deut. 33:13, 16 and 28). This concept that God is the source of agricultural life is echoed time and again in the Hebrew Scriptures, such as: "You make grass grow for cattle and plants for man to use, so that he can grow his crops." (Psalm 104:14).

Leaders in the Bible were Agriculturists

Gideon was called by God to be a judge, while he was threshing wheat (Jdg. 6:11); Elisha was called to be a prophet when he was ploughing (1 Kgs. 19:19); Saul was called to be a leader and king when he was returning from the field with his oxen (1 Sam. 11:5). Among the kings, Uzziah is characterized as the one who loved the soil. "Because he loved farming, he encouraged the people to plant vineyards in the hill-country and to farm the fertile land." (II Chr. 26:10).

Bible mentions growing different kinds of fruits, vegetables and spices. Cereals and legumes were the earliest cultivated food plants in ancient Israel. The phrase 'corn, new wine, and oil' occurs frequently in the Hebrew Scriptures.

Num. 18:12; Deut. 7:13, 11:14, 12:17, 14:23, 18:4, 28:51; Jer. 31:12; Hos. 2:10; Joel 1:10,2:19; Hag. 1:11; Neh. 5:11, II Chr. 31:5,32:28). This indicates how cereal farming, viticulture, and oil cultivation was so native to Israel. Agriculture was the main source for the regulation of the economic life of the Israelites. Biblical passages like Deut. 24:6-25:4 taking particular notice of Deut. 24:19,20,21 and Deut. 25:4 show that agriculture played a dominant role in the Israelite religion, Israelite jurisprudence, Israelite social conduct and in Israelite festivals.

Festivals in Israel were Agricultural Festivals

The three major Israelite festivals are agricultural festivals. Exodus 23:14-17 and Deut.16 give us a vivid description and rules regulating these festivals.

The first of the three festivals was the 'feast of the unleavened bread' (Deut. 16:1-8), this was a harvest festival celebrated in the spring time. It marked the ceremony of the barley sheaf. The feast of 'Passover' was held at the same time as that of 'unleavened bread', and the two became
one major festival and the deliverance from Egypt was commemorated during this celebration.

The second festival was the ‘feast of weeks’ (Deut.16:9-12) also called the ‘feast of harvest’ (Exod.23:16), ‘day of the first fruits’ (Num.28:26) and ‘Pentecost’ (I Cor.16:8). On this day the first fruits of the wheat harvest were presented to God.

The third festival was the ‘feast of In-Gathering’ (Exod.23:16), also called the ‘feast’ (I kgs.8:2; I I Ch.7:8; Neh.8:14; Isa.30:29 & Ezk.45:23); the ‘feast of the LORD’ (Lew.23:29; Jue.21:19) and the ‘festival of shelters/tabernacles/booths’ (Deut.16:13-17; I I Ch.8:13). This festival of In-Gathering or in other words ‘Fruit-Gathering’ was celebrated with great joy in the autumn, at the completion of the agriculture year. The word ‘shelter’ or in other words ‘Fruit-Gathering’ was derived from an agricultural practice, where the Israelite farmers in order to protect their olive orchards in the month of harvest (September) used to guard them by night, standing on ‘shelters’ constructed of branches and vines.

Conclusion:

In this age of commercialization of land and the alienation of people from agriculture the testimony of the Bible to God as progenitor and propagator of agriculture, the people of Israel as devoted experts of agriculture do lead us into our own affirmation of agriculture as the Church and the children of the God of the agriculture. The Bible vision, mandate, laws, social stipulations and festivals regarding agriculture will become the theological and biblical basis for our commitment to agriculture. The lands that the Church possesses are God’s preparation of the Church to this special mission of agriculture. God is glorified in every agricultural practice, creation is honored and the society is safe guarded from hunger and want.

"May God give you dew from heaven and make your fields fertile! May he give you plenty of corn and wine!" (Gen.27:28).

God the Seed Giver

Introduction:

God created the heavens and the earth by the mighty word. God created humans in his own image. God gives freedom to living creature to multiply and have progeny.

Relevance of the Bible study:

God is the creator and gives seed to all living creatures. The Hebrew word ‘zra’ used for the seed.

Text: Genesis 1: 28 to 30

Sixth day of creation concerns creating humans. Text says God gave humans all authority over the rest of the creation.

Be Fruitful and Multiply:

The verse 28 says that the Lord blesses the humankind. On the Fifth Day the Lord blesses sea creatures and the winged birds and to multiply. God desires that entire creation lives in harmony. Hence, each and every creature is given the right to procreate and perpetuate their seed.

Dominion over:

Text about bestowing humans dominion over or rule over entire creation is misunderstand. Rule over means that humans live together in harmony with other creatures.

Yielding Seed:

God gives rights for every creature to multiply its own descendents. In this way God created seed bearing plants and trees because God’s act of of creation happens only once. Thereafter, all living beings should sustain themselves there after. That is the law of creation involving all plants and trees as well. Humans need to appreciate this law.

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This Bible study written by Rev. S. Vethamuthu, CSI Thiruvadanai Pastorate in Madurai-Ramnad Diocese.
Meaning of the text:

We may thus say that God has the copy right of entire created order. God is life giver for entire creation (Nehemiah 9: 6). If humans seek to bring any change in God’s created order, it will be against God’s plan.

Text Speaks to us Today

God repeatedly calls his creation 'Good' (Genesis 1:4, 10, 12, 18, 21, 25,31).

Many have pointed to Genesis 1:28 to claim license to do whatever they please with creation (i.e. air pollution, extinction of animal and plant species). Humans having dominion over creation does not amount to outright exploitation over created order. This is not advocated or condoned in Scripture. Because, Genesis 1:28 gives blessing and mandate to humans before the Fall and secondly, this passage needs to be understood not in isolation, but in the content of the rest of the Bible, which teaches us that to have dominion means responsible stewardship.

In 29th verse mentions about God creating seed bearing plants and fruit yielding trees. Every tree and plant has freedom to multiply over all the earth.

But today, we speak about GM technology that impacts genetic code of living beings. Today we hear about seedless fruits terminator seeds. So farmers have lost their traditional seeds and depend on multinational companies for farming.

