

Rural Theology Association Newsletter Spring 2011

Chairman's Remarks

I'm writing this in Holy Week with glorious sunshine pouring in through the study window. The beauty of my garden – the colours, the bird-song, the smell of newly cut grass – is in contrast with the events we remember this week.

As I have driven around Shropshire in this past sunny month making deanery visits to priests and lay workers, I have both enjoyed the wonderful scenery of the Shropshire countryside and been made to see the pain that lies behind so much beauty: the redundant sugar beet factory that has meant lay-offs and redundancies; the small schools on the hit list for closure, affecting not just individual lives but that of whole communities; the issues of alcohol and drug addiction that remain partially screened behind closed doors but causing domestic chaos and ruined relationships. Our faith has something to say here. Our God is neither immune nor aloof from all this disharmony and hurt. This week, in particular, we recall how the Creator God, who is the cause of so much wonder, pours himself out in Jesus of Nazareth to reconcile this whole creation and his creatures to himself.

Rural ministry has, at times, been viewed in the Church as a 'second class' ministry – a place for those without the courage or ability to cope with the cutting edge of a deprived urban estate or the demands of a large town church. This is, obviously, a warped view from which I was fortunately spared by the example of my father and his ministry as a rural parson. A countryman at heart, living and understanding the lives of his parishioners – 3000 souls and many more cattle, pigs and sheep – his was a big God who created the universe yet also cares deeply for each part of his creation. My father opened my eyes to the beauty and diversity of God's world, the hidden crosses borne quietly by many in the countryside and, thereby, the virtue and integrity of a vocation to a rural Cure. Those who serve today in rural areas, both lay and ordained, will see the many opportunities for reaching every area of community life with the Gospel and the imperative for Christian witness to embody the good news with a seamless join between life and lip. This Spring I am being reminded of this crucial call.

Last autumn, we had an excellent talk from Dr Gordon Gatward at our AGM on 'Care Farming' (full text included in this Newsletter). This autumn, under the title '*Rural Theology in the Public Square towards the rural church and the Big Society*,' Dr Jill Hopkinson and Canon Jeremy Martineau will help us investigate the theology, engagement and impact of the church in rural society. I do hope that many of you will be able to join us 25th-26th November 2011 at Holland House, Worcestershire, for this timely conference. Please do tell friends and colleagues of this event and publish the poster in your church where possible.

With many thanks and all best wishes for a joyful Eastertide

Mark Rylands

Cope's Comment

As I write this, the land in East Yorkshire is gasping for water, and elsewhere, wildfires are burning. Once more, we can see why agriculture is so totally different to any other 'industry' or 'sector of the economy'. And yes, it might well be the case that our car manufacturers are on short time working as a direct consequence of the Japanese tsunami, but by and large it is only those people whose livelihoods are directly connected to the land who can experience with such immediacy the fragility of nature.

Perhaps it is that direct contact which means that our farmers tend to be stoical about their livelihoods. This year we made a loss; next year we might break even. Memories of the good years see them through the bad years, and it is so much harder to make the final decision to shut down when we know that people will still need wheat, or milk, or pork, or whatever, even though they refuse to buy it from a local supplier, or at an appropriate price, or with guarantees of decent animal welfare regimes, or whatever. Perhaps the nearest Biblical quotation would be from Job: 'The Lord gives, the Lord has taken away. Blessed be the name of the Lord.'

Yet that closeness to the fleeting, the temporary, the grass which one day flourishes, and the next day is thrown into the biomass combuster, that closeness to the fragility of life around us can make us so much more aware of the fragility of our own situation and life. 'The Lord gives, the Lord has taken away. Blessed be the name of the Lord' – a sentence from the funeral service. As we see acres of timber go up in smoke, so we can sense our own passing. As we see the land thirst, so we can comprehend the better the hunger of the world's starving.

The biggest hunger in our land is surely for the word of the Lord. Not in a sanitized way which avoids the fact that even the most faithful can suffer now and again, but in a full-bodied and full-blooded way which coheres entirely with a Word who was made flesh, and who died on a cross. 'Why? What has my Lord done?' the hymn asks. As much as countless innocent victims whom we deemed stricken, smitten by God and afflicted. And while for some it might seem fanciful, even faintly blasphemous, to consider the burning pyres of innocent cattle at FMD in the same style as the death of the Saviour of the World on the cross, I am sure that some saw the parallel.

