

The First Sunday of Creation: Forest Sunday

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Forest Sunday – Gen 2 4b-22, Ps 139 13-16, Acts 17 22-28, John 3 1-16

Early on in my time as a Buddhist-leaning uni student, the local campus evangelist was on my case. He talked me into a few days away at a Christian retreat in the hills east of Melbourne. That was a tricky time for me; I was the only one there who wasn't a Christian. To be polite, I tried to be as open-minded as possible. So at one point, I even headed off by myself into the nearby forest to give God an afternoon to let me know if there really was anyone there.

If I expected a divine voice, I was disappointed. God doesn't cave in to that sort of pressure. But I've never forgotten the impact of being alone in that forest. A mountain ash forest is very good at making you feel small, yet exultant. The great trees soar up ramrod straight for 60 or 70 metres or more. Sitting alone with your back against one of these forest giants for a few hours is a rare experience for a child of the city. I was a visitor that the forest didn't seem to notice. I was concentrating on the possibility of any word I might hear from God. So I missed what was really going on. But the smells of that day, the sounds, the living damp and the sense of being alive and insignificant have never left me.

Why go looking for God in a forest? *The mendicant goes to the forest.* Something deep inside me said it was a good place to look. Our reading from Genesis backs that up. In v. 7, God makes the first human ^(adam) from the dust of the ground. ^(adamah) And we read in vv. 9 and 19 that from this very same soil, God causes all the trees, every animal of the

field, and every bird of the air to emerge. All of us – God forms us all from the Earth. So I was there with my ancient family that day. We're connected with all life by the very nature we share with each other; we are all beings born from Earth. So in a forest, we're with our family – with those fellow Earth creatures who connect us to our deep beginnings.

And there's more. In this story, there's a special element named in our kinship with the natural order. In v. 15, the first vocation we are given is to serve as protectors of the garden – the biosphere. This is before any command about law or loving God or neighbour. So we aren't just connected to the plant and animal kingdoms by our shared provenance from Earth; we humans are connected to forests by our vocation.

In Hebrew, God declares that the human being is put in the garden to serve שָׂרָה and protect וּשְׁמָרָה it. Yet in fifty-one of fifty-two English translations, instead of the word *serve*, the translators choose to write that God put the first human into the garden 'to *till* it (variants are *tend, dress, cultivate, work, farm, or take care of it*). And instead of *protect*, forty-nine of those fifty-two translations say we are to *keep* the garden' (variants are *care for, look after, maintain or watch over*).

Only one of the fifty-two English translations says *serve*; and only three of them say *guard*. And French, German, Spanish and Italian translations are

the same. *Till* and *keep*. Can you see how our translations subtly put us in charge of the garden – suggest that our work somehow earns us a right to it, as if the garden is there for us? The Hebrew is an important corrective. We're here to *serve* the garden and *protect* it for God. It's not ours; the garden is God's gift to all life. Our work doesn't earn us the right to take it over just for ourselves. The trees are there for much more than their value or utility to just us humans. Look at v. 9; *Out of the ground the Lord God made to grow every tree that is pleasant to the sight and good for food*. The beauty of

trees is their first quality, then their gift of food. There's nothing there about value or utility to humans alone. Precious in themselves, trees proclaim God's beauty and kindness.

Serve and protect the natural order; it's our first vocation. Yet we're doing the exact opposite. The effect on Earth of humanity's blind greed for ever-increasing wealth, control and power is horrifying. The effect on the Earth community of our sin of arrogance – our selfish abuse of our fellow creatures and even poor and vulnerable fellow humans is monstrous. We were made to be much better than this.

The worldwide Church marks the Season of Creation so we can pray and learn to change; to learn what our tradition teaches us about our relationship with creation. Today we've seen how scripture says clearly what that relationship should be. So it also exposes how distorted that relationship is now. As God's Church, it's our duty to speak and act prophetically – to speak God's mind on the great issues of our time, and to live accordingly. The great issue right now is human industrial-scale desecration of Earth's sacred forests, rivers, oceans, soil, atmosphere and wildlife.

Our experience of Covid-19 should be a wake-up call. It shows us the risk of rejecting the life-principle of co-existence. Anyone who disregards their duty of service and protection of their community puts that whole community in grave danger. Can we see how this mirrors the danger of our abuse of the Earth-community's fundamental interdependence? God is committed to the poor and the vulnerable, and to all our fellow creatures. Yet our daily news carries stories of the systematic destruction of forests and the people and creatures who live in them, all in the blind service of our insatiable consumerist lifestyle.

Nothing, no-one can live without forests – eucalypt, mixed, conifer or kelp. Today we read of our first vocation; to serve and protect the world's forests as our family. Forests are

screaming out to us; we must hear them and act. Churches must declare and model the fact that humans are to serve and protect forests; not destroy them. We answer to God for the forests and all the creatures they sustain. This must shape the social action of the whole Church, and of all individual Christians. Amen