

St Mark's: 15/02/15

The Gift of Land & its Management

Introduction

Imagine God smiling over that watery ball in His hand, then gently breathing on it to drive back the oceans, exposing the rugged land beneath the watery surface – peaks & valleys, lakes & rivers, dips & hollows - every grain of soil holding potential for new life; then speaking into being the full range of vegetation for tropical forests, grasslands & plains, tundra & savannah, Karoo & desert. Picture in your mind the birth of the wild fig, the baobab and sequoia; flowering hibiscus, arum lilies on the Cape flats, fynbos & proteas; Namaqualand daisies, aloes & kippersols.

Give thanks for the tomatoes, cucumbers, spinach & marrows springing from the earth in your gardens, providing food for your tables.

Creation, the Gift of Land & God's Covenant

The land belongs to God. It is held in covenant, conditional upon right relations with Him, His people & His creation. We're called to rule with justice & mercy; to ensure equitable distribution & redistribution of land & wealth. The Bible condemns greed & abuse by the rich that leaves the poor landless & disempowered.

Woe to those who join house to house, who add field to field till no space is left ...” (Is 5:8)

Theology of Land & Biblical Principles

A theology of land raises four important principles

- God is Creator & Sustainer of all.
- The land is God's to give as a gift, not ours to take or selfishly hold for ourselves.
- This gift is given through a covenant, so we are responsible as recipients. Our choices & actions affect the land.

- The land is a blessing to all who are created in God's image.

The original covenant between God & humanity concerning the land occurs when Adam & Eve are given, & subsequently driven from, the Garden of Eden. We tend to forget that creation belongs to God & is given as a covenant gift. Living in comfort, security dulls our memory of hard times. We become arrogant & selfish, unwilling to share with others; yet God tells us "... the land is mine & you live in my land as foreigners & strangers” (Lev 25:23).

The Promised Land is given only for a time & only while it is properly used. Disobedience led to expulsion from the garden. The relationship between humanity & God changed; so did the relationship between humanity & the land. The ground was no longer fruitful, but barren, producing food only through the "sweat of Adam's brow” (Gen 3:17-19). From the very beginning our choices & actions have been inextricably linked to the health of the land.

The Faithfulness of the Rechabites

We are warned against injustice & oppression, yet the land is exploited, polluted & defiled, breaking our covenant with God.

Our second reading from **Jer 35: 8-14** leads into an appeal to Judah to reform their ways so they might live in the land God has given them.

We see Jeremiah, a gracious & friendly host, lifting his glass in a toast: "L'Chaim! Drink wine!" But the Rechabites, descendants of Jehonadab, had been commanded not to drink wine, nor to live in houses, or sow seeds or plant vineyards, but to dwell in tents all their days, resisting a settled way of life. The religion of Yahweh was seen to be a simple faith, free from the rituals

made possible by the wealth of Canaan. The simple nomadic life of this family from generation to generation in the midst of settled agricultural & industrial conditions was a singular achievement as they kept their covenant of faithfulness to God.

So, when Jeremiah proposed his toast, did they join in? Did they relax their rule for the moment so as not to offend their new friend? Did they realize they were living under emergency war conditions & it was only courteous to adapt to the customs of their protectors? Did they take a realistic view of the situation & share the common cup, showing appreciation for being treated so generously? They did not! The Rechabites lived life not on the basis of what was current with the crowd, but on the basis of what had been commanded. Their way of life wasn't shaped by historical conditions, but centuries of devotion to God; so Jeremiah used them as an object-lesson to covenant-breaking Judah. Hungry & thirsty, the Rechabites refused wine when it was set before them, but Judah wouldn't obey God or keep His covenant.

Jeremiah didn't say, "You must sell your houses & live in tents; you must abandon your vineyards & roam the desert; you must abstain from wine & drink only water." It wasn't the details of the Rechabite life that were held up, but their simple obedience & integrity. The essence of the message to Judah was this: "You also have a father who commanded you to live in relationship with Him. He set you apart for a life of love. Why don't you live in response to it? You also have a way of life with disciplines to maintain its character ... regular worship, faithful prayer, tithing & caring for the poor, moral conduct, pursuit of righteousness. Now, why don't you get on with it? The Rechabites are ordinary, human

beings & they've been doing it for 250 years. Don't just look at them or talk about them. Pay attention to what's distinctive about them. They aren't entertainment; they're an example."

