

Winter 2021

# Village *Link*

The magazine of Village Hope

Editor: Peter Carruthers



Countryside at the  
crossroads

village  
hope

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*If you know of someone whom you believe may be suitable and would like to propose for consideration, then please contact us at [villagehope@villagehope.uk](mailto:villagehope@villagehope.uk) (preferably after you have spoken to your proposed candidate and made sure they are interested).*

## 'Hope for the earth'

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2022

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# From the Editor...



In October this year, Village Hope and Agricultural Christian Fellowship (ACF) held a joint webinar to explore the future of farming in Britain, entitled 'Countryside at the Crossroads: an ABC of agricultural change'. As Ivor MacDonald summing up the event writes, these are momentous times for farming, with policies being decided that will set the course for agriculture and life in the countryside for years to come. But there are signs of hope, for example, in the potential for a new cooperation between farmers, government and other stakeholders. Ultimately, our hope is the Lord, who made heaven and earth and who will return to bring in an age of agricultural peace and prosperity, when 'everyone will sit under their own vine and their own fig-tree'.

Written versions of the presentations at the webinar occupy most of the space in this special issue of Village Link. But we start with some news from our Chairman about our newly formed partnership with ACF (the webinar was our first 'joint venture') and an encouraging update on our Village Schools Project. This issue also includes an article on Christopher Jones MBE, former ACF coordinator and founder of Farming Community Network, who has been a great inspiration and influence on several of the authors featured in this issue, including myself.

This is also our Advent and Christmas issue, so the final pages are dedicated to some seasonal poetry, some Christmas thoughts and a prize quiz!

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Perhaps you will listen to, or even attend a performance of, Handel's Messiah this winter. Its opening words from Isaiah may seem particularly significant in our current times as the Covid era grinds on: "'Comfort, yes, comfort My people', says your God. Speak comfort to Jerusalem, and cry out to her, that her warfare is ended, that her iniquity is pardoned" (Isaiah 40:1).

Words of comfort are, of course, much more effective if you can also fix the problem. The people for whom these words were most likely originally intended had lost everything that gave

them their identity as a nation - land, city, temple, priests and king - and they were exiles in a foreign land. The prophet's words were comforting, good news, because the Lord has fixed the problem. The exile is over, their national sin, the breaking of their side of their special relationship with God, had been paid for. And the tone of comfort, of good news, continues in the chapters that follow, which reveal an appointed one, a Messiah, who will come to rescue and regather His people.

They are words of comfort, good news, to us also. They may not announce the immediate fixing of our present problems, but they do announce the solving of the problem behind all the problems of humanity. Our exile from God, our broken relationship with Him, is ended because our sins have been paid for. The Messiah revealed to Isaiah has come both to "restore Israel" and be "a light to the Gentiles", to bring God's "salvation to the ends of the earth" (Isaiah 49:6). Centuries later, the elderly Simeon, on meeting the new-born Jesus, picks up the same theme, but, significantly, he reverses the order (Luke 2:29-32).

These words are not just comforting; they also call for action. The Jewish exiles had to believe the words of comfort, pack their bags, turn their backs on Babylon and head back to Jerusalem. Many did not. Likewise, we need to believe the comforting words of sins forgiven and relationship restored, turn from our own ways and the ways of the world, and follow the Messiah, the Lord Jesus Christ - not just as a first-time, one-off event, but as a way of life.

In another sense, we who follow Jesus the Messiah are to continue 'living in Babylon' for the time being, yet retain our identity and calling as God's distinct people. Part of that calling means both announcing and embodying His comfort, His good news, to one another and to the world. Christians may not have always been a great comfort to each other or the world, and 'organised Christianity' has not always been good news. In these extraordinary times, let us pray and work to do things differently in 2022.

Dr Peter Carruthers

# NEWS AND UPDATES



## Village Hope & Agricultural Christian Fellowship - a new partnership

*John Plumb*

Agricultural Christian Fellowship (ACF)<sup>1</sup> is in transition following the retirement of its long-serving coordinator, Christopher Jones, who ably and enthusiastically co-ordinated the work for so many years.

Faced with a need for administrative help, and recognising the many overlaps between ACF and Village Hope, both in purpose and personnel, we have concluded a more formal partnership, governed by a Memorandum of Understanding.

What both organisations share is the goal of bringing the hope of the gospel to rural Britain; while the focus of Village Hope is on all rural Christians, churches and communities, ACF concentrates on farming and farming people.

We were already both part of the Hope Countryside Partnership and have shared in many prayer events and in preparing the monthly Seeds of Prayer<sup>2</sup>. Our first joint venture since forming our new partnership, however, was a webinar on 'Countryside at the Crossroads' on 30 October 2021 (see opposite).

We look forward to sharing more together in prayer, work and witness in the coming months and years. In particular, I very much hope that Village Hope's annual conference in April 2022, with its theme of 'hope for the earth' (a matter of great concern to both organisations) will provide a special opportunity for the two organisations to come together.

<sup>1</sup>[acfhub.com](http://acfhub.com)  
<sup>2</sup>[bit.ly/hcseeds1121](http://bit.ly/hcseeds1121)



## Village Schools Project - work continues in school and online

*Laura Toomer*

I am so grateful to God for the continued opportunities to visit schools and share the message of the Bible with village children.

Since September, it has been wonderful to work in classrooms with children again, face-to-face! We have delivered Harvest workshops, bible story times, and RE lessons on the biblical account of creation as well as 5-week programmes working through the Old or New Testament.

Whole-school assemblies are still held back due to Covid, so we continue to use YouTube to provide Bible-based assemblies to schools, and these are well-used and appreciated.

In schools, we have had to adapt now and again to new procedures: one of our volunteers was teaching a 'Walk Through the Bible' programme to a class, where children were not allowed to leave their seats or dress up as part of our storytelling, which is a method we often rely on. Louise quickly noticed a mannequin's head in the corner of the classroom, and so this mannequin was transformed into Pharaoh, Moses, David and a whole range of bible characters over the next 5 weeks!

Knowledge and understanding of the Bible remains extremely limited in the children we meet, though schemes such as 'Open the Book' and 'Walk Through' are doing a great work in tackling that across our nation. In one of my lessons about Christmas this week, I was quite pleased when a pupil eagerly interrupted me as I talked about King Herod's plan to find and kill the newborn baby Jesus saying, "I know how they escaped, Miss – they hid the baby in a basket and put it in the reeds on the river!" This pupil may have got a bit mixed up, but had heard a Bible story told in school and remembered something of it.

We pray that through all we do in schools week by week, children would get a sense of the love God has for them in Jesus, and remember it.

# COUNTRYSIDE AT THE CROSSROADS: AN ABC OF AGRICULTURAL CHANGE

On 30 October 2021, Village Hope and Agricultural Christian Fellowship held a webinar to examine, from a Christian and biblical viewpoint, three critical issues that will shape the future of farming, the countryside and rural communities: the Agriculture Act 2020, with its core principle of 'public money for public goods'; post-Brexit transition measures and global trade, and; policies and actions to address Climate change.

The webinar was introduced by John Plumb, Chairman of both Village Hope and Agricultural Christian Fellowship. Discussions of the three topics above were then opened with presentations by Professor John Wibberley, Ian Tremain, and Dr Peter Carruthers respectively. The Rev'd Ivor MacDonald provided a closing summary and comments. The webinar ended with prayers for farming people and the work of Farming Community Network, led by Anthony Matthew.

Below, John Plumb introduces the webinar. This is followed on the subsequent pages by written versions of the three topic presentations and Ivor's closing summary and comments.

