

Hope

[Aim: to look for the sources of Christian hope in times of great change and affliction in the countryside]

Story

James and Annie had farmed the 120 acres of Long Meadow farm for thirty years. They had only taken over fully when James's father died. They raised beef cattle and sheep, feeding them almost completely from what was grown on the farm. In James's family, farming had always been considered a good living and farming had been their lives for three generations before James was born. Annie came from the nearby market town and had settled into the farming way of life.

They rented 120 acres and in good times had bought a further 60 acres a few miles away. But with BSE, the high value of the pound and then the onset of foot and mouth disease, the farm began to return insufficient amounts to pay the bills. In a short time, James had accumulated a debt which could not be cleared. As a tenant, the bank would not give him any more help. Annie had to take a part-time job in the town to keep the farm's finances afloat. This nearly came to grief however, when the businesses started to close in the wake of foot and mouth. The hotels laid off staff and the petrol station closed down, leaving Annie with the worry that her own job, related to tourist services, would be next to go. Despite their struggle, James and Annie had to face the reality that neither of their two sons or

their daughter would want to take on the farm when they retired and that all of them lived over thirty miles away.

James began to have nightmares about foot and mouth disease affecting his animals. The fear of the disease scarred him deeply and led to trouble when he refused to allow walkers on to footpaths around his land, despite the countryside being declared "open". The tourists and walkers were unsympathetic to the fact that James cared for and knew each of his animals, each of which would be sent to slaughter with a tear in James's eye. They simply saw him as being paranoid and unhelpful.

James father had been an officer of the local church for twenty years, but James lost so much confidence that he lost contact with the church and with many of his friends. Annie stayed on both the church council and the Women's Institute. Although foot and mouth did not come to their farm, the movement restrictions made life impossible and James felt he had hit an all time low when he had to put his pride aside and ask for help from the Royal Agricultural Benevolent Institution and from the ARC Addington fund. He was put in touch with one of the agricultural chaplains, a layperson who had once been a farmer himself.

The chaplain came out to visit James and Annie several times, and talked through the possibility of giving up the farm. Through him, James also talked to the Farm Business Advisory Service. The chaplain encouraged James to see how many skills he had as a practical farmer, so that starting something new was a way of using those talents, not giving up. James had to learn to get past the idea of the farm as an inherited obligation and find

change a positive step releasing him from the appalling stress. The chaplain also helped James begin to think about alternative accommodation and offered to help him talk to the estate about his options.

Discussion

This story has many strands which have been repeated many times during the foot and mouth crisis. The disease does not just affect farmers, but all kinds of businesses and industries in local economies. This shows the interdependence of various kinds of infrastructure and how people's livelihoods are connected. Things can go badly wrong where interests clash in the process of self-protection as can be seen in the clash of interests between the farm and the tourist industry. The difficulty is in turning a personal tragedy into a set of possibilities out of which hope can come.

The Church should be the place to which Christians turn for the articulation of hope, but sometimes we are ill equipped to deal with the loss of confidence and blows to faith that come with adversity. Sometimes we find it even more difficult to stand beside people who find themselves in adversity; we start to treat them differently or revise our friendships in subtle ways. Yet Jesus insists that we work hard always to treat our neighbours as ourselves, no matter whether they can offer us little or much in return.

Some suggestions for Bible study

Job 1.1-11

Isaiah 10: 18-27

John 3: 1-10

Choose one or two questions for discussion

What might it feel like to have to give up a business for which you have worked so hard?

How would you feel if you were in James's shoes?

What view might Annie take about leaving the farm after 30 years?

How might local church people help James?

What attitude could the estate take towards helping a tenant who can't pay rent?

What is the future for the estate with such a loss of rental income?

What will happen to the community if the estate fails?

Suggestions for drama or role play

What might James say to Annie at the point where he realised he could not go on farming?

What might they both say to the farm workers, people in the church, the community?

Imagine the discussions between the chaplain and James. What sort of things might they talk about?

Imagine the discussion between James, the chaplain and an estate representative. How will they decide what to do for the best?

Reflection

Sometimes it is very difficult to make sense of calamity and disaster in terms of God's plan for the whole creation. Sometimes Christians opt for simple moralising or for bafflingly complex ways of trying to make sense of such situations, which leave people feeling rejected or confused. Yet God promises us that there is always the possibility of creating something new out of adversity. How can we witness to the eternal nature of Christian hope and how can we help to make it a reality in people's lives?

A Hymn and a Prayer

*All my hope on God is founded
or The light of Christ*

**God,
The world is not always kind,
things do not turn out as we would wish or desire,
but you hold out your hand in good times and bad,
offering us new dreams and eternal hope.**

Amen