



GIVE US THIS DAY OUR DAILY BREAD

A REFLECTION ON THE IMPORTANCE
AND CHARACTER OF FARMING

Christopher Jones MBE – July 2011

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Prologue: the problem of "brain"

"Rabbit's clever" said Pooh thoughtfully.
 "Yes" said Piglet "Rabbit's clever"
 "And he has brain"
 "Yes" said Piglet "Rabbit has brain"
 There was a long silence
 "I suppose," said Pooh "that's why he never understands anything."¹

John Julius Norwich, who certainly has brain, has written a fascinating history of the Mediterranean area from the earliest times, almost to the present day. As I read it, it gradually dawned on me that there was no mention of agriculture or of how people were fed. The very comprehensive index was totally devoid of any reference to farming and food. (By contrast there was much discussion of trade). A book covering such a wide span of time and space must reflect the many authorities he referred to. A recent BBC radio programme reviewed "A history of the world through a hundred objects". The only unambiguously agricultural objects were a Bronze Age wooden yoke for oxen and a medieval wooden plough. The devisers of these imaginative and fascinating programmes certainly have brain.

By contrast, the official guide to Florence – a place replete with wonderful works of art, opens with an account of the city's history, beginning with an explanation of the derivation of its food supply and explanation of its relationship to the surrounding farmland.

There often seems to be a blind spot in British or even English speaking attitudes to farming among the educated establishment. In recent years this has been reflected in a government belief that agriculture should be treated the same as any other economic activity, and even its downgrading in the work of the Department for International Development². There have been recent signs of change, but a major reorientation of attitude is needed. The global "free" market system so assiduously constructed is not a part of basic reality: food, climate and the state of the Earth are.

¹ "The House at Pooh Corner" by A A Milne, Chap. 8

² For a fuller account of this see "An Unsafe Distance" – ACF 2010

Why farming matters: what is at stake

i) Food production: This is the most obvious concern. It is not just a matter of total global food production, though this is obviously important. It is also about where food is produced, what kind of food is produced and who controls it – as well as who can afford it. Closely linked are diet, health and much of local culture.

So much is obvious. What is not always remembered is that food security will be just as important in 10, 20 or 100 years time, and the way in which we nurture agricultural resources now will do much to determine future food security. It has been said that we face a "perfect storm" of growing population, shortage of energy and water and climate change.³

ii) The lives and livelihoods of people: In many parts of the World up to half the population is involved in agriculture – many of them are poor. As time goes on, and diverse economies grow, some of their descendants will probably move out of agriculture to something else, but if they are pitched out of it, or pauperised within it, the results are appalling. A farming family has some resources, and some sense of controlling their own food and their own lives; a shanty dweller or a casual worker on a plantation does not. To help people build on their lives, starting from where they are is one thing; destroying what they have for the sake of others gain, or even in the name of another theoretical better future for them is another.

Although the numbers involved are much smaller, there are also patterns of injustice and pain growing around farm families throughout the 'developed' world. A report from the Commission for Rural Communities in England states that in 2007-8 25% of farmer households have had incomes below the official "financial poverty" line. In 2006 -7, it was 30%.⁴

³ Professor John Beddington, Chief Scientific Adviser to HM Government and Head of the Government Office for Science

⁴ Commission for Rural Communities 2010, "Poverty among farming households" p.7

iii) Political Stability: Patterns and distribution of land ownership, and the availability of food, impact strongly on social welfare and cohesion. Narrowly based control of land and food supply often cause poverty, insecurity and unrest. It has been said that Costa Rica is the most stable and democratic country in Central America because much of its agriculture is peasant based, rather than being controlled by a handful of powerful landowners.

iv) Climate Change: Even the possibility of changing the climate by human behaviour, never mind the near certainty of doing so, should affect all our thinking and doing. The vigour and adaptability of agriculture is important to our survival in the face of global warming. Farming and food systems will also influence the speed of climate change. Agriculture currently uses fossil fuel in cultivation and in the production of Nitrogen fertiliser, which has become the basis of agricultural productivity in many countries. Ruminant animals release methane, though long-term pasture retains carbon in the soil. Other farming processes release nitrous oxide. Beyond the farm gate there are the emissions arising from the processing, packaging and transport of food.

