

Land Sunday

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Psalm 139 is for me the most beautiful psalm in this collection of 150 poems and always causes me to ponder the connectedness of the earth to the divine.

Today in our series on Creation we are asked to reflect on The Land and the short extract we heard from psalm 139 reminds us that wherever we go we cannot escape the presence of the Spirit of God...

Where can I go from you Spirit? Or where can I flee from your presence?

If I ascend to heaven, you are there; if I make my bed in Sheol, you are there,

If I take to the wings of the morning and settle at the farthest limits of the sea even there your hand shall lead me, and your right hand shall hold me fast.

If I say 'Surely the darkness shall cover me, and the light around me become night,' even the darkness is not dark to you; the night is as bright as the day, for the darkness is as light to you.

The psalmist then goes on to say:

For it was you who formed my inward parts; you knit me together in my mother's womb.

I praise you for I am fearfully and wonderfully made.

Wonderful are your works; that I know very well.

My frame was not hidden from you when I was being made in secret, intricately woven in the depths of the earth.

Your eyes beheld by unformed substance...

Just magnificent words and not written with the knowledge of science or biology but written with a mind moved by awe at the simple wonder of creation...

Back in the 1970's I watched a film entitled *One Brain Earth*.

The opening scene showed what seemed to be some insects scurrying about on a dusty landscape.

Slowly the camera pulled back to reveal an elephant grazing in the sunshine and what we were actually viewing were some mites on the elephant's skin.

In the next scene where some human beings and the camera again slowly pulled back to show the entire globe from outer space.

We humans are little more than mites on an elephant's back.

The image has always stuck in my mind.

The film was about the Gaia hypothesis a term first coined by the scientist James Lovelock.

The Gaia hypothesis or the Gaia theory suggests that all organisms and their inorganic surroundings are integrated to form a single self-regulating and complex system suitable for maintaining conditions for life on our planet.

In other words everything on the earth is interconnected and the earth itself is a single organism which regulates itself to keep itself healthy and alive.

We humans are simply a part of that interconnectedness just as the mites were on the elephant's back.

Too many mites on the elephant would undoubtedly cause it harm and the elephant may take steps to ensure its safety and survival.

Many would suggest that the earth is about to go through the same process as we humans have begun to change the delicate balance of the earth's ecosphere through the emission of too many carbons into the atmosphere or where we are poisoning the earth from pollution and poor management.

An article in the Herald some weeks ago about the Shell oil company's dismal record in the Niger basin makes depressing reading. Greed and poor management has made an entire ecosystem here almost uninhabitable.

And there is of course the Chernobyl disaster and the unfolding drama in Japan. In both these disasters vast tracks of land have become uninhabitable for human beings.

I find myself attracted to the Gaia hypothesis and there is growing scientific acceptance of this theory. The earth quietly remarkably regulates itself and repairs damage, and when we see the forces of nature unleashed we human beings are merely mites on the elephant's skin...

..and surely with global warming and the growing intensity and frequency of extreme weather events are we indeed being called to listen to the presence of God's Spirit and hear the land crying out for justice...?

Thousands of years ago a nomadic people understood the importance of the earth – that the earth was healing and life-giving that indeed 'My frame was not hidden from you when I was being made in secret, intricately... woven in the depths of the earth.'

And the gospel writer reminds us that Christ spent three days 'in the heart of the earth' before bursting forth into resurrection life...

The earth itself has amazing healing properties.

I remember for myself, at a very dark phase in my life when I was suffering from the deepest of depression it was by literally getting my hands into the soil that I found a healing strength. It was as though the earth, and nature herself, nurtured my soul and returned to me to health and life once again...

And for the indigenous people of Aotearoa New Zealand – they too know the power of the land – not as a commodity to be bought and sold but rather it is Turangawaewae – the place where we plant our feet and find identity...we would do well to embrace this same philosophy.

I remember reading once about migration – how very often British migrants still had their roots firmly planted in English soil although they had journeyed across the globe.

They tended to be 'homesick' and referred constantly to England as 'home' – winging poms I think they were called. The book suggested that to successfully migrate we needed to literally uproot ourselves and replant our identity into the soil of our adopted country.

Another interesting concept and one borne out I think in Maori language and culture...

The psalmist was able to perceive the presence of God in the wonder of nature, and certainly being moved by awe at the beauty of nature is seen as the first step in the spiritual pathway known as Creation Centered Spirituality – the via positiva – or the positive way.

So on this Land Sunday...

Let us honour the earth as our home, the place where we plant our feet

Let us embrace the interconnectedness of all things

Let us remember the sacredness and healing power of the earth as a way to wholeness and the knowledge of God

For... 'Where can I go from you Spirit? Or where can I flee from your presence?

If I ascend to heaven, you are there; if I make my bed in Sheol, you are there,

If I take to the wings of the morning and settle at the farthest limits of the sea even there your hand shall lead me, and your right hand shall hold me fast.'

Amen