

Theological Reflection on Sustainable Farming and Sustainable Rural Communities

PROPOSAL March 2007

Prior work:

- * Study Leave on Ecotheology in July 2000 and resulting article “Living on the Land” published in 2002¹
- * Life-Giving Agriculture Forum in Wonju, South Korea, April 2005
- * Sustainable Communities Workshop with Te Runanga o Te Rarawa and the University of Auckland in Kaitaia, July 2005

2007:

- * Pre-conference visit to a Canadian rural church and community and interaction at 3rd International Rural Churches Association Conference in Brandon, Manitoba.
- * Present a paper from a theological perspective at the Uniting Church in Australia Christian Farmers’ Conference in Dubbo, NSW, 18-19 September. Other speakers on the theme “Farming for the future (a Christian perspective): dealing with economics, sustainability and environmental matters” will be useful input for my own research, together with feedback and perspectives from the farmers participating.

2008: A 30-day period, at a time and location to be arranged

Goal: A publishable article and other material that could be of use within the churches and local communities.

The earlier work “Living on the Land” looked into the place – or otherwise – of Ecotheology in NZ churches. I countered the mainstream absence with a sketch of a rural theology, as actually known and experienced among the rural people I worked with and grew up with. I tested this theology with some topical issues: who belongs to or on the land, sustainable logging, the megacompany Fonterra and Genetic Modification. Finally an ecotheological understanding of the Sabbath was sketched as a catalyst for addressing issues of health and well-being among rural people.

Ecotheology remains a side-stream in New Zealand churches, although it is a growing stream with the rural ministry movement continuing to provide nurture and networking to encourage writers. The Northland context has broadened my experience of rural life considerably and, as encapsulated even within the Kaeo-Kerikeri Union Parish, brought into sharper focus tensions and interdependencies between rural and urban contexts. (Apparently by 2008 for the first time more than half the world’s population will be living in cities.)

The task in broad-brush is to bring biblical resources to bear on the important and increasingly more urgent ecological issues of our time. Where we live and how we live; how we are fed (and watered); how we do things now that will leave things better for the next generation (a long-standing goal of NZ farming as I’ve known it) or at least not leave them worse. What work as a parish minister has revealed to me is that these big conceptual issues relate constantly to practical issues for individual people and families: e.g. keeping the family farm going through droughts and economic changes; mentoring young people into useful work and meaningful lives; dealing with inadequate housing; encouraging stable family life, etc. etc.

1 *Ecotheology* vol. 6 2001/2002, 138-151. See also “Rural Spirituality: A Pakeha South Islander Reflects”, in *Land and Place He Whenua He Wāhi: Spiritualities from Aotearoa New Zealand*, edited by Helen Bergin and Susan Smith, Accent Publications, Auckland: 2004, 117-132

“Sustainability” is a word that relates across the range of particular issues and to the big picture of planning for the future. It is now a buzz word, but that itself presents a clear task for me. Rather than avoid it, I would like to articulate a solid theological foundation for it, to bring to the general conversation the tools of our Christian faith. This is important at both an academic and a local level, to enable us to speak into the debates we are surrounded by with words of faith that can engage our listeners, regardless of their personal faith or perspective. So long as its language remains in house and formulaic, Christianity continues to be at risk of only being able to speak to its own. I want to draw out some of the treasures of our faith and make them accessible to our wider community and society.

REPORT June 2008

During 2007 I undertook reflections on this topic as part of my role as Chairperson at the International Rural Churches Association Conference in Canada and in presenting a paper to a Christian Farmers’ group in Dubbo, New South Wales. This paper is inserted below.

From 5 May to 4 June 2008 I took leave first in Auckland, basing myself in the John Kinder Theological Library and reading widely for two weeks (my grateful thanks to Chris Honoré for providing very suitable accommodation and hospitality across the road from St John’s College) and then in Dunedin, staying in Arden House behind Knox College and having an opportunity to interact with old friends and current staff and students (the last group of students in the residential course based at Knox). Staff of the Knox Centre for Ministry and Leadership, and of the College, made me very welcome and provided a comfortable, low cost place to work.

During the time I wrote an initial draft for a paper that will be the basis of my presentation at the Society of Biblical Literature Conference in Auckland in early July (see below for paper as presented) and, if suitable, work it into publishable form.² I then turned my mind to material which could be useful to rural churches (attached). I want to continue working on biblical narratives that contain themes for rural communities, in relation to the continuing concerns with climate, markets and the government, and the compounding issues of food supply and food justice.

What follows in this document are the fruits of this work:

1. A Christian Perspective on Sustainability in Rural Areas (September 2007)
2. Let's Share Our Treasure (June 2008)
3. Forum Process for Engaging with the Bible (June 2008)
4. Conversations with Texts in Worship (June 2008)
5. Retelling the Story of Elijah (May 2008)
6. Retelling the Narrative of Genesis 4 (May 2008)
7. Retelling the Narrative of the Prophet Joel (May 2008)
8. Text and Context: Spiritual Resources for Sustainable Rural Life (paper presented to the Society for Biblical Literature, July 2008)

² Developed into “Joy has been put to shame”: insights from Joel for untangling life's messes”, in *A Thinker's Guide to Sin: Talking about Wrongdoing Today*, edited by Neil Darragh, Accent Publications, Auckland: 2010, 191-198

1. A Christian Perspective on Sustainability in Rural Areas

Any religion has to have a practice. When you let it go so far from practice that it becomes a matter of talk something bad happens... If you take seriously those passages from scripture that say that we live by God's Spirit and ... breath, that we live, move, and have our being in God, the implications for the present economy are just devastating. Those passages call for an entirely generous and careful economic life.³

So what of a Christian perspective on sustainability in rural areas.

Rural areas over the last fifty years have been learning the hard realities of unsustainability. In New Zealand experience, since WW2 we have watched rural population decline. Not long before I was born our farm stopped employing the customary single man for general farm work. Machinery, fertiliser and off-farm education in agriculture brought changes. Then came the 1980's. It was called Rogernomics in New Zealand, going cold turkey on government subsidies and trade protection. At that time we had to learn to live with an unholy Trinity of the markets, the government and the weather. We lamented as rural schools closed, after government agencies, banks and other service providers had moved out. And those of us left wondered how long we would last. When the bottom line is financial, either it proves you are viable or else close the church, or else sell up the farm. Community sustainability has taken second place to financial viability.

By the end of the century we also became fully aware environmental unsustainability. The urban majority in our counties was making sure of that but we knew it ourselves first hand. We lived with our own concerns about animal welfare, soil health and clean waterways, the big issue being water itself. "It's hard to be green when you're in the red." Doesn't that sum up the dilemma: the pain, the shame and the powerlessness of it?

For John Ikerd, retired USA agricultural economist and keynote speaker at the International Rural Church Association conference in Canada two months ago, it's the assumption that the only bottom line is financial that is the problem. He says:

The industrial practices of corporate contract agriculture invariably erode the fertility of the soil through intensive cultivation, poison the air and water with chemical and biological wastes, and turn thinking, caring farmers into tractor drivers and hog house janitors.⁴

Outside investment to address local needs is damaging rural communities around the world. In fact, for Ikerd, this colonisation in its contemporary form, not by other cultures or societies, but by those whose sole rule and culture is neo-liberal economics. Multi-national corporations are the empire builders of today. "Under the guise of rural economic development," says Ikerd, "rural areas around the world are being 'colonized'."

When we think about who or what it is that contributes to our own feelings of powerlessness on the farm and in the community, it is not difficult to identify the colonising forces. Who has a say in commodity prices? Who decides what seeds, fertilizers and other agri-inputs are available to us? Who holds the lion's share of the equity on our farms nowadays? And how come some rural areas have much better infrastructure and a quicker response to climate crises than other areas? I live in an area where land prices continue to escalate beyond the reach of average New Zealanders, let alone orchardists and farmers. We are being colonized by the world's wealthy for the warm climate and the beautiful view. It may feel positive and promising to be surrounded by constant construction and as a parish to be securing our finances by developing our property wisely, but who

3 Wendall Berry, Interview with Rose Marie Berger, *Sojourners*, July 2004

4 John Ikerd, "The Role of the Rural Church in Sustaining Rural Communities", *Cry from the Heart* IRCA Conference, July 2007, p.21

is going to feed the future city of the Bay of Islands? But the other half of my parish is classed as an economically depressed area with a high Maori population. That's the area that's been devastated by two above-all-previous-level floods this year – in March and in July. If Kerikeri has needed work done the wealth of its community, and the interest of the Prime Minister in its heritage values, has decisions made and action taken. If Kaeo needs work done in order to survive, who is going to pay? It wasn't done earlier because the community couldn't afford the third it was required to contribute through localised rates.