In short, farming is important because of its impact on climate and the scope for reducing this, and because of the urgent need to ensure that it adapts to the climate change that does occur.

v) Management of Landscape: This is not just about scenery, important as that is. Farmers and farming manages or affects a large proportion of the Earth's land surface. This provides habitat for wildlife, both plant and animal. Many people in the world depend on this landscape for domestic fuel. It is possible that the developed world will, in part, return to a reliance on agriculture for energy. Management of landscape has a profound effect on water supply in both the short and long-term. Finally, landscape is what many people live in, deriving some of their sense of identity and belonging from it.

vi) Biodiversity Landscape is the home of a great variety of wildlife, plant and animal. This biodiversity is very important and, depending on how it is done, farming can nurture or destroy biodiversity in both wildlife and domestic crops and livestock. This can be seen as a rather esoteric topic for biologists of a certain kind. It is not: it is an absolutely critical issue for several reasons.

Reduction of species and of variety within species has wide and unpredictable effects. There is a complicated web of interactions among microorganisms, insects, plants, birds and animals. If we damage this, not only do we risk our immediate food supply, but we demean ourselves in the same way as a vandal in an art gallery.

Biodiversity is also crucial in cultivated species. First is the management of disease in crop plants and domestic animals, as in wildlife. A genetically diverse population of living things will nearly always contain some individuals, which will survive disease or disaster. The elm trees, once characteristic of lowland Britain, were all planted as suckers from one variety of elm, mostly in the 18th Century and therefore lacked genetic diversity. Dutch elm disease in the 1970's killed them all. If this had been a major crop plant it would have been catastrophic. Biodiversity or the lack of it not only affects the outcome of disease, but also its onset. Many pests and predators have specific life requirements. A large concentrated area of suitable prey enables the rapid establishment of large populations of damaging fungi, insects or other life forms. A biologically diverse area affords only a limited foothold.

The second consideration is changing circumstances. In one place, in one era, a particular crop variety may be ideal. In changed circumstances it may not thrive, or it may be unwanted. A diverse population will contain varieties suitable for the new circumstances. In a changing climate this may be particularly important.

The fate of huge numbers of domestic animals is hugely dependent on how farming is done. It is not only a matter of day-to-day care but also of systems and processes, which are often influenced by economic pressures.

Peculiarities of farming: What makes farming different?

i) Natural factors: Seasons vary and so farming outcomes vary. They not only vary, they are unpredictable.

Not only do circumstances vary from season to season, they usually vary from place to place – in respect of local weather, soil, drainage, topography and natural vegetation. Farm management usually depends on prompt localised decision making in response to these variations. The results of ignoring this truth have been extensively demonstrated by Communist regimes. This means that farming businesses are generally small, involving only a handful of people, so that, overall, farming is characterised by many and diverse managers, with an intensely localised focus. It is thus poorly placed when it comes to transactions with companies with global reach.

Short-term changes of farming direction are difficult. Decisions take a long time to unfold and can often not be rescinded. When I worked with farmers in Southern Nigeria, an oil palm once planted took six years before it yielded fruit. Now, producing beef in England, if I put a bull with cows, it takes nearly a year to produce calves and two more to produce beef. In both cases there is no sensible way of going back once the process is begun.

Although production is gradual, consumption is often immediate. Many kinds of farm produce, such as milk, must be sold and used at once – not a good bargaining position for the producer. Even less perishable products, such as cereals, are expensive to store and are prey to rodents and insects.

ii) Human Factors: It is doubtful if most people make decisions about their lives purely on grounds of financial advantage – even if they are running businesses. Peasant and family farmers often appear to ignore price signals, when it comes to their basic farming policies. Motivation is complex. An African peasant is more likely to be looking for food and related security rather than maximum income. In recent years, hard times for UK farmers have exposed afresh the fact that an overwhelming motive for many of them is simply to

be able to keep on farming. In both cases, a reaction to falling prices may not be to produce less but, to try and produce more in order to maintain the same minimum returns.

