

Earth: Holy Land? – Genesis 12: 1-7 Psalm 24: 1-6 Matt 5: 1-10
Preached on Sunday 29 September 2019
8.00 and 11.00 at Christ Church, 9.30am at Good Shepherd

[*] At the Mount of the Beatitudes – the place remembered for Jesus teaching the Sermon on the Mount – there is a fine octagonal church and a beautiful, peaceful garden with views over Lake Galilee. Within the garden are set stones inscribed with the words of each of Jesus' beatitudes – his eight statements of blessing. [*] When we come to the third blessing, of 'the meek', the promise is not the familiar 'for they shall inherit the earth' but 'they shall inherit the land'. 'Land' and 'earth' can mean the same thing, but in a place where land ownership is hotly contested and people see themselves as under occupation (in Jesus' day and today) it changes a pious hope into political creed. The right to land, in the end, is not to be determined by force of arms, but comes as an inheritance for the powerless.

[*] Whilst in the Holy Land, I have had the privilege of hearing Palestinian Christian scholars explaining how they view the issue of land and how they understand the term 'Promised Land'. From their perspective, their own family inheritance has been seized (or their rights to it challenged) on the basis of claims based on the Old Testament. What is particularly galling for them is that many Western Christians accept without question that the modern state of Israel is a direct successor of the Biblical kingdom (even though modern Zionism began as a very secular movement) and that legitimacy afforded by God's promises in Genesis can be directly applied in the modern world.

Now, obviously, this is a huge and hotly contested subject which I am only touching on today, but I want to use Palestinian reflection on 'holy land' to inform our understanding of how we should treat the earth, which is our shared inheritance, today.

[*] In Genesis 12, this morning's first reading, God first promises land to Abraham, the forefather of the Jewish people. I've 4 points to make. First, land is a gift: 'To your offspring I will give this land.' It's not to be claimed by right. It's not going to be purchased. At this point there's no talk of conquest (although this does come later). The land of Canaan is simply promised. Second: Abraham's first action was to build an altar and to worship God. In worship you acknowledge you are dependent on God: you say thank you for the gift. The covenant between God and Abraham is established. Covenant is both relationship and contract, a mutual binding together by making promises to each other. Third: this covenant extends outwards. Abraham and his descendants are to be a blessing to others; indeed, all peoples on earth will be blessed through you. That's why the land is given. Fourth: Later on, through the law, detailed instruction will be given about protecting 'the foreigner who dwells in your land.'

[*] This Promised Land is to be a place where you deal fairly with one another, where you care for the excluded and marginalised, where you give proper rest to all who work (animals as well as people) and where the ground itself is not so exploited that it is drained of all its goodness. The land is not promised for your exclusive exploitation. It's holy because it's God's, to be a blessing for all.

[*] 'The earth is the Lord's and everything in it, the world and all who live in it' (Psalm 24: 1). The vision of promised, holy land extends outwards to cover the whole world. It all belongs to God, and God is gracious and gives us the opportunity to enjoy it and the privilege of caring for it. Unfortunately, our human agendas have been more about competing for the 'best' bits and trying to squeeze its resources dry. We fight over it. Our armies are said to adopt 'a scorched earth policy' – sacrilege – to deny any resources to their foes. We defend what we've got by building walls: that's mine; keep your hands off! Or else we cover the earth with tarmac and concrete so that the refreshing rain turns into destructive floods. We destroy forests and ancient woodlands just to make money, taking no account for the impact on either local eco-systems and or the planet's atmosphere. We poison the earth with insecticides that wash into streams and rivers and poison the water too. In the Communion liturgy we use in this service human beings are described as 'the crown of all creation,' and so it should be, but as I think about these issues it seems to me we are the disgrace of all creation. 'Who may ascend the hill of the Lord?' asked the Psalmist. 'Those who have clean hands and pure hearts.' Our hands are dirty, stained with pollutants; our hearts impure with the lust for more.

[*] What's the answer? Environmental problems have to be faced at all levels, national and super-national as well as personal and local. They involve technology, economics and politics, but above all they require will-power. But if I may identify just one thing for this week, perhaps we should think about getting our hands properly dirty – with earth, soiled with actual soil! Plant trees!

Clive Anderson of the Woodland Trust points out that 'the cleverest bit of kit to solve climate change already exists. It's called a tree. Though to make a difference we need an awful lot of them – 1.5 billion ... if we want to help the UK reach net zero by 2050.' People sometimes ask why we always have to be the ones who have to deal with climate problems. Assuming by 'us' they're thinking of Great Britain, we have to acknowledge 'we' were the first to pollute the earth on an industrial scale, so we should be first to clear it up. But actually, while the UK is ahead in some things, other countries often take the lead. On the issue of tree planting, it was reported in the press that in Ethiopia on one day in July this year they planted 224 million trees, part of a programme of planting 4 billion between May and October. That sounds to me like commitment!

[*] So, for this week's action point, plant a tree. If you've got a garden (with enough space) do it yourself. If not, sponsor one somewhere else. The Woodland Trust have lots of helpful information and suggestions. [*] Or, to link back to the first part of what I was saying, you want to do this and support a struggling Palestinian family in the Holy Land, why not pay for planting an olive tree for them. *Embrace the Middle East* is the organisation to go to for that.

Most of us are secure in our homes, on our land (whether owned, rented, or whatever). This is the gift of God to us, our bit of Promised Land! Let us make sure we use that for good, to treat it as holy, to be a blessing to others, that all the peoples of earth may be blessed.