

Contextual Practice Workshop
Contemporary Agriculture and the Future of Rural Communities
Commemoration Hall, Slaley : Monday 1st April 2019

In public museums and galleries and in private collections up and down the country, there are scores of paintings bearing some variation on the title 'Figures in a Landscape'. One such work is a small oil sketch in the collection of the Tate Gallery, painted in the early part of the 19th century by George Constable, an artist who shares a surname with, was a friend of, but is otherwise unrelated to the great painter of English landscape, John Constable. George Constable's little painting, the size of a small paperback book, shows two figures in the foreground, walking away from the viewer on a rough, stony track towards a distant cottage, from whose chimney smoke is rising into a cloudy sky, a sky which occupies the upper two thirds of the painting. The lower part of the picture is occupied by a rough moorland landscape.



George Constable (1792-1878), *Landscape with Cottage and Figures*, Oil on board, 133x200mm
Purchased by the Tate Gallery, 1981 (T03236)

When it was suggested that I end this day with a theological reflection, I found this scene repeatedly coming to mind. Almost from the beginning, biblically-speaking, there have been 'figures in a landscape'. In Genesis, the creation narrative presents us with two figures – Adam and Eve – and the landscape is that of the Garden of Eden, where they are given agricultural tasks, to name the animals and to eat from the plants they are tending. Turned out of Paradise, the safe garden, they set out to found the first village, the first rural community.

Immediately upon leaving the garden, humanity is found tilling the land and keeping flocks¹. Human beings live still within God's creation, figures in a landscape created by God, but a landscape upon which human beings have built, and which human beings have shaped, in a variety of ways and for a variety of reasons. Human beings, these figures in the landscape, are made in the image of God, the God of Trinity: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit; the God who is relationship. To be made in the image of God is to be relational; we are called into relationship with one another. As John Donne, 17th century priest and poet, so famously put it:

No man is an *iland*, intire of it selfe; every man is a peece of the *continent*, a part of the *maine*... any mans *death* diminishes *me*, because I am involved in *Mankinde*; And therefore never send to know for whom the *bell* tolls; It tolls for *thee*.²

We do not walk alone through the landscape; we walk with others: others on whom we rely and who rely upon us; and we walk with God.

At the heart of my faith are some words which I heard in our ancient village church every Sunday morning as I was growing up:

Our Lord Jesus Christ said: Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God is one Lord; and thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind, and with all thy strength. This is the first commandment. And the second is like, namely this: Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself. There is none other commandment greater than these. On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets.

Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart... Not just in Genesis, but throughout the books of the Old and the New Testament, God is the only source of the universe and all it contains. Every day, during these first weeks of Lent, we have read the Song of Manasseh as the canticle at Morning Prayer, which begins:

Lord almighty and God of our ancestors,
you who made heaven and earth in all their glory.

And, as we say in the Collect for the First Sunday of Lent, 'you hate nothing that you have made'. Creation exists before the face of God, who knows creation and who loves all of creation. To appreciate the beauty of creation, be it a distant view of mountains or the wing of butterfly, is to appreciate something of the beauty of God.

Humankind is part of creation, but human beings, these figures who were turned out of Paradise have difficulty understanding their place in creation. Our view of creation, and of humankind's place, is often seriously awry. The vastness of creation, shown to us by astronomers as they look further into deep space, should give us pause for thought about our real place, our real significance.

The problem arises with that word 'dominion' in the first chapter of Genesis:

Then God said, 'Let us make humankind in our image, according to our likeness; and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the birds of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the wild animals of the earth, and over every creeping thing that creeps upon the earth.'³

1 Genesis 4.2 (NRSV)

2 *Meditation XVII, Devotion upon Emergent Occasions*

3 Genesis 1.26 (NRSV)

'Dominion' has often been understood to mean 'subjugation' and 'domination'. In fact, as humankind is made in the image of God, so human beings have a special responsibility towards creation. For us, 'dominion' should mean a working out of what it means to be made in the image of God, what it means to have a representative function, representative of God, which is a gift of grace. Destruction of the environment, callousness towards animal and plant life, cruelty towards other human beings is an abuse of the God-given freedom enjoyed by humankind. We have a responsibility towards both the landscape and the figures it contains: the land and our rural communities.

Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself... George Constable's figures seem rather alone in their landscape, their bodies shown mostly against the surrounding countryside, their heads against the overarching sky. Once upon a time, the composition of this painting might have been seen to speak of humankind's place in the world: standing upon the earth, the heads of the two figures are seen against the sky, symbolic of heaven, of God; the clouds understood as humankind's lack of understanding, though a little piece of the pure blue is being revealed in the top left of the picture.

