

## **Leadership in the countryside**

**When leaders and other prominent figures in our churches talk to us about rural issues, what is our reaction? Do we listen, take note, react? Or do we feel we've heard it all before? How should we listen to people with public voices when they speak about the places where we live and work, the places for which we care and love?**

**The Bible gives us important clues, not just about our world and our place in it, but about leaders and orators and our reactions to them. The Bible challenges us to think about how we react when God speaks to us, when Jesus teaches and challenges us, and when God's prophets and apostles set out a vision for us.**

**For example, in Genesis 2. 8-17, we are asked to think about human beings and their environment not just as accidents of evolution, but part of the spoken purposes of God. Eden is the Lord's garden and we are given a purpose, not just to exist in it, but to cultivate and take care of it. This invitation comes with responsibility: we must not overstep the mark. But do we today listen to those who warn us to take our responsibilities towards the countryside and the environment seriously? Or do we just agree with the moral lessons of God's gifts and punishments in Genesis without asking if they are in any way relevant to ourselves?**



**And if we look to church leaders for confidence and encouragement in what we are doing, do we really take this to heart? Jesus, for example, tells the story of the fig tree without fruit in Luke 13. 6-9. The barren fig tree is given another chance, and is offered further nurture and care. It is quite a small, almost mysterious little parable annexed to a discussion of**

**repentance, - but do we heed it? If God gives us second chances to bear fruit, where are we being given a second chance in the countryside, - and can we be bothered to extend that second chance, (together with the effort of nurture and care), to other people?**

**Another way we can respond to what our leaders are saying is to learn to discern the prophetic voice. Such a voice speaks of things familiar to us, but prompts us to think beyond ourselves, and ultimately to focus on what God wants, not what we want. We learn about such challenges from passages such as Isaiah 5 and 27 where the prophet draws distinctions between right living before God and Israel's wasteful and destructive ways. Cultivation and all ways of looking after land require wrestling with thistles and briars. We might do this every day, but what is its deeper meaning? *Why* do we want buds and blossom and healthy animals around us? *Why* does God want good grapes from the vineyard? If we can answer that question, we have to go on to another one, - how far do we actively work to weed out our own lives and cultivate right living in our Christian communities? We are indeed being asked to 'fill the whole world with fruit' (Isaiah 27.6).**