Three is a proverb 'food is a medicine'. God provides seeds & herbs for all creatures (Gen 1:30). The Lord is not only the creator but also the protector.

Conclusion:

God gave humans special role and responsibility as stewards of creation. Part of our human dignity is tied to God’s entrusting us with stewardship over creation. When God gave human dominion over creation, the intent was not for us to destroy creation, but to preserve and care for it so it could benefit all people and creatures for generations to come.

Is Agriculture a Blessing or Curse?

The Biblical documents are enriched with the histories of people rooted in agriculture - with land, water, landscape etc.

Reading the Biblical Texts on Agriculture: A Background Study

The Biblical text Leviticus 26: 3-13 explains Agri-culture as God’s blessing. The wider implication of the text is to save the Biblical Israel from going back to Egypt- a slave mode of social relationships (v.13). The Blessing, as explained in the above text, is a promise of fertility and abundant harvests (v.4f, 9f), peace from wild animals (v. 6). It is also peace from foreign invaders and absence of war (v. 6). In contrast, the curse includes diseases, infertility (v. 16, 20), incursion of enemy troops (v. 17), no rains (v. 19), attack by wild animals (v. 22) etc. Deuteronomy 28 is centred on City culture. Even in the Biblical studies the use of sociological and multi-disciplined approach was adopted by many scholars such as George Mendenhall and Norman Gottwald, who could locate the text within its geographical, socio-economic and socio-cultural backdrop and recaptured the history of Israel.

adama, adam and hawwa in Agricultural Relationship:

The relationship between adama/ fertile soil or red soil and adam is intrinsic, organic and life producing, which can be understood in terms of agricultural relationships. The relationship between adama and adam is narrated in Genesis 2:7, in which adam was formed out of adama. Some of the issues addressed through agricultural relationship are relationship between adama and adam; adam and hawwa; blessing and curse. 

adama and adam:

The relationship between adama and adam is discussed in the language of agriculture. They both relate with each other in the Garden of Eden. The term garden (gan) in Hebrew denotes irrigation.

Rev. Dr. Praveen P. S. Perumalla, ACTC, Hyderabad
supported agriculture (Numbers 24:6), for which the springs beneath the earth (Genesis 2:6) feeds the earth (Genesis 2:6). Meaning of the two rivers namely Pishon denotes to spring up and Gihon denotes to burst forth (Genesis 2:11, 13). Four rivers namely Pishon, Gihon, Tigris and Euphrates can't be located at one place from geographical point of view. Such organic relationship between the adama and sweet river waters has given out adam. Therefore, by virtue of origin itself adam is inseparable with the soil, one who understands the dynamics within the garden- to till and to keep, as instructed by God's self (Genesis 2:15). The dynamics of the garden is explained as adama giving out various plants, trees, and animals etc, what is called usually as beings. The relationship between adam and rest of the beings is said to be within the agricultural labour. Different animal and bird species assists adam in agricultural works. The adam has given them names is to explain domestication in relation to agricultural works (Genesis 2:19). Various kinds of plants also have definite role in nurturing all the beings of the earth. Such variety of relationships in the garden can be explained as bio-diversity in the garden and also agricultural relationships that enriches the bio-diversity. With in such agricultural relationships the adam was to exercise restrain such as not to eat from the tree of knowledge of good and evil. As long as adam maintains restrain adam lives; failing which the adam suffers death (Genesis 2:17). The intrinsic relationship between various beings in the garden that includes both adama and sweet waters of earths river can't be separated. For the reason that they nurture each other; such a relationship of nurturing is organic. Locating adam with in the intrinsic and organic relationship with the adama is one way of dealing with the binary of 'History versus Nature' problem in which the History has been attributed to adam at the cost of nature – intrinsic and organic relationship between nature and human.

adama- Adam and Hawwa/ Eve:

The agricultural relationship between adama and adam didn't stop. It further gave room for creation of adam and hawwa. Production of life in terms of God's image further binds agricultural relationships, embedded with its intrinsic and organic value as discussed above; a value of nurturing one another; creation of Adam and Hawwa from the generic adam. The creative potentiality among the Adam and Hawwa engages in the acts of tilling of soil to facilitate life giving gases to percolate through; facilitate the irrigation to nurture the topsoil; further facilitate sowing of seeds and continue to engage to keep it as garden with enriched bio-diversity. The production of life become possible within the agricultural relationships that keeps the biodiversity on one hand and also image of God.

Agriculture: Is it a Blessing or Curse?

Agriculture from Biblical theology can be affirmed as a blessing. The word Blessing in modern sense denotes prosperity, accumulation of riches; agreeing to be rich at the cost of creating poverty that intern finds legitimacy from god. In contrast to the modern meaning attributed to the said word, the Biblical meaning of God's blessings has to do with God being in relationship within the agriculture.

The blessing of God can be summarised within the agricultural relationships. It is the presence of God with the beings of God's creation through service at the times of their desperation; extending fellowship to them and also confronting them at times; God as farmer, a Gardener, who desires to carryout Gods image through agricultural relationships.

When Adam and Hawwa were sent out of the Garden of Eden it was to the hills that they left. But, the promise of their survival was in their maintenance of agricultural relationships as tillers and keeper of soil. The curse as mentioned in Genesis 3 is not that Adam cease to be the tiler and keeper of soil, instead, agriculture becomes a difficult task, ...(By) the sweat of your (Adam) face you shall eat bread until you return to the ground... (Genesis 3:19). Likewise the soil produces thorns and thistles (Genesis 3:18) that points to terrain agriculture where water sources are not much and one has to depend on rain waters for cultivation. It is once again the vision of Garden that sustains the life in the hill country as well.

Text Posing Questions to Our Context:

1. The Christian missions have segregated agricultural activity from its missionary work. It created compartmentalization of 'spiritual versus material' and placed the Christian missionary works as spiritual, therefore, it shouldn't mix with the material works. It has nurtured an alien value that divided the rural communities. For instance in rural India, the Christian community was never separated from rest of their community
members even after they embraced Christian faith, which includes rural Pastor as well. But the Christian Missionary Societies have segregated Pastors from being one with the community. The Pastors have been assigned only to preach and earn their living through either offerings or on salary. When God of the Bible is inferred as one engaged in agriculture, planted Garden etc, and Jesus Christ is explained as Good Shepherd, How to recover Christian Mission as to till and keep the soils; to rebuild organic relationships in wider society?

