



Week Two

**OUR PLACE IN THE
CREATED ORDER**



OUR PLACE IN THE CREATED ORDER

This session digs down into our 'earthy' grounding, as 'earthlings' shaped by God's creative work – and how we as human beings have taken God's 'good' work and used it for our own ends. Getting the relationship between humanity and the rest of creation wrong might lead to 'uncreation!'

Bible Exploration

Genesis 1.1-2.25

The Bible begins with creation. Its whole story of the relationship between God and humanity is framed by the proclamation that God is the creator of heaven and earth. And this creation is 'good'. God takes pleasure in creation. That is affirmed over and over again in Genesis 1. It is that repeated phrase *And God saw that it was good* which we have drawn on as the title of this course.

But what is Genesis 1 seeking to tell us? Exactly **how** the world came into being? It is set out as a poem of praise celebrating truths about God's love for the earth and for humanity. Perhaps the key message is not '**what actually happened**' but telling us of a God who creates order out of chaos, and offers human beings partnership in the sustaining of creation. The rhythm of the six '**and it was good**', culminating in the Sabbath, reinforces this sense of ordered calm.

Genesis 1.1-2.4a is very different in feel and language to Genesis 2.4b-25. In the first account, human beings are made as the pinnacle of creation, *in the image of God* (Genesis 1.26-27). In the other, the human being is **formed** of the dust of the earth (Genesis 2.7) and before the plants and animals. But both passages – in their different ways – make clear the responsibility that God has given to human beings in relation to the rest of creation.

This is often talked about as human beings having ‘stewardship’ over creation. In Genesis 1.26-28 God blesses humankind, male and female together, with an instruction to *subdue* and *have dominion* over other living creatures. Some see this is a rather harsh and dangerous way of thinking about the relationship between human beings and creation, one of the factors that has led to creation being damaged. However in Genesis 2.15 God puts the human being in the Garden of Eden to *till* the garden (*literally to ‘serve’ it*). This relationship is reinforced by a pun: the Hebrew word for a human being (*‘adam*) is very similar to the word for ‘ground’ (*‘adamah*), which suggests that the well being of humanity and of the earth belong together. Can (*and should*) human beings both subdue and serve creation? Have we often done one – but not the other?

Jeremiah 4.11-28

The prophet Jeremiah was writing in some of the darkest days of Old Testament history – shortly before much of Jerusalem and Judah was destroyed by an invading Babylonian army and many people were killed or exiled. In this passage the future destruction is pictured as an ecological disaster which suggests there is an intrinsic connection between the earth and its creatures, the health of the land and the spiritual and moral condition of humankind, especially God’s people. Creation seems to suffer because of the sin of humanity. Verses 23-27 are particularly powerful: they remind us strongly of the creation account in Genesis 1.

But now creation is being undone! Jeremiah is predicting ‘uncreation’! Notice particularly the expression *waste and void* in 4.23 (in Hebrew *tohu wa-bohu*). This is the same expression as is used in Genesis 1.2 to describe the earth before God’s creative work commenced. It is very rare in the Bible, so readers are meant to make the connection between Jeremiah and Genesis. When one Bible passage alludes to another in this way, the effect is very powerful. The following modern poem also uses the background of Genesis 1 to speak strikingly about the relationship between human beings and creation:

Reflection

In the beginning

was the earth.

And it was beautiful.

And human beings lived upon the earth. And they said:

'Let us build skyscrapers and expressways.'

And they covered the earth with steel and concrete.

And they said, 'It is good.'

On the second day,

humanity looked upon the clear blue waters of the earth.

And said, 'Let us dump our sewage

and wastes into the waters.' And they did.

The waters became dark and murky.

And they said 'It is good.'

On the third day,

humanity gazed at the forests on the earth.

They were tall and green. And the human beings said:

'Let us cut the trees and build things for ourselves.'

And they did. And the forests grew thin.

And they said 'It is good.'

On the fourth day,

humanity saw the animals leaping in the fields

and playing in the sun. And they said: 'Let us trap

the animals for money and shoot them for sport.'

