

# **Dark**

**[Aim: to examine the contrast between perceptions of a rural idyll and the reality of life in the countryside]**

## **Story**

**Florence, who had lived all her life in London went to visit her sister who had recently moved to a remote rural location. She painted the forthcoming visit to her friends in terms of an idyllic setting which was everything the city was not. It was peaceful, while the city was noisy. It was clean, while the city was dirty. It was slow-moving while the city was busy. It was a nurturing, soothing environment for the stressed-out. In short, it was everything one might envisage for a "dream" holiday, a pastoral paradise.**

**When Florence arrived (bearing gifts of eggs "fresh from the country"), she discovered that the reality was very different. The first difficulty she encountered was darkness. She had never lived in a situation where at night it was pitch dark and she could not move around easily. She found the dark unnerving, the more so because the local people did not seem to have a problem getting around without proper pavements or street lighting. She realised that she was dependent on reflected light to make her feel safe and found the absence of headlights passing the house a deep and unnerving loss.**

**Her next problem was that the rural location to which her sister had moved turned out to be anything but peaceful. The adjoining farm created all kinds of noise: the church clock set off dogs barking, cockerels crowed and animals in the fields made much louder noises than expected. She found that birds drove her mad. Where she found aircraft and traffic noise could be reduced to a background she could filter out, she found unexpected and erratic rural noise impossible to ignore.**

**Her ideas of a "clean" environment were also shattered. She had come unprepared for mud and had no appropriate footwear or clothing. Debris from agricultural work and hedge cutting got in her hair. She also became obsessed by worries about mice and insects as erratic and uncontrollable elements in her previously ordered and sanitised life. She found that the people in the tiny village were not able to spend long periods over the garden gate passing the time of day, but were busy with their own lives and did not necessarily live more slowly. Moreover, some of the people in the remote location were struggling in as much poverty as people she had encountered in deprived parts of the city.**

**Disillusioned, Florence went home and decided to take a holiday next time in a decent hotel somewhere by the sea.**

## **Discussion**

**Florence's story illustrates some of the problems of perception that can occur when people idealise notions of the countryside and of rural life. Such distorted perceptions can, of course, occur in both directions and people**

from rural areas may also have unrealistic ideas about urban life. There is however a mythic dimension to the notion of the rural idyll, bolstered by television images of countryside locations in which the sun always shines and peace is always to be found. People may adopt a "National Trust" view of country life, in which the countryside is both contained and beautifully presented and somehow "kept" as a treasure for visitors. "Pretty villages" and "pretty churches" therefore become consumable items for visitors and tourists and while there may be some benefit from this, other problems of perception may become more acute. Visitors may have few ideas about how to behave on farmland, - where to walk or to park, or how to control their dogs, and may have little idea that the countryside is a place where people also work and worship. People may also be disappointed when their "pretty church" turns out to be cold and draughty, without a full range of services staffed by a permanent incumbent and not in possession of a peal of bells or large choir for their dream wedding.

Although much language from the Bible draws on the experience of life lived in an isolated, dark, unpopulated and agricultural setting, and Jesus himself practised an itinerant ministry, much of our modern theology derives from a Jesus in Jerusalem and the spread of the Gospel to major urban centres. Similarly, much of our sophisticated western theology seems to assume that we grow up with God in an urban environment as well as looking to an eschatological model of the heavenly city in which God is governor. This is in spite of the fact that much of the global population still lives and witnesses to God in rural situations and whose experience of living the Christian faith is shaped in those environments. For us, whether we realise it or not, the experience of living in the city has had a powerful effect on

shaping the kind of language we use. When as Christians, we spend time looking at the modes of engagement between the church and the world, we often envision the world of the metropolis. In this world, secular processes present challenges for the Church's mission. This is the world of urban church planting, of the identification of under-churched areas, of engagement with issues of marginalization and social justice, but often without considering the analogous problems faced by the Church in the countryside. How do we address the very real mission questions which surround keeping the faith alive in small villages, many depressed by lack of housing and work and by the farming crises? The idea of the retreat, for some people, has connotations and expectations of the rural idyll: a place of peace and refreshment in a different setting where we can recharge batteries before returning to the challenges of Christian witness in difficult urban and suburban environments. This similarly deflects attention from the real needs of Christian witness in the countryside which needs to be included in our theological conversations and priorities.

## **Suggestions for Bible Study:**

**Psalm 23**

**Isaiah 9: 2a-7**

**Revelation 21: 1-4, 22-27**

**Choose one or two questions for discussion:**

**Have you ever taken a holiday somewhere where the place was entirely unlike what you expected? If so, what did you do?**

**If you go for "a day out in the city" or a "day out in the country" where do you go and why? Where would you *not* go, and why?**

**Do you know how to behave in the countryside, if you are a day tripper on a coach tour? A walker? A dog owner? What would make you "streetwise" in the city?**

### **Possibilities for drama or role play:**

**How might Florence explain how she felt to her sister? What would her sister say?**

**How would Florence react when she got home; how would she tell the story to her family?**

**What would happen if the "country" sister visited the "city" sister?**

**Suppose you went on a holiday which proved quite different to expectations? What would you say to the tour guide about what you expected and what you actually experienced?**

### **Reflection:**

**What does God expect of us when we encounter the strange and the unfamiliar?**

**How can such encounter help equip us to be better witnesses or missionaries?**

### **A Hymn and a Prayer**

**For example: *Lead Kindly Light***

**or *Like a Candle Flame***

**God,**

**You are the light of the world, you are the peace we yearn and long for.**

**Help us to live in your light and share your peace.**

**Amen**