

Our Relationship with the Land

(Sermon preached by Cheryl Williams at Footscray Baptist on November 9th, 2025 – Leviticus 25:1-2, 13-14, 23-24, Acts 5:1-6, Matthew 16:21-22, Luke 19: 8-10, Luke 20:27-38)

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Do you have a favourite landscape? Perhaps it is a stretch of red desert and blue skies. Maybe it is a forest of trees – towering Mountain Ash or Tingling trees. Maybe it is the coastline. In the poem 'My Country' by Dorothy MacKellar, which all Australian children had to learn, is the line, 'the wide brown land for me' it describes the harshness and the beauty of the land we call home.

Indigenous people would say they belong to the land, indicating the mutual relationship they have with the land, they look after it and it looks after them.

This morning, I want to explore what the bible has to say about land and our relationship to it.

First though, a word or two about how we should read the bible.

The bible is a book of truth for us, however that doesn't mean it is necessarily historical facts, indeed it contains many contradictions, but it is for us a book of wisdom to guide us.

We must remember that originally it was handed down orally, well before any of it was written down. When it was written, it was in ancient languages that few of us are able to read. It was then translated into other languages and then into English and Farsi and Tagalog etc. In those translations, well before computers and AI, many people have participated, and typos and interpretations have been made. Although we would say they were all guided and assisted by God's Spirit.

The bible also contains many kinds of literature, they are narrative stories (Gospels), historical accounts (Chronicles etc), poetry (Psalms) and apocryphal writing (Revelation). As a consequence, we must be really careful about taking verses out of context and taking things literally.

We must remember each part was written in a particular social and historic context. Then it was translated in the midst of a different social and historic, and now we read it in yet again a different social and historic context.

The original writers and storytellers were all telling the story for a particular reason, its interpreters and we, the readers, all have an unconscious bias as we read and interpret, we all see things through our own world view. There is nothing wrong with that, but just need to be honest about it.

As Christians I think the important thing we need to do is to try understand the text in the way that Jesus interprets it, through a 'Jesus' lens if you like.

Most of the readings today have something to say about our relationship with land. I have only given you a snippet from Leviticus which has many quite complicated laws about the use of and disposal of land and I have sought to provide you with some of the key elements.

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So, what does the bible have to say about how we relate to the land.

1. God made the land and everything upon it.
2. Humans are called to care for the land and all upon it.
3. Leviticus has much to say about the land and how we should relate to it. We must remember these laws arise in the midst of an agricultural culture, in a society that does not have a social welfare system and where family wealth is passed on in particular ways. So what do we see in these laws?
 - a) the land must rest every seven years, it must have a Sabbath
 - b) the land must be given back to its original owners every fifty years (Jubilee) – if we followed that practice here, all land would be held by indigenous people. There are also complicated laws about selling the land before the fifty years elapsed, outlined in Leviticus.
 - c) Land must be used to provide for the vulnerable in society.
 - d) If you sell land, you must first offer it to a relative (in order to keep it in the family) and if can't find one, then you may sell it to whomever.
 - e) To whomever you sell the land you are not to cheat them.

All these laws were in place to ensure that, in the absence of a social welfare system, everyone was taken care of, the land was cared for, and that no one was cheated.

Given their context and our very different context we must be careful about how interpret these laws from thousands of years ago.

4. In Acts reading we find a couple who are selling some land. In the early church community, which the writer of Acts describes, all property was held in common. The couple selling the land had promised to give the proceeds to the community, but they held some back, they went back on their promise, they cheated others and paid the ultimate price.

I think what helps us understand what our relationship to land and property both individually and as a church is to look at what Jesus says.

I could have chosen many readings, but I think the lectionary reading for today which is about divorce, helps us see how Jesus appropriates the Hebrew laws thousands of years after they were written. In the story Jesus is presented with a situation where tragically a woman marries brother after brother (because they all die) in order to keep the family line as the law required. The question is – to which of them will she be married in heaven.

How does Jesus respond? Basically, he says – wrong question. The laws will not apply in the kingdom, there will be no marriage in the heavenly kingdom, relationships with each other will be of a different order.

In case we think that is a one off, think about what Jesus does with the ten commandments – he basically rewrites them and summarises them into two – Love God with all your heart, soul, strength and mind and love your neighbour as yourself.

However, Jesus does have a bit to say in all of the gospels about what we should do with land, property, possessions and wealth.

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To the rich young man, Jesus says if you want to follow him, to be part of this new way, then he must sell his possessions and give the proceeds to the poor. Something, that last week we saw Zaccheus do, selling his possessions to give to the poor and paying back four-fold any he has cheated. You can think of many other instructions Jesus gives people about money and possessions.

So where does this leave us? I think that we can say:

1. God created the land and everything upon it.
2. Humans are called to care for the land.
3. Land should be used to care for the vulnerable, for the common good.
4. When buying or selling land, don't cheat the other party.

We are called to be good stewards of the land which our ancestors have left for us, that is their legacy for us. What will be our legacy for those who come after us? Amen.