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Let the land produce vegetation (Genesis 1:9–13)

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

¹¹Then 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. ¹²The 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. ¹³And there was evening, and there was morning—the third day.

The highlands of Cusco, Peru are one of the regions of the planet that has been severely affected by climate change.¹ Talk to any Quechua farmer and they will tell you how things have altered in recent decades: the rains are no longer reliable; there are unusual droughts called *veranillos* during the growing season; changes in temperature mean crops have to be grown at an increasing altitude, and there are more unpredictable events, such as hailstorms, that destroy crops.

'Before, we knew when rains were to start and to end during the year. This helped us in our farming. Now that's no longer so. Crops don't produce well. The climate has changed,' says one Cusco rural farmer. Victor, another farmer, puts it this way: 'These days, seeds don't grow as they did before; the day isn't long enough to finish our work. And then . . . everything is expensive.'

Trees have a vital, multi-faceted role in countering climate change and mitigating its effects. They move carbon dioxide from

the atmosphere, hold back storms and flooding, and help protect and restore moisture and fertility to soils, improving agricultural conditions. They also provide vital habitats for other species and serve as barriers to protect high Andean crops, as well as livestock, from potentially harmful frosts, hail and strong winds. Yet, many of Peru's mountains have long been denuded of native trees as Quechua communities have used the wood for construction and cooking.

A Colombian friend called Juliana has lived in Cusco for many years. She is absolutely dedicated to helping churches understand the biblical call to appreciate and care for God's diverse creation. As well as teaching, she also looks to get churches, and especially Christian young people, involved in practical environmental initiatives that can enable them grow in understanding and commitment and be a witness in their local communities. Her work is being supported by a Baptist church in Guildford in the south of England.

One of those initiatives took place high in the Sacred Valley, and Juliana described it to me like this: 'Just imagine . . . 350 people from three rural, highland Quechua communities, dressed in bright red traditional clothing and joined by a number of volunteers, each carrying between fifty and one hundred *queuña* saplings to plant, marching in a line up the mountain. We climb and climb . . . and then together, two by two, carry out this massive tree-planting task. This initiative, called *Queuña Raymi* (literally, *Queuña Festival*) is a true celebration.'

The day led to 32,000 native *queuña* trees being planted in the Rumira Sondormayo community, at 13,800 feet above sea level, and it is part of a project to form a forest of a million trees that will cover the bare mountains and replenish the watersheds below.

Juliana went on to tell me, 'Many of the Quechua families involved are Christians. They were so surprised and appreciative that Christians are supporting them in this initiative. Besides reducing the carbon footprint and generating oxygen, they have also increased local water reserves, while other surrounding regions are experiencing increased water shortages.'

Another initiative saw Juliana working with a church in Cusco that had a vision for a prayer mountain. Literally: it had bought a mountain

on the outskirts of the city (in earlier years when land was cheap) to turn it into a 'mountain of prayer for the people of Cusco'. But the leader, Pastor Americo, wanted to combine prayer with action. He restoration of the land and so, with Juliana's help, 40 volunteers from different denominations in the city joined forces to plant 1,000 trees.

Juliana tells me that, 'in this way, the church has given a vibrant Christian testimony in their community and, though thousands of miles away, in the UK, another church showed its concern for the world. A sense of responsibility for how climate breakdown is affecting these communities, by sponsoring these initiatives.'²²

Land and seasons

As we continue following the story of creation in Genesis 1 through this Lenten time, we see a beautiful movement taking place. We started with the emptiness and formlessness of watery chaos, and as the Spirit of God moved over it, so God spoke and light was created, preparing the conditions for life and for creation to be seen. Then order was brought to the waters as they were separated into the water above the atmosphere and the water on the earth. Now we see the waters on the earth being gathered together and drawn back like a curtain so that dry ground might appear. As that happens, so the land and the seas are brought into being. Can you envisage this in your mind?

In Chapter Five we will consider the creation as in more detail; in this chapter our focus will be on land and trees, looking both at their roles in the great story of salvation in the Bible and then at how they feature in our contemporary context. We live in a beautiful world, with many of us surrounded by green – I see green when I look to the left out of my back door, or to the right out of my kitchen window at the front. My hope is that we can be inspired to a new look at the land and what grows on it and, as we move this Lent towards the death and resurrection of the Lord of all creation, to see what place they hold in our Christian faith.

On this third day in Genesis 3.9–13, we continue with the creation of the spaces and the environments which he created beings of Days Four to Six will then inhabit. Having fashioned the seas and the land,

God pronounces that the land should produce plants and trees. It is beautiful language: ‘Let the earth grow green [with] grass, plant yielding seed, fruit tree bearing fruit, according to its kind [and] which has seed in it on the earth.’³ Life thus emerges in order and symmetry, like a flower unfolding, opening up and revealing intricacy and loveliness.

In these verses, fertility is blessed and made a part of God’s world. As we will see later in this book, God’s creation is abundant – this is no miserly God being described here! This is a God who loves to bless; a God who delights in growth and richness, who wants his creatures to live in fullness of life. I have learnt that one of the dilemmas of growing my own vegetables from seed is that they often produce far more than I need. The tomato seeds give me a trayful of seedlings when I only want a handful for myself, so I enjoy giving most of them away, and the beetroot or salad seeds I sow come up thickly, so rather than let them grow to maturity, most of them go into a salad or stir-fry as I thin them out. Of course, there are reasons why plants produce so many seeds, and in the wild most of what is produced will meet too many hazards for all to grow. Yet, these verses speak of a fecundity that lies at the heart of a God who is three-persons-in-one, and who wants always to be giving to the other in generosity and overflowing love.

And God saw that it was good

In our Day Three verses we see the second and third occurrences of the statement that ‘God saw that it was good’. This phrase is used seven times in Genesis 1, including v. 31 where God declares that all he has made is ‘very good’, which reflects the understanding of completeness that the number seven holds within Judaism.