2. The modern sciences with its managerial studies and other forms of technical studies have induced an alien value that nurtures the opposites of 'civilised versus backward' or 'rural verses urban'; 'monoculture versus bio-diversity' etc. Using such opposites the educated youths are brain washed to despise agriculture and take delight to migrate to the urban centres and be in service sector- a tertiary sector. How theological theme image of God in terms of being agricultural relationship between Soil, God and Human and to work towards keeping the biodiversity can re-orient to overcome the above said binaries?

3. Segregation of men and women in a Patriarchal social relationship, where women have been confined to home making and men are active in production units, decision making. Such segregation was possible because of the opposite 'men versus women', 'man as bread winner versus woman as housewife' etc, some gets reinforced on each generation. Because of which the agriculture is gone out of the women's hands; into the hands of chemical industries and heavy machines etc. Such a shift, moving agriculture from the hands of women has resulted in increased violence on women and girl children. The increased dowry deaths, increased infanticide and so on needs to be looked into from shift in agriculture point of view. How theological theme hawwa was like adam can serve the purpose of over coming the binary 'man vs woman' and nurture into agri-culture in which God's role becomes a way to turn agriculture into blessing and not a curse.

Ruth - A Woman Agricultural Laborer of a Bygone Era

INTRODUCTION

In today's context, agricultural workers face innumerable problems, especially woman agricultural workers face abuse and exploitation. Let us see one woman agriculture worker, who had a bitter experience in the Bible. Ruth was an agriculture laborer.

Ruth 2: 8-10

A man name called Elimelech lived in Bethlehem with his wife and two male children. There was a famine in the land. So, Elimelech and his family went to live in the up-country of Moab. His wife named Naomi had two sons - Mahlon and Chilion. In Hebrew, Ruth means 'friend'. Boaz means 'God is powerful'. The name Naomi means 'sweetness'. Elimelech means 'God is my king'.

Later, we are told that Elimelech died and Naomi was left with her two sons. These two young men took Moabite wives. The name of the first was Orpah and the other was Ruth. They lived for ten years. Then, the sons also died. Naomi was left without her husband and her two sons in the foreign land of Moab.

Naomi decided to go back to her native land -Bethlehem (which means 'House of Bread'). So, she called her daughters-in-law and advised them likewise to go to their own native lands. Orpah went to her native place. But, Ruth decided to go to Bethlehem with Naomi. Ruth said, "Don't urge me to leave you or to turn back from you. Where you go I will go, and where you stay I will stay. Your people will be my people and your God my God'. Both of the widows reached Bethlehem during the harvest time of wheat. To fulfill their daily needs, Ruth asked permission from her mother-in-law to go for gleaning the barley and wheat. Even though Ruth was stranger to that place, she was brave to collect the wheat for their livelihood. When Ruth went to the field, fortunately that land belonged to Boaz, who was the kinsman of Elimelech. She got the protection from Boaz. As per Naomi's consent, Ruth asked Boaz to marry her.

Ms. R. Dhavamani
Madurai - Ramnad Diocese
TEXT SPEAKING TO THE CONTEXT

Naomi and Ruth were women agricultural workers. They were moving from the country of Moab to Bethlehem. In general, the women agriculture workers are not treated equal to men. They were not paid equal to men. They faced abuses by their land lords and other workers. Naomi and Ruth were in same situation. Naomi lost her husband and sons in the land of Moab. These women lived in unsafe condition.

We see similar conditions prevailing today.

As per Naomi's statement, Ruth worked at Boaz field. Because in other fields men would tease them. Today, Dalit women agricultural workers suffer similar problem. They have no protection over their lives.

CONCLUSION

Today, many women agricultural workers suffer similar plight like Naomi and Ruth. We have work for the deliverance and rights of the women agriculture workers. In our church large number of people are engaged in agriculture and 75% are Dalits. Most of these are agricultural workers. What message we have from the Bible for the women agricultural workers in our villages?

Echoes of Agriculture in Lord's Supper

Text: John 12:24.25

"I tell you the truth, unless a corn of wheat falls to the ground and dies, it remains only a single seed. But if it dies, it produces many seeds. The man who loves life will loses it. While he who hates his life in this world, will keep it for eternal life."

The passage in St. John's Gospel ch.12 is a prelude to the Passover meal which Jesus celebrated with his Disciples. In Chapter 13:vs.1 and 2 we read about the Passover celebration. Jesus uses this meal to reinterpret the values and ways of the Kingdom of God.

The Eucharist has a connection to the Passover meal as they both declare God's act of redemption. While the Passover narrated God's act of redemption in the past, the Eucharist seeks fulfillment to the continuing act of God's redemption to the world, through the life, work and commitment of a believer, for the present and for the future following the example of Jesus. That is why Jesus repeats saying, while part-taking the cup and breaking the bread: "do this in remembrance of me."

Every Jew who celebrated the Passover festival knew the significance of this festival. It is a remembrance of God's act of redemption, as the Israelites were freed from the bondage of slavery from the Egypt. Therefore, it is also a festival of 'thanksgiving'.

Secondly, this act of redemption has bestowed on the Israelites dignity and selfhood, from being a 'no people' to becoming God's own chosen people with a covenant to bind God and His people in Partnership in God's act of redemption. While God is the source of redemption, His people are instruments of dispensation of this redeeming and saving act of God.

The Israelites from being a wandering people, were given identity and dignity as they inherit a land, on which they could plough, cultivate and grow crops for their own sustenance and towards the support of others.

Rev. J Victor Joshua,
Bangalore
Thus the Passover unfolds the story of God’s redeeming act and recalls their experience of God ‘walking with them and talking to them, and granting them His **covenantal relationship** through the Commandments given to them on Mount Sinai.

The central message of the Passover festival is that God loves and He cares. He is mindful of the suffering of his people and redeems them from bondage and slavery.

