

“AGRICULTURE AND OUR RESPONSIBILITY FOR IT”

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Address by Sir Leslie Fielding, Lay Reader

“We brought nothing into the world, and we can take nothing out of it; but as long as we have food and clothing, let us be content with that”. 1Tim. 6 v7

At this season of the year, Parish Churches throughout the land are celebrating the harvest. They are decorated with fruit and vegetables, to be sold for charity, or given to the needy. We honour the farmer's hard work. All is gathered safely in.

But with the cosiness, and perhaps the complacency, comes also more than a touch of unreality. Out of a UK workforce of 30 million, less than 2 million work on the land. Few of us can drive a tractor; and when did any of us plod behind the plough or wield a scythe in a corn field?

So, how real to *us*, are the adjustments facing British farmers, as they make the costly switch to extensive from intensive agriculture; and confront the problems of the milk quotas ‘Green Pound’, “set-aside”, and the ups and downs of international trade? Farmers in this country can and do go bankrupt. Tragically, the suicide rate among them is well above the national average.

Equally, how real to *us*, is famine in Africa, from what we see on TV? Most of us (except those who remember the war years in Europe) have never been really hungry for long enough not to have forgotten it. We rarely even bake bread – we just lift it pre-sliced and plastic-wrapped, from the shelves of the supermarket.

So this is a good time to be not only *thankful* – but also a little *thoughtful* – about agriculture and our responsibility for it; about the fragility of what we take for granted; and about how we relate to each other and to God.

Let me begin with an affirmation about The Brotherhood – perhaps I should say The “Motherhood” – of mankind.

Until recently, fossil experts thought that the human line might have split up into different races before Homo Sapiens evolved fully. But, by comparing the genes of modern people, one research team has linked everybody to a fully human common ancestor – a woman who lived in Africa maybe as long ago as 300,000 years. Just as Jesus (in St. Luke's Gospel) hails Zacchaeus the tax-gatherer as a son of Abraham, so it appears that all of us, including Abraham, are probably descended from a primitive African girl.

If so, how different from each other is today the fate of her billions of living descendants, and how little they acknowledge their mutual blood relationship. For, while some starve, others despair of their surpluses. Alas, the reconciliation of which St. Paul speaks in his Epistle to Timothy, and the hope of the divine splendour that is to come, sometimes seems easier between us and God, than it is between the creatures of God – ourselves.

Against this background, I want to say something about the problems of agriculture in the Third World, and about agricultural stewardship in the “First World”. Both affect us in Shropshire.

It is a fact of which we can never be too frequently reminded, that hunger is humanity's oldest and most tragic problem. It has been calculated.

- that malnutrition takes the lives of between 13 and 18 million people a year - year in and year out;
- that 35,000 of us a day die of persistence of hunger;

- that three quarters of these deaths are children under the age of five;
- and so that, every minute of every day, 18 children dies needlessly as a consequence of hunger.

Indeed, in many parts of the Third World – where three quarters of God’s people live – there is to be found poverty, poor health and hunger.

I once went on an earthquake relief expedition to people without food or shelter in a remote, snowbound, area of Iran. It was, for a young man, a sobering educational experience. Years later, when I was responsible for part of the EU’s aid programme, I watched Cambodian mothers with their babies queuing up endlessly and patiently in the glaring midday sun in refugee camps, to receive a few tins of fish and a bag of rice – the EU supplied rations for their families, for a week. I remember, also, being surrounded and pawed by the sick and needy on the streets of Madras. Few of us in this Church have not seen harrowing pictures of human suffering in the Sahel or Ethiopia or Bangladesh or wherever.

It is therefore right that we as individuals, and the Churches, and the relief organisations, and the Governments of the affluent West, should act to meet those immediate needs, and to help tackle in the longer term their root causes. It is not enough for us Brits to concentrate on raising welfare at home, and finding new ways of making money out of the global market.

We should not lack faith. Thanks to outside help, and to the new technology of the so-called Green Revolution, some parts of the Third World – China is a notable example – are becoming agriculturally more self-sufficient, and even in some instances acquiring for the first time a limited capacity to export surplus foodstuffs to others, where trade rules allow. Indeed, there is now a consensus among the experts that, for the first time in the history of the world, the end of hunger is achievable, given bold and committed leadership; and provided always that we do not unbalance the ecology of our planet through the destruction of the Ozone layer and the excessive build-up of CO² in the upper atmosphere.

This leads on to my second theme: that of agricultural stewardship within the Western world. Here also, there is no call for complacency and every reason for Christian conscience to be aroused.

The problem in the West is one of uneconomic over-production. We give some of it away to the world’s starving. But supply has out-stripped solvent demand.

