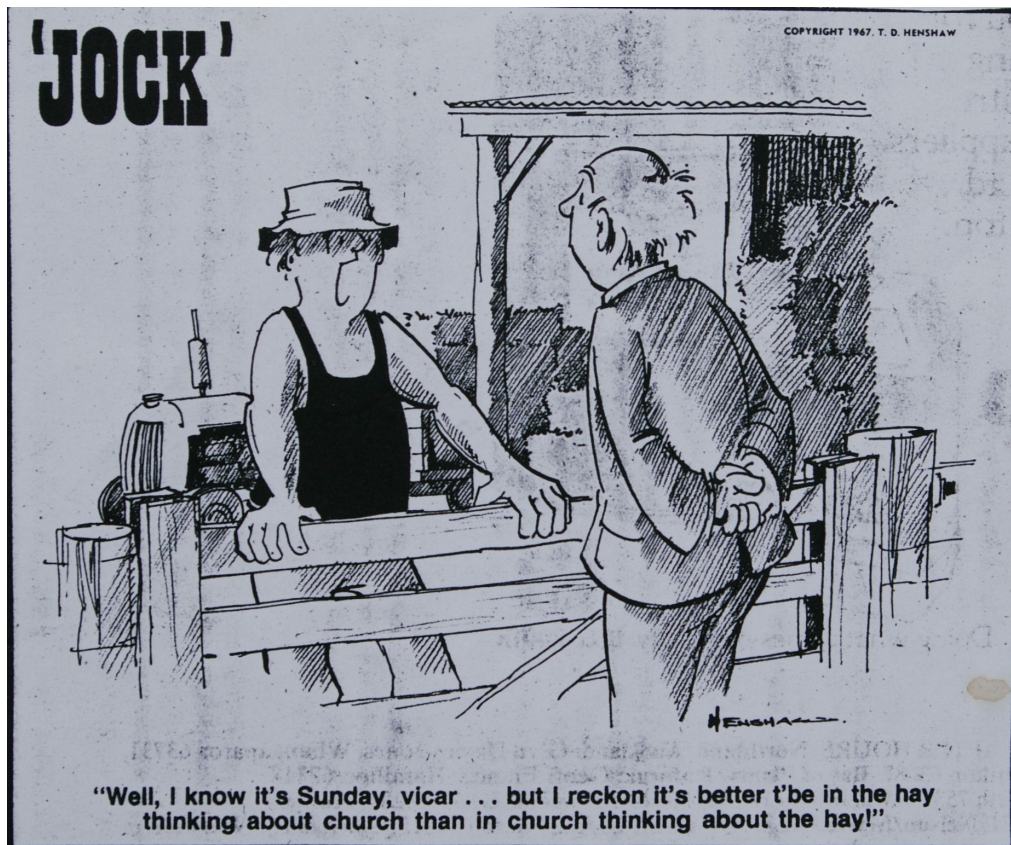


Rural Perspectives

UCANZ Forum Workshop 02.09.2011

After greetings, we began with each person selecting an object from the collection of bits and pieces provided and telling a story of themselves and 'Rural'. For quite a number it was childhood experiences, growing up on a farm or visiting regularly; for some it was rural life and marriage; some as urbanites made connections with what they are able to do with the soil they have access to; tramping experiences also came to mind, being totally at home in the natural world. (Among the objects to select the piece of binder twine was the most popular.)

This cartoon started our thoughts about church and rural people.



Do we take this person's view seriously, or do we continue to think he needs to change his attitude, he needs to be got to church?

When you think about it, what is it that rural people need? What good news to address the bad news or the no news? Practical resources? Life resources? Spiritual food?

That is, what does the church have that is so worth making available and accessible?

Our weekly worship can be a place for offering life resources and spiritual food, for people when they can make it.

Go to <http://www.kaeokerikeriunionchurch.org.nz/publications> for an article entitled "Worship" that talks about some of the possibilities.