The Christianity that was around when I was growing up would have struggled to have a perspective on this. These issues were, as ecotheologian Mary Grey puts it, “regarded as peripheral to the *authentic* project of salvation.”⁵ In our predominantly white churches, overseen from the urban centres, there was little theological reflection on earth issues, and social rejection of the earthy. Too heavenly minded to be any earthly good, as the saying goes. However the practical Christianity I personally grew up with seems to have sidestepped a lot of that. What was Christian was how you farmed and how you lived in the community. To be rural was to know your neighbours and know that you need them and they need you. Discussing the weather was never simply small talk: it was essential to picking up others' needs and concerns.

Sustainability is profoundly Christian and inherently biblical.

You'll probably be familiar with the instructions in Genesis 2, that *adam*, the creature made from the topsoil, *Adamah*, is to serve and guard the land, usually translated “till and keep” but the Hebrew words clearly pointing to be a servant of the soil and a protector of its animals.

Chapter 4 shows what can happen when this focus is put aside: Cain murders his brother Abel. Sustainable life needs to cope with variable results. In some seasons crop farmers do have a lousy year and stock farmers, for a change they might say, get good prices. It happens. So don't get hung up on one year or let the financial rule your response such that family and community relationships are harmed. For the land is also affected: the earth cries out for the blood of Abel. What's more the consequences for Cain are that he has to become an urban dweller. He is the archetypal ancestor of city life, in which crafts and technology are fostered and other specialist pursuits including science and the arts. But urbanisation raises the question: where will they get their food? The biblical witness is to increasing extraction from the land and exploitation of its people.

Relationships with community and with land cannot be neglected if life is to be sustainable.

The tower of Babel is a lesson also in social sustainability. The urban empire has grown too big: a single culture pursues progress at all costs and builds as its centre of reference for everything a static structure. What does God do? Scatters them, so that they can regain the dynamic nature of life, proliferating into diverse centres of living. Sustainable communities are not standardised clones of empire but multiple and varied and always in process. And they must find their life in their own local context, in the particular environment on which they know they depend, if they are wise.

If they are not wise, prophets like Isaiah, Amos and Hosea make it clear what happens. Their message is: when financial gain counts before all else, when you weigh small and charge high, buy the needy for a pair of sandals, and spiritual practices are considered a waste of time⁶, the social fabric is unravelled and the land is being degraded. As Hosea puts it comprehensively:

The Lord has an indictment against the inhabitants of the land,
there is no faithfulness or steadfast love,
and no knowledge of God in the land.
Swearing, lying and murder,

5 Mary Grey,

6 Amos 8:5-6

and stealing and adultery break out;
bloodshed follows bloodshed,
Therefore the land mourns,
and all who live in it languish;
together with the wild animals
and the birds of the air,
even the fish of the sea are perishing.⁷

What is lacking are the fundamental virtues of *hesed, emeth and da'ath elohim* – loving loyally, being true and a close relationship with God. Sustainable living according to the prophets, aka living according to God's way, involves an economic system and habits that keep society and land in the picture at all times and seeks the balance that these virtues generate.

Jesus of Nazareth continues this theme of integrity as he subverts the empire and corporates of his time. His Beatitudes imply that those who are succeeding according to the empire driven economy are not blessed but are more at risk of being off-track with the fundamentals of right relationship and life for the long haul.⁸ He tells a story⁹ of a man with such a bumper harvest his barns aren't big enough. (Why does he have to hold onto it?) He solves his problem – on his own, so uncharacteristic for community-loving Middle Easterners – by pulling them down and building bigger ones. Time goes by and he has so much wealth stored up he doesn't need to work. He plans to celebrate – on his own, as it seems he has no family, no community to party with. But then he dies – the life on loan is taken back. Life is not about ownership but relationship.

What's unsustainable about this life is his holding as his own what the land gives to him. Gifts are for handing on, but the line he drew around himself closed him off from other people. Luke's gospel follows this story with the classic "Therefore do not worry about your life... Has anyone by worry added to the span of their life? ... Consider the lilies, how they grow..."¹⁰ Perhaps that should be compulsory reading alongside every session spent on the farm accounts. Keep hear and head working together.

But Jesus' *pièce de resistance* for sustainability has to be his answer to the question 'who is my neighbour?'

Roman Juriga, the second keynote speaker at the IRCA conference, is an Orthodox theologian in the Czech Republic working on the theology of renewable energy use and energy saving. About the neighbour question Juriga says: "The answer of our Saviour is surprising. Our Lord says (although we do not always like it) that our neighbour is really every human being..."¹¹ For Juriga it is vital that Christ is at the heart of his Ecotheology: it is the gospel that drives his concern, and mine, for relationships between people and nations and between human beings and the environment.

The gospel of Christ shows us, says Juriga, "that our salvation is not possible without our care for our neighbour and our interest in the life they lives and will live. Our interconnectedness with all of God's creation – our neighbours – "means," says Juriga, "that the creation expects from us exactly the same [love and mercy] we expect from God."¹² Juriga urges us as rural communities to lead the way by making our own decisions on energy use and renewable energy production and putting sustainability into practice locally.

This biblical, Christian picture is a practical model for decision-making.

7 Hosea 4:1-3

8 Matthew 5:3-12

9 Luke 12:13-21

10 Luke 12:22ff.

11 Roman Juriga, "Saving God's Creation by Saving of Energy and Renewable Energy Utilisation: Contemporary Energy Challenges for Rural Communities", IRCA Part 2, 1-9

12 *ibid.* 1-10

Ikerd sees sustainability as a move from a conventional hierarchy, in which social and environmental issues are given consideration only after financial criteria have been met, to a systemic one, in which “the economy is a subsystem of society, which in turn is a subsystem of the natural ecosystem.”¹³ Imagine if we could say: how can you be red when you’re in the green? From the big picture with its principles which Ikerd names as holism, diversity and interdependence, through the community context with principles of trust, caring and courage, to the needs of the household – i.e. economics – with its principles of value, productivity and sovereignty.

A juggling act or, better said, an integrating act. These principles all count because sound economics, community well-being and healthy soil, air and water are all vital when we look broadly enough and into the future. For a key point in the philosophy and theology of sustainability is that our neighbour includes future generations. Economics on its own cannot factor them in: only when we look at community health and environmental well-being do we start looking far enough ahead to dare to use the word ‘sustainable’.

As rural people who claim faith in Jesus Christ, how then do we get sucked into sidelining the Christian way and its wisdom of sustainable sufficiency? What prevents us from holding together the needs of soil, people and economics? In other words, why is this an issue for us?

One reason John Ikerd identifies is the power of the corporations to hold us to their neo-liberal economic rules. Ikerd says: “rural people everywhere... must reject the false promises of industrial economic development.”¹⁴ And rural churches can help by finding “the courage to reject the arrogance, intolerance, selfishness, and pride that permeate much of global society today...”¹⁵ Faith, hope and love are what rural churches need to concentrate on: that’s the message and the practice we and our communities need.

But there remain two factors that I believe make it difficult for us to hold to this in the midst of financial realities.

First there is fear: fear that we will fail and because success is a scarce commodity, or so we believe, we have to compete. Isn’t that the essence of the Cain and Abel story, that there was approval for only one sacrifice, namely Abel’s? Didn’t it happen again with Esau and Jacob: apparently blessings are a scarce resource so there could be only one? But that interpretation of Genesis 4 itself carries an unstated assumption that scarcity rules. In the face of centuries of theologians, starting from the book of Hebrews, presuming that Cain must have done something wrong, we have to acknowledge that the biblical text doesn’t actually say this. For me, a more true to experience interpretation is that it was a bad harvest for Cain the crop farmer, but okay enough a season that Abel was able to select out one prime lamb at least for the sacrifice. (And again imagine what today’s dairy farmer would have brought.) In fact the main focus of the story is how to deal with the let down: not to lash out, not to take it out on people and environment around him, but to be wise. Be your brother’s, or sister’s, keeper. Learn from experience. Keep focussed on working well with the land and in your community.

