

The Trees of the Lord Are Well Planted

Psalm 104:1,12-17

¹Praise the LORD, my soul.

*LORD my God, you are very great;
you are clothed with splendor and majesty.*

...

*¹⁶The trees of the LORD are well watered,
the cedars of Lebanon that he planted.*

*¹⁷There the birds make their nests;
the stork has its home in the junipers.*

It amazes me the number of stories that depict forests, especially ancient forests, as somehow menacing and even evil. It seems to be part of European mythologies. And it comes out in books like “The Lord of the Rings”, and stories like “Red Riding Hood” and “Hansel and Gretel”.

I can't understand it.

In Australia, our ancient forests are wonderful places.

We have the quiet forest of Huon pines in Tasmania. This forest is quiet because there are next to no birds and mammals in it. And there are none of these because there are very few flowering and fruiting plants. It's also astounding to think that a Huon pine with a trunk a metre across is around a thousand years old! An ancient, quiet forest – the only sounds coming from the cascading water in nearby creeks.

In contrast, we have the tropical forests, like the Daintree, where the air resounds with animal life. Every tree holds thousands of different animals and plants. Stay still, and you can hear life crawling around in the leaf litter at your feet, let alone twittering in the branches overhead. And then there are the colours from flowering plants.

And go on one of the forest walks, and walk around the ridge and one can quickly move from rain forest into dry eucalypt forest on the lee of the hill.

What also amazes me is that most forests in Australia actually grow on the poorest land. Hardly any topsoil. And devoid of rich

nutrients. And yet they thrive. Unless disrupted – then you end up with a ‘moon scape’ like near Townsville or Queenstown.

But, as Psalm 104 suggests, the forest gives honour and glory to its Creator simply by fulfilling its created purpose.

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the stork has its home in the junipers.*

So what should be us human beings’ relationship to the forests of the world?

In the Old Testament reading for today we are told:

The LORD God took the man and put him in the Garden of Eden to work it and take care of it. [Genesis 2:15, TNIV]

This passage can help us understand some general truths about our relationship with the creation around us. So a few points about what this text means for us.

Work

The first thing to note is that work is part of God’s good creation. God appointed people to work in the garden. And this was before the Fall.

Certainly we experience work as often full of pain, sweat, thorns and thistles of various kinds, and at the end of all that striving, having to give it all up in death (Gen 3:17-19). This is the result of sin twisting God’s creation.

But even so, the truth of Gen 2:15 still stands.

In fact, what comes to my mind, at a more simple level, is working with my dad in the shed on one of the many building projects. God the Father encourages us, his children, to work with him in his building project.

And, like any patient father, he knows there will be mistakes along the way, and the need to pull things apart a bit and fix things up better.

Use

The next theme is that we are to use the garden. This comes out of the theme of working it. We work it for our daily bread. The word ‘work’ here has behind the agricultural image of ‘tilling the

ground’.

In Genesis Chapter 1 (vv28-30) we are told:

²⁸*God blessed them and said to them, “Be fruitful and increase in number; fill the earth and subdue it. Rule over the fish in the sea and the birds in the sky and over every living creature that moves on the ground.”*

²⁹*Then God said, “I give you every seed-bearing plant on the face of the whole earth and every tree that has fruit with seed in it. They will be yours for food. ³⁰And to all the beasts of the earth and all the birds in the sky and all the creatures that move on the ground—everything that has the breath of life in it—I give every green plant for food.” And it was so. [TNIV]*

This is not about the freedom to exploit creation, but the use of it for our own survival. The thought that is behind it is that life is precious – it belongs to God. So to take life can only be allowed if God allows it. And even then, God put restrictions on what can be done: *They will be yours for food.* Not for amusement, or to go on hunting expeditions. Or whatever, but for food.

Care

Finally we are to care for the garden.

The garden is not ours. It belongs to God. We are only ever stewards of what he has entrusted to us.

The word that is used here for ‘take care’ has the sense of caring and guarding. It is the same verb, ‘keep’, that is used in the blessing at the end of worship:

²⁴“ ‘ *“The LORD bless you and keep you;*

²⁵*the LORD make his face shine on you and be gracious to you;*

²⁶*the LORD turn his face toward you and give you peace.” ’*

[Numbers 6:24-26, TNIV]

Just as God ‘keeps’ us, we are to ‘keep’ his creation.

Just as God blesses us, we are to bless the earth.

Tree Huggers?

So, should we all be ‘tree huggers’, to use a term that is often used as an insult.

I don’t know about being tree huggers. But one thing I do know.

The forests have a beauty that we should preserve simply for its own sake; for the forests, just as they are, tell out the glory of the Lord. And at the end of time we are told,

*¹²You will go out in joy and be led forth in peace;
the mountains and hills will burst into song before you,
and all the trees of the field will clap their hands.*

[Isaiah 55:12, TNIV]

And, of course, we need the forests. They are the lungs of the earth.

And not only the lungs, but they are essential for good rainfall patterns.

And we need them too for our homes and lifestyle.

But what I hope is that my children's, children's children will be able to walk in ancient forests, and enjoy them as much as I do. And not just little remnants, like pieces in a museum or a zoo; but vast tracks that support such a huge range of life.

And then with the Psalmist, every generation can say:

¹Praise the LORD, my soul.

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Amen.