

Theological Reflection

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The most basic question that has to be addressed by the Church in the countryside is how it is equipped both to hear and to communicate good news. This suggests that there can be no consideration of a rural theology that does not at the same time reflect on the relation between the rural and the urban. Good news is what we share in the Church. That is to say, no bit of the Church is going to know everything about the gift of God in Christ: the challenge is to manage the variety of human context and experience in the Church in such a way that it becomes a sharing of Christ with one another and so with the wider world. Mutual isolation and mutual confrontation between rural and urban are not options for the Christian. Like all Christian communities, they need each other.

But the relation is undoubtedly very complicated. For much of the Church's history, there was still an assumption somewhere around that the town-country connection was essentially that of market and producer. As towns acquired new identities by way of the concentrated development of both financial services and non-agrarian production, that is, through capitalism and industrialization, the assumption became increasingly unreal. But it is (surprisingly?) not true that the Church was wedded to agrarian styles and patterns, except in the lives of some monastic communities. Its early European development was regularly a story of movement from town to country; it was a major shaper of the urban life of the early Middle Ages as bishops emerged as protectors of the concentration of commerce in towns (and so ultimately protectors of incipient financial services) and cathedral schools, and later universities, attracted large transient populations of young adults.

Historically, then, it is not that the Church was bound in with a rural economy and timetable, rather that it was regularly on the town

side of the relationship, so that its leadership and administration focused on urban locations, 'exporting' the faith to an imperfectly Christianized and rather threatening countryside. Thus, in spite of the powerful mythology of a religious countryside over against a godless town, the fact is that the Church, for all its eventually pervasive presence in the country, retained a model of moving *out* from town to country, with the attendant problems of decision-making being centred in towns. As the classical relations between town and country changed in the West, with the mutual dependence of producer and market practically vanishing as industrialization advanced, the focus of the Church's life remained in towns; what active mission, sharing good news *from* the country, might look like was seldom fully thought through.

So one aspect of trying to construct a theology for and of the rural Church is asking what is distinctive about rural Christian and human experience so that it can form an offering of Christ's good news to other kinds of community within the Church. I want to outline very briefly two aspects of this which may help focus discussion. They could summarily be described as having to do with a theology of *land* and a theology of *limit*.

Land

Rural life often involves anxiety and conflict over questions of land ownership and appropriate land use; yet the claim to 'own' land is a complex one, and its complexity is recognized by many in the countryside. There is a strong sense of something like trusteeship, an awareness that to own land is to be a steward and manager of long-term processes rather than simply the proprietor of a piece of disposable material territory. Those who treat it more in this latter way are often the object of disapproval or even incomprehension.

And the Christian might well want to connect this with the vision set out in Leviticus 25 (the 'jubilee' passage). The land is God's; it is not to be alienated in perpetuity from the families who originally occupy it because it is held in trust for God, so to speak. The sale or exchange of land is the sale of a certain number of harvests (v. 16), a matter of the specific use of the land for a period. And because it is God's, it must be granted a 'sabbath' every seventh year, so that the occupier may be reminded of the need to trust the giver; just as in the

fiftieth year, the year of jubilee, all claims are cancelled, and there is a 'sabbath' for all activities involving profit, ownership, power over others as well as power over the soil.

The land given by God is more accurately *lent* to the human occupier for the particular purpose of cultivation; but that cultivation must not be carried out in a way that obscures the ultimate ownership of God. Land cannot be a commodity to be traded (hence the jubilee principle of redemption and return of land that has been leased, along with the remission of slavery in the fiftieth year; the principle is the same); its inalienability is not a matter of guaranteeing unchallengeable human ownership but rather the exact opposite, a testimony to the fact that it is not simply at the disposal of an occupier. So far from confirming some imagined Judaeo-Christian principle that puts the earth, the material environment, in a position of absolute subordination to humanity, this passage reserves to God the 'rights' over the processes of nature and commands practices that recall this to mind. God gives the land, but only as part of a gift that is mobile, developing, the gift of a system of life in whose processes human beings have a hugely significant but not isolated role. The trusteeship of land is only intelligible in connection with the injunctions to let the land enjoy its sabbath and to rectify the imbalances, including slavery, which emerge from our economic practice.