— — —  
*Oh, give thanks to the Lord, for he is good, for his steadfast love endures for ever! Let the redeemed of the Lord say so, whom he has redeemed from trouble (Psalm 107:1-2).*

So begins King David's psalm of praise and thanksgiving to God who comes to the rescue each time his people cry out to Him in their trouble.

There are those lost in a wilderness (4-9), those imprisoned for rebellion (10-16), those afflicted because of wrongdoing (17-22), and those caught in a storm (23-32). Whatever their predicament, crying out to the

Lord brings deliverance from distress. And, in every case, His people are exhorted to be grateful to the One who helped them out of the mess they got into.

*Let them thank the Lord for his steadfast love, for his wondrous works to the children of man! (Psalm 107:8).*

Farmers will agree that there is always some new challenge or constraint to have to deal with, from weather events, crop and livestock disease, vandalism and fly tipping, and price fluctuations, to ever greater bureaucracy, regulation and inspection, agriculture is always 'under attack'.

Many become embittered and disillusioned by what seems to be a war of attrition, but the God who made the universe, the land and the sea and every living thing, and in whom all things hold together (Colossians 1:17), is personally and intricately involved in every process within this wonderfully complex creation. This includes farming the land, where faith in Jesus transforms every daily task into an act of worship.

Our webinar addressed some big issues. The Agriculture Act 2020 is set to shift farmers from being food producers to countryside custodians, post-Brexit trade deals directly threaten to undermine our high quality home-produced food, and the drive to 'net-zero' greenhouse-gas emissions will radically change our approach to land management. At this crossroads, we seek God's blessing both for, and from, our countryside.

Psalm 107 is just as true today as when David composed it. The Lord responds to our cries for help, but so often we have forgotten to give Him our thanks. So let us thank the Lord for His providence and blessings. Our 'green and pleasant land' is God's gift.

*They sow fields and plant vineyards and get a fruitful yield. By his blessing they multiply greatly, and he does not let their livestock diminish (Psalm 107:37-38).*

**John Plumb**

# AGRICULTURE ACT 2020

John Wiberley

## Biblical pointers

The Bible has much to say about farming. Its very first chapter sets out the 'creation mandate' or 'dominion covenant', whereby we are given stewardship of the earth and its creatures (Genesis 1:26-28), for which we are accountable (Luke 16:2). "The heavens are the Lord's, but the earth He has given to men" (Psalm 115:16) and we are His tenants. God cares for the land and nurtures it (Psalm 65:9-13). Providing bread for the hungry delights God's heart (Isaiah 58:7) and is central to His care and our prayer (Matthew 6:11). Everything that has breath and all that He has made praise Him (Psalm 150:6; Psalm 145:10-13), and, through our words and work, especially our farming, we are called to join in that continual praise!

## Policy milestones

The Agriculture Act 2020 received Royal Assent in November of last year. This 'enabling legislation' signalled the biggest change to UK agricultural policy since the 1947 Act. The latter initiated a great production drive after World War II. From 1973 until 2020 (ie during the UK's membership of the EU), agriculture was shaped by the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP). This combined intervention buying of production surpluses with farm subsidies, in order to regulate markets, but keep food prices down (yet the UK is still only 64% self-sufficient in home-produced food). By 2016, when the UK voted to leave the EU, the cost of the CAP had risen to an unsustainable half of the EU budget.

## Agricultural change

The years since 1947 have seen great changes to UK agriculture. The numbers of farmers and farm-workers have declined, but farmer stress has risen. Production per farm, hectare, and animal has increased, but margins have tightened. Farmland has been lost to roads and urbanisation, and farmland birds and other wildlife and their habitats have been lost. Debate over the pros and cons of alternative farming systems, opportunities for farm diversification of businesses, and public interest in farming have all increased.

Productivity came to be measured in terms of output per person employed. Mechanisation much improved that ratio, but did not properly consider the downward energy-efficiency and increased environmental impacts accompanying input-fuelled advancing yields, nor the consequences of disconnecting people from the land. Many sounded the trumpet for more environmentally friendly

approaches to agricultural management that would recognise the fundamental importance of soil biology for nutrient cycling and carbon capture.

Now, many UK farmers are working together in the 'Linking Environment And Farming' (LEAF)<sup>1</sup> and Nature Friendly Farming Network (NFFN)<sup>2</sup> initiatives. The National Trust in England, Wales and Northern Ireland (the world's largest conservation charity with some 5.5M members) is working hard with its 1800 farming tenants to deliver landscape-scale environmental management alongside profitable farming.<sup>3</sup>

## 'Public goods'

Under the terms of the 2020 Agriculture Act, the current subsidy system of direct payments to farmers based on total amount of land farmed will be phased out over a seven-year period and replaced with a system of payments for 'public goods', such as better air and water quality, improved soil health, higher animal welfare standards, public access to the countryside and measures to reduce flooding.

Direct payments have not been linked to any specific public benefits (although home-produced UK food is surely a public benefit) and have been skewed in favour of the largest landowners. The top 10% of recipients have received almost 50% of total payments, while the bottom 20% received just 2%. Direct payments will, therefore, be reduced more quickly for recipients of larger sums than for those receiving smaller payments.

The UK government is working with farmers to design, develop and trial the new approach, called the Environmental Land Management Scheme (ELMS). The current focus (autumn 2021) is on developing a 'Soil Health Action Plan'; further work will focus on animal welfare. Landscape-scale trialling is also underway.

## Integrated farming

A case needs to be made to policymakers and the public for policies and practices that favour integral management, but have viable farm livelihoods at their heart. As the Women's Institute 1998 poster declared, 'Farming is Everyone's business.' Farming is integral to ecosystem security and for water, food, energy, livelihoods and geopolitical stability. Thus, ecosystem security must take account of all factors relevant to sustainable life on earth with agriculture having a crucial role. Farming systems based on agro-ecology deliver such integration, notably 'Conservation Agriculture'.

### Key provisions of the Agriculture Act 2020 & the Environmental Land Management Scheme

- Sustainable farming, local nature and landscapes.
- Seven-year transition from EU CAP (half EU budget)
- A 'green Brexit' - towards more environmentally-friendly trading
- Measures to increase productivity sustainably
- Increased R&D funding, especially farmer-led projects
- Encouragement of farmer collaboration.
- Improving soil health, animal welfare and other indicators of good husbandry
- Sustainable production along with a lower environmental 'footprint'
- Risk management & a retirees/new entrants scheme (2021-27)

There are some 500 million farming families worldwide still maintaining the crucial linkage between family and farm, which has sustained life on earth hitherto. As the finite nature of unmanaged environmental resources becomes clearer, we hope farming's central role should be more obvious for:

- global ecosystem security policy, with more national food sovereignty recovered from the World Trade Organisation;
- biodiversity and landscape conservation to care at scale for the countryside, integrating trees, but not swamping it with them;
- achieving sustainable rural livelihoods within relational, well-connected rural communities.

### A farmer-led future?

Change of any kind can be threatening and many farmers are worried and are making more use of the services of the Farming Community Network (FCN)<sup>4</sup> and other similar agencies.

The Agriculture Act 2020 makes some limited provision to encourage farmer retirement of those who need to do so, and provides incentives for training new entrants. But initiatives are needed to catalyse farmer networks, strengthen farmer sovereignty in decision-making, and encourage voluntary collaboration for resilience using natural capital.

Natural capital includes both physical and biological resources and people's skills and entrepreneurship. Good practice in environmental management is only deliverable through positive relationships with farmers and local people. Engaging with the over-arching experience and wisdom of rural communities is vital, with specialists alongside to inform this practical core on particular issues. We need to celebrate the environment-care by farmers that is already happening.