Jesus uses this symbol and analogy, familiar to all Israelites and connects his own life of love, sacrifice and humility in the service of God and people, as the way, ‘the marga’ for a new covenantal relationship with God. This shall be the sign and a symbol as a ‘sacrament’ for this new order in Jesus Christ. It is a point of reference for redeeming act of God in the life of a believer. In John 13:15 we read, I have set you an example that you should do as I have done for you.”

How does this connect to the passage where Jesus speaks of the grain of wheat falling to the ground and dying in order to produce more? This is a direct analogy to the life of Jesus. Jesus has spent his life in the service of others- restoring the out castes, bringing into fellowship, those who were marginalized, giving assurance and reassurance to those that have no place or worth in the society. “The Son of Man has come to seek and save the lost”; “The Son of Man has come not to be served but to serve and to give his life a ransom for many”

Jesus presents to his disciples a life of love, sacrifice and self denial.

This is what the grain of wheat that falls to the ground represents.

_Agricultural Worker Today:_

The tiller is familiar with the process of tilling the ground and sowing the seed to raise the crop. He is aware of the process of the death and decay of the seed under the watchful eyes of the tiller, in order that a new life could germinate out of it – into a new plant, a new fruit and many new seeds that benefits a thousand more. That is the magic of sacrifice in love and humility- that it would generate a life sustaining act a thousand fold. That is that divine act that comes as an example, as a ‘role model’ in and through the life of Jesus.
Echoes of Agriculture in Parables

(Mathew 13:1-9)

1. Introduction

Agriculture has been one of the primary professions during the history of humankind. If there is a common profession that is depicted all through the Bible, it is Agriculture, which is related to land, soil, and wages among many other themes. Our world today is crying for basic necessities like food, livelihood, water, which are all in some way connected to the way we approach agriculture. We may only imagine that all our forms of globalization and modernization are answers to our problems, but the answer lies in agriculture. In India, where agriculture constitutes the major work that people are involved, it has become imperative to rediscover the Biblical message for us today. It is also important to address the issues of the agricultural workers and the challenges that they face, in order to sustain their lives and the lives of the others.

2. Reading of the Text

Parables are stories which have a spiritual meaning, but describe situations of everyday life. Jesus used this probably, to make his teachings vivid and memorable. The listeners were compelled to take a position, and not be neutral in their response to Jesus.

In Matthew, Jesus is portrayed, as a teacher. Chapter 13, contains, what is generally known as, the parables of the kingdom.

3. Context of the Parable

Thus far, Jesus was teaching in the Synagogue, he was addressing people who were part of the religious structures. But here, Jesus began to teach outdoors. He moves to people who were mostly poor peasants, agricultural workers, people who had no time for religious discourse.

Rev. Dr. Dexter S. Maben is a presbyter of the CSI Karnataka Central Diocese, serving as Associate Professor, New Testament, at the United Theological College, Bangalore.

Maybe people out of the Synagogue were more responsive, than people inside. The crowds that followed Jesus listening to his teaching and observing his miracles were amazed and said, “Can this be the Son of David?” (Matt 12:23), but their leaders told them, he was not. Beginning with the parable, being discussed here, Jesus narrates seven parables. It begins with the importance, with an explanation by Jesus of the purpose in using the parables and then an explanation of the parable. All the seven parables are often described as “parables of the kingdom,” describing the values of the kingdom, which was the core of Jesus’ teaching. While the parables did have a spiritual meaning, we cannot overlook the social reality, which Jesus was addressing. The reality of Galilee and Judea, which Jesus mostly taught and travelled, was mostly rural, poor and agriculture and fishing being the mainstay of the economy.

4. Exegesis

This parable has generally been understood as the farmer representing Jesus, the soil representing Israel, and the seed representing the proclamation of the kingdom. The parable has generally been understood as a contrast between the results of acceptance and rejection of the gospel message.

In this parable, we need to focus on three aspects, the **Sower, Soil and the Seed.**

4.1 The Sower

The parable highlights the role of the sower, in the saying ‘A sower went out to sow’ (13:3). During the time of Jesus, farming was as traditional as in India today, with the farmer sowing with his hands and not with machines. The act of sowing is one of the most important skills of a farmer. And as he sowed, not all fell on the ground, but some fell on the path, others on rocky ground, and others on the thorns (vv.4-7). But only what fell on the good soil produced grain, a hundredfold, some sixty some thirty (v.8). Sower needs to be skilled to ensure that most of the seeds will fall on good soil and not on unproductive places.

4.2 Soil

The parable also highlights the role of only the ‘good’ soil producing grain (v.8). When there is rocky ground without ‘much soil’ and no ‘depth
of soil’ (v.5), there is no productivity. The soil determines the productivity. It is important for the farmer to identify the good soil exclusively, not shadowing it with other unproductive surfaces. A productive surface is also a very receptive surface. The role of soil in the whole aspect of productivity is striking. The role of soil is directly related to the sower and his ownership of the land. The parable while emphasizing the different kinds of soil also emphasizes the importance of the right and timely utility of soil, but the agricultural worker. Jesus was fully aware of the role of soil in agriculture and its implications.

4.3 Seed

A seed needs to be good, but also should reach its intended destination. The parable explains that the ‘birds came and devoured’ the seeds that fell on the path (v.4). The seeds that fell on rocky ground were ‘scorched.’ ‘And since they had no root, they withered away’ (v.6). The seeds that fell among the thorns were ‘choked’ (v.7). So, the seeds are natural and needs natural nurture and care, and have optimum utility, when used in the right way. References to seeds in the biblical narrative are about life, which sprouts, and is productive. Seed is indicative of the role of God’s purpose in creation, for the sustenance of furtherance of his creation. Seed indicates the continuity of God’s creative act in the new creation, where creation is actively participating in the continuing work of God.