The second factor is likely the key to Cain’s experience when he submits his low grade crop: shame. And why we fear failure so much. Very little is said, but then there’s action suggestive of shame’s negative antidote, an arrogant self-assertion against his brother and the land he has relied on. We know about shame in rural communities. When the bank forecloses, when a member of the family commits suicide. The whole community can feel the shame. Shame turns us inward and narrows our view to the immediate isolated self, who assumes others are casting judgment. To protect our vulnerability we close the door, so to speak, on our connections to others and on the future.

13 John Ikerd, *A Return to Common Sense*, Philadelphia: 2007, p.127

14 “The Role of the Rural Church in Sustaining Rural Communities”, p.23

15 *ibid.* p.28

And noted carefully this assumption of being judged. Cam Harder talked about this in Canada. 'Who's to blame' is the automatic question when something goes wrong. Judgment calls for punishment to pay for the error of our ways. And worse still, God is implicated because we assume the Bible's messages about blessings and curses are to be interpreted as a system of rewards and punishments, with God backing the winners in the system.

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

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

There has been catastrophe on the land, with mention of a locust plague described also in images of drought and enemy invasion. We can relate to that: many Australians know the first one and there are plenty of other biological pests we live with (clover root weevil, fly strike, varroa mite...); we all know the second – drought and other climate crises (some of us do floods more often); and the enemy invasion is in fact very descriptive of the effects of globalisation and corporate power, what John Ikerd at our 2007 International Rural Church conference called "economic colonisation".¹⁶

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

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

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

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

Honour God and reclaim the honour that you have as people of the land. And let yourselves hear

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

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

What I am pointing to here are biblical tools for a sustainable faith, so that we can live by the Jesus model. It is tapping into wisdom, as explored in the third big section of the Hebrew Scriptures, and lived in the flesh by Jesus himself. Ecotheologian Celia Deane-Drummond connects this wisdom to the contemporary interest in Philosophy in virtue ethics, with a move away from pure consequentialist theories to base morality on certain virtues like prudence, practical wisdom, justice and Ikerd's faith, hope and love. With these qualities in place we can keep the dynamic that integrates environmental, community and economic issues alive in our decision-making process.

And sustainable faith's best tool is the Sabbath, the key to sustainability itself. Sabbath is the pattern of work and pause, to listen more deeply and consider more carefully, to give space for wisdom or what John Ikerd calls 'common sense.'

2. Let's Share Our Treasure

This is a plea that we take deliberate steps to share our Bible's treasure with our communities. It is a plea particularly to those of us who are part of rural or edge-of-rural churches, where the local economy has been reliant on land (or sea) and where viability and sustainability are growing concerns (pun intended). Livelihood for family farmers (and fishers), the viability of local communities and sustainable fish stocks and soil and water use are increasingly in question. And now food justice and supply is taking centre stage as a global concern. We need to share our biblical book of books because it is, in fact, full of rural stories and sustainable wisdom.

Assumptions are made about the Bible which have functioned to fence it off and shut people out from hearing its life-giving voices. Part of the Bible's credibility problem has been that it has been interpreted predominantly with one voice, and that this voice, in the words of one Chinese writer, "not only claims to provide the answer but defines the question too!"¹⁷ A rich mix of narratives and traditions has been drawn under one all-encompassing meta-narrative, namely, Christian redemption. "A thin-sliced understanding" is how Kwok describes it, unable to make connections outside the Western context that has driven this salvation meta-narrative yet, in the way of imperialism, this Western world-view has presented it as universal truth. It is not that this perspective is wrong – far from it. It is just that, as a solo voice and excluding others, it has put restrictions on opportunities for the Bible's rich mix to speak to different people. There has been an issue of relevance, because the voices that might speak to the huge variety of concerns we live with have not been recognised. The Bible contains the very kind of confusion and uncertainty we know every day and the conflicts and ambiguity that are a fact of life for us, but a 'one track' approach to biblical interpretation has hidden this away. It has also blinkered us to the underlying 'ruralness' in the Bible's texts.

Many rural people, and others, have rejected the Bible's answers in the manner they have been promoted – or have simply not been interested in them – because their own questions prove hard to relate to the key question on offer: 'are you saved?' It has not been a straightforward step from their pressing problems to the usual matters under discussion. I would venture to suggest that a form of trickle-down theory has been operating implicitly, namely, that if the issue of personal sinfulness is sorted other aspects of life will come right too. But when, for example, one is looking for clues for how to farm faithfully, in terms of integrity in economics, ethics and land care, there is immediacy about the need for practical answers. There is a 'poverty of spirit' that thirsts for direction and purpose here and now. Faced with a confusion of decisions as self-employed owner-operators on the land, with strong voices telling them there is no alternative (TINA) to what dominant economic players put before them, the spiritual need cannot easily wait. In any case, our poverty of spirit *need* not wait. We have a treasure at hand that can help us look at these very issues which, for rural people, are a matter of viability and sustainability into the future.

A word of caution however. To engage with the Bible with a view to gaining insights to practical issues of life and livelihood, we must be ready for surprises. We also need to be willing to speak of 'perhaps' and 'maybe' as we debate our way through to hearing God's word for our context. When we are accustomed to clear pronouncements about what a particular text means, it may be an uncomfortable experience to start a process of conversation with a text and not have the security of

17 Kwok Pui Lan, "Discovering the Bible in the Non-Biblical World", in *Voices from the Margin: Interpreting the Bible in the Third World*, R.S. Sugirtharajah ed., SPCK, London: 1991, pp.302-3

somebody taking charge of where we are going. We will need to trust the Spirit. And we will need to consider the prospect that there is more chance of it being God's word for our situation if we put ourselves and our situation into dialogue with the Bible text we are reading and let the process produce the results.

Walter Brueggeman provides substantial grounds for trusting a 'conversation' approach to the Bible. He quotes Jewish critic George Steiner who writes: "It is the Hebraic intuition that God is capable of all speech acts except that of monologue, which has generated our acts of reply, of questioning, and counter-creation."¹⁸ "Dialogue," says Brueggeman, "...is not merely a strategy, but it is a practice that is congruent with our deepest nature, made as we are in the image of a dialogic God."¹⁹ Hearing the word of God is always a relational matter; knowing God is a matter of relationship, as Jesus tells us again and again.

This dialogical approach is what I urge us, as church, to make available to ourselves and the people we live among, troubled as we are by what is happening around us and not sure how to move forward faithfully. I imagine conversations happening between text and context. I imagine life-giving conversations as life and livelihood issues meet biblical narratives, and new options break the closure of past and present. I imagine conversations in which texts of faith help us identify and challenge the death-dealing trends and forces in what we are undergoing at this point in our planet's and our species' history. The purpose is, in practical terms, sustainable living. In spiritual terms, it is life in all its fullness, living in the perspective of eternity.

The majority of our rural people have rejected the Bible for not helping them, or they have ignored it because it seems to be about something they cannot relate to. So long as they remain in the dark about this book of many books, with many voices and stories, and an authority that arises, not from a stand alone infallibility, but from its faithfulness to life's confusion, open-endedness and mystery, these people will be denied the opportunity to explore a treasure trove of stories to interweave with our own stories. What we could be doing together is "theology that is truly meaningful, rather than an excess of metaphorical afterthought..., deeply engaged in the problems that effectively determine our lives."²⁰

To engage with the Bible we must be living, active subjects, not passive receptacles, and that means we bring the perspectives and assumptions, the cultures and histories of our context. These affect how we read and how the biblical text reads us. If God speaks through this engagement, it is in the conversation that happens as we and the text 'talk together', interweaving our story in a retelling of the textual narrative, thereby bringing it "closer to where we are, so that the Bible can surface among us"²¹. If biblical interpretation were a singular process it would have been a closed book centuries ago. Indeed the narratives and strands of teaching that both Hebrew and Christian scripture contain would not have made it into written form if they were not already speaking to people in their varied contexts of place and time. "Reading the Bible ... is rather like pulling up a chair at a feast that has been under way for some time."²²

So let's open up this feast to all our friends around us, to all who care about how we treat people and the land and sea we work with. Making Jesus Christ known is one way of expressing our

18 George Steiner, *Real Presences*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago: 1989, p.225

19 Walter Brueggeman, *Mandate to Difference: An Invitation to the Contemporary Church*, Westminster John Knox Press, Louisville and London: 2007, p.73

20 Phillip Goodchild, "Debt, Epistemology and Ecotheology," *Ecotheology* 9.2 (2004) p.173.

21 Jione Havea, "Is there a home for the Bible in the Postmodern World?" *Ecumenical Studies*, Vol 42 No. 4 Fall 2007, p.558.