Those of us who live among the full cycle of life and death understand most fully the concept of life in all its fullness which Jesus came to bring. Those of us whose businesses, even, are helpless against the ravages of coastal erosion or tornado have a far better perspective on life than those whose income and success is gauged solely by the number of widgets exported. Those of us who watch the mystery of birth in new lambs as well as the despatch of fully-fattened pigs to complete their lives by giving sustenance to others understand more clearly that all here is transient, including ourselves.

As the crops grow, then, so let us grow, in stature and in favour with God and man, rooted in the fullness of life we have been given, so that we may be expended in the completion of the task God has given to each one of us. Life, death, resurrection, eternity.

Stephen Cope
RTA Secretary

From last year's AGM: Gordon Gatward's edited address Care Farming – A Theological reflection

I had the privilege of chairing the first national Care Farming Conference in 2005. In my summing up at the end of the day I mentioned that I believed (as I still believe) that care farming is a wonderful expression of God's love in action. The reaction I got to those few words came as a pleasant and unexpected surprise as a number of the audience then informed me that this was the very reason why they had got involved in care farming. For them it was a vocation, and they spoke of their profound sense of being called by God to engage in this very specialist area of care.

What I heard that day in 2005 I've heard many times since. As the network has grown, as I've visited more care farms and as I've spoken with more care farmers so I've heard the same story repeated many times.

Very few however, have been able to move on from that initial sense of God's leading to a position where they've been able to explore the deeper theological implications of what they're doing. This comes as no surprise. In fact it reminds me of a comment made by Hans Kung in his book 'On being a Christian'.

'I must not keep looking back over my shoulder at God when I turn to my fellow man, nor indulge in pious talk when I'm supposed to be helping somebody. The Samaritan helps without dragging in religious reasons; the need of the man fallen among thieves is sufficient for him and at that moment his whole attention is concentrated on the victim.' (p.256)

Those words sum up where many care farmers have been and still are. They're completely focused on their clients; on meeting human need and doing so in the face of much professional disinterest and dismissal as well as in some cases local opposition. Despite the growing body of research that supports its efficacy many still believe Care Farming is both radical and unproven and some that it is threatening to the life of the local community.

Things are changing however, and as the evidence base grows so the remaining cynicism and doubt is steadily being eroded. I believe that this is an opportune time for the journey of theological exploration and reflection to begin and hopefully this paper will prove to be the first faltering and tentative step.

Before that can happen, the definition of care farming needs to be clarified and the evidence base already mentioned has to be identified. The most widely accepted definition is set out in 'Green Care – a conceptual framework' where it is described as :

'The use of commercial farms and agricultural landscapes as a base for promoting mental and physical health through normal farming activity. It is a growing movement to provide health, social or educational benefits through farming for a wide range of people.' (p.37)

It's a movement that encompasses a large part of Europe and in the UK it's represented by the National Care Farming Initiative (NCFI) – an affiliation of the ARC, Harper Adams University College, The University of Essex and the Federation of City Farms and Community Gardens. All share a commitment to promoting the concept and practice of care farming in the UK and to providing support to the growing national network of care farmers, a network which represents a wide range of client groups and an equally wide range of farm enterprises.

It's also important to recognise that that network is itself just part of a larger programme of care provision that comes under the umbrella of Green Care and that it stands alongside Animal Assisted Therapy, Therapeutic Horticulture, Eco-therapy, Wilderness Therapy and Facilitated Green Exercise in using the land and nature as a focus for therapy and treatment. All share a common conviction

‘that contact with nature improves psychological health by reducing pre-existent stress levels, enhancing mood, offering both a restorative environment and a protective effect from future stresses.’ (‘Green Care – a conceptual framework’ p. 19)

The evidence to support this statement is steadily growing. Much of it can be sourced via the NCFI website (www.ncfi.org.uk) but there are three reports that are particularly worth noting:

- ‘Care Farming in the UK – evidence and opportunities’ is a report of the research carried out by the University of Essex, commissioned by NCFI and funded by Natural England.
- ‘Care Farming : harvesting the benefits’ was published by West Mercia Constabulary following their very successful pilot project placing prolific offenders on a care farm.
- ‘Farming and Care Across Europe’ is a Nuffield Scholarship paper produced by Debbie Wilcox, the NCFI National Co-ordinator.