5. Context of the Agricultural workers in India

5.1 Sower

The agricultural worker deserves attention and solidarity. The aspects of skill and benefits are vital to an agricultural worker. In India, although agriculture is the mainstay of the economy, it is not reflected in the schemes and finances allotted to agriculture in the plans of the Government. While the service sector is important for an economy, it is sad, that the agricultural sector has not received the derived attention from the Government, society or the nation at large. The ministry of Jesus reminds us that Jesus was well connected with the agricultural workers. He was aware of their needs and importance in society. The ministry of Jesus also assumes that sowers were mostly men, because that was probably the reality. But today, agricultural workers, includes men and women, because the role of women is not secondary to men, but is one of partnership.

5.2 Soil

Soil is a precious gift of God, a sharing of resources for all. However, like all other forms of living, soil needs to be preserved, sustained and nurtured to be productive. Farm workers in India are promised high productivity at a short time, through the use of chemical fertilizers. The fertilizers seem to help in high yield, but results in the degeneration of soil, which loses all the natural ingredients. A natural nurture of soil is hampered by artificial nurture. The parable talks of the ‘depth’ of the soil, which is so very real in our modern context. As degradation of the soil happens, layers of soil become unproductive and the depth of the soil, required for any productive farming, is missing. It is important that the right crop for the right soil is practiced, rather than imposing a crop on a soil, just because of commercial value.

5.3 Seed

Seeds are a critical aspect in farming. Seeds were traditionally grown and developed by our farmers in India. However, recently, seeds have been marketed by transnational companies, promising better productivity. Seeds that are commercially developed are sold at prices with high profit margins, leaving a small farmer in our country completely helpless and vulnerable. Natural seeds are in the parabolic language, 'scorched' and 'choked,' by companies with the sole intention of profit. Interestingly many of the companies, who are based in western countries, do not have a big market in their own countries, but exploit weak governance in poorer countries, to sell their products. Sadly, the leaders of governments like India, promote such seed companies, just to further their own interests.

6. Challenges from text to the context

The parables reflect the earthly realities encountered by Jesus in his earthly journey. Land and agriculture are dominant themes in the traditions surrounding Jesus, especially the parables. The parables have the potential to address real people and real issues in our own times, especially in our own country, where agriculture is a dominant
way of life for most people. The three dominant themes of Sower, Soil and Seed remind us that all three are important and indispensable, and importantly, all are related to life. They help us to understand life in its fullness, and not form the point of view of human life alone.

7. Conclusion

One of the ways Jesus taught effectively is through parables, which is predominant in the Gospel of Matthew. Jesus moved out of the comfort zone in the Synagogue to the streets, fields, marketplaces and homes. Jesus was sensitive to the needs of the people and was able to demonstrate his compassionate justice to the people, who are poor, marginalized and alienated from the mainstream of society. The Parable is a reminder that we need to move out and go to the people, mainly, agricultural workers, who are finding it hard to sustain their lives as a whole. The Church cannot ignore a significant segment of its people, who are poor and dependent on land, but also to be concerned about agricultural workers at large. The call of Jesus is, 'He who has ears, let him hear' (Matt 13:9).

Echoes of Agriculture in Lord's Prayer

"Give us today our daily bread. And forgive us our debts."
(Matt. 6.11, 12 a)

Introduction

Jesus had great concern for the toiling people of Galilee. He knew how they suffered under the unjust Roman rulers. Much of their hard earned income was depleted paying taxes to the Romans. Therefore, their day to day existence was one of anxiety and struggle. Jesus also knew how/why the poor could not have recourse to their own religious authorities either. He found these Jewish leaders insensitive and indifferent to the plight of the poor. Instead of bringing Yahweh's message of mercy and hope to these unfortunate faithful and soothe their pain and agony, they chose to appease the Romans. They used the Temple and Torah to serve their own interest and to maintain status quo. So, in his teachings, Jesus openly criticized the hypocrisy of the priests, the scribes and the Pharisees proclaiming himself as the messiah of the oppressed poor. No wonder, the Galilean multitude followed Jesus wherever he went. And Jesus taught them the ways of the LORD (Yahweh) and the meaning of true spirituality as enunciated in the Law and the prophets. He cautioned the people not to be fooled by the teachings of their community leaders, but instead put their trust in God.

The teaching of Jesus on Prayer in Matt. 6.5-13 powerfully brings out his solidarity with the Galilean poor. In simple language, using minimum words Jesus first negates the false teachings of the hypocritical leaders concerning prayer. And then he teaches them what prayer really is and how to pray to be acceptable in the sight of God. It is here we find the timeless jewel, 'The Lord's Prayer' - the most said prayer by Christians down the ages. It constantly reminds the faithful to be aware that they are praying to a God who knows what they need before they ask him (Matt. 6.8).

The Lord's Prayer

In the 'Lord's Prayer' Jesus articulates the struggles and aspirations of an afflicted community. The faith community puts its absolute trust

Rev. Dr. Stanley JG Thangaraj
Hyderabad
in and dependence on God for their day to day sustenance (v. 11, 12a - ‘Give us today our daily bread, and forgive our debts...’); and also for the ultimate freedom from the oppressors who inflict suffering and pain (v. 13 - ‘Do not put us to the test, but save us from the evil one’).

‘Stay of bread’ and ‘stay of water’ are the basic resources to sustain life (I Kg. 18.4, 13; Job 22.7; Ps. 105.16; Isa. 3.1). So, it is natural for the hungry to long for food for their daily sustenance. Jesus aptly articulates this basic need of the Galilean poor in the prayer he taught them – ‘Give us today our daily bread’. How very much apt is this prayer even today for the poor of India who go to bed every night hungry! Sad to say, India has the largest number of hungry and also under-nourished people in the world (Global Hunger Index 2012). Without food-security the poor in India are forced into debts to buy food. In the absence of a state that cares for the poor, where else can the impoverished carrying a heavy burden of debt appeal for food, but to God? So, the cry, ‘forgive our debts’ emerge from their struggle for survival.

**Painful Prayer of Peasants**

It makes sense when the hungry pray for bread hoping that God would provide and satisfy their hunger. But God does not drop ‘manna packets’ from heaven. Instead, the divine provision is sourced from the produce of the land on earth. In other words, food supply for people has to come from nature and/or farmers who work on the land and produce food crops. In fact, it is the farmers who contribute the maximum to the food basket. Therefore, ideally, the ancient proverbial axiom, “Anyone who tills the land will have plenty of bread” (Prov. 28.19) must be true of today’s farming community too.