22 Mary Chilton Callaway, "Exegesis as Banquet: Reading Jeremiah with the Rabbis", in *A Gift of God in Due Season: Essays on Scripture and Community in Honor of James A. Sanders*, ed. Richard D. Weis and David M. Carr, p.220

mission in being church. The invitation to join in conversation with Christian Scripture is an invitation to people to meet a person who knew first-hand the suffering and challenges, as well as the joys and beauty, of living with the land – Jesus of Nazareth himself. His context was rural; he lived on the margins of a society whose powers-that-be took his life. And his primary circle of concern was the *anawim*, the people of the land, who were getting poorer and poorer under a regime that was at the same time claiming to bring peace and prosperity to the world. Peace through the threat of violence, prosperity through an economic system of winners and losers – peace that is no peace, prosperity for some on top of poverty for many. This was a society that had major issues about food supply and food justice. For Jesus, food was a constant theme and a recurring image of the kingdom of God. Here again, the Bible’s voices are speaking to our context.

3. Forum Process for Engaging with the Bible

Christian churches in rural Aotearoa New Zealand have at hand a remarkable resource for people on the land. As a book of books, containing multiple threads of narrative and teaching, the Bible offers multiple opportunities for unpacking issues we are troubled by and shining new light to open up what often seems to be a very limited future. Our all-encompassing concern for sustainability, in which economic viability, maintaining healthy local communities and caring for land, sea and waterways are inseparable and interwoven, is a biblical concern. This is practical Christianity, engaging us in the pursuit of righteousness (right relationship), love of neighbour and salvation particularly in its sense of healing (salve) and giving life (whakaoranga).

The process I am advocating involves a core group of church people identifying an issue of concern in the local area at a particular time and deciding they would like to invite people in the wider community to a Community Forum. The purpose would be to talk things through together and share ideas and strategies for the future. As an event facilitated by the church, whether in a church or another community building, it would be promoted as offering the church's hospitality of a safe place to talk, where all views are respected, sensitivity to personal privacy maintained and *no hidden agenda*. Farmers are often invited to events hosted by the bank, or PPG-Wrightsons, or Fonterra, or Ravensdown, or an investment group promoting retirement options. The church can offer a place simply to be on common and equal ground.

The Bible enters the scene quietly as a tool for conversation, a partner in the Forum. It is definitely not presented as the book with the answers to hand over with the promise that all will be well. New Zealand farmers of wary of easy answers whoever is offering them: they are inherently suspicious of experts who come from outside to tell them what they should be doing. For many, if they have any experience of the Bible, it has been this kind of 'One Truth', conform and be saved approach. Or there has been an overwhelming sense of irrelevance, expecting from it "an excess of metaphorical afterthought" as one person perceptively describes it, and definitely not something that "deeply engaged in the problems that effectively determine our lives."²³ Texts that are so familiar in their pinned down, spiritual meaning, e.g. the Garden of Eden, have been judged of no earthly use to people of faith on the land. In reality, much of the Bible is about rural life and yet we do not realise it. This is in part at least because it has been talked about in a way that relates more to an individualist approach to faith and salvation and to urban existence, with human beings detached from the land and focussed on economic, social and political systems that take on a life of their own.²⁴

As a book of books, the Bible contains a wide range of texts – narratives, songs, teaching and future visions – that tell not one story but many, not one grand narrative but a rich mass of pathways and possibilities. In fact there is so much of real life in this book that it even contains mixed messages. As one person put it (speaking of Genesis but it applies in many other places also), there is an 'intentional hybridity'²⁵ as different strands of tradition have been brought together into the written text and differences have not been smoothed over but allowed to stay and reflect both the reality of life and the ultimate unknowability – the holiness – of God. At times we remain appropriately ambivalent about the Bible's conflicted God, now angry and giving judgement, now full of mercy and loyal love. As Job learns, if there is one thing we can be sure about, it is that God will not

23 Phillip Goodchild, "Debt, Epistemology and Ecotheology," *Ecotheology* 9.2 (2004) p.173.

24 Taking into account the likely world of its first listeners and readers, the Garden of Eden's key themes appears to be food and sex – food supply and fertility – which happen to be issues constantly on the minds of agricultural and pastoral farmers.

25 Mark G. Brett, "Earthing the Human in Genesis 1-3", in *Earth Story in Genesis*, ed Norman C. Habel and Shirley Wurst, Sheffield Academic Press, Sheffield: 2000, p.85, using a term borrowed from Mikhail Bakhtin "who argued that the deliberate juxtaposition of different voices is potentially subversive to dominant ideologies".

conform to our expectations nor to tidy systems of reward and punishment, success and failure. A Bible which gives room for bewilderment and uncertainty, which offers stories that despite their antiquity connect with contemporary land and livelihood issues, is more true to the realities of our rural lives than the Bible of certainty and instruction that has been on offer almost without exception in our churches. If the ‘many perspectives’ approach to the Bible seems to make it unreadable, which in many places, truth be told, the Bible is²⁶, then New Zealand farmers know well the puzzle of trying to read the unreadable. For this is what they live with constantly, with the need for decisions almost every day amidst a cacophony of voices, the strong voices of big players in economics, the niggling voices of government compliance, the immediate needs voices of family and farm, and the quieter yet deeply compelling voices of ethics and ecology.

The Bible is able to feature in a Rural Community Forum, therefore, as a partner for the conversation through which to try to read the unreadable and see something for the future. Text talks with Context and the way I suggest doing this is by offering the text as a ‘window’ through which to take a look at our current context. The first task therefore is to identify the particular concerns that the Forum is focussing on. For example, a drought, where the situation is an extended period of dry weather with people becoming noticeably stressed, withdrawing into themselves and finding it hard to go off farm even for a few hours. Another topic could be ‘The Future of Family Farming’, an issue that continues to concern us as more and more land goes into corporate hands.

With the details of the issue identified, a story is then told: a biblical narrative retold as a story in our kind of language, drawing out from within it the issues that relate to our particular concerns. It is a moment to relax and enjoy a narrative, and can be offered as such, like a pause in the process after naming the difficult issues and before getting down to hard work together. Stress is always a feature of farming issues, whether climate problems or corporate pressures or concern for continuing the family tradition of life on the land. A story can be like a prayer for calm and a clear head. But it will also be able to remain part of the conversation as people turn to practical issues and its images and ideas linger in their minds.

The procedure for the conversation is to form small groups, carefully selected if the state of relations between people (including among extended family members) suggests this would be wise. Questions are provided that focus on different facets of the issue and may include questions framed from perspectives provided by the biblical narrative. For example, the book of Joel gives a story of land disaster in which the theme is honour and shame and how to deal with the shame experienced when disease or drought or outside influences put viability and our relationship with the land to the extreme test (return to God, lament, reconnect). Among the questions will be one or two that relate to strategies and next steps. The experts in coping with rural trials are those who are gathered in the groups. As people talk together about their struggles, as they lament the situation they are in, the instinctive practical response as fellow-travellers is to share the pain *and* to share techniques for continuing on. Leaving a Forum like this with even just one thing in mind that one plans to do is in itself empowering and can prove to be a turning point.