Food producers also have reason to be very wary of responding to sudden or short-term changes in price because by the time a change in direction is bearing fruit, prices may well have changed again.

A further complication is the inelasticity of demand for food. A small surplus depresses price, but people do not go out and buy more and stabilise the price, so it falls further. A shortage does not cause people to eat less until there is no other option, so prices may rise and rise. Farmers cannot exactly control production and so supply and demand seldom exactly fit. Authorities anxious to ensure enough have to plan for more than enough.

For all these reasons the 'laws' of supply and demand, as generally understood become delayed, bent, attenuated or displaced when in contact with Agriculture.

iii) A Wider View: Adam Smith is often depicted as the father of free market economics – a world where everyone simply pursues their own economic advantage, and in which that alone takes care of everything. So his views of farmers and farming are worthy of notice.

"The case of farmers is very different – and not because of inferior ability. The inhabitants of the country, dispersed in distant places, cannot easily combine together. They have not only never been incorporated, but the corporation spirit never has prevailed among them... After what are called the fine arts, and the liberal professions, however, there is perhaps no trade that requires so great a variety of knowledge and experience... The direction of operations, besides, which must be varied with every change of the weather as well as with many other accidents, requires much more judgement and discretion than that of those which are always the same or very nearly the same."⁵

⁵ Adam Smith, Book 1 X Part 1 p230 in the Pelican Classics addition.

Present Realities – Emerging Trends

i) Producers: Though it is hard to summarise the diversity and complexity of the worlds farming, farmers both North and South, can be usefully described in terms of three categories, or “Rural Worlds”:⁶

Rural World 1: Large, entrepreneurial, often corporate, *agribusiness farms and farmers* who are globally competitive and usually part of global industrial supply chains. They are a minority of all farmers, although they probably produce most of the agricultural goods traded internationally. These farms are highly capitalised and tightly managed and are able to meet the standards required by importing nations and the food-processing and retail sectors. They are also usually able to produce sufficient quantities to achieve a viable income, despite constantly falling farmgate prices.

Rural World 2: The ‘shrinking middle’ of *family and landed peasant farmers* ‘who have traditionally constituted the bedrock of the rural economy from India to the American prairies’.⁷ These farmers are small to medium-scale landowners who are often undercapitalised. They generally serve local or national markets, and they are often only poorly integrated into food processing or retail chains. They have no influence or control over the market to which they sell.

Rural World 2 is increasingly vulnerable to, for example, the withdrawal of government support, liberalisation, and corporate concentration and market power. They continually face decreasing returns and the increasing risk of losing their livelihoods. As a result their households are, of necessity, becoming increasingly multi-occupational. In the UK and Europe, and in other developed economies, such farmers are going out of business at a growing rate, their farms usually being taken over by the large farmers of Rural World 1.

Rural World 3: The *subsistence and semi-subsistence underclass* of rural households living in developing countries, many of whom often do not have enough to eat. Their priority is usually survival and minimising the risks to their fragile livelihoods. They have limited access to productive resources, such as land or credit; often have little or no access to services such as healthcare and education; and are generally excluded from decision-making structures. Few are able to benefit from global markets, though they may sell some part of their produce through local and regional markets often at disadvantageous prices, because need drives them to sell immediately after harvest. Later they will probably buy at higher prices. Their households are usually multi-occupational, with family members seeking work elsewhere, often in urban areas, and their livelihoods are insecure. This group also includes the large numbers of landless rural families that make their living as agricultural labourers working for others.

Rural Worlds 1 and 2 exist in both the Global North and the Global South. Rural World 3 is largely a feature of the South – but not entirely – significant numbers of Southern and other migrant labourers are a standard part of contemporary agribusiness at harvest time in the US and Europe, including UK.