The importance of this pronouncement of the individual aspects of creation as being good should not be underestimated. It has not always been understood in the Church. In fact, the American nineteenth-century preacher, D. L. Moody, said famously about his calling, ‘I look upon this world as a wrecked vessel. God has given me a lifeboat and said to me, “Moody, save all you can.”’ His view has been very influential

within Christianity, contributing to an understanding of the Christian faith that says the created order is doomed to destruction and our mission is to save souls onto the lifeboat of the Church and whisk them off to salvation in heaven. I have the privilege of teaching on the Bible and environmental care in many different contexts, involving church leaders from around the world, and I often meet people who tell me that the Church’s job is to ‘preach the gospel’ and plant churches, and anything else is a distraction. I encounter these attitudes online too, as in the tweet I received from someone telling me, ‘With the Church in the state of collapse that it is, you should be planting churches not trees!’

In the next chapter we will look more closely at different Christian views on the future: what will happen to the world (indeed to the whole universe⁴) and whether our final resting place will include the earth. The key point here is that the logical understanding we see in Moody’s deeply-held belief – an understanding of the Church as exclusively ‘preaching the gospel’ and planting churches – is rooted in a relative view of the world. In previous chapters we explored how the Genesis text depicts the world as coming into being, not through the actions of squabbling gods, but due to the one true God deliberately choosing life. Reflecting what we saw in Chapter Two, former Archbishop of Canterbury Rowan Williams draws on the Russian Orthodox theologian Father Sergei Bulgakov, and on Jewish mystic in the late Middle Ages, in talking of creation as having come from the loving God making space for it through his creative and generous heart. God is creator, not only at the moment when the act of creation occurs, but in his very nature. And so the eternal nature of God becomes visible in his creation: ‘Creation translates into time and limit and history the eternal fact of God.’⁵

How then can something that God has declared good; that comes from the overflow of his love; that is the ‘translation’ of who God is, and that is continually sustained by his Spirit, be described as a sinking vessel?

British New Testament scholar, Richard Bauckham, points out that the declaration ‘it was good’ at the end of each day in Genesis 1 (as

opposed to only at the very end when all was completed) indicates that 'each part of creation has its own value that does not depend on its value for other parts. The environments . . . are not valued only because they serve as environments for their inhabitants'. Whilst the provision of food and habitat is of course a key part of what is being described in Genesis 1, yet 'God appreciates the trees and plants also for their own sake'.⁶ What a beautifully simple yet profound statement!

The astrophysicist and theologian, Professor David Wilkinson says, 'matter matters to God'. It is a wonderful phrase and one that destroys a dualism that has its roots in pagan Greek Platonic thinking, but has become a prevalent part of Christian theology. This dualism separates out body and spirit, earth and heaven, natural and spiritual. It exalts the latter and denigrates the former, so that nature/creation is held to be inferior to the 'supernatural' realm.⁷ We see this dualism at play in many aspects of the church. We encounter it when we describe church leaders as being in 'full-time Christian ministry', rather than viewing all of us as working full-time for God, whatever sphere of life we are in. We see it when we separate evangelism from acts of practical care, and when we restrict our worship to something that we sing or say on a Sunday. It creeps in when we talk about 'saving souls', and it's there again when we declare this world to be of less value to God than heaven and as something that will be destroyed. We see it when we sing hymns with lyrics like, 'This world is not my home, I'm just a-passing through'.

The world has paid a price for this dualism. Swedish theologian Mika Vähäkangas, reflecting on the environmental crisis in Tanzania where he lived, comments on the sacred/secular dualism that Protestant missionary theologians brought with them to Africa, and how alien this was to African traditions, as well as being unbiblical (as we will see further in Chapter Four). He believes that 'a major reason for the environmental crisis today is the way the western thinking has demystified nature and included it in the sphere of the secular'.⁸ By contrast, as highlighted in the previous chapter, God's appreciation of his creation as 'good' allows us to see the land with its plants and trees as sacred. Maybe we can learn something from Native American

Cheyenne priests who touch the earth. This is done in recognition that the earth is a creation of one creator God. It is to be acknowledged and not idolized.⁹

And so God declares the seas and the land to be 'good', prompting Bonhoeffer to talk about 'the profound this-worldliness of Christianity'.¹⁰ But let us notice that this declaration comes not as an abstract assertion, but on what he has made. It is, as American theologian Ellen Davis puts it, 'a divine perception'.¹¹ In environmental ethics there is debate over where the value of nature lies. Is it outside of itself as a resource for us to use (around 'ecosystem services?') or intrinsic of itself, regardless of its value to people? The Genesis narrative tells us that the value of the seas and the land and the trees and of all created things (including people of course) lies in God and in his perception: as I have often heard my friend, Dr Dave Bookless, Theology Director for A Rocha International, say: the value of nature is *theocentric*.

To know that God sees what he has created and, in his seeing, gives value to it and pronounces it to be good is a deep call to us, similarly, to reflect this Lent on how we view the world around us. If we are really honest, do we perceive the wider world primarily as a resource for us to use as we wish, or do we regard it primarily as something that God loves and is precious to him? In *Lent that doesn't cost the earth*, I talk about a beautiful tapestry I made some years ago that hangs proudly on my wall. It is a William Morris design of a peacock in the woods. Can you imagine how I would feel if I came out it on the floor and were using it to wipe their muddy feet? I'd be so horrified . . . devastated . . . so upset! Well, I can tell you with complete certainty that would never happen. Why? Because they love me and could never dream of doing something so terrible to the tapestry I love so much. And they love it too, because I love it. God's affirmation of the goodness and value of this world (not a sinking vessel) spurs us therefore to take care that we do not wipe our ecological footprints over it, leaving it damaged and wrecked.¹²

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Living in the land

The affirmation of the goodness of the land and the plants and trees is a reminder to us that we do not have a disembodied faith but one that is rooted: rooted in place and land and in the whole world that God has created. The wider creation is not simply the background – it is the context within which we live out our faith and is an integral part of how we work out our salvation.

Genesis 1.9–13, particularly its emphasis on seed-bearing plants and trees,¹³ reminds us that the people of God in the Scriptures lived their lives deeply dependent on agriculture. And it is a reminder too that, however urban we may have become globally, we all depend on agriculture for our existence, even if that connection may feel distant for some of us and is easily forgotten.

