

Life and faith in rural Britain...

COUNTRYWAY



Let the land produce

We are intrinsically linked with the soil, certainly from a biblical perspective. In Genesis, God reminds us that we were made from the soil (Genesis 2:7) and that it will become the source of our food. We are explicitly told to care for it (Genesis 2:15) and in doing so live out God's original call to us as human beings.

This is not a new way of looking at these verses, but it is one worth revisiting in light of John Medley's article and his exploration of our literal care for the soil. As he points out, the soil is alive with activity and the plants it sustains are the primary source for nearly all our food – whether directly or through the digestive systems of animals.

Our care for the soil is vital for our own care. This is explicitly highlighted in the recent IPCC report on land use and something I see regularly brought to the fore with articles I read in the Farmers Weekly, where how we cultivate the soil is hotly debated. A common theme running through all these reports and articles is that our relationship with the soil is complex, with all that this implies. There is no simple one-size-fits-all response.

It reminds me of the concepts of 'space' and 'place' explored by Walter Bruggemann in his book *The Land*. For Bruggemann, space means somewhere that we are free to do as we wish, a neutral void; in contrast, place is somewhere with which we have history, which provides continuity and identity across generations. We have a history with the soil we farm for our food, and how we learn from that will be vital for our future.

But what about meat and our relationship with animals? In 1 Corinthians, Paul discusses the topic of meat which has been sacrificed to idols then eaten subsequently at a meal (1 Corinthians 8). Paul asks whether it is sinful to eat such meat. He argues that it is when it causes you, or those around you, to fall prey to those other idols: it is not the eating of the meat that is wrong but the idol it was sacrificed to.

While he is addressing a different audience, Paul's comments do seem to have a resonance for us today as we consider the ethics of eating meat, particularly when we become aware that animals are often raised poorly, and our planet's resources are depleted to raise them. What idols are these animals being sacrificed to? Is it money in the form of cheap food and higher profits?

There has been a relationship between the land, pasture, animals and people since time immemorial: as draft animals providing power, through grazing converting otherwise indigestible pasture into milk and wool, their manure returning to the soil and feeding it, and at the end of their lives as meat and leather. For much of our history this relationship has been marked by a spirit of thanks and respect. Over recent decades there has been a transition to a process where there is no longer this harmonic relationship between soil, pasture,

animal and people: animals are being raised in isolation from the land and have become an end, a profit centre, in themselves.

I agree with John that we should be eating less meat. I would go so far as to suggest that if we are to eat meat, we need to acknowledge our relationship with it and the land from whence it came, that we know its source and are comfortable with the producer's goals. Through your purchasing power you can demonstrate the values you hold to be important; by doing so you will encourage others to embrace values that respect the animals on which we depend and do not reduce our relationship with them to a simple financial transaction.

Revd Dr Mark Betson
National Rural Officer for the Church of England
mark.beston@churchofengland.org
@mark_j_beston

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