

## When Land Rebels

*A sermon on Genesis 3:14-19; 4:8-16; Psalm 139:7-12; Romans 5:12-17; & Matthew 12:38-40 by Fr Paul Turner, pastor of the Cathedral of the Immaculate Conception in Kansas City, Missouri, USA.*

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. I'm Father Paul Turner, pastor of the Cathedral of the Immaculate Conception in Kansas City, Missouri, United States of America. I have been friends with your Senior Pastor Nathan Nettleton for many years through our mutual membership in Societas Liturgica, an international group of professionals in the field of worship.

I made my first trip to Australia in 2009 because that is where our society's international meeting was held that year. I returned to your country in 2011 and in 2014 to give talks for ministers, volunteers and faithful members of Catholic churches in places such as Sale, Perth, Adelaide, Hobart, Launceston, Brisbane, Broken Bay, Sandhurst, Townsville, Wollongong, and Melbourne. I returned in March of 2020 to speak at a conference in Parramatta, and at several other places. You will remember March of 2020 as well as I do. Every day that I was in your beautiful country, enjoying the company of wonderfully hospitable Australians, I received increasingly dire messages from home about the arrival of the coronavirus on the shores of the United States. I figured out how serious this was when I heard that my beloved Major League Baseball had suspended its games.

On March 16 I was on my way to a gathering in Pakenham when I learned that organizers had canceled the talks I'd planned to give in Melbourne and Perth out of concern for spreading the virus. So, with much sorrow, I told my friends in my next stop, Adelaide, that I'd decided to go home straightaway. After a last supper in Melbourne with some colleagues there on March 17, and missing a golden opportunity to connect with Nathan over a Melbourne brew—or two, I went to the airport the next day and flew back to the US, a week earlier than planned. Because I had spent many hours on board full flights, passing through airports in San Francisco and Chicago, I put myself into a two-week quarantine in Kansas City before going to the home that I share with two other Catholic priests, a residence that also serves as an office building for the members of our parish staff. I had left the US on March 3rd, and finally got back to my own apartment on April 2nd. I felt like Rip Van Winkle, a character in American fiction who drank a mysterious liquor, fell asleep, and woke up 20 years later to a very changed world. During my quarantine I had a Tasmanian single malt scotch that put me to sleep while the virus changed the world. Thanks be to God, I've been healthy through all of this, and I have been taking recommended precautions.

This virus comes from within humanity. Shockingly, we give it to one another. Human companionship is designed for greater goals: collaborative work, enjoyable play, common service, and mutual love. Our closeness to one another makes us individually more human. I feel somewhat betrayed by this virus, as if it has rebelled against me. It is not just dangerous to individual health; it thwarts the mutual exercise of human companionship. A virus rebels.

Land rebels. The Uniting Church in Australia, Synod of Victoria and Tasmania, has prepared readings across a three-year cycle for the Season of Creation. This year's Series A, The Spirit Series, "concentrates on those texts where the Spirit is breathing life into creation, suffering with creation and renewing all creation." Last Week was Forest Sunday. You still have Outback / Wilderness Sunday and River Sunday coming up. Today is Land Sunday.

I come from the State of Missouri, right in middle of the mainland United States. To the west of me opens up the Great Plains, an immense expanse of land especially suitable for agriculture. If you drive your car from Kansas City west to Denver, Colorado, without

stopping, it will take you eight and a half hours. Most people who do this say it is boring because the Great Plains are both great and plain. The landscape doesn't change very much at all. But that mesmerizing repetition of vast fields can produce a calming effect on a midwesterner like me.

So, when I told Nathan I'd choose Land Sunday among the four options in September, it was because I don't live near a forest or an outback. We do have a river, and I love our river. But in truth, I'm more a child of the land. The humble countryside around here has no snowcapped mountains, no towering redwoods, no sandy seashore—just a relatively flat expanse with gentle hills that lend sufficient interest to appreciate the subtle beauty of God's creation.

But the scriptures proposed by the Uniting Church tell another critical tale about the land. Land rebels. Pope Francis likes to quote a Spanish proverb: "God always forgives; people sometimes forgive; but nature never forgives." From the sin of Adam, enmity entered the world. As a result, the woman and her offspring do battle with the snake. The gift of childbearing requires toil and pain. The woman's desire for her husband encounters his desire for dominance.

And the land—because they ate forbidden fruit from a tree—the land rebelled against them. God said, "Cursed is the ground because of you! In toil you shall eat its yield all the days of your life. Thorns and thistles it shall bear for you, and you shall eat the grass of the field. By the sweat of your brow you shall eat bread, Until you return to the ground, from which you were taken." Yes, they were formed from the land, and they return to the land. So are you. You are earth, and to the earth you shall return.

Cain took his brother Abel into a field—not on a boat, not in the outback—into a field, and killed him there. The land rebelled against him too. God heard Cain's blood crying out from the ground. So God banned Cain from the ground; he no longer owned land, and land would no longer produce him food. Cain became a nomad, a wanderer without a land to call his home. He went to Nod, east of Eden, no longer a child of the garden.

God watched over Cain as surely as God watches over each of us. Psalm 137 says we cannot flee from God's face. "If I climb the heavens, you are there. If I lie in the grave, you are there." That is good news, not fearsome news. As St. Paul says, God was aware of the sin of Adam, but God sent grace in abundance through Jesus Christ. "The gift is not like the transgression.... For if, by the transgression of one person, death came to reign through that one, how much more will those who receive the abundance of grace and of the gift of justification come to reign in life through the one person Jesus Christ."

From Matthew's gospel Jesus gives the greatest promise for those who dwell in sin. The Pharisees ask for a sign, but he reminds them of the sign of Jonah who spent three nights in the belly of a whale. But this is not Ocean Sunday. This is not Fish Sunday. This is Land Sunday. We hear Jesus promise to redeem the land. Just as he rescued humanity from the sin of Adam, so he will redeem the earth. For as Jonah spent three days and three nights in the belly of a whale, so did the Son of Man spend three days and three nights in the heart of the earth. As God promised Adam and Eve who were made from earth that they would return to the earth, so Jesus Christ, the Son of God, accepts his death and burial into the earth, from which he rose, restoring beauty and purpose to this land.

The Spirit indeed breathes life into creation, suffers with creation and renews all creation. Christ has redeemed the land that once rebelled. With Christ at our side we live on the land,

love the land, till the land, protect the land. In Christ we provide green spaces that reveal the beauty of the earth, we preserve habitats for wildlife, we promote the biodiversity that our Creator intended, we prize the one home common to all races and ethnicities, we improve the quality of soil, we protect the land's capacity for food and fiber, we increase opportunities for recreation.

It is the earth that gave us birth, that supplies our environment, and that awaits us when we die. God created the earth and gave it to us. If we care for it well, the land will not rebel; the land will be our home.