The land thus plays a crucial role in the story of God's people in the Old Testament, and how they live on it is a key part of how they walk with God and follow his ways. They are always to remember that the land belongs ultimately to God: 'The earth is the Lord's and everything in it' (Ps. 24.1). Moreover, the particular land they have been given is exactly that, a gift, promised right back in the covenant God made with Abram in Genesis 12, and one which they must not take for granted or abuse. They are to see themselves as tenants of the land (Lev. 25.23). As Moses tells the people, 'You may say to yourself, "My power and the strength of my hands have produced this wealth for me". But remember the Lord your God, for it is he who gives you the ability to produce wealth, and so confirms his covenant, which he swore to your ancestors, as it is today' (Deut. 8.17–18).

Many of us are used to reading the Old Testament as the story of God working to restore his people's relationship with him, through the laws he gives and the establishment of the priesthood and the sacrificial system. And of course that is right. But it cannot ever be divorced from how the people relate to God's creation, both human and wider: the Old Testament is the story of a chosen people *in a promised land*. The quality of the people's relationship with God – their righteousness – is seen precisely in how they treat one another (for example, whether they take care of people or perpetuate injustice and oppression, e.g. Isaiah 58.6–7), and how they treat the land and

other creatures (for example, whether they allow it and their animals to have Sabbath rest or flog them mercilessly to produce more and more, e.g. Lev. 25.1–5).

The land itself does not stay inert and silent in the background and the Scriptures portray it as having an agency of its own. Psalm 148 shows all manner of God's creation exuberantly praising God. This includes not only living creatures but aspects of the landscape, animate and inanimate: the waters above the skies; the mountains and hills; fruit trees and cedars. Isaiah describes the mountains and hills bursting into song before their God on account of the people returning to him, and the trees of the field clapping their hands (55.12). Looking at the New Testament, we see Paul describing the whole creation as groaning in pain as if in labour, eagerly waiting for the child of God to be revealed. The New Testament scholar, J. B. Phillips, has translated this as 'standing on tiptoe', a lovely image of impatient anticipation (Rom. 8.19–22).

Paul's depiction of the creation groaning that, alongside praise, the land also responds negatively as it witnesses the sins of the people (as they fail to practice justice for and care of the needy in their midst), and the judgment that God brings on them as a result. Both Isaiah and Jeremiah describe the land as mourning (Isa. 24.4, Jer. 4.28), and Joel speaks similarly of the loud mourning (1.10).¹⁴

So the land – in all its dusty, soily, muddy, earthy physicality – is an indispensable part of the story of salvation, and it is no surprise therefore that the future (which we shall explore more in the next chapter) retains that dimension. The Old Testament prophets envisage a time when the people will live in their own houses and eat the fruit of their own vineyards (Isaiah 65.21), and the New Testament looks further ahead – as we have seen already – to a picture of a garden city with a river and trees.

The concept of the garden city may give hope to those of us reading this who are urbanites and wondering how we got into all this talk of soil and land, when our experience is primarily of concrete and glass! The Bible reflects diverse contexts and the people of God – particularly in the New Testament – to be found in the cities as well as in the countryside. Cities can provide safety and, through our creativity in urban design, we can reflect the

creativity of God. But Genesis 1.9–13 brings us back to the essential reality that even in the midst of the most intensely urban setting, we need the light, water, land and seed-bearing vegetation that God has created in order to survive, and we neglect to think about those things at our peril. Beyond mere survival, there is plenty of evidence to show that having nature areas both within and around our cities brings a wealth of health and well-being benefits to us as well as, of course, aiding biodiversity and therefore other species.¹⁵ So whether urban or rural, we need to be looking after the land.

Acknowledgement of country

In this respect we have much to learn from those who have traditionally lived closer to the land than many of us. The Venerable Karen Kime is Archdeacon for Indigenous Ministries with the Anglican Diocese of Canberra and Goulburn in Australia and is herself a Birripi woman. In a speech she gave to the Victorian Council of Churches she began with an ‘Acknowledgement of Country’, saying,

‘I’d like to acknowledge that we are in Wurundjeri Country. We give thanks for its beautiful borders of mountains and streams and the way in which it continues to provide for her people. We acknowledge the many Elders and Custodians who continue to care for this land and who are the knowledge keepers and leaders of their communities. We also give thanks for the many Aboriginal people and families who call this place home.’

She went on to talk about the rich and diverse nations of south eastern Australia:

Barkandji Country – the place of hot and arid plains, where one can see the footprints of Biamee, the Creator Spirit of the Barkandji people.

The *Yuin nation* on the south coast of New South Wales, whose stories surround the sea and who jointly manage the Booderee National Park. The Yuin people pay attention to the skies and

the presence of the sea eagle, known to represent the ‘father and protector’ of them all.

The *Wiradjuri people* refer to themselves as the River People and are deeply attached to the rivers that flow through their Country. The Wiradjuri have a wonderful saying that one needs to be ‘calm like the water, and strong like the current’.

The *Ngungawal people* – the people of the highlands whose stories and Country include the foothills of the snowy mountains and whose Country was an important meeting place for the many surrounding nations.¹⁶

This challenges me. In all my years of attending conferences, Christian festivals and church services, I am not sure I have ever heard anyone start their talk by acknowledging the area’s natural features and the people who live there in the way Karen Kime does, nor have I ever done so myself. It is a practice I shall learn from.

I recently met a woman called Jocabed Reina Solano Miselis, who is from the Gunadule people and was brought up on the Guna Yala islands off the coast of Panama. One of the names given by the Guna to the earth is *Nabgwana*, which means ‘the mother who provides abundant fruit and expresses intimacy and joy in the beings created within her’.¹⁷ She writes of the Guna practice of burying the umbilical cord and placenta in the ground when a baby is born. The women cut the cord and wrap it with the placenta and give it to the grandfather. He takes the umbilical cord and placenta to the mountain, plants a cacao tree, buries them with the tree and sings:

Our good and great God, we thank you for the life you give this baby girl/boy. We have come from the earth and we give back to the earth. Today we bury these symbols of life and give back of your own generosity so that, just as the child grows strong and healthy, this cacao tree will grow big and strong. For we are one, humans and the earth.

