

Sunday 12th September 2021 – Genesis 2:8-17 ‘Looking after God’s world’

I freely admit I’m not much of a gardener. All I can really do is destroy things. Give me some brambles to hack back, or nettles to pull up, or garden waste to burn, and I’m the chap for the job. But ask me to *grow* anything – well, that’s a different story. It ought to be a constant prayer of mine: Lord help me to be better at tending the flock than tending my garden!

Up to a few years ago, Alise would probably have said the same. We didn’t have gardens in our first decade of marriage and rarely attempted any sort of real cultivation. But over the last few years Alise has tried her hand at a number of projects in our garden; and this year’s project was for a little wildflower meadow in one derelict corner. We had a spot which was uneven and overgrown with nettles, and over the spring Alise dug it over, removed the weeds and planted a lot of wildflower seeds. And perhaps for the first time, we’ve had some success. After a slow start, the flowerbed looks like this (PICTURE).

This is probably a small achievement for many of you, but for us it’s huge. We have experienced the satisfaction of tending to our garden and watching it flourish. In short, we feel less like ground clearance labour and more like stewards.

The biblical concept of stewardship is a hugely important theme: indeed it is central to what it means to be human – certainly what it means to be made in God’s image. In the creation story, God gifts day-to-day responsibility for the earth to humans as the pinnacle of his creation. In what sounds controversial to modern day ears, we are given authority to ‘rule’ over other creatures and to eat whatever grows out of the ground. But the point is that we are *not* the top of the management chain – our authority is ultimately given by God and we are answerable to God. We ‘rule’ on God’s behalf.

Which means that **we are meant to rule as God would, in a way that God would approve of**. As we said last week, this earth is not ours: to be stewards is to exercise authority on behalf of someone else, and in this case, that would be God. Stewards receive what they have as a gift, and are meant to use this gift according to the owner’s instructions.

So (the big question is) as stewards, how does God expect us to ‘rule’? Well, Genesis 1 and 2 give us two differing perspectives on this, and we need to acknowledge both. It’s helpful to see these as two sides of the same coin. In chapter 1, God tells us to ‘fill the earth and subdue it’. And here in today’s reading (chapter 2), God tells us to ‘work it and take care of it’. So to be a steward is both to subdue and to take care.

Sadly humanity has been prone to act only on the first command and less on the second. And even in exercising the first, **there has been a tragic misunderstanding of what it means to subdue the earth**. What is meant here is not sort of tyrannical rule, but rather the fruitful manipulation of the environment to maximise its resourcefulness. A great example would be the way we’ve built Milton Keynes, which sits on a flood plain, and was neither especially good farmland in the past, nor suitable for house-building either. The brilliant solution was to construct artificial lakes, especially the huge ones on our side of the city – Willen Lake and Caldecotte Lake – which absorb all the potential floodwater, making the rest of the land suitable for house-building. Much of the remaining green space is also protected from flooding, allowing a wonderful abundance of plants and wildlife. Yes, we’ve manipulated the land here, but in a way that *enhances* life. That is, in biblical terms, what it means to subdue.

The flip side is what we read today – we also take care of the world. We are not to abuse our capacity for subduing the planet, to the point where it becomes abuse or exploitation. **Like any ruler, we are to exercise authority for the benefit of those we rule** – in this case, all the plants and animals in the world.

And this is the crux of the crisis at present. Our world is amazingly resilient, and many of us were amazed at how certain parts of creation flourished during last year's lockdown. Given even a small space to breathe, our planet has a remarkable capacity to heal itself. But it's not indestructible, and the human impact on the environment is taking its toll. Unless we change course radically this decade, much of the damage will be irreversible.

There's not time today to start addressing that question in more detail, and we'll give ourselves more time to think about that question over the next 3 weeks, from three different biblical perspectives. But today, what I want to focus on is the value of recovering this sense of stewardship.

The idea of stewardship lies at the heart of what it means to follow Jesus, and is much wider than our relationship to creation. It begins by **recognising that everything we have is gift and is to be used for God's glory**. Our gifts and talents are to be stewarded wisely – in other words, offered to God. Perhaps hardest of all, we are stewards of our money – I say hardest because many of us work hard to earn a wage and the idea that this too is all God's and not ours is one we're reluctant to accept. That's for another day, though!

But our stewardship of the planet is one of the major questions for us today, and one that we're finally giving more attention to than we have previously. Sadly, for many years, this was never even included in Christian teaching about what it means to be a follower of Jesus. Now it is, which is a start – and the next stage is for each of us to work out what that means for our lives.

And this is an area where we may not agree. Certainly some of the choices we'll have to make will be costly, because our whole system is built on a set of assumptions and behaviours which are no longer sustainable. Some of us will feel passionately that certain behaviours are mandatory for Christians, while others will consider them to be optional. Over the next 3 weeks we'll give ourselves some **biblical guidelines for making those choices**: defining the limits of freedom and setting the parameters for the choices we make, how the law of love is supreme, and also the biblical warnings relating to continually choosing greed and personal gain ahead of other considerations.

But **the bottom line is that as Christians we live before God**, and ultimately we are answerable to God for the choices we make. So much of our debate about the world is naturally framed in human terms: we are answerable to the future generations, to the poor, to fragile ecosystems... and this is, of course, true. But so often these motivations fail because they miss the most important point of all. We are stewards who live before God, and whose stewardship reflects the image of God. To care for creation is part of what it means to be fully human, fully alive; to live the life God designed us to have.

Any of you gardeners know that – think of the joy that brings you! Well, **it's time to do for the world what we do for our gardens** – and may God bless our desire to be stewards, for his glory. Amen.