And the biggest treasure we have as church is the Bible. So many texts in the Bible speak of small community life – life in constant relationship with other people and with the land (and water and weather...).

In the workshop we looked at three examples of texts to interact with, through which we can

interweave our story with their story, our story with God's story.

In each case the focus and concerns that I've been aware of in rural life have opened up understandings that I suspect are not too distant from what the writers were thinking and how the first people who heard them responded. These readings may be surprising to us because a couple of hundred years ago the Bible started being read differently – as predominantly statements of fact (or fiction). For many people however, particularly people of the land (e.g. indigenous people who embraced the Bible as a spiritual treasure) it has always been “a book that reads me”, stories that give script to our life stories, and open up new possibilities. For our 'western' rural people it can be likewise.

1. LIVING WITH THE VARIABLES: INSIGHTS FROM GENESIS 4

By the end of Genesis 3 earth creature Adam and mother of all living Eve have joined the real world, the mixed blessings world we know. Full of potential for good inter-connected earth-based living and God's continuing care; but God's original dream disrupted as (we soon find out) relationships break, crops fail and violence terrorises.

It is hard labour outside Eden and even the land finds it costly to sustain life. But the first verse of Genesis 4 alerts us that the original blessing of the life-giver “be fruitful and multiply” (Gen 1:28) still holds. Conception and birth make their first appearance: two new lives, Cain and Abel.

In adulthood Cain and Abel represent two ancient - and modern - ways to live off the land: Abel, the keeper of sheep, and Cain, the tiller of the soil; stock and crop; animals and plants. Both growers of food.

In the course of time these two people assess their achievements. It seems it has not been an easy year. (What year is?) We are not told the lambing percentage but it was probably not a good one; we sense that the yields of grain and seed are poor in quantity and quality, perhaps it was a struggle to get harvested or the crop needed extra dressing (cleaning) to ready it for use as food or next season's seed. But in the nature of stock farming it is possible to select out your best from the flock and be take some satisfaction in it even in a poor season. There are sure to be some prime lambs. However, with field crops, it shows up in the whole crop that then has to be rated at a lesser grade. Then it could have been the market that gave grief to the agriculturalist but a reasonable return to the pastoralist. (I've always wondered how the story would read with a dairying brother as well.)

“It's not fair,” says Cain the agriculturalist. “Abel is better off than I am.” Now in a good year differences wouldn't matter. When everyone is prospering, all can feel positive and confident of their worth as a farmer. But in poorer years, envy, self-pity and self-doubt are inclined to enter the scene – “sin is lurking at the door” (v.7). This reactive and self-focussed aspect of our humanity is like the farm dog sitting waiting for us while we have smoko, a domesticated animal, well-trained, but with instincts for the wild that mean it must be watched.

“But you must master it,” says the voice of wisdom (v.7). “Keep your eye on it, or tie it up. Be aware of what's going on – that your face has fallen and unhealthy feelings are stirring up in you.” God is trying to get Cain to face the reality of life outside Eden. He needs to lift his head up and look for options for the future and not get hung up on the problems.

Cain doesn't get the point. He reacts to what has happened to him by taking the way of least resistance – lashing out. Part of what he felt when God took no notice of his efforts is sure to have been shame, whakamā. Shame has us withdraw and separate ourselves from what's around us. And it's a short step to feeling everything's against it and we'll only survive if we go whakahīhi and arrogantly rise up. So all Cain can do is take a swing at the world, and it's Abel that takes the hit.

When God moves in to raise questions about the ensuing violence, Cain's arrogance holds sway as he makes a joke of God's question “Where is your brother?” “Does my brother, a keeper of sheep, need a keeper?” In fact, he has proved himself to be no brother to Abel and there can be no escaping the consequences of such a disconnected, uncaring act. Abel's blood has been poured onto

the soil, the very earth that early had no life because there was no water to pour into it and no creature to till and keep it. With blood trickling into the soil, it brings not life, but a cry from the earth itself. Cain's act of violence is so contrary to God's original vision of life – earth and human beings interconnected and giving and receiving from each other – that Cain cannot now return to normal life. Violence has knocked him out of the loop so he becomes a placeless person, a constant wanderer, with no roots and no base. (In fact he builds a city! But there lies another retelling, and issues of urban/rural relationships.)