What a powerful way of showing our connection to, and dependence on, the land. As Jocabed Miselis says, ‘For nine months the umbilical

cord and placenta united the baby and the mother. Now the cord ties men and women to the earth. It fertilizes the earth from which a plant germinates as a sign of unity and of the hope for future generations.¹⁸

Maybe this sounds romantic and idealized to those of us used to a birthing system that involves the afterbirth being whisked away out of sight. I am reminded of the furore caused when the chef and campaigner, Hugh Fearnley-Whittingstall, cooked a placenta on television for a couple to eat with their family to mark the birth of their first grandchild. But I reflect also on how some Australian Aboriginal people rub earth over their children when they are born, and I wonder when you or I last actually touched the earth and felt the soil? Shane Claibourne says he resolves to ‘regularly get my hands into the garden, so that when I type, I can see soil under my finger-nails’, and Rowan Williams once wrote, ‘Receive the world that God has given. Go for a walk. Get wet. Dig the earth.’¹⁹ Are there practices you could develop to remind yourself of your connection with the land that you are living in and are a part of?

This loss affects everyone

We have much to learn from indigenous people groups, as Miselis says, ‘not merely as part of the current fashionable trend to include those traditionally discriminated against but rather as legitimate models with hopeful proposals for the world. If we do not work on these proposals . . . we will lose a great deal as a society. With the disappearance of indigenous languages, knowledge of medicinal plants is also lost, as well as other insights into humanity’s relationship with the earth. This loss affects everyone.’²⁰

In reflecting on the creation of the land in Genesis 1 and its place in the story of God’s people, we must also recognize the role the land plays in creating identity and therefore the deep grief that is experienced when people are robbed of their land, and the ongoing problems that ensue. We cannot speak about land today without also talking about colonialism and the impact this has had as land has been ripped from people’s lives, and – through the trans-Atlantic slave trade – people were ripped from their lands. And, we must acknowledge that this is a

dark seam that runs through even the history of the Old Testament as the Israelite possession of their land came from the dispossession of those who were already living there, resulting in long-term problems which we still grapple with today.

Karen Kime talks about how colonization in Australia has created wounds that every Aboriginal person and family continues to experience. These wounds derive from the very personal experience of inter-generational trauma. Every original family in every community has such a story.²¹ Rob Coe describes this as ‘the bitter fruits of colonization’ and talks of the cultural invasion which meant that thousands of Maori ‘turned their backs to the wall during the 1800s and quietly died,’²² and Ernst Coen die talks of ‘the destructive legacy of (neo)colonialism and mission Africa.’²³

Writing from a North American perspective, that legacy is described well by John Mohawk:

Colonization is the greatest health threat to indigenous peoples as individuals and communities. It produces the anomie – the absence of values and sense of group purpose and identity – that underlies the deadly automobile accidents triggered by alcohol abuse. It creates the conditions of inappropriate diet which lead to an epidemic of degenerative diseases, and the moral anarchy that leads to child abuse and spousal abuse. Becoming colonized was the worst thing that could happen five centuries ago, and being colonized is the worst thing that can happen now.²⁴

One of the tragedies is how linked the Church has been to colonization, and therefore to the dualism and negativity of the earth that we saw earlier. Political domination went hand in hand with the domination of the land as the traditional sense of relationship and connection was destroyed. Former Archbishop Desmond Tutu is well known for having said, ‘When the missionaries came to Africa, they had the Bible and we had the land. They said “let us close our eyes and pray.” When we opened our eyes, they had the Bible, and they had the land.’²⁵ He may have meant this humorously, and of course there were many missionaries who did *not* take the land, but still some truth remains. With this recognition comes

the need for repentance, both by those of the Christian faith (Protestant and Catholic) and those outside the Church who recognize the almost unfathomable damage done, and being done, to indigenous peoples as a result of colonization.

The right to land

One key issue in colonization, and when thinking about the land in general, is land rights. This is a topic that many readers in economically developed countries do not give a second thought to, and yet for billions around the world it is of the utmost importance. The region of La Mosquitia is on the east coast of Honduras.²⁶ Containing forests, lagoons and a rich variety of animals and plants, it is home to various indigenous peoples, whose lives are strongly linked to the land. They have traditionally used their land for gathering food, hunting, fishing and collecting wood for building canoes and houses.

Mopawi, a Christian development organization, has been working in La Mosquitia since 1985. At first it was employed on projects such as improving crop yields and accessing clean water and sanitation, but soon realized that longer-term problems were being caused by the fact that the indigenous peoples had no legal rights to the land or the forest. The most significant problem for them was land grabbing. Usually heavily armed, the grabbers – often companies being funded by foreign investors – fenced the land off and deforested it for agricultural or extractive use.

Supported by Tearfund, Mopawi started working with the communities to bring together an indigenous peoples' collective right to the land, forests and rivers. It discovered that there were no Honduran laws allowing people to claim collective land rights – especially when indigenous peoples were the ones asking. But Mopawi kept insisting that the government address the issue and over time the community members learned how to advocate and speak out for themselves, even talking to the president of Honduras himself.

It took from 1987 to 2012 to gain the first collective land rights for a cluster of 39 communities along the coast. After this, the government granted eleven more land and territorial titles, giving indigenous

people the right to the natural resources as well as the land itself. In total, the amount granted is now 14,000 square kilometres.

Compared to the 30–40 million hectares of land around the world that has possibly been acquired by foreign investors to meet our demand for resources (a lot of which would fall into the land grabbing category), this amount of land is tiny.²⁷ It makes a huge difference to those who live on it.

Away from La Mosquitia, in the centre of São Paulo, Brazil, families literally had to live in the ark. The state electricity company, Electopaulo, cut the power to buildings, claiming that the wiring was a fire hazard and that the supply had been switched off to keep people safe. However, land values had been rising and many residents believed the company was deliberately making the buildings uninhabitable to force families out. They tried to negotiate with Electopaulo, but their efforts were unsuccessful and they were forced to use gaslights and candles to illuminate their homes, quite a fire risk. CAFOD's partner APOIO accompanied the families in their negotiations with the authorities. After a lot of lobbying, the families were finally given the right to claim and the electricity was switched back on.