Farmer-generated innovations have always been crucial to practical agricultural progress. However, great caution needs to be exercised regarding GM (Genetically-Modified) technology – and indeed all 'silver bullets' backed by any over-ardent vested interests.

Worldwide experience suggests that farmers are the best

judges of appropriate agricultural innovations. A principal issue with GM is its potential to erode farmers' control over their natural resources, including timely availability of seeds and intergenerational selection from a wide gene pool of crops and livestock breeds.

Technological innovations need objective, precautionary research. Encouragement of genuinely pasture-fed livestock systems is warranted<sup>5</sup>, as is work with cross-bred livestock. Digital technologies offer means to monitor both agricultural and environmental indicators of genuine progress.

Other important ways forward include: longer tenancies (these are only around 3 years average duration at present) and improved landlord-tenant cooperation; re-evaluating and re-envisioning individual farms' progress and 'bench-marking' the best practitioners; strengthening community engagement, and; delegating to NGOs, local communities and commerce.

### Conclusions

Agricultural productivity and responsible environmental management are mandated by the Bible, are mutually inclusive, and require policies that integrate them as simply as is possible. The UK needs to lead in improving sustainability of global farming practices and farm livelihoods, rewarding farmers for comprehensive ecosystem security, food, timber, clean water, carbon capture (and soil nitrogen), and in deriving other income streams from therapeutic, recreational, touristic, heritage and cultural values of land.

The Agriculture Act 2020 provides opportunities for all this to happen and policymakers seem genuinely keen to engage with farmers and land management practitioners in seeking to develop it to best serve these ends. May we in Agricultural Christian Fellowship, Village Hope, Farming Community Network and other organisations stand with farmers in adjusting to these changes for both public benefit and the well-being of their own families and rural communities.



*Professor John Wibberley, PhD, NSch, FRAgS, FIAGR, has run his own integral mission business since 1989. John is Visiting Professor of Comparative Agriculture & Rural Extension at the University of Reading and the Royal Agricultural University. He has worked extensively in the UK and overseas, notably Africa. John is a former Chairman of Agricultural Christian Fellowship (ACF) and Farm Crisis Network (now Farming Community Network), and currently chairs FCN Devon & the TAA (Tropical Agriculture Association).*

<sup>1</sup> leaf@leafuk.org <sup>2</sup> nffn.org.uk <sup>3</sup> nationaltrust.org.uk <sup>4</sup> fcn.org.uk  
<sup>5</sup> pastureforlife.org

## BREXIT, FARMING AND TRADE

Ian Tremain

In 2016, the British public voted in a referendum to decide whether the United Kingdom should remain in or leave the European Union. Forty-three years after we joined the then EEC, 51.9% of us chose to leave the club that had influenced our politics, passports, and freedom to travel, work and study, and had shaped agricultural policy and farming support mechanisms.



### The long view

In 1972, it was reported that the Chinese leader Zhou Enlai was asked about the impact of the French revolution almost 200 years before. “It’s too early to say”, he replied.

Now, in 2021, it is only five years since the Referendum. And, while we may have noticed some very tangible effects of Brexit, it is far too early to say what impact Brexit will have on our lives and livelihoods in the years ahead. Like Zhou Enlai, we need to take the long view!

### Different perspectives

I listened with great interest to the news in the run up to the Referendum, and, like many people, weighed up the arguments, considered the issues that would affect me and my livelihood and what was best for our country, prayerfully asked for wisdom on how to use my vote, and made my choice.

The one thing that surprised me was the depth of feeling and the passionate way people took up their positions on one or other side of the debate. As a nation, we were divided - across political parties, age groups, families, and income categories. People in agriculture and the allied industries held different views as did those in the faith communities.

What we did not see coming after the Brexit referendum was a global pandemic that would change our world more than any other event in my lifetime.

So here we are looking back at the effect of the Brexit decision with just a few years hindsight, and, depending on your position, you may be thinking how wise or foolish we were. On the one hand, we might see the success of the Covid vaccination programme as a result of being independently capable of making swift decisions to protect the lives of our own citizens. On the other hand, you may be looking at the shortage of labour to pick our fruit and vegetable crops or drive food delivery trucks or milk collection and fuel tankers and point the finger at the Brexit decision and declare it a catastrophe. Maybe you trade with the EU itself and see nothing but costs and red tape. Or you may be concerned about the United Kingdom itself and consider the border down the middle of the Irish sea a disaster for the union or the rise in the Scottish independence movement as an unexpected consequence of Brexit.

### Back to the Bible

None of these issues is a surprise to God. When we read our bibles and see the rise and fall of empires in the Old Testament or the blessings on leaders of nations who turn their hearts to the



Nehemiah  
Russian Icon Painter, Public domain, via Wikimedia Commons

Lord, we see that, whatever we may have felt passionate about in the Referendum, He is more interested in the state of our hearts towards our fellow man than our well-reasoned political arguments.

One of my Old Testament heroes is Nehemiah. I love the story of this humble, yet devout, God-fearing man, who was moved by a sense of wanting to honour the Lord by rebuilding the walls of Jerusalem and by doing so to begin to rebuild his nation. He was not born into a position of power and influence, nor was he an experienced builder or clever politician. He was a man of prayer. At the right time he was bold enough to ask the King for a big favour, and he was granted his request. In the months that followed, he was a man whom others could believe in, and stone by stone the city of Jerusalem became, once again, a strong symbol for God's people.

However, the quality that Nehemiah possessed most was his confidence and total trust that his prayers would be answered. He faced criticism and ridicule, but he never wavered from the task that God had set before him.

When we get down on our knees in prayer it is a very humbling experience, and hopefully when we get up we can remain humble and still get on with the task God has set before us.



### Just balances

Having grown up on a small Cornish dairy farm, I realised at a young age that there must be an easier way to make a living than milking cows. We had a smart and helpful feed rep who came to the farm each month, in a modern car, and wearing a clean shirt. This lifestyle looked very appealing to me, so after a year at Duchy college, I landed a job selling feed to farmers. This was the beginning of a career in the supply industry and one that I have loved for 35 years. I now run my own raw material trading business, which supplies mills and merchants with some of the more niche feed ingredients.

I belong to the Bristol Corn & Feed Trade Association, whose motto is: 'my word is my bond'.

Being able to trust those with whom we trade is the basis for a sound and stable society. The Bible has much to say about honesty and integrity, especially in the use of weights and measures: "you are to maintain just balances and reliable standards for weights, dry volumes, and liquid volumes. I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt" (Leviticus 19:36); "honest weights and scales are the Lords" (Proverbs 16:11). Jesus Himself approved legitimate trading as in the parable of

the ten minas (Luke 19:11-27), in which the master summoned his servants so that "he might know how much everyone had gained by trading" (Luke 19:15).

While today each trade is backed up by a written contract, being able to trust the seller, and in turn being trusted by the buyer is key to an ongoing supply of commodities and, ultimately, food on our plates. While my own small business does not trade in foreign currency or rely on imports from the EU, we are fortunate not to have suffered any detriment in the day-to-day transactions as a result of the Brexit decision. But I know that many are having to come to terms with the new regime and protocols for lorries crossing the channel. Yet, I do not doubt that we will adapt to the new world as it is, because being resilient in our businesses is essential to keep afloat.

### Yesterday, today and forever

So whether you were a Brexiteer or a Remainer perhaps it is good to take the long view and not worry too much about whether we were right or wrong in our referendum decisions, and, instead, focus on how we serve the Lord of the universe, who has seen the rise and fall of empires, kings and nations.

