

The poet John Clare, born and bred at Helpston, a small village in the Soke of Peterborough, in the late eighteenth century was a chronicler both in his poems and prose of rural life at a time of great change. The land was being enclosed and living as a peasant with access to the common land no longer possible. Life for an agricultural labourer was already hard and was about to become much harder. He was born and lived in relative poverty but his genius as a poet had become known to the local gentry and to members of London's fashionable literary society. He found fame and sponsors but it was a two-edged sword. If a member of that society didn't like what he was saying about the rich for example dispossessing the poor, he was told to omit certain passages or change the wording. And he had in some instances to concur – without a certain servility there would be no sponsorship and no way to support his growing family apart from working on the land. He dreamt at times of escaping this life to write poetry only,

*'free from "all labouring strife", "living in a decent house ..." "He asks for a reasonable number of rooms and a cupboard for a library of choice authors, a sizeable well-ordered garden, a good view, unmarried ...a modest, not too ignorant domestic maid, and sufficient income to spare a crust for a passing beggar "'.*

He was indeed offered just such an opportunity – though it was too late for the unmarried bit- on a couple of occasions – but as his biographer Jonathan Bates astutely notes if his wish had been fulfilled his poetry would have lost its power. His prophetic stance depended on this tension between earning his living as a poet and as an agricultural labourer always on the edge of poverty, and sadly, madness too. He has to live on the margins to speak truly. And this is our tension too. For the prophetic voice does not arise from a place of domestic or financial or political security but from a place of suffering, a place of helplessness where God's spirit has a chance to be heard, where its recipients know their need of God. It's an uncomfortable realisation and our preferred mode is one of "them" and "us" – we are God's preferred ones, look, we have the security of a strong church, with magnificent buildings and many people, beautiful liturgy and influence – this is obviously where God is at work. Not so says Jesus, look to the "little ones" and there you will find God.

Or better perhaps "look after the "little ones" wherever they might be and there you will see God at work and better able to access God's word, wherever and whoever you are. For God has no favourites, so there's hope then for us all.

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