The families agreed with Electopaulo to pay for the cost of an engineer and materials to carry out the work needed to meet the fire safety standard. This was a lot of money for these very poor families to find and they are paying it off in instalments, but this demonstrates their dedication and determination to stand up for the land they live on.

In South Africa, the Land Claims Commission has been established to redistribute land taken from its own during the removals in the 1970s under apartheid. One group that lobbied to claim back their land rights is the Roosboom United Churches Committee (RUCC) in central KwaZulu-Natal, who lost two churches and community members' homes under the regime. Their advocacy efforts have been very successful, and in 2017 the commission began to pay them the money of the churches to start reconstructing the buildings that had been destroyed. At least five of these have now been completed, and this has meant that rather than

meeting in improvised shacks, congregation members have been able to return to worshipping in a formal church building.

There remain, however, a number of outstanding claims from other churches in the community that have been subject to various delays, with the issue of land rights being deprioritized by politicians once they have secured the votes they need for a successful election. Christian Aid partner, Church Land Programme, has been working with RUCC to push for the commission to finalize these claims and restore to people the land to which they are entitled.

Trees of life

Let's return to the biblical text and the creation on the Third Day. Having drawn back the waters and created land, God then calls for the land to produce vegetation – plants and trees that bear seeds and fruit – as he continues to create the environments that will be populated in the coming Days. So from land, we now turn for the rest of this chapter to trees.

I wonder whether you have ever given much thought to trees in the Bible. Once we stop and pay attention, we notice that trees feature through the whole story of the Bible and are present at nearly every major occurrence. As Professor Julian Evans, leading forester and horticulturalist, says, 'It continues to impress me that even in such ordinary things as trees and woods we find encapsulated the elements of the gospel.'²⁸

From the tree of life and the tree of knowledge of good and evil to Eve and Adam eating the forbidden fruit in the second creation narrative of Genesis 2; from the Lord meeting Abraham near the great trees of Mamre to him speaking to Moses through the burning bush; from the use of trees in the laws of purification that God gave to the Israelites (e.g. Lev. 14.49–53) to their use as a site where the Judges sat and then in the building of the temple, we see trees all the way through the biblical narrative. Solomon is described as someone with great wisdom, insight and understanding, and this extends to his knowledge of plant life, 'from the cedars of Lebanon to the hyssop that grows out of walls' (1 Kings 4.33). Trees are at the heart not only of the nation's worship of the Lord in his temple, but also at the heart

of the false worship that sent them into exile as 'they set up sacred stones and Asherah poles on every high hill and under every spreading tree' (2 Kings 17.10).

Trees feature strongly in the Prophetic literature and are often used to speak of judgment. Julian Evans describes the cedar as being like 'the Rolls-Royce or Ferrari to add to the recourts of the day. This lovely, precious and increasingly scarce number was used for great works like the temple, and used by the nobility as a status symbol.'²⁹ So, it is with heavy irony that Ezekiel speaks of Assyria as being like a majestic cedar of Lebanon 'with beautiful branches overshadowing the forest'. Not even the cedars in the garden of Eden could compare with it and yet God cut it down to show the nations that they are all mortal and destined for death (Ez. 31).

But alongside judgment, trees speak a word of hope, and particularly of hope in the Messiah, the righteous branch, beautiful and glorious and bearing the fruit of the Lord (Jer. 23 Isa. 4.2). The people look forward to a time, as we saw above, when they will eat the fruit from their own trees and vines, and when they will not need to gather wood from the fields or cut it from the forests because they will use the weapons no longer required for warfare for fuel (Ez. 39.9–10).

One of the best-loved passages concerning trees in the Old Testament is Psalm 1. Let us hear it afresh in this version:

Those persons who choose to live signifiant lives
 are not going to take their cues
 from the religiously indifferent.
 Nor will they conform to the crowd
 nor mouth their prejudices
 nor dote on the failures of others.
 Their ultimate concern is the will of God.
 They make their daily decisions in respect to such.
 Compare them to a sturdy tree
 planted in rich, moist soil.
 As the tree yields fruit,
 so their lives manifest blessing for others
 and are purposeful and productive.³

The soil is moist because, as most translations render it, the tree is 'planted by streams of water'. It is a lovely image, reflected by Jeremiah too who describes the one who trusts in the Lord as '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' (Jer. 17.7–8).

I am confident this is the yearning of all our hearts, to be firmly planted with our roots going down deep into the Lord who created water and who is, himself, the water of life. In *Just Living*, I write of the need for us to build rhythms of space and silence into our lives: gaps when we can stop, be still, reflect and simply be. Creating such a rhythm is, I believe, a key way of building resilience and learning both how to resist the never-ending demands of our consumer culture and finding sustenance for a journey that is often tough and wearying. I talk of my own practice of silent meditation and how I sometimes visualize a cross-section of a river. The flow of the river runs along the top, representing all my thoughts that course along constantly. When I am aware of particular notions coming into my head, I can consciously throw them into that river of my life and into God's care. At the bottom of the river is the bed where the rocks lie motionless, and it is there, at that still point, where I meet with God when I am sitting in silence.³¹

This is a slightly different image to the one the psalmist talks about, but I wonder whether you could use it to help you root yourself into the stream of living water that God so graciously and generously provides for us? In this Lenten period, as you seek time to reflect and pray and let go of some particular habits, are there new practices you could take up to help you be like that tree planted in rich, moist soil?

I am the vine

As the history of God's people and his wider creation unfolds, we see trees are constantly present, their branches spreading around the whole story. This is no less true in the story of Jesus' life in the gospels. We associate Jesus' birth with sheep and stars, but trees are there too in the gifts the Magi bring. Both frankincense and myrrh are resins that come from the sap of their respective trees, which is collected by cutting

the bark so the tree 'bleeds'. Both resin and aromatic fragrance, and frankincense can also be made into oil. Neither frankincense nor myrrh grow in Israel, making them valuable items; they would have been carried many miles to be presented to Jesus.

How appropriate to give gifts from trees to the Messiah who was to follow in his earthly father's footsteps and to earn the trade of carpentry. He must have spent many hours with Joseph, hearing about the different trees and the wood they provided, becoming familiar with the grain of each and its shaping and polishing.