I am generally an optimist, and while there will be all sorts of frustrations with the consequences of Brexit, there will be many advantages too. The human being is remarkably adaptable when we need to be. So, following Nehemiah's example, maybe we should get down on our knees to build a great nation, and not rely on our politicians, our national pride in "Cool Britannia", or our independence.

Maybe it is still too early to say what impact the French revolution will have had on society, and it is certainly too soon to see how Brexit will change life. But one thing I am sure of is that God is the same, yesterday, today and forever.



*Ian Tremain, NSch, ARAGS, runs a niche raw material supply business, acts as an independent chairman for a number of farming businesses, and mentors younger members of the supply trade. He became a Christian while travelling in Canada 28 years ago, and is part of the leadership team of Creech Baptist Church near Taunton. Ian lives in Somerset with his wife Rosie on a smallholding, and has recently taking up competition ploughing.*

## C CLIMATE CHANGE

Peter Carruthers

In 1827, French scientist, John Baptiste Fourier, proposed that the Earth's atmosphere retains solar energy like a greenhouse, thus originating the 'greenhouse effect'. Three decades later, CO<sub>2</sub> was identified as the most important 'greenhouse gas'. In the mid-20C, scientists connected rising temperatures and CO<sub>2</sub> emissions from burning fossil fuels, and computer models began to project the extent of this 'global warming' effect.

A slightly warmer earth in itself may not be an issue. But scientists believed that global warming could change many other aspects of the climate, with widespread impacts on food and water resources, human health and settlements, and natural ecosystems. Predictions of the extent, intensity and imminence of these effects are the essential drivers of today's 'climate emergency'.

From the 1960s, growing environmental concern pushed global warming ever higher up the global political agenda, culminating in the Paris Agreement (2015) aimed at "achieving a climate-neutral world by mid-century". At the time of writing, leaders of more than 120 nations were assembling in Glasgow for COP26, to "accelerate actions towards the Paris Agreement goals".

Climate-change activism has also burgeoned in recent years, as exemplified by Greta Thunberg, Extinction Rebellion and Insulate Britain. Apocalyptic tropes, like 'extinction', 'emergency' and the 'last chance to save the planet', have stoked a mood of urgency, alarm, panic and impending disaster.

The UK government is committed to reducing its greenhouse gas emissions to net zero by 2050. Exactly how this will be achieved is not yet clear, but it will be costly (for government and consumers), and is likely to necessitate greater surveillance and control of citizens.

### Farming & the land

Farming and food production are major sources of greenhouse gases (although rural land is also an important carbon sink). Livestock are seen as the chief culprits. A recent UK study proposed reducing beef and lamb consumption by 50% by 2029 and 100% by 2049, in order to meet the net-zero target. Other measures include 'low-carbon farming practices',

widespread tree planting and peatland restoration. More than one-fifth of UK farmland might need to be released to carbon sequestration, habitat restoration and bioenergy production by 2050. What ever the detail, meeting the net-zero target seems set radically to change the face of the countryside as we know it.

### 'We're all doomed' or 'don't panic'?

The 'climate-change orthodoxy' behind the story above says: "the climate is changing and it's our fault; it is an 'emergency' and we face extinction; we must act radically now, or we are all doomed!" This narrative is backed by 'mainstream' scientific opinion, and has been overwhelmingly, and seemingly uncritically, embraced and promoted by Christian churches and ministries in the UK and beyond; some seem to have more enthusiasm for the 'gospel of net zero' than the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

There are other views. The most prevalent of these accepts the scientific 'consensus', but not the proposed solutions: climate change is real, but humanity has solved such problems before, through technology and innovation, and can do so again. Mitigation may do more harm than good; adaptation is preferable. Alternative scientific views argue that the models depend on some questionable assumptions: factoring in different assumptions produces radically different outcomes. In either case, their advocates argue, there is no need to panic.

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How, then, do we address climate change from a Christian and biblical viewpoint? Below, I set out some principles to guide our understanding and response to the issue.

### Truth

Truth is at the core of biblical ethics. But, contemporary culture has relativised, privatised, and deconstructed it: "truth has stumbled in the public square" (Isaiah 59:14). Climate change is a 'wicked problem', shrouded in 'epistemological fog': we do not know how to know; things are not what they seem. Science helps us to understand how creation works and how we have affected it, but we are not



to 'follow the science', but follow the Lord and His Spirit and truth. If we are to present things as truth, then we need to be 100% sure they are true, because we will have to give account. If we are to promote a cause, we need to comprehend fully its goals and not be too quick to join any faction (John 2:24-25). More than ever, we need to "test all things" (1 Thessalonians 5:21) and "walk circumspectly because the days are evil" (Ephesians 5:15-17).

### Justice

The "Lord is a God of justice" (Isaiah 30:18), calls us to "do justice" (Micah 6:8), and has a special concern for the poor and oppressed (Isaiah 61: 1; Luke 1:52-53). Many Christian and secular agencies believe justice for the world's poor is best served by advancing the mainstream mitigation agenda. However, their needs may be better and sooner served by building resilience through economic development, adaptation and innovation.

### Wisdom

Biblical wisdom enjoins us to care for future generations (although the priority is to teach them about the Lord, eg Psalm 78:4-6), yet not to "worry about tomorrow" or presumptuously plan for the future (Matthew 6:24; James 1:13-17). As American environmentalist, Wendell Berry, put it: "All we can do to prepare rightly for tomorrow is to do the right thing today... We have the same pressing need that we've always had – to love, care for and teach our children".

### Caring for the earth

God created people in His image and likeness, to rule over the other creatures as His viceroys (Genesis 1:26-28) and to "tend and keep" His creation as His stewards (Genesis 2:15). God is Himself a gardener, 'tending the earth and watering the earth' (Psalm 65:9-10) and we are his under-gardeners. The call to care for creation is, rightly, at the heart of our approach to climate change and the environment in general.

### The earth mourns

However, our first parents' disobedience led to disharmony between God and Man, among people, and in creation itself. The ground was cursed (Genesis 3:17), the "earth mourns" (Isaiah 24:4), and creation was "subjected to futility" (Romans 8:20). Nature may be beautiful and bountiful, but it is also 'red in tooth and claw'.

Subsequently, the Law given to OT Israel, which included commandments to exercise restraint in the treatment of creation itself (eg Sabbath & Jubilee), made it possible to recover in part what was lost in Eden. Right relationships at all levels bring peace; broken relationships brings sorrow. Covenant breakers curse creation. Environmental pollution starts with moral pollution (Jeremiah 2:2-3; Hosea 4:1-3; Isaiah 24:4-5).

Whatever the truth about climate change, global pollution should not surprise us too much; it is what independent humanity does. Made in God's image, we are capable of great creativity; fallen, we are capable of great destruction (Revelation 11:17-18).

### 'Seed time and harvest'

After Eden, increasing human wickedness led to the Flood (Genesis 6 - 8). But, God did not destroy all humanity, and, after the Flood, pledged that the seasons, weather and farming would not cease "while the earth remains" (Genesis 8:21-22). This promise should surely temper excessive fears of imminent destruction and extinction due to climate change.

### 'A hope and a future'

Unlike contemporary environmentalists, whose only hope is in humanity getting its act together, we have a message of hope - for humanity and the earth (eg Romans 8:21) - which depends not on human endeavour, but on God's mercy and love.

At the Cross, Jesus overcame sin, death and the devil, mended the broken relationship between humanity and God, and opened the way to life, peace and reconciliation for people and for the earth itself (Colossians 1:19-20). His Resurrection inaugurated a process that culminates in the liberation and transformation of the whole of creation (Romans 8:19-21), in a "new heavens and a new earth" (2 Peter 3:13).