All of these can be found on the website along with a wide selection of case studies, some of which include the data from continued monitoring.

The fact is care farming works and looking at it from a theological perspective that comes as no surprise for the longer I’m involved with NCFI the more I become aware of the Gospel values and principles on which it is founded. Similarly as someone who derives great personal benefit and pleasure from working the land and working with stock I know the difference those activities make to me physically, mentally, emotionally and spiritually.

It’s probably because of that interest that I’ve always been fascinated by the Biblical use of garden imagery. Part of the Creation story centres on Eden and God’s stated purpose for humanity, ie Gen2:15

‘The Lord God took man and put him in the Garden of Eden to till it and keep it.’

Temptation then enters the world, God’s purpose is thwarted and there is expulsion from the garden and disconnection – not only between humanity and God but also between humanity and the land. This is vividly expressed in Gen. 3:17

‘cursed is the ground because of you; in toil you shall eat of it all the days of your life; thorns and thistles it shall bring forth to you and you shall eat the plants of the field. In the sweat of your face you shall eat bread.’

And that’s the relationship – the disconnectedness – you find right through Scripture until you reach the Gospels and an episode relating to another garden, when from the cross Jesus makes a promise to a dying and penitent thief :

‘Today, you will be with me in Paradise.’ Luke 23:43

‘Paradise’ is a word from ancient Iran which originally meant ‘a walled garden’ but which later becoming synonymous with the King’s garden.

Here Scripture is effectively providing us with a journey from expulsion and disconnection through to reconnection and redemption. Humanity removed from the Creator’s garden is now invited to walk in the garden of the King of Kings. It’s the journey from Eden to Paradise.

I believe that’s a powerful image of the journey many people make on a care farm, moving from disconnection to reconnection – psychologically, emotionally and frequently spiritually. Of those three outcomes it’s the first two that are usually the focus of interest but even cynical commentators can’t escape or ignore the impact and importance of the third. Again from ‘Green Care - a conceptual framework’ :

‘Given that connectedness to nature is both desirable and beneficial, then it follows that a disconnection from nature is likely to have negative effects on the psychological health of individuals.’ (p.20)

The writers then suggest that

‘The natural environment seems to help us to feel in touch with something much greater than ourselves (but which we might hesitate to describe as God) and which is healing.’ (p.87)

From disconnection through to reconnection but at a spiritual level as well as psychological. Note again :

‘Whilst green care in general does not explicitly propose any spiritual philosophy or advocate any religious views it is highly likely for some people working in the natural environment fulfils deeper spiritual needs.’ (p.88)

And this ‘spiritual reconnection’ is something that Paul Tournier would have well understood when he wrote his book ‘A Place for you’, especially in this statement :

‘What is the meaning of this nostalgia for perfection which some admit and others hide, but which is inevitably there in every man and woman? It is our home-sickness for Paradise. The place we are looking for is the Paradise we have lost.’ (p.38)

I believe that for many care farm clients their experience of that environment marks the first step back on that journey of rediscovery and reconnection, a journey which is integrally linked to the process of redemption.

The keynote speaker at the 2010 National Care Farming Conference was the journalist Tom Heap who was until recently the BBC’s Rural Correspondence. In his presentation he stated that care farming is the story that every journalist is looking for – ‘the story of redemption’. It’s the story of lives transformed by the experience of working with the land and with animals, nurturing plants and tending stock. All care farmers will know exactly what he meant as they’ve witnessed that transformation in the lives of those they’ve worked with.

- Roger at Highfield Happy Hens sees it in the lives of young offenders completely turned around, to the extent that one of them eventually trained as a Probation Officer.
- Matt at Willowdene Farm witnesses it with drug addicts who throw off the habit and manage to stay clean, with one of them now training for ordination.
- Colin, who spoke at the Care Farming Conference, shared his experience at Growing Well in Cumbria. Having suffered from mental illness for many years, his time on the farm enabled him to cope with his illness, re-establish his business and also train in horticulture so that he could help train others at Growing Well.