It is often noted how steeped Jesus was in the natural world. His parables and teaching draw on many aspects particularly linked with the farming and fishing that would have been the main trades of many of the people with whom he talked. And of course trees feature too: in the well-known warning about not looking at the speck of sawdust in your own eye whilst ignoring the plank in someone's eye; in the parable of the mustard seed, and in Luke's parable of the single fig tree growing in a vineyard.³²

As we go through Lent, we are gradually making our pilgrimage towards Holy Week, and here too – in the palm fronds of Palm Sunday, the cursing of the fig tree, the olive trees of the Mount of Olives where Jesus spent his last night, the crown of thorns, and the myrrh offered during his death – we see trees accompanying him all the way. And of course, ultimately, we watch as Jesus is put to death on a tree: a wooden cross.

John Evelyn, the seventeenth-century English writer and gardener, expressed this beautifully:

In a word, and to speak a bold and true truth, trees and woods have twice saved the whole world; first by the ark, then by the cross; making full amends for the fault of the tree in paradise, by that which was born on the tree in Golgotha.³³

The Lord of all creation, the one through whom all things were made (including trees), died for us, nailed to a cross, so that we who were once far off might be brought near through his blood, spilled onto the land, and the whole creation saved. Little wonder then that

the natural world responds so dramatically at the moment of his death as darkness descends over the land and the earth shakes (Matthew 27.45, 51, Mark 15.33, Luke 23.44–45).

But the story does not end there and we move from the cross to a garden, another motif that runs through the biblical story. The philosopher G. K. Chesterton, in his book, *The Everlasting Man*, wrote:

On the third day the friends of Christ coming at daybreak to the place found the grave empty and the stone rolled away. In varying ways they realized the new wonder; but even they hardly realized that the world had died in the night. What they were looking at was the first day of a new creation, with a new heaven and a new earth; and in a semblance of the gardener God walked again in the garden, in the cool not of the evening but the dawn.

What a beautiful description of what has happened through the death and resurrection of Jesus. We are invited to join the gardener God, to walk in the garden with him knowing that Jesus the Messiah died for us and so through him, we have now received reconciliation. Jesus declares in John 15.1, ‘I am the true vine and my Father is the gardener’. In the same way as we are invited to be like trees strongly planted in his life, so here too we are invited to ‘abide in the vine’ (v. 4): to remain closely entwined in Jesus’ love so that we might bear fruit from the soil of our lives.

Blessed be you Tree of Life,
with your roots reaching down to the dark centre of the universe
your leaves yearning towards the light beyond heaven.
Shelter me with all your creation as I rise up this day
and take my rest this night.³⁴

Do trees scream?

Looking out my kitchen window I see a tree that I have watched grow for the last 25 years. A beech tree, it is now twice the size of nearby houses and beautifully shaped. In the summer, it provides welcome

shade and families often sit under it with the children play. I love that tree – and also the others I can see on the green, some of which I’ve helped plant myself – and were a developer to come and try to cut it down, I would fight hard to prevent that happening. The developer would have no qualms about felling, not knowing the tree or having any connection with it. But I do. As God were good, so I see that tree. In some way, I have a relationship with it and I love it.

But, though I care about the trees that are around me, I am aware that I have much to learn about what goes on in their lives and how utterly amazing that is. Peter Wohlleben, who we met in Chapter Two, has written a fascinating book called *The Hidden Life of Trees: What They Feel, How They Communicate – Discoveries from a Secret World*.³⁵ Drawing on his experience as a forester of over thirty years and the latest scientific research he has learnt that trees are social beings, sharing food with their neighbours and even with competitors. They are connected by a vast underground system of roots, interwoven with an astonishingly dense network of fungal mycelium which exchange nutrients, help neighbours in times of need, and enable trees to pass information about insects, droughts and other dangers. They communicate with one another above ground too, as we see with the umbrella thorn acacias in the African savannah. When a giraffe starts feeding on a particular tree, that tree sends up ethylene as a warning gas to other trees in the vicinity. Immediately, they pump giraffe-repelling toxins into their leaves and the giraffes have to move some distance away to find trees that haven’t had the memo.³⁶

One fascinating insight is the possibility that ‘when trees are really thirsty, they begin to scream’ – though not in a way we can hear because it happens at ultrasonic levels. When the flow of water from the roots to the trees is disrupted, the trunk starts to vibrate. As Wohlleben says, this is probably just mechanistic, and yet

We know how the sounds are produced, and if we were to look through a microscope to examine how humans produce sounds, what we would see wouldn’t be that different: the passage of air

down the windpipe causes our vocal cord to vibrate. When I think about the research results . . . it seems to me that these vibrations could indeed be much more than just vibrations – they could be cries of thirst. The trees might be screaming out a dire warning to their colleagues that water levels are running low.³⁷

Wohlleben has also discovered that many of the characteristics he has observed in old growth forests disappear in fields of modern agriculture, where, thanks to selective breeding, they have ‘lost their ability to communicate above or below ground. Isolated by their silence, they are easy prey for insect pests’. This is also the case in planted monoculture forests, where he describes the trees as becoming more like street kids, isolated and behaving like loners.³⁸

Yet trees are truly wonderful things and they give us great aesthetic pleasure through the resource of their wood, their role in protecting soil, absorbing CO₂ and the way they provide habitats for a myriad of wildlife. However, deforestation continues to happen at an alarming rate, with over half of the world’s tropical forests having been destroyed since the 1960s.³⁹