Of course some producers are on the borderlines of these categories, or oscillate between them. Sometimes large landowners in rural world 1 devolve all, or part of the organisation and risks of production, to tenants free or bonded.

Historically a large part of the World’s food security has been rooted in Rural World 2, and most prosperous well-fed and stable societies in the last 100 years have contained viable rural world 2 farming. The fabric and structure of many less urbanised societies rests on versions of Rural World 2.

ii) Consumers: Much of the food produced is consumed by those who produce it. In some societies producers and consumers are often intermingled and interchangeable. It is suggested that 70% of the worlds people is fed in this way.

⁶ The ‘Rural Worlds’ categorisation was developed in 1996 by Bill Reimer and David R Davila Villers for the Canadian Rural Advancement Foundation.

We have borrowed (and adapted) this categorisation from the report by Bill Vorley of IIED for the UK Food Group.

⁷ *ibid*

The majority of consumers in western countries, and the burgeoning middle class elsewhere, buy from a globalised market through large retail outlets, which provide a variety of standardised, usually packaged products, through numerous outlets, well organised for the purchaser's convenience. This now extends to ready-made 'convenience' food and beyond that to 'fast' food. An increasing proportion are overweight and threatened with illnesses such as diabetes as a result of overeating unsatisfying food with excess salt, sugar and fat, and lacking exercise.

Finally, and most important, there are those 800 million half satisfied potential consumers, at the edge of the game. Harried by conflict or simply lacking either productive capacity such as land or purchasing power, they remain malnourished or worse: a painful counterpoint to the obese.

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Christian Perspectives

All of these practical considerations about the importance and character of farming are reflected in the bible, in the context of creation and the unfolding of relationships of God, people, and the Earth, and its plants and animals.

The importance of food

We all know that we have to eat to live. Throughout the Bible, God is depicted as making provision for mankind to eat:

'God said, "See, I give you all the seed-bearing plants that are upon the whole earth, and all the trees with seed-bearing fruit: this shall be your food".'
(Genesis 1:29).

With the chosen people came The Promised Land – God's gift – a place with a potential for plenty:

'A land where you will eat bread without stint, where you will want nothing' (Deuteronomy 8:9)

It is God who visits 'the earth and waters it' ...

You load it with riches.

God's rivers brim with water

To provide their (the nations') grain (Psalm 65).

Jesus taught us to pray. 'Give us this day our daily bread'. We are to embrace God's concern for our food and as His sons to share His concern for others' food supply. How could we claim 'to love our neighbour' if we did not?

However food is more than fuel. It is a bond between humans and nature and among humans. It reflects the history and culture of societies. It is a testament to God's care for us, to the way in which the state of things enables our life. Bread and wine are essential to the central act of Christian worship.

i) Belief in God as Creator

Belief in God as the deliberate Creator of the world and of Mankind runs right through the Old Testament. The same belief is equally firm in the New Testament. For example, in the beginning of John's Gospel we read,

'Through him all things came to be, not one thing had its being but through him'. Paul makes the same point in his letter to the Colossians (1:15):

'For in him were created all things in heaven and on earth'.

It is echoed by the author of the letter to the Hebrews (1:2) ('...through whom he made everything there is'), who goes on to talk of Christ 'sustaining the universe by his powerful command' (v3). In Psalm 104:27-32 we read of God's continuing activity within Creation:

*'All creatures depend on you
To feed them throughout the years...
You turn away your face, they suffer,
You stop their breath, they die
And revert to dust.
You give breath, fresh life begins.
You keep renewing the world'.
God is Sustainer as well as Creator.*

ii) The value of Creation

Next, the Bible teaches us (if we have not seen it for ourselves) that Creation is good. 'And God saw that it was good' is repeated again and again. In Christ we see God's love fully revealed, and it was 'through him' – through this love – that everything was made. This can only mean that the whole of Creation must be treated with the greatest reverence, – 'Yahweh, what variety you have created, arranging everything so wisely' (Ps. 104:24) – but it is a reverence that reaches behind Creation to its Creator.

