

“THE EARTH IS THE LORD’S”

Psalm 24

We are surrounded today by reminders that God provides for us. The tins of food that we have here at the front are visible pointers to the fact that we depend very much on agriculture for our daily existence - in the past that link with our own farming industry has been very close and obvious, but today it is increasingly the agriculture - or agribusiness - of overseas nations. The flowers remind us of the beauty with which God surrounds us. And then there are these other gifts that we have brought, without which our lives would be much the poorer. We have our clothing, the wood and bricks of this building, the transport that brought us here this morning - cars, bike, shoes, buggy and so on. God provides for us out of the richness of his creation and, although I'm sure we thank God for such things day by day, we have that special opportunity to remember today that God gives us everything we need.

And all that he provides for us comes from the bounty of his earth, this creation of which we are a part and over which we have been entrusted with stewardship. But at the very foundation of all that we are doing today is that little phrase which begins *Psalm 24*, the words with which we began our worship this morning: “*The earth is the LORD’s, and everything in it.*” We can never escape the fact that the earth is the Lord’s, whatever our theological viewpoint, whatever our political stance, however we might respond to the discoveries of science and philosophy - “*The earth is the LORD’s.*” So, just for a few moments this morning, we’re going to reflect on what that can mean for us - God made it, God gave it and God saves it. But we can have a part to play too.

1. GOD MADE IT

The simple and basic truth is that God is the Creator. In John’s gospel we read, “*Through him all things were made: without him nothing was made that has been made*” (*John 1:3*). As science continues to give us clues as to the very beginning of creation, so there seems to be a growing suspicion that our universe was created from nothing at all (at least in the sense in which we understand it) and, whatever our views on creation and evolution, however obscurantist we might be about our own pet theories, there is no denying that what we are part of is the creation of an all-powerful and all-knowing God.

God made the earth; God made all the resources; God made our environment; God made us. The Bible begins with that bald statement of fact: “*In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth.*” And he continues that act of creation in his sustaining work. Year by year, season by season we reap the harvest of his continuing creativity. What we see before us today is evidence of his sustaining power.

And what God creates is good. The little phrase that runs like a refrain through the poetic story of creation in *Genesis 1* is “*And God saw that it was good.*” We are talking about a benevolent God who has put his energies into the creation of a basically good universe. For that reason we can say that “*The earth is the LORD’s.*”

2. GOD GAVE IT

This creating God made men and women in his own image and gave them the specific task of participating in his creative work. In *Psalm 115:16* we read, “*The earth he has given to humankind.*” The first command that we come across in the Bible is the one in *Genesis 1:28* and it includes the idea which is translated in different versions by words like “*dominion*”, “*rule*”, “*subdue*”. It is clear, whatever word you choose, that authority and power were given. The task of naming the animals, for

example, is an indication of humanity's unique role and place in God's creation. Humanity was given power over and within creation - and such power could not have been given by God if it was not his to give in the first place.

But God gave us the earth and the power and responsibility for its stewardship in the context of being made in his image - the image of the Servant King. As David Atkinson writes in his book on *Genesis*: "*People were to be facilitating servants, not exploitative lords.*" That idea is made more explicit in *Genesis 2:15*, where the phrase used is "*to work it and take care of it.*" The Bible is quite clear that God did not give the earth to human beings to use simply for their own ends: rather it was placed in our hands in trust, with the command that we should be responsible stewards.

As we all know, though, sin came into that situation and as a result responsible stewardship turned to selfish exploitation. The very first sinful act involved taking part of God's resources for selfish reasons - and that has been the pattern ever since. Were that not the case we would not be collecting gifts today to send to people in other parts of our world who are deprived and destitute. We see the results of that selfishness, that exploitation in relationships, as men and women seek only self-fulfilment. We see it in our trading patterns, which make the poor even poorer and the rich richer, both within our society and, perhaps more appallingly, in comparison with other parts of the world. So that we can have cheap coffee, tea, textiles, fruits and so on, others are exploited and disenfranchised. We see it in the wanton and destructive waste of the earth's resources so that our selfish desires and convenient lifestyle can continue - acid rain from industrial complexes: deforestation; toxic waste disposal so that our costs can be kept down; depletion of non-renewable energy resources so that we can have the convenience of driving round the corner to the shop, the few hundred yards to school; the destruction of the countryside for roads so that no-one has to come up with a coherent public transport policy; short-term plundering for the benefit of the so-called "share-owning democracy".

You and I benefit - and we have got used to it. Even in my relatively short lifetime, the standard of living of most people in this country has improved beyond measure - but at what cost to the earth that God has given us? At what cost to those who are at the bottom of the heap? At what cost to our children and grandchildren? "*The earth is the LORD's*", but rather than receive it gratefully as a gift, we have tried to wrench it from his hands and make it unrecognisable as his, by stamping it indelibly with our own destructive mark.

3. GOD SAVES IT

Of course, there are growing numbers of people who are trying to make a difference in the way we treat this earth - and the *Earth Summit* in South Africa recently was one example of that (although the whole thing seems to have been hi-jacked by the very people who have caused the problem in the first place!). The apostle Paul, though, makes it clear that God does want creation to be saved from this misuse. In *Romans 8:21* he writes, "*The creation itself will be liberated from its bondage to decay and brought into the glorious freedom of the people of God.*"

Just as the whole creation was affected by sin in the first place, so it shares in God's work of redemption through Christ's blood which was shed on the cross. Paul (again) makes that clear in *Colossians 1:19,20*. So when we are touched by God's Holy Spirit, when we are "saved" ourselves, it's not just for our own selfish enjoyment - it's so that we can become part of God's saving plan for his whole creation, so that we can live as he intended, taking seriously the commission he gave humanity at the very outset. *Ephesians 2:10* makes that clear. We should once again begin to "take care" of God's world as we begin to share God's concerns and reflect something of his nature. Our role is to share what God has given us - to bring a harvest of hope to a shattered world, a harvest of peace to a shattered humanity.

4. THE TASK IS OURS

That's easily **said**, especially on festival Sundays, when people expect to hear something like that. It's easily **said** when we have channelled into our living rooms pictures of devastation and despair. The big question is, "What exactly can I **do**?" How do we start to get real about "*the good works which God has prepared in advance for us to do*"?

Well, we can all share what we have - and this collection of gifts this morning is a part of that. But it shouldn't be an annual thing, a yearly salving of the conscience, so that we can spend the rest of the year indulging ourselves. We all have something to give, although some of us here this morning may not be in such an economically commanding position as others. We can all help in our own community. We may have time, resources, energy, money that we can use to help those in other less advantaged parts of the world. All of us have a surplus in some area that we can use for the benefit of others.

Part of that could be channelled through an aid agency - *Christian Aid, Tearfund, BMS, CWM*. Use a collecting box or give regularly through a direct debit. Pray for and support individual workers with letters, read the information that appears in *Vision* and on the church notice boards and act on it. Think carefully about your trading patterns, what you buy and where.

And we can all contribute to the improvement of the environment in our own locality - not least by taking advantage of the much-maligned local council recycling scheme. And when you buy new clothes before the old ones have worn out, take the old ones to the charity shop (*Oxfam* or *Save the Children*). If we are to make a difference in this world, we need to be thinking about it 365 days of the year, not only on Harvest Festival Sunday.

"*The earth is the LORD's.*" He **made** it, so let us thank him. He **gave** it, so let us receive it gratefully and use its resources wisely. He **saves** it, so let us join with him repairing some of the damage we and our forbears have done to it. **The task is ours**, so we have no alternative but to follow the command of God and participate.