Every region of the world has its issues with deforestation. In Africa, one of the biggest concerns is the ongoing destruction of the Congo Basin – an area that contains 20 per cent of the world’s tropical forests – mostly due to clearing the land for subsistence farming.⁴⁰ In South America, the Amazon is being lost due predominantly to forest conversion for cattle ranching for beef, and just today as I am writing this, a new report has come out claiming satellite imaging has shown that an area of Amazon rainforest roughly the size of a football pitch is being cleared every minute.⁴¹ In 2019 the sky in São Paulo turned black from unprecedented wildfires in the Amazon, many of which were from land clearances as President Bolsonaro relaxed legislation in order to open up the Amazon for agriculture and mining. In Asia the big issue is palm oil, and researchers (again using satellite imaging) found there was much greater loss than expected in the highlands of Southeast Asia.⁴² In Europe, forests are faring better, with both the overall area of forest and the area of protected forest actually increasing.⁴³ Here, there are calls to step up foresting work and move

to a re-wilding approach which focuses on the large-scale restoration of ecosystems, often re-introducing key species (such as beaver and lynx) to manage the environment in the way we saw wolves do in Chapter Two.⁴⁴ There are, however, notable exceptions even in Europe, with mass deforestation taking place in Sri Lanka.⁴⁵

The main driver of deforestation is agriculture, both for subsistence farming and, at a much bigger scale, for export crops such as coffee, soy and palm oil. Beef production – including grain for cattle feed – was responsible for almost half of all forest clearance relating to agriculture between 1990 and 2008,⁴⁶ but other important crops are maize, rice, sugarcane, cocoa, tea and coffee. After agriculture, wood products (including for fuel) are the next main driver of deforestation. I remember a trip to Nigeria where I was struck by how much wood for charcoal I saw by the side of the roads. Charcoal is massive business in many countries but it is causing large-scale deforestation; that is why Tea and Earth’s solar, biodigester and clean cook stove projects and advocacy work are so important.⁴⁷

The terrible impact of deforestation includes destroying biodiversity; worsening climate change; disturbing water cycles; disrupting lives and livelihoods, and human rights abuses by companies engaging in this work. A report by Global Witness states, ‘It has never been a deadlier time to deforest one’s community, way of life, or environment’, and their research including coffee, palm oil and banana plantations, is the industry most often linked with violence (including murder) against land and environmental defenders.⁴⁸

As I consider the appalling consequences of deforestation, I am struck, by way of contrast, with the Jewish festival of *Tu b’Shevat*, ‘the New Year for Trees’. I first encountered this when I was invited to the launch of the Eco Synagogue scheme which was held, appropriately, on *Tu b’Shevat*. On this day, the Jewish people eat a lot of fruit, particularly fruits traditionally associated with the land of Israel, sometimes also using their seeds to plant new trees. I have long thought how beautiful it is to have a new year especially for trees; a day where we pause to recognize their beauty and wonder and all they do for us and the land, and to commit ourselves to looking after them and planting more.

This is not to worship trees, but rather to honour them – something that is practised in many cultures, from the Celtic ‘Green Man’ motif to the sacred fig trees in Kikuyuland in Kenya. Wangari Maathai, from the Kikuyu tribe herself, remembers being told by her mother that she should never collect firewood twigs from around the fig tree since it was *mūti wa Ngaii*, ‘a tree of God’. She also recalls that if you approached a tree during a ceremony or climbed Mt Kenya, which was heavily forested in earlier days, people had to take off their sandals, which reminds us of God’s instructions to Moses as he approached the burning bush.⁴⁹ Tanzanian Andrew Kyomo talks about the proverb in his tribe that says, ‘The forest is our skin and if one removes the skin of a human being, the result is death’: a reminder of how important trees are to our survival.⁵⁰

Ramine Souza and Josiani Baia are two young women who live in the Brazilian city of Barcarena in the Amazon. Having been unemployed and close to destitution, they are now jewellery makers, creating ‘biojewel’ adornments from the beautiful seeds around them that are plentiful in that area. They have learnt to value the relationship between the forest and the city and, alongside having a stable income, are part of a group of artisans working to protect the Amazon, raising awareness through their handicrafts, and denouncing the deforestation that would destroy not only the biodiversity of the forest, but also the businesses they have worked hard to create.⁵¹

They have done this through a course run by the Diocese of Amazônia of the Anglican Episcopal Church of Brazil, which has been working to educate people on looking after the rainforest for more than a decade. The course runs in the Belém region and trains leaders from riverside and remote communities, increasing awareness and changing attitudes around environmental issues, and equipping participants to develop projects to do this. The course combines protecting the environment with empowering those on the fringes of society.

Safeguarding the Amazon, which captures 25 per cent of global carbon dioxide emissions, is vital in the fight against climate change. The decline in the Amazon carbon sink in the decade to 2015 amounts to one billion tonnes of carbon dioxide – equivalent to over twice the

UK’s annual emissions.⁵² While vital, reforestation will not fully resolve the issue of the loss of trees because newly forested areas are not as effective carbon sinks or as biodiverse as older forests. It is therefore essential to prevent deforestation from happening, rather than simply mitigating its effects. Deforestation caused droughts, and these have led to the loss of more trees in the Amazon, in turn worsening the droughts. Environmental devastation, particularly in the Amazon, is a problem for indigenous communities are all problems facing in the Amazon, but Bishop Martinez holds on to Jesus’ words in John 10.10 that he has come to bring abundant life, and has dedicated herself and her diocese to working for ‘the multiplication of a Culture of Life, the rescue of dignity, justice, peace and social and environmental preservation!’

There are schemes all around the world working to protect our vital trees, and it is encouraging when churches are involved too, as we saw with Juliana at the start of the chapter. The Church of South India, for example, has produced its Children Protocol Guidelines, approved by the Synod Executive for use in all its dioceses. It has twelve areas for action, one of which is tree and sapling planting. Churches, whether urban or rural, are encouraged to plant a sapling every time there is an important function or visit of a dignitary, and to plant fruit bearing trees in public places to provide food for other creatures. In some dioceses the first time a couple will do after getting married is plant a sapling on the campus of the church, and guests are welcomed with the sapling or flowering plant.⁵³ Green Anglicans (the Anglican Church of Southern Africa Environmental Network) is spreading a similar culture of tree planting throughout southern Africa and Kenya.⁵⁴

In Ethiopia, the Orthodox Church views the natural forest as a gift from God and needs its habitat. For them, these natural environments provide sites for contemplation and prayer as well as burial places, and so rural churches have instinctively looked after the forests around them whilst the rest of the country has suffered severe deforestation. Ethiopia used to be covered with tall forests, but this is now true for only five per cent of the country due to mass deforestation to provide agricultural land for the h population boom that

has occurred. Aerial shots of Ethiopia dramatically show pools of green within broad swathes of brown: as forest ecologist, Alemayehu Wassie, says, 'If you see a forest in Ethiopia, you know there is very likely to be a church in the middle'. He is now working with churches to increase their understanding of the biodiversity these oases contain and how to protect them against the encroaching grazing and agricultural fields.⁵⁵ In fact, Ethiopia as a whole is taking massive steps towards reforestation. In July 2019 the nation planted an estimated 350 million trees in one day. Some think this statistic cannot have been correct but, whatever the actual figure, huge numbers of saplings were planted in a thousand sites across the country in order to begin counteracting the mass deforestation.