Still God's care continues. The mark of Cain expresses God's commitment even to the vagrant, indeed to all outsiders of society's norms and systems. There is therefore no need to fear what is perhaps the ultimate fear, namely of being totally alone, cut off and unwanted.

Perhaps that was Cain's problem: perhaps he feared rejection most of all. He thought he had been rejected because his farming efforts were not as good as Abel's, and his uncontrolled reaction led to him disposing of his perceived competition. If only he had known what he found out when it was too late to make a difference, after violence had taken over. If only he had known that he was not in competition for God's favour. It's just that it comes in different ways at different times and for different people. In good seasons it can be felt in the satisfaction of doing a good job as a farmer, at one with the work and the land. In bad seasons it can be known in the God who hangs in there with us, listens to our grumbles and laments, draws us out of ourselves and encourages us to look to the new season just round the corner.

For reflection and conversation

1. *Think about your experiences of "bad seasons", in farming or in any venture, also in your personal life. Share any thoughts you have about how this re-telling of Genesis 4 helps you understand.*
2. *What are the seasonal and market issues right now for people in your local community?*
3. *This re-telling shifts perspective from thinking of God primarily as passing judgment on people's work (N.B. There is nothing in Genesis 4 that indicates Cain has done anything wrong – it's just that he had poor crops).*

How would you speak of God, if someone asked you, in relation to people's grumbles and laments?

2. RETELLING THE NARRATIVE OF THE PROPHET JOEL

Do you know the story in the book of Joel? A plague of locusts strike, the land is trashed and the people devastated, shut off from their God. The assumption has been that Joel's message is to do with sin, judgment, repentance and then blessing. The problem is that Joel makes no mention of what they've done wrong. All he does is call on the people to return to their God, and he offers them hope that the catastrophe will end. Joel is a prophet of encouragement.

He is also a prophet of honest realism. "Their joy has been put to shame," says Joel (1:12). Instead of inventing sins to account for the disaster, we make more sense of this prophet's story if we go with his silence on who and what is to blame and think about the situation that has turned joy to shame.

There has been catastrophe on the land, with mention of a locust plague described also in images of drought and enemy invasion. We can relate to those: many Australians know the first one and there are plenty of other biological pests we live with (clover root weevil, fly strike, varroa mite...); we all know the second – drought and other climate crises (some of us do floods more often); and the enemy invasion is in fact very descriptive of the effects of globalisation and corporate power, what John Ikerd at our 2007 International Rural Church conference called "economic colonisation".¹

¹ John Ikerd, "The Role of the Rural Church in Sustaining Rural Communities", in *Cry from the Heart*, International Rural Church Association Conference, 2007. Go to www.irca.is and click on Conference Reports.

These things have resulted in a big drop in production, with harsh economic consequences and damage to land and waterways. Then and now.

For Joel's time, that meant the people couldn't and/or wouldn't carry out their routine religious sacrifices. The supplies for sacrifice were not available and likely all energy and resources were being used for survival. For us these circumstances often mean that we cannot afford to attend to our social, emotional and spiritual well-being. In hard situations, rural people withdraw into themselves and experience anxiety, self-doubt and often depression. Even if the major circumstances are outside their control individual farmers feel a failure when land, stock or the bank balance suffers. This sense of shame shuts a person off from others, the communal experience of God and from the farm they love. The joy of a good life with land and community has been put to shame.

Joel's advice to them is to get together and share their sorrows. Return to your God and lament with God this suffering that has come at you from outside. Let yourselves lament openly and honestly – rend your hearts as well as your garments - and, by doing this, you will get yourselves connected again physically and spiritually as a community. Communal lament brings the shame out into common ground in an environment that is safe because it is shared. Shame is thereby turned back into honour and to a positive pride that goes with knowing one belongs. One's strength and potential returns – in relationship with others in the community and with the land that gives livelihood.