And they did. And the animals became scarce.

And they said 'It is good.'



On the fifth day,

*humanity felt the cool breeze in their nostrils.
And they said: 'Let us burn our refuse
and let the wind blow away the smoke and debris.'
And they did.
And the air became dense with smoke and carbon.
And they said 'It is good.'*

On the sixth day,

*humanity saw the many kinds of people on the earth –
different in race, colour and creed.
And they feared and said: 'Let us make bombs
and missiles in case misunderstandings arise.'
And they did. And missile sites and bomb dumps
chequered the landscape.
And they said 'It is good.'*

On the seventh day,

*humanity rested.
And the earth was quiet and deathly still.
For humanity was no more.
And it was good!*

(Anon)

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Of course neither Jeremiah, nor this poem, are the end of the story as far as the Bible is concerned. It is significant that the Bible ends (*Revelation 21–22*) with a picture of **new creation**, which also uses vivid language and images drawn from the Book of Genesis.

Reading the Bible with Anglicans around the World

In Hebrew, the same word *'eretz* can be used to describe both a particular land or country and the whole earth. It reminds us that the wellbeing of specific countries or regions of the world, and the wellbeing of the whole earth cannot ultimately be separated. Nor – according to the biblical passages we have explored – can the wellbeing of the land and the actions of human beings. What does this mean for Anglicans who read the Bible in parts of the world where the issue of the ownership and use of land is a deeply pressing question? Where the relationship between human beings and the land is undermined so people are denied the right to be **stewards**? Where all too often land issues and injustice go hand in hand?

One of the regional groups working on **The Bible in the Life of the Church** project is based in South Africa. Members of the group were involved in the production of a Report of the **Southern African Anglican Theological Commission, 1995** entitled, **'The Land and its Use in South Africa'**. The report gives important insights into how Anglicans in South Africa read the Biblical passages relating to land. It says:

'Fundamental to the Old Testament view of land is the belief that the earth is the Lord's and the fullness thereof (Psalm 24. 1). Land cannot be owned in an ultimate sense by human beings, but only derivatively and conditionally. The earth is created by God and for God's glory. As God's creation the land is fundamentally good. The land and all that is in it belongs to him and is in his care (Psalm 50.9-11; 104.10-30). While there is the theme in the creation story of God's command to human beings fill the earth and subdue it, this is subordinated to the theme of Sabbath rest, of blessing, in praise of God's work.

There are limits placed on the dominion of humanity, as symbolized by the forbidden fruit. There are consequences to overstepping the limits, as symbolized by the expulsion from the garden. The same process is at work in the story of Noah: human sinfulness results in natural disaster and human loss. God makes a covenant with Noah, guaranteed by the sign of the rainbow.

Blessing and fertility of the land are dependent on right relationships between God and human beings. The theology of covenant underpins the understanding of land as promise and gift. Intertwined with the stories of the conquest of the land of promise, which have had very harmful



consequences in Southern African history, as legitimization of white conquest of African land, is the underlying principle of the land as gift. It is God who apportions the land, and even then conditionally. This is the fundamental principle, and not expulsion or conquest or sacred war. Land is held in covenant with God, and ownership is conditional on the preservation of right relationships between God and human beings.

Because the land is gift, it is held as a sacred trust. The land cannot simply be bought and sold, as if it is property like shoes and grain. As the story of Naboth's Vineyard shows, the links of family and blood to the land cannot be set aside by an act of the king, even by offers of just compensation. Indeed, attempting to subvert the gift of land by changing the boundaries is an offence against God (Deuteronomy 27.17: Proverbs 23. 10). The ties between family and land are so important that special marriage laws (Levirate) exist to preserve the family's rights to continue on the land when someone dies without an heir.

The Old Testament laws recognize the propensity of the land to become alienated from its owners under the pressure of drought and debt. Provision is made for the restoration of the land to those families who had lost it, every seventy years in the Jubilee Year. Whether or not this law was ever successfully implemented is not the important question, but it upholds the principle that land cannot be permanently alienated from the poor and powerless, but must be periodically redistributed to prevent unjust accumulation of resources in the hands of a few.