‘It’s hard to be green when you’re in the red.’ This succinct statement expresses perfectly the confusion and the ambivalence of living with integrity on the land. People of faith – those who are part of our churches now but also many others who, as experience has shown me, are looking for ways to live and work with the land that is spiritually grounded – are trying to read the unreadable and make choices that are life-giving, in economic terms, and in terms of the viability of the local community and the health of the land. This statement is a plea for understanding that sustainability is a whole of life matter for rural people. They are not saying, do not expect us to be green because

26 Cf. Walter Brueggemann, “An Ending That Does Not End: The Book of Jeremiah”, from *Postmodern Interpretations of the Bible – A Reader*, ed. A.K.M. Adam, Chalice Press, St Louis Missouri: 2001, p.117

it is impossible, but rather help us by recognising that the issues we face are so entangled that only an integrated approach can make gains. Economic survival, ethics, the common good, political negotiation, technical nous and ecological mutuality are all essential for sustaining the place in which we receive and give life. I believe the local church can be a venue for encouraging this integrity and for building skills and confidence to go the Christian way in our work as in all of our life.

4. Conversations with Texts in Worship

Hearing the Word of God has always been an important part of our worship within the mix of denominational traditions that have fed the spiritual hearts of people in rural churches, as in urban churches. During the Trans-Tasman Rural Ministry Conference in Myrtleford Victoria in 1996 we heard about a service that took place during one of the hardest periods on the land in Australia. The drought was so bad and prices at the meat works so low that farmers were shooting their sheep. This was the work they were primarily engaged in through the week prior to worship, digging holes, shooting sheep and filling in the holes. The drought was hard enough to take but this requirement that they be death-dealers was extremely traumatic for people whose vocation is animal husbandry and caring for the land.

We heard that at church one Sunday during this time the reading was from John's Gospel, chapter ten – the Good Shepherd. The Bible text was read, the service continued and *not a word* was spoken about what the farmers were going through – “it slipped past, without comment”²⁷. As the epitome of irrelevance, this story has remained for me a reminder of what we must not do in our churches.

Recent Trans-Tasman Rural Ministry Conferences assure me that we have come a long way. Networking and the sharing of resources and ideas for sustaining church life have built up the confidence of rural churches. These things have also encouraged ministry that puts context and practical issues of life and livelihood second only to Christ in our focal awareness. Rural church leadership now predominantly involves ministry teams or clergy who have grown into ministry within a local rural church. They are practical people who instinctively seek to connect their faith to everyday life and to the current concerns of rural living.

We need to keep encouraging this and expand this understanding among people who join us at worship, namely, that faith relates to their concerns and they are not required to leave their troubles at the door when they enter a church. Seeing church as a refuge may tempt us to think this, and treat worship simply as a chance to be distracted for a time. Also we might think we should protect God from all the messy stuff and present ourselves as respectable and under control. But if this refuge is also going to be our strength it must be one where the pain and worries can come too, where it is safe to let them show a bit and where there is a feeling they are being shared and the load lightened as a result. If God is God, then God will cope with our messiness, our unrespectability and even our being out of control. That's all part of God's world, grist for the mill of God's compassion and justice.

We need also to encourage an understanding that attending church does not mean we leave our brains at the door. It is no quick and easy matter of matching pain and worries with scriptural words, as if band-aid Bible texts. To read about Jesus the Good Shepherd and then speak of the farmers' suffering, of reasons, causes and options, is hard work. It needs the inspiration of the Holy Spirit for sure, and a sharp mind to question and reason, to debate with the text and with the context and listen hard for God's word in the midst of the listening and talking.

The conversation I imagine engaging people in is between the biblical text and the people's context, and each person present conversing within themselves. They ask questions and listen for answers, and wrestle with the text in terms of their own needs and longings. It will be an active not a passive process, if we are to hear God's living, engaging word and not simply remain detached spectators at a worship event.

But our context is something so implicit in us that we take it as given and, like assumptions, do not usually spend time identifying it. We all know what's going on; we all know what life is like for us

²⁷ *An Ecological Vision for the Rural Church*, ed. Julia Stuart, Uniting Church in Australia, 1996, p.46.

nowadays. But do we? Or rather, do we carry with us clarity of thought about what is of concern. Often it is more a dull ache of worry, or private pain that doesn't yet have words, or the sheer bewilderment of so much change and uncertainty surrounding us. In the rural context there are the times when these things sit together with the immediacy of a drought that still hasn't broken or a dollar that stays too high and costs that would escalate further if it dropped.

It makes sense therefore to foster skills and confidence to find our own words for our experiences. Dorothy McRae-McMahon's idea of a Symbol of God's Presence, which I use regularly during the early part of the worship service, helps do this by encouraging a substantial portion of the congregation – as many as take a turn at Bible reading and want to participate – to identify something in their life that they link with God being present with them. Significantly, the first step in identification is not words but an object: choosing something to bring along and place on the Table for the remainder of the service. Words follow as, almost without exception, people speak about what they have brought. They speak of their life, their experiences, passions, hopes, and they connect them with God. Our ordinary life is hallowed, as I experience it, listening to the stories that are told. Our context is clearly identified as a place where God is at work.

These people also choose the hymn or song that follows their symbol. This is not just a cunning plot to ease the taxing task of choosing hymns for worship, but adds another dimension to the person's reflections on faith and life. Music engages the right brain, and the hymns or songs we choose are usually holistic experiences of words and music together. In introducing their choice, those involved regularly insert another gem of insight into the weave of personal history and journey with Jesus.

This symbol is one suggestion for nurturing among us a greater consciousness of, and some competence in articulating, our life and context. It is groundwork that can make the particular task of engaging with biblical texts in the next stage of the service more natural, and more productive of results in terms of hearing God's word and getting clues for moving on.

The following suggestions for how this engagement can be assisted are an adaptation for worship of the Forum process I have used with rural community groups, which I urge us as rural churches to make use of. Text and context can engage in conversation with each other, that is, the Bible and the people of God gathered at worship can enter into dialogue with questions coming from each side, and answers too – ideas and possibilities, puzzles to keep puzzling about and challenges that trigger changes. I suggest the process starts with naming some of the concerns we currently have. With a small group they may help do this and interaction between leader and congregation will set the tone well for interaction in one's own thinking as one listens to scripture. Particular issues may be highlighted because the day's Bible readings have seemed to the leader to make salutary connections. What we are doing is placing some issues clearly in the centre of attention; then we can be ready hear the chosen Bible texts. For we are invited to listen to the text as if it were a 'window' through which we look at our context and discover new things.

Tradition says that what we read is the Bible as given (in translation, using whichever version is preferred). Paraphrases like Eugene Peterson's *The Message* are acceptable in some places and it may be possible to re-tell the story in more contemporary words or with a view to picking up a particular theme in it. But whether this is done as well as reading the original text or instead of it needs to be decided in sensitivity to the congregation's tradition and expectations.

A brief introduction to the text is valuable, in terms of its place within the Bible (which is in fact a book of books with a myriad of variety within it) or in relation to texts before it that may have been read on previous weeks. The introduction can also place it in the likely cultural context of its origins in oral memory and as a written text. Immediately before the reader begins, the invitation is given to listen for what we hear that speaks to the concerns we have named, and others as well. It can be helpful to encourage people to let any questions or disturbances that stir in them as they

listen also come to mind, not to push them away “so as not to upset God”, but to go for an honest and open conversation with this book that carries the stories of our faith.

What the preacher speaks following this reading of the text becomes a third offering for the conversation. Presented as the product of just one person’s reflection on how this text interacts with our context, the conversation can be kept open for those listening to participate. As one person has put it “reading the Bible ... is rather like pulling up a chair at a feast that has been under way for some time.”²⁸ There is always room for one more, as we say regarding the Communion Table. This needs to be operative also for the liturgy of the Word. A sermon need not be a monologue, even if other voices do not speak. In some situations there may be willingness to spend some of the sermon time, or another point in the service, in conversation as a whole group. But even when everyone else besides the preacher remains silent during the sermon, people need not be silent within their own thinking.

It all depends on how the leader’s words are spoken. If they instruct and dictate answers to the questions raised, if they propound a view that is imparted as definitive and conclusive of the issues – the one right way to see things – that is monologue. But if the words invite listeners to hear and consider, to form a faithful yet provisional understanding; if they model a process of searching and finding, and searching again, using questions as a way to explore further and being ready to change direction when new discoveries are made, then it is a form of dialogue.

