

Week two: Monday 11 September

A prayer for those who work in rural communities and agriculture from North Western Synod

The pages of the Bible are full of rural and natural images. The creation story puts the first people in a garden. There are scenes that take place in the desert and in the fields, up on the summits of mountains, out in a boat on the water and on the lakeshore. Rural areas can be untamed wilderness and cultivated farmland. The countryside is both a place to escape to and a world to run away from.

Those who regularly watch television programmes such as Countryfile or Countrywise will have an awareness of many of the issues that affect rural areas. Those who work in agriculture and allied industries are confronted with changing prices for their crops and for the animals that they rear. In more attractive villages across the Lake District and Yorkshire Dales, the Peak District and the Cotswolds, and in the west country, many communities have been changed by the tide of second and holiday home ownership and the knock on effect this has on the provision of local services: schools, doctors' surgeries, buses, pubs, and of course churches. Local people are often priced out of the areas that they call home. As those unfamiliar with country ways move into a village or hamlet, they sometimes have unrealistic expectations about what rural life is like; the story of the couple who have just moved into their dream country retreat furious that the farmer next door had the temerity to muck spread their fields on the first dry Saturday of spring (or variations thereof!) is a common one.

Rural areas also are affected by poverty and deprivation along with all the social problems that are present everywhere. Some are surprised to hear about the poverty present in the heart of the Lake District: farmers but also those who work in the service and tourism industries, often for minimum wage or little more. Political decisions, Brexit of course being the big one; no one yet knows how the loss of EU agricultural subsidies will affect farmers, or indeed how limitations on freedom of movement will impact on both agriculture and other rural industries. Government cuts on spending impact on small local schools and other services differently to how they might in an urban context. Imagine how difficult it is for someone who is unemployed, lives in a village where the bus might pass through once or twice a week, to get to the nearest job centre to sign on to be able to receive benefits. The bus is likely to be considerably more expensive than it would be in a town or city, and what if bus day and sign-on day do not coincide?

In rural areas, the length and breadth of the country, churches are often still at the centre of community life. Congregations are often tiny but Christian people work hard to present and represent the Good News of Jesus Christ in their communities. Rural and agricultural chaplains work hard to support farmers and others at auction marts. Country and village shows are a highlight of the year. But the challenges facing the rural church are immense too. One Church of England minister in Cumbria has pastoral charge of a dozen fellowships. United Reformed Church ministers in Cumbria (and in rural pastorates in other synods) cover huge distances between their churches; it is not unusual to spend a significant portion of one's working week in the car.

The sweep of the grand Biblical story ends in the heavenly city of the book of Revelation. The journey from country to city is a common one, in the lives of individuals - many young people raised in villages go to cities for education and work and do not return - and in respect of how cities 'grow' and swamp surrounding villages. But the rural has much to teach us: about how to live in rhythm with the natural world and about the long game of Christian faithfulness.

God of field and mountain
we hold before you the rural communities
of this land.
We pray for congregations and people
witnessing to the Good News
in villages, hamlets, and in isolated farms and homesteads.
We pray for those in ministry
in rural areas, and for all who serve our churches.

God of valley and stream
we hold before you the work of the countryside:
farmers, labourers,
those who make and maintain equipment,
auction marts, veterinary surgeons
cleaners, publicans, teachers,
doctors, nurses, midwives, bus drivers,
rangers, foresters and so many others.

God of forest and moor
we hold before you those who visit our countryside,
and those who live and work there.
May each person 'see beyond the view'
both to stand in solidarity
with rural issues,
and to discover you and your purpose
for their lives, more fully.

In the name of the One
who retreated to the quiet places.
Amen.

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