

## Readings for LENT Week 3; Land and Vegetation

### **Genesis 1:9-13**

<sup>9</sup>And God said, "Let the water under the sky be gathered to one place, and let dry ground appear." And it was so. <sup>10</sup>God called the dry ground "land," and the gathered waters he called "seas." And God saw that it was good.

<sup>11</sup>Then God said, "Let the land produce vegetation: seed-bearing plants and trees on the land that bear fruit with seed in it, according to their various kinds." And it was so. <sup>12</sup>The land produced vegetation: plants bearing seed according to their kinds and trees bearing fruit with seed in it according to their kinds. And God saw that it was good. <sup>13</sup>And there was evening, and there was morning—the third day.

### **Psalm 1**

<sup>1</sup>Blessed is the one  
    who does not walk in step with the wicked  
or stand in the way that sinners take  
    or sit in the company of mockers,  
<sup>2</sup>*but whose delight is in the law of the Lord,  
    and who meditates on his law day and night.*  
<sup>3</sup>*That person is like a tree planted by streams of water,  
    which yields its fruit in season  
and whose leaf does not wither—  
    whatever they do prospers.*  
<sup>4</sup>Not so the wicked!  
    They are like chaff  
    that the wind blows away.  
<sup>5</sup>Therefore the wicked will not stand in the judgment,  
    nor sinners in the assembly of the righteous.  
<sup>6</sup>For the Lord watches over the way of the righteous,  
    but the way of the wicked leads to destruction.

### **Leviticus 25:1-7 (NIV) The Sabbath Year**

**25** The Lord said to Moses at Mount Sinai, <sup>2</sup>"Speak to the Israelites and say to them: 'When you enter the land I am going to give you, the land itself must observe a sabbath to the Lord. <sup>3</sup>For six years sow your fields, and for six years prune your vineyards and gather their crops. <sup>4</sup>But in the seventh year the land is to have a year of sabbath rest, a sabbath to the Lord. Do not sow your fields or prune your vineyards. <sup>5</sup>Do not reap what grows of itself or harvest the grapes of your untended vines. The land is to have a year of rest. <sup>6</sup>Whatever the land yields during the sabbath year will be food for you—for yourself, your male and female servants, and the hired worker and temporary resident who live among you, <sup>7</sup>as well as for your livestock and the wild animals in your land. Whatever the land produces may be eaten.

### LENT Reflection: Week 3: Land and Trees

Trees and plants are woven into the biblical story – from the story of the Fall where Adam and Eve ate from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, to the book of revelation and the tree of life on the banks of the river which flows through the city:

‘On each side of the river stood the tree of life bearing twelve crops of fruit, yielding its fruit every month. And the leaves of the tree are for the healing of the nations.’

At the centre of our faith – is a dead tree – the wood of the cross onto which the hands of the Carpenter, who had worked so many years with wood; skilfully moving with the grain; were callously hammered. The tree of death – which opened the gates to the tree of life for us.

Trees, plants and land are not just an inert backdrop for the biblical story; they speak of God through parables, similes and metaphors. Jesus compared the Kingdom to a mustard seed... look at the church today and see how apt that is.

Psalm 1 compares the righteous man to a tree growing by the water and this is probably the basis for Jeremiah’s reflection in Chapter 17:

“But blessed is the man who trusts in the Lord,

Whose confidence is in him.

He will be like a tree planted by the water

That sends out its roots by the stream.

It does not fear when heat comes;

Its leaves are always green.

It has no worries in a year of drought

And never fails to bear fruit.” (vv.7-8)

When it feels impossible to be that tree, Jesus reminds us that we can only do it in and through him; (John 15) he is the Vine and we are the branches; if we remain in him we will bear much fruit..... but sometimes we are pruned in order that we become more fruitful. Perhaps the Corona virus and our voluntary exile could be just such a pruning..... there is food for thought.

It seems therefore, that Biblical teaching is rooted in Creation; you cannot disentangle it so that we have the holy, other-worldly, sacred life and the earthy, physical or secular life. This heresy has beset the church from its very beginnings. It is called dualism and is rooted in Greek platonic thought, very strong in first century Mediterranean world and entirely different from the Jewish understanding that the land and creation was good and infused with God. Go back to day 3 of Creation; after God separated the waters and brought forth dry ground which he called ‘land’... he saw that it was GOOD. The same day he called forth the vegetation and again it was GOOD. The land and plants have value in their own right, long before man came along to use them and value them as a resource for himself. They are not purely utilitarian... in their beauty and variety; in their very nature they speak of, they give glory to God the Creator. Thus, Jesus could muse:

“LOOK at the flowers of the field, they do not labour or spin, yet not even Solomon in all his splendour was clothed like one of these; if that is how GOD clothes the flowers of the field which are here today and flung into the fire tomorrow... will he not much more clothe you... O ye of little faith.” (Matt. 6:29-30).

Jesus clearly spent time appreciating Creation... seeing that it was GOOD... and so should we. At this time of insecurity and anxiety moments spent contemplating the intricate beauty of Spring growth; the unfolding of a leaf bud or the delicacy of blossom – this can be precious and healing – speaking hope and conveying eternity:

‘To see the world in a Grain of Sand  
And Heaven in a Wild Flower,  
Hold Infinity in the palm of your hand  
And Eternity in an hour.’

William Wordsworth

It is as we appreciate the beauty of Creation and our ties to the earth of which we are a fragile part, that we begin to act with greater reverence for Creation and feel God’s grieving heart over human exploitation, human greed... which takes from the land constantly without tending and nurturing as Adam was asked to do: “The Lord God took the man and put him in the garden to work it and take care of it.” (Genesis 2:15)

Our reading from Leviticus gave God’s original instruction to his people as they entered the Promised land and exchanged a nomadic life as herdsmen for that of settled farmers tending fields, vineyards and olive groves. Every seventh year they were to give the land a Sabbath rest – let nature have her way and TRUST that God would provide enough for men and animals. This is fascinating in the context of some current experiments in rewilding some of our Countryside (book.....

On a planetary scale we have depleted our forests, destroying the lungs of the earth – the rainforests of Congo, Amazon and the Far East, so that they can no longer fix the carbon dioxide we are producing in ever-increasing quantities. Beyond that we are losing the beauty and complexity of probably the most complex ecosystem on our planet and the knowledge of tribal people who lived in harmony with it, reverencing land and plants and knowing their healing properties. They had no land rights in the face of huge corporations buying up land... this is reminiscent of the enclosures act in England or the Clearances in Scotland and I am struck by the relevance of another few verses from Leviticus 25:

“The land must not be sold permanently, because the land is mine and you are but aliens and my tenants. Throughout the country that you hold as a possession, you must provide for the redemption of the land.”

The land is mine and you are but aliens and my tenants..... this fragile earth is God’s and we are but tenants trusted to take care of it... our small part of it.... To live in harmony with Creation and neighbour. We have failed in our duty, but let us repent and ask God; the God of hope and new beginnings; witnessed by each Springtime and witnessed profoundly by the resurrection; let us ask

this God to work with us and others to restore our planet... to plant trees, reduce our consumption and tread more lightly on the earth for the sake of those who follow us.