Old Testament theologian Walter Brueggeman quotes Jewish critic George Steiner who said: “It is the Hebraic intuition that God is capable of all speech acts except that of monologue, which has generated our acts of reply, of questioning, and counter-creation.”²⁹ Therefore, says Brueggeman, “Dialogue ... is not merely a strategy, but it is a practice that is congruent with our deepest nature, made as we are in the image of a dialogic God.”³⁰ Hearing the word of God is always a relational matter; knowing God is a matter of relationship, as Jesus tells us again and again.

28 Mary Chilton Callaway, “Exegesis as Banquet: Reading Jeremiah with the Rabbis”, in *A Gift of God in Due Season: Essays on Scripture and Community in Honor of James A. Sanders*, ed. Richard D. Weis and David M. Carr, p.220

29 George Steiner, *Real Presences*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago: 1989, p.225

30 Walter Brueggeman, *Mandate to Difference: An Invitation to the Contemporary Church*, Westminster John Knox Press, Louisville and London: 2007, p.73

5. Retelling the Story of Elijah

It's the 9th century BCE and Elijah is an *ish elohim*, a man of God, filled with spirit and power and at times a bit crazy with it. The prophets of this time in the history of Israel are somewhat different from the likes of Isaiah and Jeremiah, who turn up a couple of centuries later. A prophet from this early phase is a person who goes into an ecstatic trance and becomes known for achieving wonders – a seer.

There were many prophets in the land at that time, but what was significant about Elijah is whose prophet he is. There are prophets of Baal, prophets of Ashteroth, prophets of others besides, and there were prophets of *Yahweh*, the God first known to Abraham, Sarah, Hagar, Isaac, Rebekah, Jacob and Rachel (and assorted other women). This is the God that got Moses to lead the Hebrew slaves out of Egypt. This is the God that set them up as a people with instructions (the torah or Law of Moses) for living together as a community, instructions that were taught and recorded over the forty years of wandering in the wilderness (as the story goes).

Elijah hears the voice of this God and knows Yahweh's teaching for just and peaceful living together as a community with the land. But he sees the king of Israel³¹ taking no notice of Yahweh or the Law of Moses. Other gods, other life options, are taking precedence, especially when the king, Ahab, marries Jezebel, a Phoenician woman, who understandably sticks with her own gods, but goes so far as to kill off as many prophets of Yahweh as she can track down. Some scholars see traces in the Elijah stories of a battle for hearts and minds between the God who came with the more recent arrivals in the land – the Israelites – and the Gods of the original residents, the Canaanites. Also in conflict are the rural life and values of the immigrant Israelites and the economic and political power of the Canaanite city states (e.g. Phoenicia). The worship of Baal and Ashteroth seems to focus primarily on fertility and production, with rites and rituals to celebrate and encourage the return of life with each new season. Yahweh, in contrast, is a singular God of community, bringing rules for right relationship, social organisation and land use. There is also a reflection here of the transition in time from many Gods, to one God. This birth of monotheism provides the roots for the three monotheistic religions that persist today – Judaism, Christianity and Islam – each of which has a significant place for Elijah in their scripture and tradition.

The theme is drought. Elijah sees the signs of a drought, no doubt the physical signs (he would know the usual patterns) but also the signs that all is not well in the land and he speaks to King Ahab about it. His perspective as a person whose God is Yahweh is that how people live their lives, how their society treats the least and the land, is reflected in the way things pan out, be it enemy invasions or in this case the weather. Ahab doesn't at all like what Elijah has to say and calls him "you troubler of Israel".

After his challenge to King Ahab, Elijah goes away on retreat and lets himself be total dependent on the land and his God. This is his way of being sure he can hear clearly the call on him to act as God's prophet. He trusts himself to God and the land to look after him and to show him what to do. Ravens come and feed him. They are his care-givers, his hosts, and in accepting their hospitality Elijah lets the ethic of relationship, of giving and receiving, take charge of his life.

When the drought begins to bite and he can no longer survive out there, Elijah trusts his instincts and calls on a widow who lives in Zarephath, again handing himself over to the hospitality of another. Zarephath is in Phoenician territory. That is, this woman is one of Jezebel's kind, a foil to her character in the tale. The woman is very concerned, not antagonist but simply fearful and embarrassed because she only has enough food for one more meal for her son and herself. When

31 This is after the split in two that followed the reign of Solomon: Israel is the northern kingdom based on Samaria, Judah the southern kingdom based on Jerusalem.

Elijah persists and promises that Yahweh will keep replenishing her supplies, she takes him in. Her food jars keep refilling and she is saved from starvation.

When her son becomes ill a few days later and dies, Elijah calls on Yahweh and the boy lives. The woman is rapt – understandably – and recognises Elijah to be a true ‘man of God’.

After three dry years it is time for Elijah to prove to the king and all the people that Yahweh is God. For the true God will be the one who breaks the drought. Elijah invites a contest on Mount Carmel between Queen Jezebel’s prophets of Baal and himself as lone prophet of Yahweh. Whichever side can call on their God to set fire to the sacrifice set out on an altar will be the winner, and their God the true God.

The prophets of Baal work in vain, with cries and songs and dances, and Elijah taunting them relentlessly. Eventually they have to give up because no fire from their God appears. Elijah then sets up his altar with stones, wood and bull and gets some people to pour twelve jars of water over it all. He prays, and fire strikes to burn up everything on the altar. The people see it, announce that Yahweh is their God and, at Elijah’s instigation, they drag away the prophets of Baal and slaughter them.

Then comes the rain and the drought is broken.

However ...

Queen Jezebel is not happy. She is in a rage. She has never liked Elijah and his campaign for Yahweh as God of Israel, and now, for his victory over her prophets, he must die. Elijah is warned by the court prophet Obadiah and, terrified, flees into the back country. He wants to die, but miraculously there is food nearby so he’s encouraged to hang on. He is then travels on the strength of that food for forty days and forty nights and comes to Mount Horeb (called Sinai in some scriptural sources), Yahweh’s mountain. This is a time of despair for Elijah. He is alone, he feels helpless and hopeless.

Resting in a cave on the mountain Elijah Yahweh asks him what he doing there. God wants Elijah to come out of the cave and talk constructively about the future. But Elijah won’t budge: he keeps saying the same old thing: “I’ve been your passionate prophet and now they’re after me and I want to die.” Elijah wants to give up his work as a prophet.

But God wants him to continue and asks him to go out and stand on the mountain. Something’s going to happen so that Elijah can change his tune. It seems that Elijah still doesn’t move. So there’s a big wind, but no sign of God. An earthquake, but no sign of God. Fire, but still no sign of God. Then in contrast to all this fireworks, and it seems it is the contrast that jolts Elijah out of his extreme ennui, there is “a sound like sheer silence”. Elijah gets up, wraps himself in a cloak and goes to the mouth of the cave and finally gets into a conversation with God that doesn’t end with his litany of ‘I don’t want to be your prophet anymore.’ He at last hears God calling him to new action.

For it’s time for Elijah to get political and help begin the process of ending Ahab’s reign. Also he’s to prepare to hand over his prophet’s mantle to Elisha.

But life in the palace has continued much as before. It gets worse in the eyes of Yahweh and Yahweh’s prophet Elijah when Ahab decides he wants a vegetable garden. There’s an echo here of Egyptians, as it was said that Egyptians were vegetable growers, while the land of promise is a place for agriculturalists and pastoral farmers. Now there is an ideal paddock right beside the palace. It belongs to Naboth so Ahab offers to buy it from him at a fair price.

Naboth refuses because it is his family land and he cannot in good faith let it be alienated from his people. Ahab goes into a bit of a sulk over this and Jezebel asks him what’s bothering him. He tells her about his garden plans and Naboth’s turning down of the offer. Jezebel’s response is something like: ‘Are you a man or a mouse?’ From her perspective as a Phoenician, the king has

total authority. That's a contrast of course to the idea that Yahweh is king and the human king is always second to Yahweh and Yahweh's code of practice. That's what Elijah stands for.

