

**WESTMINSTER ABBEY SERMON FOR THE 150<sup>th</sup>  
ANNIVERSARY SERVICE FOR THE R.A.B.I. -  
24<sup>th</sup> February 2010**

Old Testament Reading – Psalm 104 verses 1, 5, 10-19, and 23-24  
(BCP)

New Testament Reading – II Corinthians 9.6-15 (NRSV)

1860: Queen Victoria is approaching her Silver Jubilee; Abraham Lincoln is elected President of the United States; just a few months earlier, in November 1859, Charles Darwin has published his momentous book *On The Origin of Species*; in literature and music, Anton Chekhov and Gustav Mahler are born; the internal combustion engine is invented; the mainline railway system in Britain is substantially complete, transforming travel and the possibility of moving goods, including farm produce, around the country quickly and cheaply.

This was the world into which the Royal Agricultural Benevolent Institution was born. It was an uncertain time for farming: the repeal of the Corn Laws in 1846 had been fiercely resisted by landed interests, for fear that the price of corn would fall dramatically, but in fact those fears were, for the moment at least,

misplaced. A rapidly growing urban population and the buoyancy of mid-Victorian prosperity ensured that prices remained relatively high, and with them farming profits.

1860 marked the high point of Victorian high farming, a time of great success, when more people were employed on the land than ever before – or since; when prices were high, thanks to high input/high output methods, rapid mechanisation, new fertilisers, better crop rotation and vastly improved animal breeding. People came from all over the world to marvel at the success of Victorian high farming.

So when John Joseph Mechi, an Essex farmer, canvassed support in 1859 for a fund to help farmers who did meet with sudden or unexpected misfortune – and it could happen then, as now, through illness or accident or an outbreak of animal disease, or a spectacularly bad harvest – he found many willing to contribute, as you can see from the introductory note to the service sheet. Sadly, and ironically, John Mechi himself fell on hard times, and died a bankrupt 20 years later.

It was just as well that the R.A.B.I. did come into existence then, because before long British farming was to be faced with enormous problems, and to enter a period which lasted from the

1870s to 1939 of debilitating depression. Huge imports of grain from the newly exploited lands of North America, and the invention of refrigeration in the 1880s, which made possible the import of cheap meat from Australia and New Zealand, devastated the British farming industry. The Government's commitment to Free Trade, and its concern to keep food prices low to feed the vast urban population, meant that farming suffered a period of severe neglect, and destitute farmers became sadly numerous, far more than the R.A.B.I. could help in those hard years. It was the first onset of what we would now call globalisation.

Our farmers found themselves confronted with a new problem: how to hold their own when they were farming in a fickle climate, on expensively rented land, whose fertility required constant renewal, against produce raised under more genial skies, on cheaply rented land, whose virgin richness needed no fertiliser.

How strange that farming could suffer such neglect; is it not, after all, the most important job in the world? For all life depends on food production, and food security is vital – a truth which is at last beginning to receive the recognition it deserves. There is a Biblical text in the book Ecclesiasticus which sums it up well: “Those who set their heart on ploughing furrows, and are careful

about fodder for the heifers, rely on their hands and are skilful at their work ... without them, no city can be inhabited”. How true, and today, as we celebrate in particular 150 years of the work of the R.A.B.I., we celebrate also the central place of farming and food production in human life and we give thanks to God for his whole complex and wonderful creation: “Oh Lord, how manifold are they works, in wisdom thou has made them all; the earth is full of thy riches” – from today’s first lesson psalm 104, in the glorious language of the Book of Common Prayer.

Farming is an essential job, a highly skilled job, a practical job – but it is also a spiritual job, in which those who undertake it are in daily contact with the soil, with the miraculous power of growth, with the lifecycle of their livestock, with the seasons, with the weather – with creation, in a society in which so many are cut off from these things. Most farmers are people of integrity and dedication, caring deeply for the welfare of their animals, and increasingly aware of the environmental implications of what they need to do to safeguard biodiversity and landscape. Where we live in the Radnorshire Hills, lambing is about to begin, and if you have 800 ewes to lamb in 2 or 3 weeks, it is an unbelievably demanding task – cold, back-breaking exhausting work, yet also immensely rewarding. The sight of the first lambs in the fields never fails to be a source of happiness and delight.

But farming is still tough, and problems abound; there are burdens of bureaucracy; excessive regulation, TB and animal movement restrictions, the disproportionate power of the supermarkets not to mention the rural payments agency and issues of sickness and accidents. The help which the R.A.B.I. can give is urgently needed by many, and those of us who are Trustees and members of the Welfare and Grants Committee regularly see some heart rending cases. We support about 1,500 long-term beneficiaries, older people with little or nothing in the way of savings after a lifetime's work on low wages, who receive a modest top-up to their old age pensions, and help with big items like window repairs, or a new washing machine or fridge, or a riser recliner chair and you will be hearing the testimony of one of our beneficiaries later in this service.

R.A.B.I. welfare officers are amazingly skilled at navigating the complexities of the welfare system, ensuring that people receive all the benefits to which they are entitled, like pension credit or attendance allowance. That may be all that needs to be done for some applicants, but we still give away about £2 million a year in grants of various kinds, rising enormously at times of special crisis, like the terrible Foot and Mouth epidemic of 2001, when we distributed nearly £9 million to 8,000 desperate farming

families, and the 24-hour help line was receiving as many as 300 calls a day.

Working farmers can be helped too, with temporary farm work taken on to tide them over serious illness or a family crisis; or a touch-screen computer for a severely disabled child; or an all-terrain wheelchair for a young man terribly hurt in a farm accident; or, most recently, with our Gateway Scheme grants, which enable a working farmer to acquire a technical qualification, in for example mechanical or electrical work, or as an HGV driver, which will enable him – or her – to do some part-time work to supplement a meagre farm income; and once again you will be shortly hearing a personal story.

All this is done through an immense amount of voluntary work, to back up our excellent professional teams at head office and throughout the country, with the county committees in a key role. Thank you all for coming today, representatives of the vast numbers of friends of RABI of all ages, from the YFCs, whose support we particularly value this year to the retired. The point is that none of what the RABI does could happen without the most generous giving, and that is why our second lesson was so appropriate.

In II Corinthians Paul is urging the Christians at Corinth, mostly gentiles, to give generously to help the Christians in the mother church of Jerusalem, mostly Jewish, who had suffered from famine and were in urgent need of financial support. Paul uses – appropriately for this occasion and this congregation – farming metaphors about sowing and reaping, but – importantly – he bases his call for practical help on clear theological principles. In the previous chapter he has spelt it out: “You know the generous act of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sakes he became poor.”

Paul appeals to the generosity of the incarnation; in sharing our human nature and human existence, Jesus shows the innate generosity of God. So human generosity arises out of what we believe as Christians; how we behave depends on what we believe. If God has done so much for us, we cannot but respond with generosity towards our fellow human beings in need. It is 150 years of that sort of generosity which we celebrate today with humble and thankful hearts.