

The instructions for giving the first fruits of the harvest in the temple began with the words: “A wandering Aramean was my ancestor.”

The words that follow form one of the oldest texts that we have. It precedes the Bible or the book of Deuteronomy. It was gathered up and incorporated into the book of Deuteronomy because it was already a text of great antiquity. Nomadic peoples would have composed it and if it was uttered by these Hebrew ancestors it becomes one of the oldest phrases we know that human beings have ever breathed. It is a fossil from our past that leaves us in awe.

The whole text tells the story of where we came from. In presenting the harvest before God, the worshiper in the temple was claiming their story, their identity, their origin. It all began with a mysterious reference to a wandering Aramean.

“Wandering” has its roots in lost, straying, or in danger of perishing. It suggests that they were a rootless people; almost destroyed. “Aramean”



some argue was Abraham, others Jacob, but many suggest that it was Jacob’s uncle, Laban.

You remember, Laban welcomed Jacob into a foreign land when Jacob was on the run from the murderous threats of his brother, Esau. It was a great act of mercy and hospitality. But Laban also became a source of deception, trickery and abuse, and eventually oppression. After Jacob had worked the prescribed seven years to marry Laban’s beautiful daughter, Rachel, Laban deceived Jacob by presenting his daughter Leah instead of Rachel. Then it was agreed that after *another* seven years, Jacob could marry Rachel. After this, Jacob worked for additional six years before finally leaving Laban’s oversight. In this light the text becomes, “An Aramean (Laban) tried to destroy my father (Jacob).”

The text recalls the story of exile and exodus. Exiled to Egypt, Joseph, the first born son of Jacob and Rachel, was thrown into a pit by his older brothers and left to die.

The only reason we have any harvest at all to present to God is because God has saved us. After being the objects of deception, abuse, oppression, we should have been extinguished.

But, the story recalls, with a mighty and outstretched hand, signs and wonders and terrifying displays of power, God brought us into this land flowing with milk and honey. This is our story of origin.

Once we were not a people, but now we are a people.

Centuries later, after Jesus feeds the multitude who were perishing in the wilderness, people demand that Jesus give them a “sign” or a “work” to demonstrate that he is actually from God.

“The sign” or “the work” Jesus says is “the bread from heaven, my body.” This body, this flesh, will be given up and broken on a cross and then, by an act of God, raised from the dead. So even though you may be in danger of perishing; even though you may be a rootless people; even though you may be the object of deception, betrayal and denial; even though you are scorned and scourged and almost destroyed; the event of the resurrection will not only become a sign that Jesus is from God, but it will also become the vehicle by which you are delivered into a promised land. It will become your exodus through a “terrifying display of power.”

So any threats of destruction, any deception and trickery, any attempts to condemn you to the bottom of the pit to leave you to die, or even sealed in a tomb, will all be absorbed and dissolved, left powerless, in the frail and wounded body of Jesus.

This is the sign: the bread which has come down from heaven gives life to the world.

“Well, sir,” they say, “give us this bread always.”

Surrounded as we are this morning by beautiful signs of our earthly harvest, we join with our ancestors, to present the first fruits of our labour, and discover that we are actually surrounded by signs of an imperishable harvest. Recalling our ancient story of origin: “A wandering Aramean was our ancestor,” and recalling in the creed our exodus, that Jesus suffered, was crucified, dead, and buried; our only response is to place our whole trust and confidence in God, and offer our deepest thanks for this lasting and imperishable sign of the incarnation. For through it, once you were not a people, but now you are people, chosen and beloved of God.