The story also reveals there's another dimension to the disaster. Right from the start it is the land that calls on all its inhabitants to lament: to grieve for its loss and to weep with it for the disastrous state they are in now. The land's human inhabitants, the only ones that can speak on its behalf, have gone silent: it seems that their world of concern has shrunk. Although this land is their daily companion as they work in partnership with it to produce life and livelihood, their own problems have become so all-encompassing that they have closed themselves off from the land as well as from one another.

Honour God and reclaim the honour that you have as people of the land. And let yourselves hear words of hope that the disaster of the present time *will* end. As Joel puts it, God will destroy the locusts, end the drought, drive off the enemy invasion and restore the land so that your shame will be history. It happens. The Day of the Lord encompasses the worst disasters that we face but it is also about hope. There will be a future: God's spirit will make sure of that.

For Reflection and conversation

- 1. Rural sustainability has felt under threat for some decades now, and the recent economic recession has only deepened the concern. What are the contemporary issues that fit into Joel's schema: biological infestation, climate events, outsiders taking over?*
- 2. How are people in your area (yourself included) responding to these threats or concern?*
- 3. Who or what is considered to be to blame? How does this blaming affect emotions, self-perception, and the ability to make good decisions in this situation where livelihood is under challenge?*
- 4. Following Joel's approach and considering shame to be one of the primary feelings when hard times hit and incomes drop, what is one practical thing you could do in your community to call people back together and do a contemporary version of "returning to God"?*

3. SOMETHING ABOUT SEEDS: GENESIS 1 AND SUSTAINABLE RURAL COMMUNITIES

Genesis 1 is first and foremost a Poem of Praise – a celebration song. Get one person to read it out loud and listen for its rhythm. Listen also for changes in rhythm. For this is no second-rate writer – the pattern of perfectly balanced and concise phrases is broken for a reason.

Why the change in flow? The questions will pick up on this and help us see how this pre-eminent Bible text “reads” our contemporary big worries.

Listen **before** you read on through the thoughts and questions below.

For Reflection and conversation:

1. *There are two big breaks in the flow. The latter one we regularly focus on – day six and the creation of the animals. The arrival of humankind warrants expansion from the usual succinct presentation. The nature of this creature means there's a special responsibility and risk in relation to the rest of creation, which will need to be recognised or else there will be problems.*

The earlier break to the flow is usually passed over. What is happening in vv.11-12. Why so much repetition? (“Let the earth sprout-out sprouts, plants seeding seed, fruit trees making fruit, each of its own kind – with their seed in them – on the earth,” and it was so. And the earth brought forth....²)

2. *What are the key factors affecting work and livelihood in your local community? Employment/unemployment? Overworked? Underpaid? Are people able to earn a living? What are the limiting factors?*
3. *Genesis 1 celebrates the **self-perpetuating** nature of creation. It's in the nature of living things to carry the seeds of ongoing life. Work defined by employment and wages follows more of a mechanical or production model – input to produce output. Work understood as seeking livelihood through co-operative interaction with the reproductive patterns of living things (soil included!) is the biblical – and indigenous – model.*

If we were to re-imagine work in our home place as more about livelihood and less about selling labour for wages, what would we turn our attention to?

Some websites for Rural Church networking:

<http://irca.net.nz/> for the International Rural Church Association, including a discussion forum.

<http://www.presbyterian.org.nz/national-ministries/rural-ministry> for archive of the NZ ecumenical rural ministry newsletter and other information.

Coming Up in 2012

Trans-Tasman Rural Ministry Conference 2012 in the Atherton Tablelands, Queensland, in the first week of July (school holidays in both countries).

Robyn McPhail
September 2011

² Ellen F. Davis, *Scripture, Culture, and Agriculture: An Agrarian Reading of the Bible* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2009), p.48