*'Glory forever to Yahweh.
May Yahweh find joy in what he creates.
I mean to play for my God as long as I live.
May these reflections of mine give him pleasure,
As much as Yahweh give me'* (Psalm 104 v. 30-33).

iii) Our dependence on Creation

Linked with this is the fact, clearly seen in Genesis, that we are totally dependent on Creation to survive, all of us. We are not gods, separate from it – we are part of it: Adam is depicted as being made from the earth, adamah. This is a reality of our existence, but it is one which modern technology and economy make it easy to ignore in practice. It is a reality experienced even by God – in Christ. Ownership of Creation: Creation is not ours, nor is any part of it the possession of any of us.

*'To Yahweh belong earth and all it holds,
The world and all who live in it'* (Psalm 24:1)

The Israelite law, which forbade permanent sale, recognised this. 'Land must not be sold in perpetuity, because the land belongs to me (Leviticus 25:23).

The Earth which began before we did and will probably out last any individual, family or society now in existence, cannot be said to belong to anyone in any ultimate sense: 'ownership' is provisional. Christians need constantly to remind themselves of this and keep reminding others: no individual or nation or even an entire generation has the right to consume the Earth.

iv) Human Responsibility

'Let us make man in our own image and let them be masters of the fish of the sea, the birds of heaven, the cattle, all the wild animals and all the creatures that creep along the ground' (Genesis 1:26)

When this was written, people were more likely to be oppressed by Creation than to oppress it. Now Mankind is indeed master, but often not acting in the image of God. It is useless and wrong to try and recoil in horror from the relationship with the rest of Creation: rather we need to change our attitude and build a true relationship. It is perhaps useful to reflect on the story of Christ's three temptations. As the Man truly representing the image of God, wrong ways opened up in three areas of relationship: – with God; ignore Him and get on with it by himself; with people by coercing them to follow him with showy power demonstrations; and with the rest of Creation, in the shape of a pile of stones, by coercing them to be something else just for his own ends.

Farming is one of the major expressions of the human relationship with the rest of Creation. We perhaps start on the wrong foot by calling it the 'environment' as though it only existed and had purpose in relation to ourselves. We care for our children and in a particular way are their 'masters' (or mistresses), but if we imagine that their being and purpose only relates to us we are in for a rude shock!

SIX

More about 'brain'

Going back to the prologue whose disappointment was that those "with brain" have a great capacity of overlooking what is obvious to others. We have tried to set out some of the realities of farming and food, and to initiate some reflection on biblical perspectives on these and related matters. If you "have brain" please do not, all at once, start trying to use, from within a saucer full of sharp understanding and knowledge, arguments to deny these things. Adam Smith at one point almost parallels Winnie the Pooh. "The common ploughman, though generally regarded as the pattern of stupidity and ignorance, is seldom defective in this judgement and discretion. He is less accustomed, indeed, to social intercourse than the mechanic who lives in a town. His voice and language are more uncouth and more difficult to be understood by those who are not used to them. His understanding, however, being accustomed to consider a greater variety of objects, is generally much superior."⁸

Practical reality and the necessities of life combine with the Biblical view of life to emphasise the importance of farming to physical and spiritual existence. This in turn emphasises the importance of understanding its nature and particularities. Such an understanding can inform the work of all those involved in food and farming but also everyone else in the way they make policy, or buy and sell, or simply go shopping. It can also inform our eating and the way we relate this to our family and social life, our approach to nature and climate, our reaction to poverty deprivation and our appreciation of the world in which we live.

⁸ Quotations from 'The Wealth of the Nations' – Adam Smith – Book 1 X Part 1 & Book 1 XI Part III



The Agriculture and Theology Project seeks to bring biblical and ethical principles to bear on issues and trends in world farming. It is a joint venture between the Agricultural Christian Fellowship (ACF), the Church Mission Society (CMS) and the John Ray Initiative (JRI)

Agriculture and Theology Project
Manor Farm
West Haddon
Northampton NN6 7AQ
Tel 01788 510800
www.agriculture-theology.org.uk