Jezebel knows useful details of Yahweh's code, including the law that says that when there is trouble in the land, the trouble-maker is flushed out by calling a fast and a people's assembly and inviting those present to speak up and name who and what has broken the law of Yahweh. Jezebel arranges in Ahab's name for a fast to be called and she finds two ratbags to make charges against Naboth. This they do, claiming that he has cursed God and the king. Naboth is condemned and stoned and his property, according to the law, reverts to the king.

Elijah hears of this and goes to Ahab and tells him the consequences of his blood-spilling injustice – disaster for all of his family, worst of all for Jezebel whose body will be eaten by dogs. Ahab feels remorse to the extreme and turns to Yahweh for forgiveness. Ahab therefore lives – disaster is postponed until his son Ahaziah's reign.

Elijah's work is done and God's ultimate authentication of Elijah comes with the means of his departure. No ordinary end for this person: a fiery chariot carries him away in a whirlwind. Elisha is there when it happens, having refused to leave his side so that he can take up the mantle and continue the work.

Elijah's passion for his God makes him act with purpose and despite the risks. He is challenging the social status quo. Elijah's priorities reflect the priorities of his God: care for the least in society and respect the land, its seasons and its ability to provide. For Elijah, life is a gift to receive in trust, not something to be grasped and possessed regardless of the needs of other people or the land. This is Elisha's inheritance.

6. Retelling the Narrative of Genesis 4

By the end of Genesis 3 earth creature Adam and mother of all living Eve have joined the real world. It is the world we know, a mixture of blessing and curse. Blessed in its potential for good inter-connected earth-based living and God's continuing care. Cursed in the disruption to God's original dream as – we soon find out - relationships break, crops fail and violence terrorises.

We are not to dwell on the experience of Eden, whether error or the next step in human learning. It is hard labour outside Eden and even the land finds it costly to sustain life. But the first verse of Genesis 4 alerts us that the original blessing of the life-giver “be fruitful and multiply” (Gen 1:28) still holds. Conception and birth make their first appearance: two new lives, Cain and Abel.

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

In the course of time these two people assess their achievements. It seems it has not been an easy year. (What year is?) We are not told the lambing percentage but it was probably not a good one; we sense that the yields of grain and seed are poor in quantity and quality, a struggle to get harvested and needing extra dressing (cleaning) to ready it for use as food and next season's seed. But in the nature of stock farming it is possible to select out your best from the flock and be take some satisfaction in it even in a poor season. There are sure to be some prime lambs. However, with field crops, it shows up in the whole crop that then has to be rated at a lesser grade.

“It's not fair,” says Cain the agriculturalist. “Abel is better off than I am.” (Doubtless if there were a dairy farmer within range, that one would have been keeping very quiet about even better fortunes!) Now in a good year there might be no issue. When everyone is prospering, all can feel positive and confident of their worth as a farmer. But in poorer years, envy, self-pity and self-doubt are inclined to enter the scene – “sin is lurking at the door” (v.7). It's like the farm dog sitting waiting for us while we have smoko, a domesticated animal, well-trained, but with instincts for the wild that mean it must be watched or it will be away worrying sheep.

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

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

When God moves in to raise questions about the violent act that ensues, Cain's arrogance contains as he makes a joke of God's first question: does my brother, a keeper of sheep, need a keeper? In fact, he has proved himself to be no brother to Abel and there can be no escaping the consequences of such a disconnected, uncaring act. Abel's blood has been poured onto the soil, the very earth that early had no life because there was no water to pour into it and no creature to till and keep it. With blood trickling into the soil, it brings not life, but a cry from the earth itself. Cain's act of violence is so contrary to God's original vision of life – as an interconnected giving and receiving from earth and human companions – that Cain cannot now return to normal life. Violence has knocked him out of the loop so he becomes a placeless person, a constant wanderer, with no roots and no base. (In fact he builds a city! But there lies another retelling.)

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

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

7. Retelling the Narrative of the Prophet Joel

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

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

There has been catastrophe on the land, with mention of a locust plague described also in images of drought and enemy invasion. We can relate to that: many Australians know the first one and there are plenty of other biological pests we live with (clover root weevil, fly strike, varroa mite...); we all know the second – drought and other climate crises (some of us do floods more often); and the enemy invasion is in fact very descriptive of the effects of globalisation and corporate power, what John Ikerd at our 2007 International Rural Church conference called "economic colonisation".³²

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

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

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

The story also reveals there's another dimension to the disaster. Right from the start it is the land that calls on all its inhabitants to lament: to grieve for its loss and to weep with it for the disastrous

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

state they are in now. Its human inhabitants, the only ones that can speak on its behalf, have gone silent: it seems that their world of concern has shrunk. Although this land is their daily companion as they work in partnership with it to produce life and livelihood, their own problems have become so all-encompassing that they have closed themselves off from the land as well as from one another.

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

8. Text and Context: Spiritual Resources for Sustainable Rural Life

SETTING UP THE CONVERSATION

I imagine conversations between text and context in rural Aotearoa New Zealand, indeed anywhere in the rural world. I imagine life-giving conversations as livelihood issues meet biblical narratives, and new perspectives break the closure of past and present.

About the term 'rural': in our rural church networks,³³ 'rural' is where people acknowledge dependence, direct or indirect, on land or sea for livelihood and where neighbourhood relationships shape interactions.

What I envisage is dialogue, between people and biblical text and among people of varied economic, cultural and religious milieux. Jewish critic George Steiner wrote: "It is the Hebraic intuition that God is capable of all speech acts except that of monologue, which has generated our acts of reply, of questioning, and counter-creation."³⁴ In quoting this, Walter Brueggeman comments: "Dialogue ... is not merely a strategy, but it is a practice that is congruent with our deepest nature, made as we are in the image of a dialogic God."³⁵ Hearing the word of God is always a relational matter.

Reading texts in dialogue is a power-giving process. Rhetorical hermeneutics have long since identified the issue of power in biblical interpretation. Among many others in the theological hinterland, rural voices have been silent, fully occupied with life and livelihood tasks, as are Earth³⁶ and its other dwellers. Biblical research, as the specialist work of mostly city dwellers, has suffered from the urban/rural gap, with suspicion and ignorance on both sides making communication limited. 'Voices from the Margin' in other contexts have led the way and give us permission to *alter-read* texts³⁷ for ourselves, to uncover their many rural voices.

RURAL CONTEXT

When rural people are asked about their life, worries about water and soil usually top the list – competition for water, degraded waterways, corporatisation of land, monoculture and urban competition for land. The well-being of people features highly too – unemployment, alcohol, drugs, mental illness, transport costs, distance from urban opportunities, absence of youth, migrant labour, loss of future perspectives. The weather has always been a challenge, with signs of climate change now added to seasonal variations. Markets are by nature unpredictable, and the consumer debt-model combined with globalisation is making rural people feel more and more vulnerable to big financial players. Farmers feed cities and cities purchase rural products but contemporary issues with food supply and security, with food justice and the 'stolen harvest' for biofuels, reflect a skewing of this mutuality. Urban sprawl and the encroachment of urban culture through mobility and information technology are displacing core values that have sustained rural communities in the past.

The Gospels are replete with texts that feature food and life with the land and I relish the thought of bringing urban and rural readers of the Bible into dialogue around a particular text. A parable about soil and seed might evoke from an urban participant rich metaphorical insights into nurturing

33 See e.g. the International Rural Church Association, www.irca.net.nz, and links.

34 George Steiner, *Real Presences*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago: 1989, p.225

35 Walter Brueggemann, *Mandate to Difference: An Invitation to the Contemporary Church*, Westminster John Knox Press, Louisville and London: 2007, p.73

36 Cf. the Earth Bible project introduced in the first of its five publications *Readings from the Perspective of the Earth*. As they do I use the term "Earth" as inclusive of all that forms the world we know: land, sea, rivers and everything that flies, swims or creeps thereon.

37 Jione Havea, "To Love Cain More Than God", in *Levinas and Biblical Studies*, ed. Tamara Cohn Eskenzai, Gary A. Phillips, and David Jobling, Society of Biblical Literature, Atlanta: 2003, p.94

faith, the same passage drawing out a rural participant to speak of the faith they need to cope with the variables of seasons, parasites and markets. Jesus lived and breathed rural life and the Gospels reflect his hinterland status, his neighbourhood relationships with all people he encounters, and his special bond with the *ochlos*, the people of the land. The same narratives invite imaginative construal within even the most urban of contexts to help reclaim life's essentials of nurture and thankfulness.