The land is not unreservedly at the disposal of its human tenants, but has rights of its own. In this regard, the land must be left fallow on the seventh year, its own sabbath rest. During this period of recovery of the fruitfulness of the cultivated land, its fruit is available to the poor and to the wild animals and birds. The land is for sustenance and enjoyment not for the few but for all.

The mark of blessing is that every person shall sit under her/his own vine and fig tree (Micah 4.4). All of these basic principles with regard to the land seem to have originated in the period before the emergence of a strong central monarchy in Israel/Judah. The adoption of the Canaanite model of kingship legitimated by a central temple led to the emergence of an aristocracy and to the accumulation of land in the royal domain. On the one hand, the origin of the Davidic kingship is in the popular election of a king to deal with foreign invasions.

On the other, the Davidic monarchy developed a theory of special election of the family of David in perpetuity. A conflict between the claims of the monarchy for land, labour and tribute and the older land traditions of the tribes was the background to the attacks of the prophets on injustice and

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exploitation and the impoverishment of the ordinary people by the monarchy and temple.

The history of the people of Israel in the Promised Land is a continuous story of disobedience and punishment, restoration and hope. God continues to honour his covenant with his people despite their failure to honour their side of the agreement. It is this constancy and goodness of God which holds out the promise of restoration to the land, even in times of exile or catastrophe. The hope grew of a new covenant which would establish God's people in a renewed land in renewed blessing, peace and security (e.g. Isaiah 32.15-17; Micah 4.3-4).'

The full report can be read at:

<http://churchland.org.za/publications/Bulletin53page275.pdf>

There is a church-based organisation in South Africa **The Church Land Programme** whose website [http://churchland.org.za/publications.php# Bible](http://churchland.org.za/publications.php#Bible) offers many useful resources for exploring the theme of Bible and land from the South African context.

Questions for Discussion

1. What does the fact that the Bible begins with creation suggest to you about the nature and purpose of the Bible?
2. How far do you take the pictures of the relationship between human beings and creation given in Genesis 1 and 2 as normative for us today? To what extent is your view affected by whether or not you think creation '**happened**' exactly as described in these chapters?
3. The notes on Jeremiah say that the prophet suggests '**there is an intrinsic connection between the earth, the creatures, the health of the land and the spiritual and moral condition of people, especially God's people**'. Do you think this is true? How comfortable are you in reading the parts of the prophetic books in the Bible that link disaster and human behaviour?
4. The reflection from South Africa commented on the difficulty of relating to the parts of the Bible, such as Deuteronomy and Joshua, which focus on land in terms of conquest. In what other parts of the world might a similar difficulty be felt? How do we interpret such '**difficult**' parts of scripture?



Sharing our Insights

What do you want to share with fellow Anglicans as a result of your study and discussion?



Are there comments you wish to feed back into the Bible project? You may wish to do this directly via the Anglican Communion website or email them to the Bible project coordinator. For further details turn to this section in Week Five.

Closing Prayer

Holy God, Creator and Lover of all that is,
 we confess to you that we have sinned.
 We have failed in our care for the land and its creatures,
 we have been greedy, destructive, and wasteful
 of the resources you entrusted to us.

Polluted air and water,
 eroded soil and salty earth,
 birds and animals deprived of habitat,
 and neighbours left hungry and thirsty by our selfishness:
 all these cry out against us.
 We do not know how to restore what we have damaged,
 and we repent in sorrow and distress.

Forgive us, we pray, and have mercy.
 Give us grace to change our ways,
 to make amends,
 and to work together for the healing of the world,
 through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

The priest pronounces this Absolution:

Our Saviour died and rose again
 so that for all who live in him
 there is a new creation.
 Therefore I declare to you:
 your sins are forgiven,
 through Jesus Christ our Lord.

Amen. Send out your Spirit, O Lord.

Renew the hearts of your people.

Renew the face of the earth.



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