

Farming according to torah:

biblical insights for present day farming

The first five books of the bible are known as Torah, which means instruction about what makes for life and what destroys it. They are written, of course, against the background of a subsistence economy, but we can still learn a great deal from them. We can highlight five points:

First, in our culture farming is marginalised but in Scripture it is the basic form of work, for which the word is 'abad', to serve. Jesus finally depicts service as the true human role (Mk 10.43). Farming, serving the earth, serving the whole human community, is likewise fundamental as an account of what it means to be human.

A good farmer is one who cares for his land, his crops, his stock; he serves them. The view which ascribes the ecological crisis to Genesis 1.28, the dominion verse, is written by someone who knows nothing about farming, or only about industrial farming. You cannot be a good farmer and dominate. The good farmer cares for and nurtures his land and stock: he husbands them. Good husbandry is the heart of all farming.

Secondly, farming is about the most basic form of production, the production of food; central to the whole biblical story from Joseph to Jesus. This is crucial in a world where population already nears 7 billion and may rise to 12 billion. Given limited amounts of fertile land, how is that population going to be fed?

Third, following Torah means not allowing 'the market' to dictate the production and distribution of food. The crisis we have lived through in British farming over

the past twenty years is part of an insane economy oriented to profit rather than to life. Torah points to a very different organisation of the economy.

Fourth, good farming requires wisdom. This applies to our present oil dependent agriculture. Oil has already peaked and there is no obvious replacement. How are we going to farm in a world without oil, and in a way which will feed 8 or 10 billion? The question whether small mixed use farms are more efficient than big monocultural units is moot and might be the application of wisdom, as argued cogently by Jules Pretty and Colin Tudge.

Fifth, the pace of global warming means we cannot pretend that we can simply carry on in any area, least of all in farming, with 'business as normal'. The results of such warming are unpredictable. At worst whole ecosystems could unravel, and this presents a huge challenge to farming in how to feed the human family.

**'Does not wisdom call, and does not understanding raise her voice?'
'Whoever finds me finds life and obtains favour from the Lord; but those who miss me injure themselves; all who hate me love death.'**

(Proverbs 8:1,35-6)

Can we respond to wisdom, to instruction, to torah? Or are we condemned, as some think, to a new dark age? The decisions we make with regard to agriculture will be amongst the most crucial of the next thirty years. ■

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