Another way of understanding this dialogue between text and context is to see a particular biblical narrative as a window through which to view contemporary concerns. Consider the story of Cain and Abel as a tale of two farmers, one arable, the other sheep and beef, who have quite different seasons – Abel has a good year, Cain has a bummer. Coping with hard seasons and seeing others do well is not easy (imagine if there had been a third brother, a dairy farmer!). One needs to learn to live with it, processing feelings of shame and resentment and realising there will be another season. Another example is the talking point for assessing and dealing with urbanisation that can be found in the Tower of Babel narrative, whether interpreted as scattering the proud or as giving space for multiple communities to flourish. Genesis 2-3 grapples with issues of food supply and production difficulties. And a hearing is given to concerns for water and soil when we listen to the voice of Earth³⁸ in the opening verses of Hosea 4 where the health of soil and community is linked to the rightness of human relationships with land, people and God.

The book of Joel provides an example that I would like to present more fully. I retell the story with one eye to current scholarship³⁹ and one eye to what it is like trying to survive on the land.

A plague of locusts strike, the land is trashed and the people devastated, shut off from their God. "Their joy has been put to shame," says Joel (1:12) and calls on the people to return to their God. Joel is silent on who and what is to blame, naming no sins facing judgment. The issue is a situation that has turned joy to shame.

The catastrophe takes the form of a locust plague, described also as drought and enemy invasion. Australian farmers know about locusts and we can all relate to devastating biological pests; drought and other climate crises are very familiar; and the enemy invasion is in fact very descriptive of the effects of corporate power, what John Ikerd at our 2007 International Rural Church conference called "economic colonisation".⁴⁰

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

For Joel's time, this meant the people couldn't carry out their routine religious sacrifices. For us these circumstances often mean we cannot afford to attend to our social, emotional and spiritual well-being. Under economic pressure, rural people withdraw. Even if the primary cause is beyond their control, farmers feel a failure when land, stock or the bank balance suffers. Anxiety, self-doubt and often depression take hold and they become shut off from others, from the communal experience of God and even from the farm they love. The joy of living with land and community has been put to shame.

Joel's advice is to get together and share their sorrows. 'Return to your God and lament this suffering that has hit you. Let yourselves lament openly and honestly – rend your hearts as well as

38 See n.4 above

39 In particular: Ronald A. Simkins, "God, History, and the Natural World in the Book of Joel", in *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 55 (1993), 435-452, "Return to Yahweh": Honor and Shame in Joel, in *Semeia*, 1994, 45-54; James L. Crenshaw, "Who Knows What YHWH Will Do? The Character of God in the Book of Joel", in *Fortunate The Eyes That See: Essays in Honor of David Noel Freedman*, ed. Astrid B Beck, Andrew H. Bartelt, Paul R. Raabe and Chris A. Franke, William B. Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, Michigan: 1995, 185-196; Laurie J Braaten, "Earth Community in Joel 1-2: A Call to Identify with the Rest of Creation", in *Horizons in Biblical Theology* 28 (2006), 113-129.

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

your garments – and by doing this you'll get yourselves connected again, physically and spiritually.' Communal lament brings the shame out into common ground in an environment that is safe because it is shared. Shame is thereby turned back into honour and strength returns – in relation to others in the community and with the land that gives livelihood.

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

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

This narrative opens up questions with which to *alter*-read big issues in our rural context and break their often paralysing hold. By re-construing our concerns in terms of the three images in Joel – biological threats, climate events and economic colonisation – we can gain perspective. The call to lament is an invitation to grieve for what could have been, and therefore be able to move on to the next season. This is not the clichéd 'getting closure' on the past: indeed it is the opposite, since it is in allowing ourselves to lament for as long as it takes, that the past reveals *openings* for a better future. As we lament *together* we naturally begin to strategise about the future. "Returning to our God", that is, reclaiming our communal social and spiritual rituals, we are enabled to *respond* rather than simply *react* to our circumstances.

Lamenting with the land means we embrace the pain of seeing it in a wounded state, and stay with it just as we stay at the bedside of a suffering loved one. Although we can do nothing but be there, that in itself means we are maintaining the relationship.

But the key breakthrough with this re-telling of the story of Joel is the question it asks, not about blame, but about shame. Extracted from the constraints of a sin-judgement-repentance-blessing interpretation of Joel, which contrived to fit it within the grand narrative of Christian salvation, this story enters into immediate conversation with the rural context. The prevailing mode of analysis of rural problems, like other problems, is blame, which de-powers the situation further and serves to eclipse the future. When we re-frame trauma or crises in terms of honour and shame, we enable lament to flow and be freed to turn to new strategies. When we talk of our, or a neighbour's, shame we instinctively seek ways to turn it back into honour, to rebuild confidence in each other. We look for words to say and things to do that express what it can mean to "return to God" in the 21st rural context.

PEOPLE AND LAND

"Land is not just real estate," writes Laurie J. Braaten in an Earth Bible study of Hosea, "where the drama of salvation is played out or where Israel receives agricultural blessing..."⁴¹ What Braaten rejects here is part of the metanarrative that makes God and human beings the Bible's sole focus of concern. Consider also attitudes to land in this part of the world. New Zealand ecologist Geoff Park in his book *Theatre Country: Essays on landscape and whenua* writes of the development in the 1890s of the concept of "conservation 'estate', of pristine nature, in balance and able to be 'preserved', or of land and nature as 'national park' or 'wilderness'."⁴² It is a notion that has no place for human inhabitants – notably indigenous peoples – or for processes for living in interdependence with the land as whenua (which also means 'placenta'). If this conservation

41 Laurie J. Braaten, *Earth Story in Psalms and Prophets*, p.188

42 Geoff Park, *Theatre Country: Essays on landscape and whenua*, Victoria University Press, Wellington: 2006, p.81

movement had not arisen when it did, large areas of forest that remain today would have succumbed to the project of cultivation. But both the cultivation of farm lands and the protection of wild areas stem from a perception of people and nature as in opposition, and of nature as empty of culture.

Park traces this to the Romantic poets in England and the *entré* they gave to seeing nature as scenery. It was like going to the theatre: you could be touched by it, but always as a spectator; you did not have to stay there and survive.

For those who cultivate the land, this default attitude to land as landscape, or as real estate within which God's blessings of a good life can be worked out, has not meant lack of care. Most New Zealand farmers consider themselves stewards of land that is theirs only for a time. The story is often told of a visitor to a farm saying, 'this is magnificent: you must thank God often for it,' and the farmer replying, 'I don't know about the Almighty: you should have seen the state it was in before we took it on!'

We may care mightily for the land, but we remain *caring outsiders*, without the "intimacy, reciprocity and inhabitation"⁴³ that first nations people have known, and that our retelling of Joel opens up. As outsiders, albeit caring, we are thrown out of balance when disaster strikes: our essential disconnectedness has us withdraw from the Earth's pain to focus entirely on our own. Joel's call to return to God is a call to be again *implicated insiders* whose world remains bigger than just ourselves alone no matter how bad it gets, because we retain a connection that carries us through any present loss to be ready for next season's blessings. We move from 'landscape' as something we tame and take individual pride in (and we feel shame when we fail) to 'whenua' as our partner in life and livelihood.

'It's hard to be green when you're in the red' is a phrase I have heard repeatedly at farmers' meetings and it is a succinct summary of rural life worldwide. This statement is not saying 'do not expect us to be green because it is impossible', but rather 'help us by recognising that the issues we face are so entangled that only an integrated approach can work'. Economic viability from land and sea is part of the broader issue of sustainability, as is viability of local communities, which nurture individuals and families by way of communal rituals and collaboration for the common good. Economic survival, the common good and ecological mutuality are equally indispensable to sustaining the place that feeds us. There are many narratives within the Bible in conversation with which we can re-frame stories of struggle into stories of hope and I am urging us to make them available for good use. This is not just a rural matter but has urban implications. We are talking about viability, well-being and sustainability for our planet.

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43 *Ibid.*, p.127