

A 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 are 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."¹ 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.²

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'³ 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

¹ Phillip Goodchild, "Debt, Epistemology and Ecotheology," *Ecotheology* 9.2 (2004) p.173.

² 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.

³ 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".

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 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 is⁴, 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

⁴ 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

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 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.

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