



# Down to Earth

A newsletter  
for rural  
communities



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 THE CHURCH  
OF ENGLAND  
DIOCESE OF SALISBURY

## Richard's Scribblings!

As I travel around talking to people, on farms, in villages and at auction marts (when I am allowed to!), I hear so many of the same concerns and worries, besides that of a hideous disease named COVID - TB, financial worries, Brexit, employment concerns, prices for produce and the RPA, worries about small rural businesses which might not be here this time next year, succession planning and people grieving for relatives or friends who have died from the virus. And so the list goes on and on. People often ask "Where is God in all this chaos and mess?". Well, may I ask you to pray the blessing at the end of Louise's reflection, particularly the last three lines. They are:

*"In this time of uncertainty, confusion, pain and waiting,  
may you experience the hope that comes from knowing that  
Jesus Christ is the same yesterday, today and forever. Amen"*

Wonderful and beautiful words, and we must rely on their strength! No matter how black life has become, we have hope. As it says in Hebrews 13: 5-6 (part), "...be content with what you have, because God has said, 'Never will I leave you, never will I forsake you'." On that assurance, we must rely!! In this edition, we have articles on internet coverage, being healthy in rural areas, the Agricultural Transition Plan, and a wonderful poem in "And finally"...

As we draw towards the end of another year, and one that some folk may not wish to repeat, may I, on behalf of the rural team, wish you all a Very Happy Christmas and a Blessed New Year. Let us again hear the angels heralding a new birth – a birth that changed the world!

**Richard**

**The Reverend Richard Kirlew**  
email: [rural.chaplaincy@btinternet.com](mailto:rural.chaplaincy@btinternet.com)

**Rural Officer for Dorset - Agricultural & Rural Chaplain**  
tel: 01963 23570 mobile: 07966 754110

## Thoughts and Reflection...

*Louise Davis, who is the Training Manager at the Arthur Rank Centre, offers this short reflection/experience about Advent.*

**Cold hands, warm hearts!** Alongside my role at the Arthur Rank Centre, I have a volunteering role which involves quite a lot of standing around outside, even – particularly! – in the winter! On Sunday, as temperatures in the Midlands stayed resolutely in the low single figures, I donned several layers of clothing and headed out for the kind of quality 'people time' that's literally kept me sane for the past few months. And yes, I hold my hands up and confess to being a soft Southerner!! This role – which I've been in for almost eighteen months – has been a brilliant opportunity for me to spend time with people who are, in many cases, very different from me, with very different life experiences, interests and perspectives. This year I challenged myself to try and find ways of enabling the group to engage with Advent, not just through the story of Christmas but by encouraging them to embrace something of the kingdom values of justice, compassion and love that we meet in the person of Jesus. My challenge to myself became a challenge to them: to buy some Christmas 'treat' groceries for a homeless project here in Leicester. Today I met up with a few of the group and was presented with several bags of shopping. My hands are cold; my heart is warm!

Many of us have seen God at work in unexpected places this year, and our hearts have been warmed by the experience. But the struggles of this year have been real, and just as many of us will have suffered, and continue to suffer, the cold hands – literal and metaphorical – of sacrificial service in our church and communities, even our families. For some of us, the promise of Advent seems far off and intangible. Whatever your experience of life at this time, we pray you will know the justice, compassion and love that we meet in the person of Jesus at Christmas.



### **A Blessing for Advent**

*May you hear the gentle voice of the One who speaks to you saying  
"well done, [your name!], good and faithful servant".*

*May you feel the loving arms of the One who assures you that  
"I am with you always, to the end of the age."*

*May you see the light that shines in the darkness,  
that the darkness cannot overcome.*

*In this time of uncertainty, confusion, pain and waiting,  
may you experience the hope that comes from knowing that  
Jesus Christ is the same yesterday, today and forever. Amen.*



## The Digital Wastelands?

Danny Kruger, MP for Devizes, stressed the need for better internet coverage across rural areas in the recent Parliamentary Digital Infrastructure, Connectivity and Accessibility debate on how best to address areas of poor connection. He said: "More is needed for rural areas. The internet is actually the saviour of the countryside. If we want to get our towns and villages to prosper, then that means more remote working, more start ups and more young people staying in the countryside. We know that 30% of rural firms experience unreliable broadband, which is twice the rate of firms in urban areas. Levelling up really means equalising the quality of broadband between urban and rural areas, and it's not just the deserts of Dorset we need to worry about, but also the wastelands of

Wiltshire." Mr. Kruger also highlighted the work of the Good Things Foundation, a charity which supports socially excluded people to improve their lives through digital means. Their plans include digital "hubs" within libraries.

The debate came after Andrew Glover, Chairman of the Internet Services Providers' Association, described the Government's scaled-back plans for faster broadband speeds as "a blow to rural communities." His comments followed Chancellor Rishi Sunak's new Spending Review, which revealed that plans for full-fibre and gigabit-capable broadband for every home and business across the UK by 2025 - a Conservative manifesto pledge in 2019 - had been altered. The target is now for "a minimum of 85% gigabit capable coverage by 2025". According to the National Infrastructure Strategy publication, the Government will "seek to accelerate rollout further to get as close to 100% as possible".

Mr. Glover said: "Instead of aiming for nationwide coverage, Government now expects coverage of 85%, and with only a quarter of the previously promised funding allocated until 2025. As our experiences over 2020 have proved, our broadband infrastructure is fundamental to propping up the UK's economy in periods of lockdown. We urge the Government to ensure that this policy pivot does not lead to longer-term digital exclusion of those in harder to reach areas."

*(I have to say that the above could be written of the majority of our rural areas, let alone Wiltshire. How about Dorset!! - Ed.)*

## An Expanding Waistline - are we piling on the pounds?

Since the pandemic began, clinical studies have reported that many of the sickest COVID-19 patients have been people with obesity. An analysis of 75 studies (some 399,000 patients) published in Obesity Reviews found obese people who contracted COVID-19 were 113% more likely than people of healthy weight to end up in hospital, 74% more likely to be admitted to an intensive care unit, and 48% more likely to die. These figures come against a backdrop of a growing recognition of the problems associated with weight gain dating back to the 1980s. How many of us are overweight or living with obesity, and what can we do about it in rural areas?

Jessica Sellick, Rural Words <http://ofi.direct/1.20120800>



## The Agricultural Transition Plan

On 30 November DEFRA set out its long-awaited Agricultural Transition Plan. Although it is not as detailed as previously suggested, it details the Government's plans for the scaling back of the Basic Payment Scheme and the ramping up of new schemes for productivity and the proposed Environmental Land Management Scheme.

Further information about the BPS lump-sum scheme and delinking also formed part of the announcement. It can be found on <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/agricultural-transition-plan-2021-to-2024>

## And finally...

### 'Sometimes' by Sheenah Pugh

Sometimes things *don't* go, after all, from bad to worse.  
 Some years, muscadel faces down frost; green thrives; the crops don't fail,  
 sometimes a man aims high, and all goes well.  
 A people sometimes will step back from war;  
 elect an honest man; decide they care enough,  
 that they can't leave some stranger poor.  
 Some men become what they were born for.  
 Sometimes our best efforts do not go amiss;  
 sometimes we do as we meant to.  
 The sun will sometimes melt a field of sorrow  
 that seemed hard frozen: may it happen to each one of you!



*A Very Happy Christmas and Blessed New Year to  
 all our readers!*

*May you be truly Blessed in all you do!*