This is not simply a (potentially sentimental) exhortation for human beings to feel themselves part of a greater organic whole. It establishes something central about the nature of God's gifts, that they are never in any circumstance, rural or otherwise, given as dead objects to be hoarded. Land is given for harvests, harvests are given for just distribution; our human social activity has to continue the action of God in shaping an environment whose processes nurture life. The rural experience, interpreted in the light of this significant scriptural passage, begins to set the scene for understanding the supreme gift of God in Christ, why this is pre-eminently a gift given for sharing, the incorporation of human beings into a cosmic pattern of life-yielding and life-bestowing.

Limit

This testimony that the nature of God's gift precludes absolute possession or hoarding leads into the second theological theme, that of

limit. There is no way in which rural experience can be tidied and sanitized into a controlled affair. Matters which in urban settings are mostly minor shifts and contingencies (weather is the obvious example) are in the country serious challenges and obstacles or dangers for cultivation, for travel, for supplies. From time to time, devastating epidemics take a grip on the countryside and affect everything in sight for long periods. Who in the countryside can yet forget the horrors of the Foot and Mouth plague in 2001? The patterns of growth and rhythm in rural life may be experienced as reassuring or as enslaving or both at different times, but they are not fully escapable, however much technology allows us to force the pace and the market urges us to do so. Unseasonal lambing may now be possible and almost obligatory, but nothing can alter the winter temperatures that threaten newborn lives.

Rural life at what we may think its most characteristic is about making humanly habitable and usable a landscape that is deeply resistant to human management. Of course the countryside is a 'made' landscape (this is sometimes said nowadays as if it were a new discovery); that's what agriculture is about. And even when agriculture accounts for a relatively tiny part even of a rural economy, as is increasingly the case, the rural dweller, commuter as much as anyone else, is unavoidably aware of weather and seasons and the problems they pose. Indeed, some would say that the impulse of some town-dwellers to move into the countryside is something to do with a dissatisfaction with the overprotected atmosphere of urban life; almost as if an urge to be a bit more vulnerable were rooted in human beings, as if there were a sense of something significant lost in a protected environment. Country living, country pastimes, like the increasing popularity of 'wild' trekking holidays, show some feeling for what it is that atrophies in us if we are defended from the inexorable confronting of our physical limits. And some recent television programmes, extrapolating from present trends to the possible breakdown of our systems of protection (the collapse of the electricity grid or the water supply), have starkly reminded us that even the most apparently controlled physical environment is not infinitely exploitable and malleable.

Once again we are returned to a theology of our creaturehood, our location within processes given for our use but not our domination. Much in contemporary culture encourages a covert picture of human

identity in terms of a sovereign will, only loosely connected with physical constraints. But, as St Augustine memorably put it, only when we come down to earth are we able to rise with Christ; the mind and will, so long as they entertain fictions about their isolation and sovereignty, cannot appropriate the good news that the material world itself is transfigured by the resurrection, and that the society of material and historical persons is transfigured by the communion of the Holy Spirit, through absolution by God and reconciliation with each other.

Is this part of the good news that rural experience, and the rural experience of Christian faith, offers to urban? If so, it may give one or two clues as to what the churches should be reflecting on in the rural context, even on that most difficult question of how the actual shape of rural church life maintains a distinct identity.

Conclusion

It will not do in our mission to assume that evangelism and the routine of worship in the countryside can or should be a straight transfer from urban, let alone suburban patterns; some of the malaise and frustration that are felt in rural churches have to do with this, with expectations brought from elsewhere, as well as expectations formed by a fantasy past. Part of what I have been suggesting, and part of the whole thrust of this book, is that so far from our living in the afterglow of a golden age of rural piety which has characterized the greater part of Christian history, it would be more accurate to say that rural faith is still finding its distinctive voice. And that cannot be resolved by importing styles and structures formed in other settings. The current economic and social challenges are enormous, as these essays show; but happily they also show that the response of the churches is increasingly serious and creative, conscious of the diversity of rural lives. We can reasonably hope that ahead of us lies a new level of engagement with mission in this environment.