These two figures, alone in the landscape, could be understood to reflect humankind's relationship with God in a post-Enlightenment world. Before the 18th century, an individual's life had been given ultimate meaning through their relationship with God, the creator and redeemer of all. The Enlightenment did much to sever that relationship with a consequent rise in human autonomy. Today, in the West, there is an overwhelming preoccupation with the individual, with self-interest above all else. But this autonomy, this independence, this freedom is an illusion.

Genesis tells us that human beings are defined in relationship: with God who has made us and knows us; with other persons; and with the rest of creation. If we read on into Exodus, we find the Ten Commandments which are not a charter of individual human rights but a code of relational duties and respect that we must offer one another.

In the Old Testament, the concept of community is of great importance, one into which other concepts feed: justice, mercy, compassion, not lying or stealing, the cancellation of debts, paying a fair wage. All these are aimed at healthy community living and at ensuring that there will be no poverty in the land. Some instructions are distinctly biased towards the disadvantaged and against accumulation.

'Ministry', as a recent article in the *Church Times* put it, 'is a term that includes the whole people of God'. And this is at the heart of all that the rural strand of the diocesan strategy, *growing church bringing hope*, is seeking to do: bringing people together – is in events such as this – encouraging new and fruitful working relationships. Collaborative ministry is a gospel imperative.

In the New Testament, the person is defined as a person-in-community: care and love are the hallmarks of living in relationship with others, summed up by Paul in his first letter to the church at Corinth:

For just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ. For in the one Spirit we were all baptized into one body — Jews or Greeks, slaves or free — and we were all made to drink of one Spirit... Indeed, the body does not consist of one member but of many... But as it is, God arranged the members in the body, each one of them, as he chose. If all were a single member, where would the body be? As it is, there are many members, yet one body.⁴

4 From 1 Corinthians 12.12-22

The vision of the rural strand is encapsulated in Paul's words: clergy and laity increasingly working together in teams, leading the ministry and mission of the local church, recognising and valuing one another's gifts; the church and other bodies increasingly working together, recognising and valuing one another's place in the landscape. A person is only fully a person when in proper relationship with Christ and with others, not when we are most separate, but rather when we are most dependant on the community to grow and relate and love. Our uniqueness lies in the relationship each of us has with God, who can search each one of us and know our hearts. Our task is to understand what 'community' might be in our part of the landscape. In rural areas, this was once centred around the land and farming. This has changed, and is changing still. A community is one which shares concerns and patterns of support.

The scene presented in George Constable's little painting would not be so unfamiliar to Jesus. The greater part of his ministry was spent in rural areas, in the villages and settlements where he did most of his teaching, performed most of his miracles, and undertook most of the training of his disciples. Indeed, the public ministry of Jesus began, not in Jerusalem, but on the banks of the river Jordan where he was baptised by John, far from the holy city. And in the few short years of that public ministry, that significant opportunity to touch the world with the good news, he spent the majority of his time bypassing large urban areas and centred instead on the rural areas of Israel. It is not insignificant that the revelation of God's truth, in the person of Jesus Christ – a revelation to the world – was mostly played out in sparsely-populated rural areas.

Jesus was born in a small town, grew up in a remote village far from Jerusalem, spoke with a rural accent, used agricultural illustrations in his teaching, and ministered primarily to people in rural areas. He gathered round him a core group of disciples much like himself, without formal education, unconnected to the religious networks and leaders in Jerusalem. And with this team from rural Israel, the world was changed.

The dominant theme of both Old and New Testament is the drama of salvation: the account of human pride, folly and rebellion redeemed by the loving action of the Creator. In terms of George Constable's picture, God loves these two figures walking on that stony track and he loves the world in which they live. However, it is only in recent decades, in the face of ecological crisis and environmental destruction that 'it has become unreal to speak about salvation as though it were a doctrine solely about human redemption and unrelated to the integrity of the whole of the natural order'. Thirty years ago, the Church of England's report, *Faith in the Countryside*, noted the need for 'a reconsideration and possibly a re-interpretation of a Christian theology both of creation and human personhood'.⁵ The need remains, and will always remain, for a theology of both figures and landscape that acknowledges the true place of both in God's creation.

⁵ *Faith in the Countryside: A Report presented to the Archbishops of Canterbury and York*, Worthing: Churchman Publishing Ltd 1990, p.9