

Forest Sunday: Learning to Tend and Keep



By **Revd Mark Ackford** on 02/09/2026



A woodland path after rain: a reminder that creation is a living community to be tended and kept.

Did you know that there are two accounts of creation in the book of Genesis and this Sunday on this first Sunday in Creationtide which we are celebrating across the Benefice during September one of the readings is the telling of the second of these. (Genesis 2:4b-22)

It is a story of creation that I feel begins close to the ground. Before city, church, nation, or law, there is earth, water, breath, trees, animals, and a human being placed in a garden. It is a textured beginning of many different things all coming together: earth under the fingernails, water rising from the ground, trees both beautiful and useful, and a river flowing out into the wider world.

That feels especially fitting for this Sunday which celebrates Forests. A forest is never just a collection of trees. It is a living community. Roots share space beneath the surface. Fungi thread quiet networks through the soil. Birds carry seeds. Fallen leaves feed new growth. Dead wood becomes home. A forest reminds us that life is relational. Nothing really flourishes alone.

When Genesis says, “It is not good for the man to be alone,” perhaps we can hear that more widely too. Humanity is not made to stand apart from creation. We are made from dust and placed among trees, rivers, animals, and one another. Every breath is gift. Every meal depends on soil, rain, pollinators, sunlight, and many unseen hands and processes. Even a slice of toast has a creation story behind it.

Then comes the task: God puts the human in the garden “to work it and take care of it.” That is not a licence to use the earth up. Nor is it a vague instruction to admire nature from a distance. It is a calling to loving service. The garden is to be tended, guarded, cultivated, and cherished. We are gardeners before we are consumers.

Picture a woodland path after rain. The ground is soft. The leaves are dark and shining. There is that deep smell of damp bark and earth. If we stop, we notice how much is happening without us: a robin flicking between branches, a fallen branch slowly becoming food for the forest floor, new life rising from what looked like waste. The forest is not idle. It is simply being what God made it to be.

Forest Sunday also asks us to be honest. The natural world is under strain. Ancient woodlands are lost or fragmented. Rivers carry pollution. Species decline quietly. Climate change brings heat, drought, fire, disease, and shifting seasons. The scale can feel overwhelming. What difference does one churchyard wildflower patch, one tree planted, or one changed habit really make?

Yet gardens are cared for by small, repeated acts. Care is patient, local, and faithful: a child taught not to snap branches, a churchyard left partly unmown, neighbours planting trees, a family eating more simply. These are not grand gestures, but signs of a different way of living. They say creation is not disposable. It is entrusted to us.

Naming the animals in Genesis is also a lesson in attention. To name something well is to recognise it. Anyone who watches birds knows this. At first there are just “birds.” Then slowly there is blackbird, wren, goldfinch, red kite. The more we learn the names, the more we see. And the more we see, the more we care.

There is freedom in the garden but also limit. “You are free to eat from any tree,” God says, “but...” Freedom without limits becomes destructive. A forest where anything may be cut soon stops being a forest. A river treated as a drain stops being a source of life. Ecological care means learning holy limits: enough rather than always more, gratitude rather than grasping.

For Christians, this is not an environmental hobby added onto faith. It belongs near the heart of discipleship. If the world is God's creation, then how we treat it is part of how we respond to God. Pollution, waste, and indifference are spiritual as well as practical problems.

So, this Forest Sunday invites us to walk more slowly through the world: to receive trees not as scenery but as fellow creatures, to hear birdsong as praise, and to see soil as a holy beginning. Adam is formed from the ground, and we too are dust breathed into life by God.

Perhaps this week we could choose one small act of care: learn the name of a tree, pick up litter, reduce waste, pray outdoors, plant something for pollinators, or simply sit beneath branches and give thanks. Small acts will not save the world on their own, but they may help save us from indifference.

In Eden, the first human vocation was to tend and keep. Maybe that is still our vocation: to live gratefully, gently, and attentively in the garden of God's world.

If you have enjoyed reading this blog and would like to explore these issues further come along to our Creationtide Study Group, Sundays in September, 5pm in the Church Rooms at St Peter and St Paul, Stokenchurch.