All of these are redemptive stories and at different levels they all have profound theological connotations in that through working the land these individuals have found a new experience of Creation; of where they fit into it and how they relate to it. They’ve discovered a sense of being part of something bigger than themselves (exactly what the authors of ‘Green Care – a conceptual framework’ were referring to) and this has enabled them to discover a renewed sense of personal identity and purpose.

It’s very much what Rudolf Otto described as ‘a sense of the numinous’ of ‘that which is wholly other’ and which can lead in turn to spiritual belief and faith even if it’s just to a belief in spirit. It’s what Paul recognised when he wrote the words in Rom. I:19-20

‘What can be known about God is plain because God has shown it to them. Ever since the creation of the world his invisible nature, namely his eternal power and deity has been clearly perceived in the things that have been made.’

We can meet God in and through his creation. It’s something that Alistair McIntosh recognises in his book ‘Soil and Soul’ when he emphasises the sharp distinction between pantheism and panentheism. The first he portrays in its most simplistic form when he describes it as ‘God is nature, nature is God’. He then contrasts this with panentheism with its understanding of God as being both immanent and transcendent, met and experienced in nature but not restricted to it or by it (p.118).

The care farming experience and the spiritual discovery it leads to can mark the beginning of a journey towards a fuller knowledge and understanding of the Creator as well as creation and to an awareness of our relationship to and with him. It can become a journey from the glimpses of God provided in nature to a meeting with him in the person of his Son where connectedness and redemption fully meet and come together.

And this in turn can lead to a reconnectedness and redemption experience with the wider community which again, is an integral part of the care farming ethos and philosophy. For some care farming clients this is a ‘first’ in that they’ve never previously experienced belonging to a caring, supportive group of people, being part of a group in which they are respected and valued. The defining moment in that experience can often be when an individual discovers not only that they are cared for but that they have the ability make a caring response which is of itself valuable and important. It’s the discovery that without that response crops and animals will die, as will relationships and community.

That realisation can be life changing, especially for someone with little previous sense of self-worth and with a history of being undermined and abused. And when that realisation is linked to working with livestock and especially the young it can lead to something equally dramatic when the individual concerned finds that their care for a calf or lamb evokes a reciprocal response. A relationship is born which can in turn unlock their ability to relate to and communicate with others around them. As that person becomes aware of their ability to care and receive care in response, so a new world opens up to them. They have discovered and learnt ‘community’. This can be a deeply theological experience as Wendell Berry understands when he writes in ‘Another Turn of the Crank’ of sins

‘not being wrong because they’re forbidden but because they divide us from our neighbours, from the world, and ultimately from God. They deny care and are dangerous to creation.’ (p.75)

The overcoming of the divisions that separate us from each other, the rest of creation or God himself (whatever their cause) is at the heart of the redemptive process. Jesus said as much. He recognised it in the words of the Lord’s Prayer when he instructs us to pray

‘Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us.’

It’s there again in his words from Mt. 5:23-24

‘If you are offering your gift at the altar and there remember that your brother has something against you, leave your gift at the altar and go, first be reconciled to your brother and then come and offer your gift.’

This reforming of relationships and thus of community is at the heart of the Gospel and also at the heart of care farming for it’s an essential element in the concept of care. To again quote from ‘Green Care - a conceptual framework’, the authors write of social support (which I would describe as community) in terms of

‘the person’s belief that he is cared for, loved, esteemed and a member of a network of mutual obligations.’ (p.38)

Not only is that a good definition of what the church should be but it also describes what care farms are, and what I've experienced when I've had the privilege of meeting those who run them and those who benefit from them. I've found myself being drawn into that sort of community which I've just described where I've been welcomed, included and valued. It's been an experience of 'theology in action' which is as good a definition of care farming as you could find and as appropriate a way to end a theological reflection on care farming that you could wish for.

Bibliography :

Berry W 'Another Turn of the Crank' (Counterpoint 1995)

Kung H 'On being a Christian' (Fount 1978)

McKintosh A 'Soil and Soul' (Aurum Press 2001)

Sempick J, et al 'Green Care – a conceptual framework' (COST 2010)

Tournier P 'A Place for you' (SCM Press 1966)

Membership renewals and suchlike

We have to apologise about the late-running of the Autumn 2010 *Rural Theology*. As a result of repeated delays to the Journal, and to simplify things, our membership renewal system is changing. Those who have hitherto renewed in January or March will now be asked to renew after receiving the Spring Newsletter; and those who renewed in July or November will be asked to renew after the Autumn Newsletter.