He accused the people of Judah of letting the crowd turn them into spectators & consumers, living flabby, indulgent lives. "You've abandoned the simple actions people of faith have used for centuries to keep in touch with the truth of God, the beauty of creation & reality of being human."

There's no unconditional right to private property. Rights must be exercised to benefit others, to satisfy human needs not human greed, & in ways that do not destroy the land. It's against God's will to strip the earth of its resources & fertility, robbing future generations of its benefits.

Land: Sin & Salvation

God's commandment to keep the Sabbath was a weekly reminder that He is the author of creation & the whole world belongs to Him. This is also shown in the concept of a Jubilee year:

- Land had to be returned to its original owners.
- People could return to families & properties.
- The land was allowed to rest, emphasizing the rights of earth itself.

Awareness of Christ's reconciling power must take into account the inter-relatedness of humankind, the land, soil, water, plants & animals; it must rediscover a reverence for the earth as God's creation. As Christians, we must examine how we relate to the land & all life.

God's plan from the beginning was to make a place where He could commune with His people. He intended this place to encompass the whole earth. His purpose was to bless humanity through the gift of land – the earth – to all its inhabitants. The earth is a land of promise.

The covenant in Gen 12 & subsequent promise passages occur within the context of restoring humanity to the garden. In Rev 22:1-3 the New Jerusalem is described as having a river flowing with the water of life, which feeds into the Tree of Life, which bears fruit all year long & has leaves that bring "healing for the nations". Making our way back to the garden entails reconciliation, living in peace, reaching out to the poor & even our enemies. Unwillingness to share the land fairly & equitably becomes a source of strife.

Many believe the land is no longer a part of our relationship with God, but this isn't true. The whole earth is filled with promise & how we care for the gift we've been given matters. Romans 8:19-23 tell us the land itself "waits in eager expectation for the children of God to be revealed" when it will be "liberated from its bondage to decay & brought into the freedom & glory of the children of God." The land groans from birth pains, waits eagerly & needs rest (Lev 25:5). It vomits out sinners who defile it (Lev 18:25-28). The land is dynamic & responds to our actions. If we repent & humble ourselves, God says: "I will hear from heaven, & I will forgive their sins & heal their land" (2 Chr 7:14).

The physical earth, the land, is where reconciliation takes place between humanity & God, between fellow humans & with all creation. Reconciliation takes place on the land because that is where sin came into the world as humanity rebelled against the Creator. The land must be transformed into a place where atonement & reconciliation can take place. Restoration of our human relationship with God has an effect on the land itself, bringing healing. Only by submitting to God & confessing to Him can true healing come to the land.

The Modern Reality

Jer (2:7) tells us: *I brought you into a fertile land to enjoy its fruits & every good thing in it. But when you entered my land you defiled it & made loathsome the home I gave you.*

Soil erosion, overgrazing & overstocking, alien plant invasion, burning, intensive high-tech agriculture & mining are causing serious land degradation, while landscapes are transformed by urban growth. Nearly 20% of our land is seriously degraded. Intensified industrial agriculture has severe long-term impacts on the environment. Pollution from mines, industry & run off from 3-m tonnes of chemical fertilizer & pesticides applied to our soils & crops each year poison our limited water resources & threaten our biodiversity. Carbon dioxide & methane emissions contribute to greenhouse gases & climate change.

These might seem like huge issues, too big for us to deal with, but there are many small actions we can take in our own homes & lives. When added together as more & more people are inspired to change their behaviour, they eventually have a major impact to protect & care for God's creation & honour His name. Become an Earthkeeper today & show your love of the Earth & the land, given as a covenant gift by God to you & to me.

Conclusion

God's vision for us includes reconciliation, confession, repentance, & restoration. This takes place in the context of the covenant gift of land which is transformed into a "new earth" by our actions. Through Jesus, we become a "new creation" (2 Cor 5:17) & the land a "new heaven & new earth" (Rev 21:1). What actions will you take? What impact will you have on the land?