But what if the very cultivators and providers of food suffer hunger themselves? What an agonising experience it would be for them to pray for food! Asking God to provide their daily bread in such a pathetic situation ironically becomes a painful prayer for the farming community, especially the subsistence farmers, and the large number of landless farm-workers who tend their lands.

Most farmers have been in distress for decades in India, the magnitude of which only practicing farmers would know. Having been systematically deprived of their right to cultivate traditional food crops using locally available, economically viable farm inputs, knowhow and methods, as well as to fix the price for their produce, they have become prey to the exploitative market forces. In the process, food which is meant to satisfy hunger has been turned into a commodity to be sold for profit. To maximize profit, the Market driven by global capital seeks to control the entire food chain, from tilling to post harvest distribution of farm produce, thus making agriculture capital intensive, therefore, untenable for most farmers. Over burdened with mounting debts, many farmers are forced to make the most painful and bitter decision to end their life.

While reciting the Lord’s Prayer, ‘Give us our daily bread, forgive our debts’– more than others, the distressed farmers not only understand, but also feel the significance of the words, us and our. For, they, as fellow sufferers know that they share a common destiny; likewise, they are aware that their hope lies in their collective struggle to eat the produce of their hands, to be free from the clutches of ruthless money lenders and not so friendly banking sector, and to regain the lost right over their land. When their hope comes true, in the wise saying of Sage Thiruvalluvar, the world would once again affirm the truth: ‘Who ploughing eat their food, they truly live; the rest to others bend subservient, eating what they give’. With their pre-eminent position in society thus restored, there will be total absence of hunger among the farming community. Till then, they need to pray with painful hearts, “Lord, give us today, our daily bread”.

**Questions for discussion:**

1. How do people in your area view farmers and farm-work?
2. Is farming worth the trouble in your own experience?
3. How severe is the issue of farm debts in your village, district and state?
4. Are there any cases of farmer suicides in your area? If so, how did the general public react to this tragedy? How did members of the farming community express their solidarity to the bereaved families?
5. What role does the local church play in the life of farmers in your area? Are you satisfied and happy? If not, what would you like the church to be and to do?
A Sower Went Out to Sow

In India, a church initiative helps promote sustainability and connect farmers with the dignity of their vocation.

"WE WANT FARMERS to rediscover the sacredness of farming," says Rev. Daniel Premkumar. Premkumar's respect for farmers and farming grew from his experience of serving for nearly 40 years as a Lutheran parish priest in Andhra Pradesh, the "rice bowl" of India. "We have forgotten that the people who grow our food play a critical role in the care of creation," he says. "That is why we are creating a farmers' Bible."

We sat in his office at the Synod of the Church of South India, the largest Protestant church in the country, in Chennai. The church includes 10,000 Protestant congregations (Presbyterian, Congregational, Reformed, Anglican, and Methodist) across South India. Rev. Premkumar is now the director of diaconal concerns for the church, and he is advancing the concept of agri-ministry, which views agriculture as a form of ministry and upholds the need for church ministry to directly address the concerns of farmers. He created the Agricultural Workers Fellowship (AWF) in 2011. A small AWF workshop where theologians and farmers came together to discuss agricultural perspectives on biblical passages led to the idea of a book offering a reading of the Bible from the farmers' perspective. They hope this book and a farmers' devotional guide will be finished by 2014.

The initiative to spur the church to explicitly integrate faith and agriculture comes at a time when food and farming in India—and globally—is at a critical juncture. Will India follow the United States in relying on genetically modified crops, monoculture, inorganic and unsustainable farming practices, and the corporatization of agriculture? Or will it restore farming as a livelihood, emphasizing safe food and healthy soil and water?

Agriculture has been the backbone of the Indic civilization's economy and social engagement and her people's faith experience for the past 5,000 years. According to Raj Supe, co-founder of the Foundation for the Contemplation of Nature, "farming as a sacred activity has been a central belief of Hinduism right from the very beginning. That's the reason Vedic learning was done in forest universities, ashrams are laid out on green acres, and Indian temples have their own orchards." The sacredness of farming was also present in India's Christian community, probably from the time, tradition holds, that St. Thomas began evangelizing in Kerala, India.

Older church members recall an era when Christians held farming in higher esteem. However, India's industrialization and urbanization—and the impact of the U.S.-influenced "Green Revolution," with its emphasis on pesticide-heavy, mechanized approaches to agriculture—contributed to farming losing its cultural and religious significance.

The growing cultural rift between food, cultivation, the environment, and the sacred are also a denial of the reality of many congregation members' daily lives. Today almost 70 percent of Indians still live in rural areas. Although agriculture contributes less than 20 percent to the nation's GDP, it continues to provide livelihoods for the majority—close to 60 percent—of the people.

"Too many people no longer appreciate farming," says Premkumar. "They think comfortable city jobs are better than being on the land. Even farmers themselves do not recognize the value of the work they do in the eyes of God."

This has substantial consequences for environmental and human health. The loss of farmers' dignity goes hand-in-hand with corporations taking control of food production and care of the earth. U.S. companies Monsanto and DuPont have been pushing genetically modified (GM) crops. India ranks fifth in the world for acreage devoted to GM crops, with 6.2 million hectares. (The United States is first.) Pesticides are used at rates far higher than is acceptable in Europe or the U.S. As eating patterns change, India has surpassed the U.S. as the "diabetes capital" of the world. Natural habitats are being lost at alarming rates. Agricultural biodiversity has decreased significantly, a detriment to overall environmental health. Traditional cultivation practices are quickly fading from farmers' memories. Burdened by patterns of heavy indebtedness, small-scale farmers face substantial stress in a career that can be uncertain at the best of times. According to a major study in

Sara J Wolcott
Sara J. Wolcott, a consultant on sustainability and spirituality, is a seminary student at Union Theological Seminary in New York. She has worked with the Institute for Development Studies at the University of Sussex and in India.
the U.K. medical journal *The Lancet*, there were 19,000 farmer suicides in India in 2010 alone. Even when farming pays more than urban jobs, many young people choose the urban jobs because of perceived comfort and social status.