### Birth pangs

The final link in the story is the promised return of Jesus to the earth in glory. This will usher in the promised restoration of creation and the age to come. Christian environmentalism is ultimately eschatological! When He returns we shall need to give account of our stewardship of the earth and its creatures, and we need to take responsibility now. But we are not all doomed, and there is no need to panic!

Further, before He returns, there will be great turbulence in the natural world and in human society. So we should not be too surprised at what is happening just now. These are just the beginning of the 'birth pangs' (Matthew 24:8; Mark 13:8) of an 'old' creation anticipating the delivery of a 'new' creation liberated from corruption (Romans 8:21-22).

And, as Jesus said, when we see these things happening, we are to "look up for our redemption", and the redemption of the earth itself, draws near (Luke 21:28).



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<sup>1</sup>[bit.ly/unccpa](http://bit.ly/unccpa) <sup>2</sup>[ukcop26.org](http://ukcop26.org) <sup>3</sup>[bit.ly/nzukunis](http://bit.ly/nzukunis) <sup>4</sup>[bit.ly/22perc](http://bit.ly/22perc) <sup>5</sup>eg Tear Fund - [bit.ly/tfccadv](http://bit.ly/tfccadv)

## RE-INTEGRATING FARMING

Ivor MacDonald

As our webinar presentations make clear, we live in times of momentous change. Policies are being decided that will set the course for agriculture and life in the countryside for years to come. Certainly, the countryside is at the crossroads.

However, as John Wibberley reminds us, our starting point as Christians is that farming must first be informed by our calling to reverence God and to be stewards of His creation. The Bible appreciates wilderness, but God's blessing is expressed in land restored to full agricultural productivity. God given peace-shalom is people living in a healthy threefold relationship with God, the land and each other, with "everyone under their own vine and under their own fig-tree" (1 Kings 4:25; Micah 4:4).

### Trends in policy

John describes how agricultural policy has oscillated between extremes since WW1. Food security was the post-war priority and the emphasis on production continued under the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP). But subsidising farming on the basis of output or headage resulted in overproduction and support came to be based on land area farmed. However, this meant that larger units, already benefitting from economies of scale, received a hugely disproportionate share of support.

Today the pendulum is swinging away from production, with wildlife and nature pushed to the top of the political agenda. Alongside this, research into unmanned tractors and harvesters points to a 'brave new world' of a countryside full of wildlife, but empty of people.

The Organic Movement showed that to be sustainable, food production must be 'connected' (ie 'organic'). But policies since WW2 have eroded the connectedness between food, land and people in all sorts of ways. Measuring 'efficiency' in terms of output per unit has resulted in fewer and fewer people being connected to agriculture.

### Agriculture Act 2020

Notwithstanding all the above, a new act is necessary, not least because the EU support mechanism was unsustainable. It may have been good for the consumer by keeping food prices down. But it did little to maintain a strong land-based community or protect the environment. On these counts at least, we should not be too sad to see the CAP behind us.

But what of the future? John encourages us to be hopeful. The Act provides real opportunities to re-

connect and re-integrate food, land and people. We should reject ideas of setting aside of land for strict protection coupled with intensive farming. There is ample evidence that the most sustainable systems mimic creation in its natural state.

### Post-Brexit trade

How ever government supports agriculture, farming is ultimately market driven. That is why what happens to markets for food products now we are outside the EU cocoon matters enormously.

Will post-Brexit free-trade deals undermine British farming? Without the CAP, will farmers be paid more fairly or less fairly for their products? As Ian Tremain said, 'it's too early to tell'!

Regarding markets, the Bible stresses principles of justice, fair measures and honest trading. And that is where the problem lies. In an 'ideal world', there would be no need for governments to do anything other than ensure that food is produced legally in ways that respect the environment with nutritious healthful outcomes.

Most farmers would prefer to see agriculture thrive because of a fair market that takes account of the hidden production costs of animal and environmental welfare. One cannot help thinking that food is simply too cheap in the UK: we spend less than 8% of disposable income on food, much less than market-driven agricultural powerhouses such as Australia do. Not rewarding food producers properly has resulted in poor mental health and increasing suicides, and pressure to cut back on animal and welfare environmental care.

Even processing conglomerates are acknowledging that food prices are too low. As



Rajit Singh Boparan, Britain's 'largest chicken producer', said, "the days when you could feed a family of four with a £3 chicken are coming to an end".<sup>1</sup>

In a free-market, producers need to command price premiums by drawing consumers attention to provenance, environmental and welfare credentials, cultural and historical connections, etc. For the Christian farmer, integrity in trade will mean that such marketing is not just 'greenwash', but is done with integrity, reflecting the Biblical commitment to stewarding the Lord's earth.

## Climate change

With world leaders gathering in Glasgow for COP26<sup>2</sup> as we held our webinar, global climate change is the most visible and immediate of the currents impacting agriculture.

The idea that humanity is responsible for a rise in greenhouse gases, leading to global warming and the disruption of climate patterns, is, by and large, the 'new orthodoxy'. On the eve of COP26, newspaper headlines were shrill, declaring that this is the 'last chance' to save the planet. Many churches and para-church organisations now have climate change activism firmly on the agenda. Christians must get on board, they argue, or else be seen as hopelessly out of touch or even to be hindering the work of the gospel.

Peter Carruthers urges us as Christians to approach the issue with wisdom and caution. In a recent article,<sup>3</sup> he introduced me to the notion of a 'wicked problem' - one in which truth is not easily obtained because of a 'fog' of moral, ethical and scientific issues. This seems to be true for global warming; hence the need for wisdom and caution. We acknowledge science as God's gift, but it is the Lord and not science we follow.

Christian perspectives on global warming must be informed by key biblical truths. Due to the Fall, the world is caught up in the consequences of sin, yet God has made a covenant with the earth to sustain it (Genesis 8:21-22). Redemption encompasses not just human beings, but the whole earth, of which we are stewards who will have to give account. The hope of Renewal means we look to a new heaven and a new earth. The earth has a glorious future. It will not be lost through human sin. Jesus is returning to renew it. This, above all, should shape our response to climate change.

## Re-integrating

As described above, policy tends to veer from one extreme to the other - from maximising production to 'rewilding' and tree planting arable ground, from extravagantly supported agricultural markets to reckless free markets, from industrialised agriculture to fear-driven moves to abandon meat production. The Christian voice must speak out against these costly pendulum swings.

Underlying these policy swings is a pervasive disintegration of food production, environmental care and support of land-based communities, in a local context. These belong together. Jesus declared concerning marriage, "what God has joined together, let not man separate" (Mark 10:9). The same applies to food production!



One particular concern is the perilously low number of people directly involved in farming. This has resulted in most people being totally disconnected from one of the most fundamental aspects of being human. Yet everyone is involved - 'eating is an agricultural act'.

We have come a long way from this vision of an integrated, connected, local, 'organic', food-land-people system. Recently, I was in Oban, a fishing port in the west coast of Scotland, where I enjoyed a superb fish supper. I asked the owner if the fish were caught locally. He replied they came from Peterhead, on the other side of Scotland. We surely need to return to the local food networks that were once a feature of our society!

## 'Give us this day our daily bread'

Praying, 'give us today our daily bread', reminds us of the miracle of God's provision of food, prompting awe and reverence. These should be the Christian hallmarks of food production. But they have been undermined by "just in time" food retailing, and, more profoundly, by policies that deliberately reduce the number of people able to engage in food production, and who are, therefore, close enough to the miracle to be in awe of it. 'Reverence' prompts a Christian vision for earth care which is at the same time humble and hopeful.