In the heart of London, just round the corner from Waterloo station, St John's Church has been hard at work with their churchyard – so hard at work, in fact, that it has won both a Silver Eco Church award and a Silver Gilt award for London in Bloom. Members of the congregation have planted a pollution-reducing hedge at the street-facing corner, with golden foliage that traps fumes and creates colour in a shady spot. They have dug out and planted a new wildlife garden in a disused part of the churchyard, creating a welcome sanctuary for bees and butterflies. The churchyard also features a walnut tree, two beautiful cork trees grown from seed, blossom trees, three huge plane trees, and lots of other shrubs and flowers.

Many churches all around the world, from different denominations and networks, urban and rural, are planting trees and looking after their patch of land in ways that provide habitats for other creatures and create places of beauty for people to enjoy. Lambeth 2020 will itself see a new small forest come into existence, with a tree planted in Canterbury diocese for each bishop in attendance. In this and in every action taken, the church is being what Bonhoeffer called 'a yes to God's earth'.⁵⁶

We are called to follow God in loving and cherishing this world, not only in our understanding but in our practice too, living lives of gratitude, reverence and appreciation. Kyomo tells us, 'We cannot claim to be Christians . . . if we engage in destruction of God's creation like deforestation,⁵⁷ and yet we do so (albeit often unwittingly) when

we eat a high meat and dairy diet, purchase products with palm oil in,⁵⁸ and buy wood and paper products without making sure they have come from a sustainable forest or from recycled paper. What this means is that we should all be reducing paper usage drastically and using recycled paper wherever possible. At the very least, every Christian home and every church should use recycled toilet paper if in a country where that is available! Another really simple thing you can do is calculate your carbon emissions for a year through the Climate Stewards calculator and then offset them, directly funding tree planting and reduced-fuel cookstoves in projects in Uganda, Kenya, Ghana and Mexico.⁵⁹ On top of these things, let's plant trees wherever possible as we know that this is one of the most effective and cheapest ways to tackle climate change.

Saying yes to life

On the Third Day, God created the dry land and the plants and trees and 'saw that it was good'. As we go through Lent may we also look at what are around us and act with new appreciation at the land and trees that are around us and act in ways to love and protect them.

To plant a tree is to say yes to life

It is to affirm our faith in the future.

To plant a tree is to acknowledge our debt to the past: seeds are not created out of nothing.

To plant a tree is to co-operate in natural works whereby all forms of life are interdependent.

To plant a tree is to take sorrow for past mistakes; when we took life's gifts for granted.

To plant a tree is to make a social statement for green-consciousness, for conservation and ecology.

To plant a tree is to enhance the quality of life. It brings beauty to the eyes and uplifts the spirit.

To plant a tree is to make a spiritual statement. We are all members of the tree of life,

we stand or fall together.⁶⁰

For discussion

- 1 This chapter talks about a false dualism that separates out body and spirit, earth and heaven, natural and spiritual, and views body/earth/natural as inferior. Does this reflect the Christian tradition within which you stand? Where have you seen it played out? How does a fresh realization of the place of land and trees in the Bible affect your thinking?
- 2 How aware are you of your connectedness to the land? What helps you appreciate that more deeply?
- 3 In what ways has colonization impacted your country?
- 4 Watch this chapter's interview with Bernadette Kabonesa. She is a Senior Research Technician at the Ugandan National Agricultural Research Organization and an expert forester. You can see the interview at <www.spckpublishing.co.uk/saying-yes-resources>.
- 5 Consider how your actions impact on forests, whether through meat that comes from deforested land or wood and paper products you may buy. What steps could you and your church take in response?
- 6 Finish by reflecting on Psalm 1, asking God to root you deeply into him through the rhythms and practices of your life.

A Prayer from El Salvador

Oración por los árboles y la tierra

Dios de la creación nos has enseñado a amar la vida, a que de todos nuestros deseos debe superar el anhelo por la vida, deseo que debe trascender valorando todos los seres vivos de la creación. Los árboles y la tierra gimen a causa de nuestra poca conciencia por cuidarlos y protegerlos, nos hemos adueñado y lucrado lejos de protegerlos de la muerte. Hemos visto a la tierra como un recurso para explotar y no como madre. Aceptamos el desafío de cuidarnos a nosotros mismos para cuidar de nuestra madre y casa la tierra, de los árboles y de la vida. Reconocemos que nos has dado un entendimiento mayor al de otros seres vivos para reflejar tu carácter creativo, comunitario y amoroso con todo lo que existe. Señor, nos comprometemos a vivir

cuidando de toda la naturaleza, protegiendo nuestro corazón de los deseos egoístas y viviendo no como dueño sino como hermanos y en comunidad con todos los seres vivos y especialmente con los árboles que son fuente de vida.

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Prayer for trees and earth

God of creation, you have taught us to love life. That our longing for life should be above all other desires; a transcendent longing that values all of creation's living creatures. The earth and trees groan because of our failure to care for and protect them, ruling over and profiting from them rather than protecting them from death. We have viewed the earth as a resource to be exploited rather than as our mother. We accept the challenge of giving care of ourselves in order to care for the earth our mother and our common home, for the trees and for life itself. We recognize that you have given us an understanding greater than other living creatures in order to reflect your creative, communal and loving character towards everything that exists. Lord, we commit to live carefully for all nature, guarding our hearts from selfish desires and not acting as proprietors, but acting as brothers and sisters and in communion with all living things, especially the trees that are the source of

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