It is not a sufficient explanation to blame the poor old US or European agriculturalist – notwithstanding the cash-cropping, the over-employment of chemical fertilisers, and (until recently in the UK) the spread of cultivation to marginal land by sometimes ecologically dubious methods. It has to be recognised that long-standing governmental policies for the financing and protection of agriculture have got into trouble. And that today’s bio-technology, excellent in itself, has proved also potentially a sorcerer’s apprentice, conjuring up larger and larger yields; and frightening us – where GM crops are concerned – by their little-understood potential dangers.

Meanwhile, the budgetary costs of agriculture in the West have soared, at the expense of the consumer, of better social infrastructures, of investment for economic growth, and of enhanced overseas aid programmes. The World Bank has just estimated that the US and the EU are together spending £630 million a day in support of their farmers – which is six times the European and American total overseas aid budgets.

Western Governments have recognised the problem for what it is. I myself helped start the ball rolling at Punta del Este in 1986, as the EU’s international trade negotiator, in launching the Uruguay Round of negotiations, to roll back subsidies, reduce barriers to competition, and give developing countries more of a look in.

The Church can welcome the principle of this. But, on practical aspects, there is no easy Christian answer, no ecclesiastical “staff solution”.....

Thus, corrective action has been slow and none too well co-ordinated, with much trading of threats and insults. At Cancun in Mexico, last Sunday, the High Level Meeting of the World Trade Organisation broke up without any agreement between the 146 government delegations participating, to bitter mutual recrimination. (I can guess, from past experience, the frame of mind of the principal protagonists, not having seen their hotel bedrooms for the last 48 or even 72 hours – more exhausted even than exasperated!).

In the European Union, the call is for the reduction of cultivated areas, the cutback of production quotas, and the conversion of land to forestry, to recreational use and to ecologically beneficial purposes. But what may save money in the end, will cost more money now. And with 13 million workers in the EU on the dole, where can we find alternative employment for some of our 27 million farmers, if they have to come off the land? Joseph Stalin allegedly starved over 14 million people to death in imposing communism on the Russian countryside. We in the West have not sought to solve our problems that way, since the Dark Ages.

Nor are Christians agreed in all respects on the economics of human prosperity and well-being.

Those to the Right of the political spectrum argue that poverty and malnutrition are the by-products of discredited state interventionist policies imposed over decades; that privatisation, reduced government interference and lowered tax rates are amongst the strongest prescriptive drugs available to cure the economic ills of our time. But other Christians, to the Left of the spectrum, argue with equal conviction and plausibility a different approach, qualifying the case for free enterprise, market forces and low taxes, by the claims of enlightened central planning, generous social programmes and beneficent State control. And Left, Right and Centre each argue for different solutions to the problems of Europe's Common Agricultural Policy. (I even have one, myself – not that anyone will listen, now I am no longer in Brussels!).

I therefore put to you the following Christian propositions.

First, we should pray regularly for people of goodwill whose job it is, in all parts of the world, from Africa to America, to grapple with poverty, starvation, waste, and misallocation of resources. And the better organisation of living conditions. The Bible, the Tradition and the Church can give guidelines as to *what* basically needs to be done. The secular order has to decide *how* to do it. And individuals will need to be guided by their Christian conscience on matters of detail, illuminated by the Holy Spirit and supported by your prayers for them.

Second, we should pledge money or time, wherever we are able to spare them, to support Our Lord's Church in its mission to this age. A Godless society will not get these things right – as Stalin's Russia did not, and as Mr. Putin's Russia may not. The Brotherhood of Man does not work if you do not also acknowledge the Fatherhood of God. It is no good saluting a common genetic ancestor, if you do not see the ancestry as part of God's creative purpose on earth.

Third, we should be more consciously and outspokenly thankful for what we have – for food and clothes and shelter, and for all the fruits and glories of Creation of which the Psalmists sing. These are God's gifts, of which the Gospel tells us that the Lord knows we stand in need. Let us rejoice in them. Even the pagans know how to express gratitude. How much more so, should the followers of Jesus.

Finally, there is the matter of our ultimate priorities. To be sure, this is our only earthly existence, and we must live it responsibly. The world which God created, matters; and we matter in it. As Christians we are called to be active here and now. For the welfare of our fellow human beings. Faith, hope and charity – and, especially, charity – are supposed to be our watchwords.

But only the Godless cling to the material world – setting their hearts on thing to eat and drink, or the love of money; falling a perpetual prey to temptation, as St. Paul says in his letter to Timothy, and getting trapped in all sorts of foolish and dangerous ambitions.

The Bible tells us not to worry in that kind of way ; but to set our hearts on the Kingdom of God; and to receive what Jesus in St. John's Gospel calls the true bread from heaven. We can take nothing out of this world, except trust in Our Lord Jesus Christ, comparable to that of Zachaeus the

tax-gatherer. If we thank God for what we have today, and we undertake to make better use of His gifts tomorrow, it is because we hope one day to be joined with Him for ever. Then we shall be truly the reunited family, not just of Abraham, nor even of a common, prehistoric African mother, but of the One Who made us. And the final harvest of the Saints will have been gathered in.

Amen.