With awe and reverence, we are to steward the earth, provide for ourselves and feed the hungry. May we in these challenging times be like the men of Issachar, "who understood the times and knew what Israel should do" (1 Chronicles 12:32).



*The Rev'd Ivor MacDonald, BSc (Agric), MSc (Agric Management), BD, is Minister of Hope Church, Coatbridge, North Lanarkshire. Originally from the Isle of Skye, he studied agriculture at Aberdeen and Reading and worked as an advisor for the Scottish Agricultural Colleges. He then trained for the ministry at Aberdeen University and Westminster Theological Seminary and was ordained in 1993. Before his present incumbency, he served congregations in Lewis and Skye. He is author of 'Land of the Living' (Virtualbookworm, 2005).*

<sup>1</sup>bit.ly/rsbhp <sup>2</sup>ukcop26.org <sup>3</sup>bit.ly/cop26sps



*As coordinator of Agricultural Christian Fellowship (ACF) for many years, Christopher Jones played a major and unique role in developing its work and building its membership. He also spearheaded the founding of Farm Crisis Network (now Farming Community Network) in 1995 and was the leader and architect of its development until his retirement in 2007. This article looks back on his life and work. It was first published in the Farmers' Guardian<sup>1</sup> on 4 November 2021, and is republished here by kind permission.*

Christopher Jones has had a long and distinguished career helping other rural dwellers, not least through the formation of the Farming Community Network. Sara Gregson went to meet him.

There are some people who go through life continually giving, and Christopher Jones is one of them, even at the grand age of 80. It is clear that faith, kindness and the community are at the heart of all he does, especially when it came to founding one of the sector's leading charities, the Farming Community Network.

But he has led quite a life. Christopher has lived and farmed at the 90-hectare (222-acre) Manor Farm at West Haddon, Northamptonshire, for more than 70 years, after moving there with his parents in 1948. He studied agriculture at university in Oxford, where he met his future wife, Ita, a nurse at Radcliffe Infirmary.

A man of deep Christian faith, Christopher and Ita spent their first 10 years of married life in Nigeria

working for the Church Anglican Missionary Agency, working with small farmers and co-operatives, and their time there coincided with the Nigerian-Biafran civil war.

Christopher says: "It was a big learning experience being in someone else's civil war. Trying to take things forward when it was over was a challenge. A friend described my role as 'responsible for everything and in charge of nothing'.

"But it made me understand that planning what might happen in the future is just as important as trying to work out the best things to do in the present."

### **Setting up**

On their return to England in 1978, Christopher and Ita found themselves to be in similar predicament, as Christopher's father had no succession plan in place. He says: "In the 1950s and 1960s, this size of mixed farm could financially accommodate an incoming and outgoing generation, but that is not true anymore. We sold the main farmhouse to clear a large overdraft and converted the

old tractor shed into a much better house to live in."

Half of Manor Farm is now down to wheat and oilseed rape and managed by a share farmer. The other half is grassland, with a flock of 100 Mule and Charolais cross ewes and 20 suckler cows. The animals have been looked after by livestock manager, Sovra Warden, for the past 10 years, and they eat nothing but grass and conserved pasture with all the progeny taken through to be finished. Christopher and Ita used to sell their meat from the farm gate, but nowadays most of the beef and a proportion of the lamb is sold through local butchers.

Some smaller buildings have been turned into workshops to let, as well as housing the national Farming Community Network office, a charity which has been of great service to the rural community and down to Christopher, who has an innate desire to help others. The final decades of the 20th century saw a steep decline in the fortunes of some British farmers and a sharp rise in the numbers of suicides.

Christopher, along with a small group, set up the Farm Crisis Network after inspirational visits to Germany, the USA and Europe. He says: "Origins matter; they determine the method and the mindset, which form the tradition, so they need to be remembered. The vision and method came from a farmers' Christian initiative in Germany and the Gloucestershire Farming Friends service in this country. The goading to 'get organised before something happens' came from the US and the first real finance arose from the efforts of a Dutch member of the European Parliament. The final divine touch was the emergence of a group of remarkable volunteers with insight, farming knowledge and empathy."

## Help

Farming Community Network is a voluntary organisation and charity set up to offer pastoral and practical support to farmers and their families with personal or business-related problems. It was set up as a joint

venture between the Agricultural Christian Fellowship and Germinate: the Arthur Rank Centre in 1995.

When the foot-and-mouth outbreak hit the UK in 2001, the service was ready to respond, setting up a dedicated telephone helpline. Farming Community Network, of which Prince Charles is a patron, was initially run from Christopher's spare bedroom at Manor Farm and the network of volunteers grew in demand for rising calls for help. Volunteers are usually farmers who are on hand to provide a sympathetic ear to anyone who needs to talk and are there to 'walk with' anyone in the farming community, guiding them to appropriate professionals who can help them rather than give direct advice. Christopher stepped down from the day-to-day running of Farming Crisis Network in 2007 and was awarded an MBE for services to agriculture in 2011. The number of volunteers and callers to the Farming Crisis Network helpline increased every year since then, and

in 2013 it changed its name to the Farming Community Network.

Christopher says: "The critical thing for volunteers is to be good listeners, sticking alongside people with deep worries.

"I can see great troubles ahead for many smaller farmers – with things such as Brexit and climate change all making things harder. Farming has been pushed to the edge of consciousness of politicians and the public. This is because their guiding lights have been competition in all things. These are presented as the ultimate realities to which farmers must adapt. But the ultimate realities farming must adapt to are land, soil, climate and weather, animals and plants, health and disease and relations with both people and the natural world.

"I would like to be remembered for working for justice within the farming world, not just for its own sake, but because it is God's way. Our faith has been there in everything Ita and I have done over the past decades."

## Agricultural Christian Fellowship - a personal perspective

### Neil Holiday

*Agricultural Christian Fellowship (ACF)<sup>2</sup> exists to help Christians in all branches of agriculture, horticulture and related activities make a Christian response to the many blessings, challenges and problems they face. Below, long-serving ACF member, Neil Holiday offers some personal reflections on the current farming situation and how ACF fits in to it.*

My working life as a rural surveyor, along with the majority of those working in the industry, coincided (until now) with Britain's membership of the EU and agricultural policy shaped by the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP). Whilst far from perfect, this provided a clear framework within which we were able to work.

However, in a relative short number of years, many of these certainties have been upended by a multiplicity of issues, especially Brexit and the consequent new Agriculture Act

2020, with its principle of 'public money for public goods'), and climate change and the ambition to reach net zero by 2050.

The farming industry now faces perhaps the biggest reset since the last war. This, combined with the average age of farmers, is likely to result in a major restructuring in the industry in the next decade.

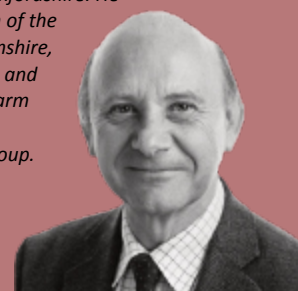
ACF exists to help Christians apply their faith to their everyday work, think through issues from a biblical perspective and try to influence the context within decisions are made that affect us all. The opportunity to work with Village Hope now coincides with these changes, and I can see God's hand in this.

I joined ACF as a student at the Royal Agricultural college in the late 1970s, for which I have John Wibberley to thank! I served periodically on the ACF Committee and it has been a privilege to work alongside like-minded Christians who have sought to live out their

faith in their working lives and apply the mind of Christ to some of the big issues facing agriculture. ACF's annual conferences have provided opportunities to meet as a body and collectively think through some of the issues of the day.