Churches in India—as in the U.S.—have often been silent bystanders to this process.

The Church of South India’s new “farmers’ Bible” offers an opportunity for the church to be more actively engaged in food, farming, and the well-being of farmers. It will integrate biblical passages, advice on organic farming, information on dealing with suicidal tendencies, and healthy nutritional tips. The book will be informed by a team of pastors, theologians, farmers, and experts in agricultural biodiversity, climate change, and organic agriculture.

Theologian George Zachariah at United Theological College in Bangalore, while not a member of the Church of South India, is an active “guest” in the process. He feels this project is significant, especially for the Dalits (“untouchables” in the caste system) who make up 70 percent of the Christian population in southern India.

“Landless agricultural workers, who are mostly Dalits, have no other option but to work the land,” says Zachariah. “As the prophet says, they cultivate, but they do not eat. The new Bible is not going to change the destiny of these people. But it will certainly create a different understanding in the minds of Christians who seriously engage with it. We will try to categorically affirm that the biblical vocation of human beings is to be farmers: to serve the earth, to till, and to keep (Genesis 2:15). Hopefully, that will create better understanding about the crisis of agriculture and poor peasants.”

“This endeavor honors farmers,” says Premkumar. “As much as we are looking forward to gaining suggestions from experts, we also want to emphasize the farmers’ expertise. We have had and will have farmers involved through the whole process.”

This is not Premkumar’s first experience with a specialized take on the Bible. In response to a young man’s death from AIDS, he compiled Ronnie’s Bible, with Bible passages, reflections from the perspective of a person with HIV, and nutritional and health advice.

AS A RESULT OF the Agricultural Workers Fellowship, villagers are already reading the Bible with a farmer’s perspective. From the high mountains of the Western Ghats to the plains of Andrah Pradesh, small groups of farmers are getting together to share about the Bible and their vocation. They highlight that the Bible begins with the creation of water and land, essentials of farming. Jesus declares that “My father is a vinegrower” (John 15:1), which suggests the importance of farming.

Rev. D.G.A. Thomas, who has been an active part of these gatherings in Tamil Nadu, India, says that the farmers gain tremendous support from these gatherings. “Farmers tell me that they had not appreciated their own work as being part of their Christian faith as much as they do now,” Thomas says. “But it is not just farmers. Other people, including shopkeepers and teachers, come to have a greater appreciation of farmers too, and they start treating farmers better in the community. That’s important for us.”

In Thomas’ diocese, 70 to 80 percent of the population works in agriculture. Of the 550 churches in his diocese, 250 have daily services. The Workers Fellowship is re-integrating communal prayer into these daily services and into farming patterns. He notes that “before mechanization, there used to be morning services for farmers—at 5 a.m., 6 a.m., they would say a service to bless their work that day. But now, people come to church only on Sundays. Worship becomes separate from the rest of their life. [With the new fellowship] some of our parishes are offering early morning blessings of the farm work.”

The new farmers’ groups, including groups for women and youth, are gaining popularity. They seek to fully embed the church into the farming life, and vice versa. Active members of the fellowship are working on liturgies, Bible lessons, worship services, and folk songs that celebrate farming; training centers for youth and women; and celebrations around the harvest and other important times. They hope to bring pastors fresh from seminary into these communities for at least a week to learn about farming as an aspect of Christianity. They would like to see advocacy groups campaigning for agriculture policies more favorable to small farmers, rejuvenated water bodies in the village, and renewable energy on farms. Their vision of the Agricultural Workers Fellowship proposes that the Pentecost spirit is ready to “descend on the farm world of today ... speaking out the groans of the women farm workers who receive
lesser wages than their male counterparts and to echo the lament of the landless."

Premkumar also sees the interfaith potential of this work. He points out that "in the fields, Hindus and Christians often work together. We need to get out of the churches and go into the fields and be with the farmers and the laborers."

The Church of South India's initiative occurs as Hindu and other religious leaders are increasingly returning to the importance of sustainable agriculture. Hinduism Today describes one respected venture in natural farming that has a Hindu temple on site, and another farm run by Ashok V. Sanghavi, a Jain, that hosts the local Jain society for worship. Says Sanghavi, "A farmer is performing his dharma when he engages in agriculture, not just making a profit. Through agriculture we serve the animal kingdom, we serve humankind, and we serve the environment."

IN INDIAN POLICY and intellectual circles, sustainable agriculture is growing in importance, especially in the midst of climate change. Increasingly, state governments are incorporating organic farming and sustainable agriculture techniques in their policies. Dr. Vandana Shiva, one of the country's leading spokespersons for non-GM seeds and sustainable agriculture, believes that Indian agriculture could become completely organic within the next two decades. However, as demonstrated by the current fight over the Biotechnology Regulatory Authority of India Bill—which would shift from a cautious approach to GM crops to promoting them—there is still a long way to go to reclaim the sacredness of farming.

"It hasn't been easy," Premkumar says. "For decades, the church has gone along with society and ignored farming. Now we want to bring dignity to farmers, to agricultural workers, and to the land itself. We are pushing organic farming as much as possible. There needs to be a lot more training on organic farming and crops that are good for drought, such as traditional varieties of millets. The church is often unaware of the importance of these issues in the lives of the people."

Reclaiming the sacredness of farming helps restore right relationship between humans, the earth, and God. Doing so challenges multiple dimensions of unsustainability, from the corporatization of farming to distorted visions of the "good life."

For the ordinary farmers involved in this initiative, one thing has already changed: They know their work is sacred. They are starting their work with prayer, blessing their seeds, and in their own way charting a path to reclaim the sacredness of cultivating the holy land in which they grow our food."
FAIR AND JUST WAGES

Matthew 20:1-16

Jesus told many parables and some have been interpreted by Jesus himself. Some are easy to understand but there are many parables which are very difficult to understand and interpret. Here in this passage of Matthew's Gospel Jesus tells a parable which is not only striking but also challenging our sense of fairness and human view of justice. The story in the parable goes like this.

