Wendell Berry is a farmer in Henry County, Kentucky, - he’s also a novelist, poet, essayist and environmental activist – and he describes himself as “a person who takes the Gospel seriously”

Sometimes it seems there are real tensions between faith and environmentalism. How far should we trust in and act on the science rather than trust in God? Surely God will sort it out? Isn’t catastrophe prophesied in the bible? How can the urgent quest for solutions to environmental degradation, mass migration and yes, pandemics, be admissible if it requires without question or deliberation people of all geographies and all faiths to work together with a shared vision and a mutual hope?

In Cromer on Wednesday there was a climate march through town. It was led by a group called ‘Make the Wave’ – who focus on the outcomes of rising sea levels. One banner showed the rising sea - a child - submerged by the waves, still holding onto its parents’ hand, had a thought bubble pleading - “Do something”. The parent whose head and shoulders were still clear of the water was replying, “I am too busy”. It made me think of this morning’s gospel reading – in the story Jesus tells how all of the invited guests decided on the day of the banquet that they were too busy to attend. It made me wonder what kind of banquet precisely the man intended it to be? Why was the man so determined to fill his house? What exactly was the banquet celebrating?

I know you have answers to these questions, perhaps Berry answers some of them too.

From ‘Native Hill’ written in 1968 - “Sometimes I can no longer think in the house or in the garden or in the cleared fields. They bear too much resemblance to our failed human history – failed, because it has led to this human present that is such bitterness and a trial. And so I go to the woods. As I go in under the trees, dependably, almost at once, and by nothing I do, things fall into place. I enter an order that does not exist outside in the human spaces. I feel my life take its place among the lives - the trees, the annual plants, the animals and birds, the living of all these and the dead – that go and have gone to make the life of the earth. I am less important than I thought, the human race is less important than I thought. I rejoice in that. My mind loses its urgings, senses its nature, and is free. The forest grew here in its own time, and so I will live, suffer and rejoice, and die in my own time. … I wish to be as peaceable as my land, which does no violence, though it has been the scene of violence and has had violence done to it.

The most exemplary nature is that of the topsoil. It is very Christ-like in its passivity and beneficence, and in the penetrating energy that issues out of its peaceableness. It increases by experience, by the passage of seasons over it, growth rising out of it and returning to it, not by ambition or aggressiveness. It is enriched by all things that die and enter into it. It keeps the past, not as history or as memory, but as richness, new possibility. Its fertility is always building up out of death into promise. Death is the bridge or the tunnel by which its past enters its future.

To walk in the woods, mindful of the age of it, and of all that led up to the present life of it, and of all that may follow it, is to feel oneself a flea in the pelt of a great living thing. One has come into the presence of mystery. After all the trouble one has taken to be a modern man, one has come back under the spell of a primitive awe, wordless and humble.

In the centuries before its settlement by white men, among the most characteristic and pleasing features of the floor of this valley - and of the stream banks on its slopes, were the forests and groves of great beech trees - with their silver bark and their light, graceful foliage, turning gold in the fall.

But those forests are all gone. We will never know them as they were. The ‘land’ as we have made it - by the pretence that we can do without it as soon as we have completed its metamorphosis into cash - is no longer here.

Until we understand what the land is, we are at odds with everything we touch. And to come to that understanding it is necessary, even now, to leave the regions of our conquest – the cleared fields, the towns and cities, the highways – and re-enter the woods.

Only in this silence and darkness can we recover the sense of the world’s longevity, of its ability to thrive without us, of our inferiority to it and our dependence on it. Perhaps then, having heard that silence and seen that darkness, we will grow humble before the place and begin to take it in – to learn from it what it is. As its sounds come into our hearing and its lights and colours come into our vision and its odours come into our nostrils, then we come into its presence, … and want to remain. Then our lives will grow out of the ground like the other lives of the place. We will be with them – neither ignorant of them, nor indifferent to them, nor against them – and so at last we will grow to be native-born. That is, we must re-enter the silence and the darkness, and be born again.