Whilst as individuals and as an industry we face many challenges, we have the certainty that we serve an unchanging God who, through His Son and the Holy Spirit, walks with us and works through us in our everyday lives.

*Neil Holiday, FRICS, is a land agent with 40 years' experience across a wide range of rural matters and sectors. He became a Christian at age 16, through his school's Christian Union. Neil currently attends Charlbury Baptist Church in Oxfordshire. He is Chairman of the Buckinghamshire, Oxfordshire and Berkshire Farm Community Network group.*



<sup>1</sup>bit.ly/fgcjfc  
<sup>2</sup>acfhub.com

# Village POETRY

## Special offer

*Just look at modern living, Lord.  
We must be busy; never bored.  
Must grab these special offers, Lord.  
To add to our material hoard.*

*Special offers, through TV and Press,  
Got me thinking, I confess.  
You were our Special Offer', Lord.  
You did not ask, "could you afford?'*

*There was no contract to be signed.  
No small print to bear in mind.  
No sell-by date to be defined.  
Just boundless love for all mankind.*

*You're the Special Offer I couldn't resist.  
Unrepeatable offer, not to be missed.  
Thank you Lord, you didn't count the cost.  
And leave us all for ever lost.*

Joan Kirby, 2012

## Do you write poetry?

Send your poems to  
villagehope@villagehope.uk or the  
address on the back page, for a  
chance to have them featured in the  
next issue!

## Advent

*It is time -  
to climb into the loft  
and look for the tree;  
to wrap up the parcels  
very prettily.*

*The cake is baked  
and needs decorating,  
the cards need a letter  
friends will be waiting.*

*The freezer needs filling  
with cookies and pies,  
to give our visitors  
a delicious surprise!*

*Look in the cupboard  
and find the decorations.  
Have we then finished  
our Christmas preparations?*

*It is also time –  
to look into my heart  
and search for my reason,  
for celebrating now,  
this very special season.*

*Giving and receiving,  
It is important for us all,  
but accepting God's Gift  
means kneeling at the stall.*

*Shopping is expensive  
as we hide gifts on a shelf,  
but nothing like the price  
of God's Son – part of Himself!*

*As we begin the countdown  
to our celebration,  
let's bring our heart-felt gratitude  
for the Gift of our salvation.*

Doris Townsend, 2021

## Advent

*The sea raged wild there yesterday, down in the sweet South Hams.  
Where recently gold wheat did sway, signalling summer lands.  
Seasons come and seasons go, and Advent's here once more.  
To celebrate when Jesus walked on earth, on Israel's shore.*

*And did He come to England too, from far Arimathea?  
With Uncle Joseph for his tin, boat carpenter career.  
And merchants, two millennia past, came out from Palestine,  
To gather Cornish copper, tin – the world's then major mine.  
Whatever are the answers thus, the main point is He came  
To earth, to rescue all who Him with fulsome trust will name.*

*This Advent Jesus beckons us: "rely on Me, it's true.  
This Christmas, and henceforth, I wish, to shine My Light through you;  
I am the coming King who made with Father-God above  
The whole creation, and, one day, will reign here through His Love."*

John Wibberley, 2016

### Late autumn pilgrimage

*November. Sky, pale grey and pale blue;  
Clouds, scudding, speeding,  
As if heading for warmer, far-off skies;  
Yet brightness beyond.  
Ivy-covered oak, enmitten hands raised  
To praise, maybe.  
Fingers plucking unseen strings,  
Or pressing keys.  
And leaves, all over and everywhere,  
Falling and fallen, lying, dying...*

*Winter. Coming soon, more cold, steelier skies;  
When earth is still and sleeping,  
And ice, hard, unyielding;  
Animals hiding, hibernating;  
Bees, consolidating,  
And all is still, all is sole, soul-solitude, solicitous,  
Waiting, anticipating..*

*Christmas. Midst of dark days, age-old,  
Family lights, warm fires, food and choirs,  
Cathedral lit up, replete with memories,  
And hopes. Happier days, long gone or not yet  
come;  
Hot soup, Jaffa cakes.  
Parcels and presents with love;  
Night star delivering joy;  
Angels announcing peace;  
Loved ones; many times gone since,  
But still your gift endures..*

*Bethlehem. Then and now, almost now.  
But that too, a memory.  
Memories of wonder at a place,  
So unassuming, inglorious,  
Wax and paraphernalia, all over and everywhere,  
And guns, dust and dirt,  
And garish pictures, and old, old stone,  
And Jerome, writing in the cool cave,  
And shepherds abiding, and Magi arriving,  
And the whole thing, the whole package and  
packaging,  
Recyclable and recycled, on the road to..*

*Jerusalem. Golden city, cathedral's centre of world,  
And my soul's centre and heart's centre,  
And pilgrimage.  
Yet also a distant memory; next year, next year.  
When will next year come?  
And prophets perishing and smoke of sacrifice  
rising,  
And falling and rising, dying and rising,  
Never to be laid to rest, then, now and how much  
more to come..*

*Sunshine. Still wind, but sun breaks out  
In the urgent Autumn,  
Urgent as if unleaving is running against a clock,  
Divesting to be ready  
For the middle-winter sleep and celebration.  
Sun-star breaks out shining,  
Yet only an hour before dusk,  
Perhaps the eleventh hour?*

SH, 2015

# Christmas mysteries

Peter Carruthers

*The story of Jesus' birth is very familiar, but it contains some interesting 'mysteries'. Three of these are explored below.*

## Q: Why was Jesus born in Bethlehem?

**A:** The gospels give us two reasons. As Luke reports, because Joseph was "of the house and lineage of David", he had to be in Bethlehem, the city of David, for the Roman census (Luke 2:1-7), which coincided with Jesus' birth. Matthew reminds us that this was to fulfil the prophecy of Micah that the Messiah would come from Bethlehem (Micah 5:2: Matthew 2:6).

Digging a little deeper, however, reveals some further reasons why Bethlehem is significant (and why it might be of special interest to rural and farming people). Jesus is the "bread of life", the "living bread which came down from heaven" and gives eternal life (John 6:48-51), so it is fitting that He is born in Bethlehem, the 'house of bread', and laid in a manger, a container for animal feed. Early Christian writers saw the manger as signifying the Ark of the Covenant, which contained a piece of manna, the bread that fed Israel in the wilderness.

Bethlehem is first mentioned in the Bible as the site of Rachel's tomb (Genesis 35:19), but its substantial introduction is in the story of Ruth and Boaz, a 'farming story' set in an agricultural community at harvest time. Ruth, the destitute widow is protected and provided for by, and eventually married to, Boaz, her 'kinsman redeemer', pre-figuring Jesus who as incarnate Saviour and Lord is kinsmen-redeemer to all who receive Him. Ruth and Boaz were the great-grandparents of David, the 'shepherd-king', again a type of the Lord Jesus Himself.

## Q: Why are an ox and an ass in so many depictions of the Nativity?

**A:** No animals are mentioned in the gospel accounts of Jesus' birth, but the ox and the ass appear in very early depictions of Jesus' birth and have done ever since.

Nothing in Luke's account is trivial and the mention of the manger may be intended to indicate the presence of animals. The first surviving source referring to the ox and ass is Origen's (184-253) thirteenth homily on the Gospel of Luke, which states that the manger in which Christ was laid "was that very one, which the prophet foretold, saying, 'the ox knows its owner and the ass its master's manger'".

The ox and the ass represent the animals, who, therefore, witness the Incarnation, are with Jesus during His temptation in the wilderness (Mark 1:13), and will live in peace and harmony in the Messianic age to come (Isaiah 11:6-9, 62:25). Early Christian writers also saw the ox and the ass as fulfilling the Septuagint's translation of Habbakuk's prophecy that the Lord "will be known in the midst of two living creatures" (Habbakuk 3:2, LXX).