A land owner had a garden of wine. The grapes were fully ripe and ready to be harvested. The vineyard owner knew that it would be foolish to wait even for another day. Hence at daybreak he went to the market place where the agricultural labourers and others looking for jobs would assemble. The anxious and eager workers who got up very early to be first in the line were there at 6 am. These men wanted first to know how much they would be paid for 12 hours work. They seemed to have bargained with the owner of the vineyard and struck a deal of one denarius for 12 hours work from 6 am to 6 pm, the standard day's wage at that time. Three hours later the owner desiring to hire more workers returned to the market place, found some more men and invited them to work. This time these workers did not bargain. The master said to them, "I will pay you whatever is right, just and fair". These men had trusted the owner to keep up his word to treat them fairly. The same process of hiring the workers assuring them fair wages was repeated at 12 noon and at 3 pm. Finally at 5 pm just an hour before the completion of the harvesting work the owner returned to the village and found a few more workers. To the master's question, "why have you been standing here and doing nothing?" they replied, "Because no one hired us". What a sad situation! There was no employment opportunity for these agricultural labourers. They were desperately looking for an opening to work at least one hour to earn even a little amount as they were reluctant to go home empty-handed. They also trusted the owner to treat them fairly even for 1 hour work. The listeners of Jesus' parable would have been curious to know what Jesus would say next. The story continued with payment of wages. The owner very surprisingly instructed his manager to pay in reverse order from the way they were hired. First 5 pm batch, next 3 pm batch, 12 noon batch, 9 am batch and finally 6 am batch. When 1 hour workers who might have expected a fraction of a denarius were paid one denarius, the normal wages for 12 hour work, it was a great and pleasant surprise to them. Their excitement and joy were indescribable. When the 12 hour workers noticed this, they expected more than one denarius. But they were shocked to receive the same amount and began murmuring and grumbling. They found fault with the master for paying equal wages to all workers and to them as most of us would think that the master was unfair and therefore was unjust.

Is this parable applicable to our context, particularly the context of agriculture? What lessons can we learn this parable that would be a source of encouragement and enlightenment? What are the new insights we can get from the reversal that takes place at the end of the parable?

First, we notice that equal wages were paid to all workers irrespective of number of hours they worked. The God whom Jesus introduced is one who wills equality. The owner in the parable represents the creator of humankind. All human beings are made in God's image. So no one is superior to others or none is inferior to others. As the owner pays equal wages to all workers, God wills equality. Economic or Material inequality in the world is not God's will.

Secondly, the workers who came earlier to work demanded higher wages whereby expect to create inequality in the society. When the master paid one denarius, the 12 hour workers should have rejoiced with them for there is no discrimination with the owner who does not perpetuate inequality by paying lower wages to some. He wants to level everything and treat everybody equally. But the 12 hour workers were envious and found fault with fairness of the master and wanted him to pay them higher.

Thirdly, we find the reason for the reversal in payment of wages. When we prepare the salary register roll in any institution or firm we prepare it according to seniority. Those who joined the institutions
or organization earlier will find their names at the top. The recently appointed or the newly appointed will find their names at the bottom. But here those who should be at the bottom have been promoted to the top. It is not simply a surprising reversal but a shocking reversal ‘ulta’ which no reasonable person would be able to digest. Why such ‘ulta’? The reason is the owner wants to extend his arm of mercy to those who came last. Let us listen to what the New Testament scholar William Barclay says in his commentary on Matthew’s Gospel: “The men who were standing in the market place were not street-corner idlers lazing away their time. In Palestine, market place was equivalent to that of the labor exchange. A man who came there in the morning with his tools, waited till he was hired by a land-owner. The men who stood at the market place till late in the evening were not gossiping idlers or lazy people, they were waiting for work and the fact some of them stood on until 5 pm is the proof of how desperately they needed work because they never wanted to go home with nothing in their hands and see their spouses and children suffer with hunger. When they were questioned by the master their reply was “No one hired us, employed us, and gave us jobs to do”. The problem of unemployment of agricultural labourers due to urbanization, industrialization and commercialization is not the fault of the workers. They have become victims of globalization and industrialization. Let us not blame poor agricultural labourers and designate them as “idlers, gossipers and lazy people.” Though the workers who were employed in the parable at 6 am or 9 am or 12 noon outwardly sweated as they claimed more wages for having borne the burden of the day and the scorching heat, the men who were hired at 5 pm and 3 pm inwardly sweated with the mental agony of having no work to do, no employment opportunity, no wages and hence no food for them and their family members. What a pitiable and desperate condition in which they were found in the market when the master saw them at 3 pm or 5 pm. Hence the heart of the owner melted with compassion towards the more desperate ones and the merciful hand of the master was first extended to them who worked only for one hour or 3 hours. This is showing ‘preferential option’ towards the less-privileged, the more unfortunate persons is a lesson to be learnt and model to be emulated by the Christian community and the secular society. This parable invites us to see the ‘wounded psyche’ of those who are deprived of opportunities, discriminated because of the economic inequality and come forward to extend our helping hand first to these persons the least, the lost and the last lift them up instead of serving the interest of the rich, powerful, the first and the top brass of the society.

Fourthly, while paying the wages to workers the master paid living wage to each and every worker irrespective of the no of hours they worked. Each was given according to his need. He had taken into consideration their basic needs, the necessities of life and paid them with a sense of fairness and justice. The owner was not profit-motivated person but justice-oriented person. By paying one denarius to 1 hour workers 3 hour workers and 6 hour workers he had to bear the loss. He was not greedy but ready to lose his profit or gain. This shows the sacrificial mind of the master who was ready to empty himself of the profit by paying just and fair wages to all the workers. He was neither calculative nor taking into account the number of hours of work or their input for production but only their need. The need of the agricultural laborer has taken precedence over the profit of the land owner. Each one was given according to his need and not according to his greed.

We live in the period of farmers losing their lands because of the greedy land-owners, avaricious real-estate businessmen and covetous politicians. They are deprived of their possessions, the job opportunities and their livelihood is threatened. In this context may the truth in this parable stab us, quicken us, sensitize us and make us unselfish, justice-oriented and fair-minded person taking the need of the unemployed workforce and underprivileged section of the society.