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### THE FARMING CRISIS

Terry Musson

#### **Its historical roots, some practical and spiritual solutions**

*At the February Group of Sessions of the General Synod there was an important discussion on the crisis in farming. Through our links with rural churches Church Society is well aware of the problems this crisis is causing. Terry Musson is a member of St. Olaf's church in Poughill, a General Synod representative for Truro Diocese, a member of Church Society Trust and a lifelong dairy farmer. Terry spoke in the General Synod debate not only explaining the hard realities of the situation but also providing what virtually no other speaker offered, some biblical observations on what is happening. This article is based on the speech he gave.*

Born on a farm at the beginning of the War in 1940, food production has always been a challenge to me. The first twelve years were the time of rationing and, although my father produced food, 'waste not, want not' was the watch word. I had four sisters and two brothers and my parents had to provide all our needs from what they produced. Our living standard depended on a 'good harvest'. As children we would collect eggs, apples, plums etc. and look after chicks, lambs and calves in their season. Everything was precious.

This school of thought was carried over into my college days when, on Graduation Day, the College Principal delivered his farewell speech to us students and the local dignitary - a very clear speech - sending us out into the world to feed a hungry nation. Remember that at that time a third of the world was starving and there was an expected population explosion. In this country alone a population of 41 million in the 'forties was predicted to rise to between 50 and 60 million by the late 'eighties. 'You will always be wanted', he said, 'unless you find new methods, there will be shortages'.

Government after Government issued White Papers encouraging us to maximise output. University boffins drummed into us the words 'efficiency', 'gross margins', 'modern farming', 'intensification', 'total output ethics' and time and motion studies. All led to a farming revolution with a year on year growth of 6% - far exceeding industrial growth of 1-1.5% for the corresponding period. Horses out, tractors in. Hand-milking (6 cows) out, machine milking (200 cows) in. The old binder and thresher out, in with the massive combine harvester. Now the day of the computer. Forty-five years on has resulted in over 60 million tons of food being produced for 58 million people - a little more than needed. Most industries would be rewarded with an OBE for such a track record whereas we seem to be getting the 'old boot'.

Certainly the last ten years have been difficult, especially the last two and a half. There was the Edwina Curry salmonella in eggs food scare, BSE, the strong pound, the Far East economic collapse, the Russian inability to buy surplus grain, butter, cheese and hides have all been well documented as contributory factors working against the farmer. To the British farmer the EU is a bit of an enigma. We seem to have the raw end of the deal - veal and pig crates are banned here yet legal on the continent; without restrictions on production methods. Beef is imported from the USA, Canada and Australia; SMT and GM food from the world market is imported - yet banned here giving imports at least a fifteen percent production advantage. Our Government has failed to claim on our behalf EU compensation - £1 billion had been 'lost' by 1998 and £350M this year must be claimed before the end of April or that too will be lost forever. Not only that, but if we fail to claim this year we forfeit our rights for the next two years. Other EU countries always claim!

The farming industry has suffered price cuts across the board. In my main enterprise, dairying, 7.5 pence cut per litre in two and a half years means a loss in income of £75,000 on my one million litre production. We have had to increase the herd size from 160 to 201 with a projected 228 cows by Summer in order to stand still. We have had to expand at the cost of our neighbours, a painful 'dog eat dog' situation. Many farmers now work 80 hours per week for no profit. 80% of dairy farmers made a £8,000 loss last year. I attended a seminar last month on how to turn an £8,000 loss into a £2,000 profit. BUT how can a family live on £2,000 a year? Morale in the countryside is now at an all time low. Stress, mental breakdown, divorce, suicide are at an all time high. We have seen £5 billion of beef incarcerated because of BSE. Calves which were sold abroad five years ago are now shot before our eyes on the farm. We have a condemned cell through which over 70 calves have passed in the last year. Skilled labour is leaving the industry, highly qualified expertise from subsidiary industry is leaving or being made redundant - the teacher for our students' NVQ has had to give up farming and is now going to New Zealand. Why? Because there are no new students.

Looking at the situation from a biblical perspective we can take several characters as examples.

Adam, the first farmer: After the Fall, Adam was given the responsibility of controlling pest and diseases and working the ground to feed his own and his extended family. The modern day farmer has accomplished this even on a global scale with production meeting world demands.

Noah: He was promised by God seedtime and harvest would not fail. God has kept his promise.

Abraham, the most blessed patriarch: In the Bible he suffered from time to time from famine (Gen 12).

Joseph, the politician: He was given a vision of the seven years of plenty and the seven years of famine and he made provision for them.

Farming has always been a long-term plan (it takes almost three years from conception to get a drop of milk from a calf!) which is something our present day politicians seem to have lost track of, perhaps it is because they are only elected for 4-5 years. The last two and a half years have seen a free-fall in prices in all commodities - unprecedented in modern history. Politicians must seek an equitable future for **all** producers and consumers worldwide. Remember the New Testament advice in 2 Timothy 2:6, 'The hardworking farmer should be the first to receive a share of the crops'.

At General Synod I called for the Church to make Rogation Day, Lammas Day, Harvest Festival and Plough Sunday special days of prayer for the industry; and to use these days as a contact point to come alongside the farming families. I also called for short interregnums in rural areas and for no reduction in clergy numbers whilst the crisis continues. I backed the report regarding early retirement so that the 60+s could retire with dignity - remember redundant miners, steel-workers and those in other industries would receive redundancy pay as well as a pension. I could only retire if I sold up - taking away my sons' livings and grandchildren's inheritance. A government retirement scheme, as on the continent, would free me for Synod duties and rural stress work still allowing my sons to continue in business.

What is God saying to us all in this crisis? Many Christian farmers have asked me what about the blessings and curses of Deuteronomy? Are we being subjected to the latter? v31 says, 'Your ox will be slaughtered before your eyes but you will eat none of it.' Never before in the history of mankind have so many cattle been killed before our eyes at the behest of others and not consumed.

In 2 Chronicles 7:14 we read, 'If my people, who are called by my name, will humble themselves and pray and seek my face and turn from their wicked ways, then will I hear from heaven and will forgive their sins and heal their land'. Here God is calling his people to pray and seek his face. Looking back over the 59 years of my lifetime it is possible to see how far we have strayed as a nation from biblical standards in areas

of morality, in Sunday observance, and in the way we pick and choose which Commandments and precepts to keep. As a nation and Church we are no longer a God-fearing people. The farming industry is on its knees and the Church ought to be on their knees asking for God's mercy and guidance, knowing full well that God will forgive and heal our land. Some say this promise is only applicable to Israel but 2 Chronicles 6:32-33 makes it quite plain that 'the foreigner' who is not of 'God's people', who comes from a far country in His name, and prays, that prayer will be answered.

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