



God's Promise

There are a couple of interesting chapters in Isaiah which have been added in and moved around. Chapters 34 and 35 are full of amazing writing and echo Ezekiel in many ways. But if we are thinking about strategies for the rural church in the widest possible sense, as a model of God's desire for the whole church, then perhaps these lines should help us to see what the rural church in particular, has to offer as a sign to Christians everywhere.

Isaiah chapter 34 opens with a dire picture of what happens to God's enemies. Those who are against God end up slaughtered and broken: 'the stench of their corpses shall rise; the mountains shall flow with their blood.' If we want to know what God's anger and disappointment with us look like, we have only to look around at what we do to the natural world when we don't take proper care of it. 'All their host shall wither like a leaf withering on a vine, or fruit withering on a fig tree' (remember what Jesus did to the fig tree?).

Nature bears the brunt of what human beings do against God, and the damage to the environment is testimony to a

world refusing to hear what God says. So God goes on to say that the downfall of human beings is like the slaughter of animals in sacrifice. There is a vision of the destruction of many animals, young and old, and this is a picture of what human beings will come to. The result is a scene of total damage and disaster, like the aftermath of a nuclear bomb: 'the streams of Edom will be turned into pitch, and her soil into sulphur; her land shall become burning pitch. Night and day it shall not be quenched; its smoke shall go up forever. From generation to generation it shall lie waste.'

From this description, which sounds like a disaster movie, something amazing happens. Nature regenerates. Animals, birds and plants creep back into the place of desolation and remake it. Owls, ravens, hedgehogs, buzzards, wildcats and goats, thistles and nettles find a place to flourish. God restores the land through the wild creatures of his beloved creation; 'not one of these shall be missing; none shall be without its mate'. Every creature is written in God's book. None is forgotten; all will be restored. Gradually, God's perfect

kingdom will be recovered and it is the countryside which recognizes the great saving acts of God and rejoices in it: 'the desert shall rejoice and blossom.' In this new paradise, God's people will be saved: 'the redeemed shall walk there. And the ransomed of the Lord will return and come to Zion with singing...sorrow and sighing will flee away.'

In the countryside, which has seen horrors and hardships with BSE and foot and mouth ('the stench of their corpses shall rise') and human communities hit by disaster, this image of God's restoration of nature as a sign to human beings of the promise of salvation is surely something to be offered to all other parts of the church. How we manage our fields, woods, hedgerows and churchyards, how we treat our animals, how we support farmers and growers, fishers and fowls – these things mirror this picture of God's salvation for others to see and understand. Rural life and faith *matter*, because it is where God's new holy way (35.8) is being built. ■

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