And again, as ever, for those who are receiving this by paper copy rather than email: If you would rather receive it electronically, please let me know and I will make the necessary adjustments. If you have already done this and nothing has happened, it is almost certainly because the email address on file is invalid in some way. Please get back in touch with your current email address.

Don't forget also that more information can be found on our website, www.rural-theology.org.uk. If you have something you would like including there, please let me know.

Stephen Cope
RTA Secretary

Forthcoming meeting

Marches Group: A Welsh-English event! 'Growing Churches in the Countryside', Wednesday 6th July 2011, 10.15 for 10.30 am until 12.30 pm, at the Ludlow Conference Centre, Lower Galdeford, Ludlow SY8 1RZ. Parking at Centre (limited) or 2 mins on foot. With Mark Rylands, Bishop of Shrewsbury, National Chair of the Rural Theology Association. He has extensive experience of country Ministry and was until recently Canon Missioner in the Exeter Diocese. The morning will be of especial interest to anyone involved with 'multi parish benefices'. It will explore – 1. The context of our changing countryside and how this has affected the life of the rural church; 2. Some missionary methods from the past that may be helpful for the 21st century rural church; 3. Some more detailed characteristics of rural mission and ministry e.g. small congregations, multi-church ministry, the significance of place. So that we know numbers please ring 01597 825183 no later than 1st June if you plan to come. Cost £3 for non-members of the RTA Marches Group.

Visitor request

The Revd Heather Kennedy writes: I am a Presbyterian Minister serving nine parishes in Southland, New Zealand. I am going to attend the Multi-Parish Ministry Workshop at Leamington Spa in June. I also wish to visit ministries similar to my own and make comparisons, learn more and dialogue. We have the weekend of 11-14 June free, in the Somerset (or nearby) area, and the weekend of 25-27 June free, travelling from Scotland to Heathrow. I am looking for accommodation as well, for myself and my travelling companion Moya. Please reply to j.kennedy@xtra.co.nz.

*Rural Theology in the Public Square:
towards the Rural Church and The Big Society*

RTA Annual Conference
at Holland House, Cropthorne, Worcestershire, 25-26 November 2011

Speakers include:

Dr Jill Hopkinson, National Rural Officer of the Church of England
The Revd Canon Jeremy Martineau, Director of the Centre for the Study of Rural Ministry

‘We’ve been doing “Big Society” for centuries’ – Stephen Cope, RTA Secretary
...yes, but what does it really mean?

The consultation starts with lunch on Friday November 25, and ends after lunch on Saturday.

The cost for this consultation is £90 for the full conference; £50 without overnight accommodation or breakfast; £36 for Friday only, with lunch and dinner; and £21 for Saturday only, with lunch. Please apply to the Secretary for bursaries of up to 50%, available for students and in special cases. Please make cheques payable to ‘RTA’.

Holland House is to be found in the village of Cropthorne. Turn off the B4084 at signpost ‘Village Centre/ Fladbury’. After the right hand bend turn first left (Kennel Bank) which leads into the House car park. The nearest railway station is Evesham; buses run from Evesham and Pershore to Cropthorne Green, from there walk down Main Street past the church and school and you will see Holland House on your right. Lifts with RTA Executive members can usually be arranged from Evesham station – please contact the Secretary at least a week in advance. Further information about Holland House can be found at www.hollandhouse.org.

BOOKING FORM

Please reserve me place(s). Payment of £..... is enclosed for full conference/Friday/Saturday

Name(s)

Address

.....

Telephone Email

My dietary requirements are

I would like to speak for a few minutes on

..... (only complete if you would like to speak!)

All correspondence to Revd Canon Stephen Cope, RTA Secretary, The Vicarage, 28 Park Avenue, Withernsea, E Yorks HU19 2JU, 01964-611462, secretary@rural-theology.org.uk. Only email receipts will be issued unless a SAE is enclosed.