The ox and ass also represent the way Jesus' coming into the world brings together things that were separate or opposite. The ox, a 'clean' animal, represents the Jews, the ass, an 'unclean' animal, represents the Gentiles. As Simeon declares, alluding to Isaiah (49:6) (but significantly reversing the order), Jesus comes to be both a light to the Gentiles and the glory of Israel (Luke 2:32).

This theme runs right through the Nativity story. Jesus' birth is witnessed by: men (Joseph, shepherds, Magi, Simeon) and women (Mary, Anna); poor, rural, unsophisticated, Jewish shepherds and rich, urban, urbane, Gentile Magi; earthly people and animals, and heavenly beings; Simeon (a "man of Jerusalem", representing the southern kingdom of Judah) and Anna (of the tribe of Asher, representing the 'lost' northern kingdom of Israel). Ultimately, this reconciling of opposites is manifest in the unifying of divinity and humanity in the Incarnation itself.

## Q: Why does Matthew say that Jesus living in Nazareth is fulfilment of prophecy?

**A:** Matthew states that "Jesus came and dwelt in a city called Nazareth, that it might be fulfilled which was spoken by the prophets, 'He shall be called a Nazarene'" (Matthew 2:23). But such a prophecy is nowhere to be found in the Old Testament.

It is possible that Matthew was citing another source, but that seems unlikely. Or, because Nazareth had a negative reputation (John 1:46), he was using the word 'Nazarene' to connote someone who is 'despised and rejected' and hence fulfilling Isaiah 53:3 and Psalm 22:6-7.

The strongest argument, however, is that it is a play on words. Hebrew was written without vowels, and the consonants for 'Nazarene' are the same as for 'netser', meaning 'sprout' or 'branch'. The two words also sound very similar in Aramaic, the common language of Jesus' day. Having already announced Jesus as Israel's promised shepherd-king (Matthew 2:6), Matthew is, therefore, indicating that Jesus is the "Branch" from the "stem of Jesse" (Isaiah 11:1), the Messiah who will bring peace not only to people, but also to the animals and the whole created order (Isaiah 11:1-9).

# Prize Quiz!



- 1 Which of these is not a Christmas tradition from around the world?
  - a) Hiding brooms on Christmas Eve
  - b) Eating KFC
  - c) Burning a goat made from straw
  - d) Flying kites
- 2 Which of these is not related to the origin of mince pies?
  - a) They originated from spice trade with the East Indies during the reign of Queen Elizabeth I
  - b) The three spices are representative of the gifts of the three wise men
  - c) Mince pies used to be an oval shape, representing the manger
- 3 Which of these is not a Christmas food from around the world?
  - a) Auks stuffed in a seal carcass
  - b) 'Butter Goose' – chunk of butter shaped into a goose
  - c) Corn dough wrapped in banana leaves
- 4 Who invented the idea of the Christmas tree?
  - a) Emperor Constantine
  - b) St. Francis of Assisi
  - c) Martin Luther
  - d) Charles Dickens
  - e) Sven Pederson
- 5 The tune of Hark the Herald Angels Sing is usually sung to the tune written by which composer?
  - a) Felix Mendelssohn
  - b) George Frideric Handel
  - c) Ludwig van Beethoven
  - d) Hans Zimmer
- 6 Which Christmas carol is sung by the carol singers in Charles Dickens 'A Christmas Carol'?
  - a) The First Noel
  - b) God Rest Ye Merry Gentlemen
  - c) O Little Town of Bethlehem
- 7 Carol singers visit Mole and Rat in Kenneth Graham's 'The Wind in the Willows'. What species of animal are they?
  - a) Dormice
  - b) Field mice
  - c) Stoats and weasels
  - d) Harvest mice
- 8 The line "Say, ye holy shepherds, say what your joyful news today" is from which Christmas carol?
  - a) It Came Upon a Midnight Clear
  - b) See Amid the Winter's Snow
  - c) Sussex Carol (On Christmas night all Christians sing)
  - d) While Shepherd's watched
- 9 Christmas day, 1642, is the birthdate of which famous scientist?
  - a) Galileo
  - b) Isaac Newton
  - c) Carolus Linnaeus
  - d) Edward Jenner
- 10 In the book 'Little Women', the girls give away their Christmas breakfast to which family?
  - a) The Laurences
  - b) The Hummels
  - c) The Hofmanns
  - d) The Engels
- 11 Which Old Testament book is the following from: "But you, Bethlehem Ephrathah...out of you will come for me one who will be ruler over Israel".
  - a) Isaiah
  - b) Micah
  - c) Hosea
  - d) Zechariah
- 12 The feast of Candlemas commemorates which biblical event?
  - a) The visit of the Wise Men
  - b) The presentation of Jesus at the temple
  - c) The birth of John the Baptist
  - d) The visit of the Angel Gabriel to Mary

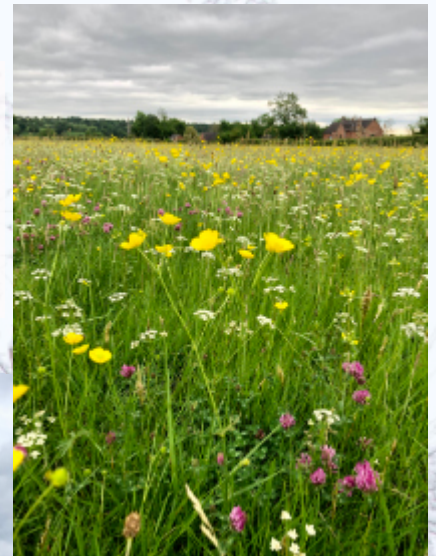
## PRIZES!

Send your answers with your full name and address to [villagehope@villagehope.uk](mailto:villagehope@villagehope.uk) or the postal address on the back page. All correct answers received by January 10<sup>th</sup> will be entered for a chance to win an Abigail Anastasia Photography 2022 calendar of beautiful scenes of the British countryside.

# Readers' photos



*This issue features photos taken by Ruth Mallard, during walks close to her home in the Derbyshire Dales*



## **Submit your photos!**

Send your photos of rural, village or church life to [abigailanastasia@mail.com](mailto:abigailanastasia@mail.com), along with a brief explanation, for an opportunity for them to be featured in the next issue.



## **About Village Hope**

Village Hope is a Christian charity with a remit for churches and communities in rural Britain. Our charitable purpose is "to proclaim and live out the Gospel of Jesus Christ in the villages of Britain, in order to establish effective Christian witness, and to encourage and enable Bible teaching, prayer, worship and evangelism in village churches".

We believe that the Gospel of Jesus Christ offers hope to all humanity, for this life and the life to come, and that the Bible both sets forth the way of salvation through faith in Jesus, and offers a way to live and a coherent vision and timeless values for society.

Village Hope is a member of the Evangelical Alliance, and its staff and trustees affirm the Alliance's Basis of Faith.

We also believe that Christians, especially those who live in rural areas, have a special privilege and responsibility as stewards of God's creation to celebrate and care for His land and His earth, which He created and sustains.

Our objective is to encourage, strengthen, support and resource those who seek to live a Christian life, serve their communities, and witness to the hope of the Gospel of Jesus Christ in Britain's villages.

## **Give**

Please consider giving towards the costs of producing this magazine and towards the wider work of Village Hope. Give by cheque or via BACS using the enclosed form. If you are a tax payer, completing the Gift Aid declaration will enable us to claim an additional 25p for every £1 you donate.

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