

The Earth is the Lord's

By Revd Heather Ford-Lark



When was the last time you stopped to notice the ground beneath your feet?

It may have been quite recently, because perhaps we've been more aware of the land than usual with the excessive heat and lack of rain we've been experiencing until the past week or two, and because we cannot avoid noticing the impact on our gardens and the fields around us, and in the trees going into autumn mode earlier than usual.

Most of us spend our days walking across pavements, roads, carpets and floors without giving much thought to what lies underneath, unless something goes wrong. We had a leak in our bathroom recently and it was only when we noticed a damp area that we got someone to look underneath to see what was actually happening. Because it had happened gradually over a long period of time, we had been unaware of what was happening out of sight.

When all seems to be going well, perhaps we don't really notice the environment beneath our feet too much. But this year we have witnessed straw-coloured landscapes where previously there was green grass, and garden produce and crops that are smaller or weigh less than usual.

Yet, despite this, beneath our feet is something extraordinary: land that is alive.

During our month of Creationtide, we focus this coming Sunday on Land Sunday. It is a time when Christians are invited to pause, look around us, and remember that the whole of creation belongs to God. From the beginning of Scripture, the Bible tells us that the earth is not simply a resource for us to use, but God's creation, filled with beauty, life and purpose.

Soil is alive with worms, insects, roots and countless microscopic organisms and these play a part in producing the food we eat, the trees we depend on, and the flowers we enjoy. Rain, when we have it, sinks into the ground and becomes part of rivers and streams. The land quietly sustains life all around us.

But this year, more than some years, we might ask the question: how healthy is our land?

With so many weeks of heat and dry weather, the land has suffered severely, becoming cracked and parched across many parts of the world. Thankfully for us locally, since we've had some rain, little green grassy areas are reappearing and, in my garden at least, the moss is truly flourishing in the area shaded by trees, though only the weeds have actually grown despite the lack of rain.

I wonder if one of the most important things we can do for the land is to care for the soil because healthy soil is alive. Good soil supports plants, holds water, stores carbon, and helps sustain ecosystems, yet is so easily damaged by humanity, through pollution, erosion, intensive farming and inappropriate development. When soil is treated simply as something to stand on or build upon, we can forget how much our very life depends upon it.

As we celebrate Land Sunday, we are invited to give particular attention to the ground beneath our feet: our fields, gardens, parks, forests, farms and open spaces because our land sustains our life, not only humans but a multitude of living things.

For Christians, caring for the land is not simply an environmental concern. It can be an expression of our faith, because the earth belongs to God who we love and serve. The opening chapters of the Bible, in the book of Genesis, remind us that creation is God's work, and further on in Psalm 24, King David wrote that "The earth is the Lord's, and all that is in it."

This simple statement of ownership changes how we see the world, because if the earth belongs to God, then we are not owners in an absolute sense. Rather, we are stewards, entrusted with something precious and our responsibility is not simply to take from the earth what we need or covet, but to care for it, protect it and ensure that it remains fruitful for those who come after us.

In current society, we often think about land in terms of ownership, development and economic value, but Scripture offers a richer understanding of land providing food and shelter; and it is a place where communities grow and belong, a place of work, recreation, and prayer.

We might plant something, create a wildflower area, compost garden waste or simply allow part of a garden to grow more naturally. Perhaps we can reduce the amount of food we waste, and pray regularly for farmers, gardeners and communities affected by environmental change. Little actions may feel insignificant, but many small actions added together by many people will definitely make a difference. It can start with us.

The earth, the land, is the Lord's. May we use it with thankfulness, care for it with love, and pass it on in as good condition as we received it.