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These preaching notes are placed here for the benefit of the deaf community at Christ Church. If others find them helpful that is fine, but note that are not in publishable format. They are simply preaching notes.

The earth is the Lord's!

We're continuing the series on the environment. And this week we are looking at the issue of land.

The earth is the Lord's we read – but do we treat it as such? Do we look after it for him? How cared for is the earth here in SA?

As we drive round it looks so wonderful and open and vast and limitless.

I am going to give a very quick overview. Please forgive what's missing.

It is largely over grazed and over stocked. It is burnt more than is natural - some amount of burning is natural but too much encourages invasive alien species and destertification. All of which lead to soil erosion.

Intensive high tech agriculture using deadly pesticides [which take up to 50 yrs to clear from the soil]. We have dammed up rivers depriving the land below and life below. We have planted vines up hillsides changing the eco systems of the area. The proliferation of vine yards in itself has a devastating effect on the wild life – animals and insects cannot survive in there.

And its not just the dry earth that we are damaging - We have polluted rivers with the run off from pesticides, and of course with waste from factories, and industry in general. And when we're not polluting is we're consuming huge amounts. No end to golf courses going up and we personally use huge amounts of water – esp as Jonathan told us last week, us in the southern suburbs –in our dish washers, washing machines, baths, showers, sprinklers and environmental nightmare the pool. [hth]

A lot of this can be debated but now is not the time. I think we would all agree - our land is not in a healthy condition. 80% of our land is

agricultural – but only 11% is arable and we have degraded nearly 20% of that.

So we have abused the land.

And on top of that we have abused one another's access to the land.

During the apartheid era as we know, people were dispossessed of their land and forcibly removed to other areas where the land was not as good or valuable. It was grossly unfair at the time and it has left a legacy of inequality and insecurity among a large proportion of the population. Thirteen million people were sent to homelands – 28% of the population was sent to 13% of the land where land was communal and rights are still unclear. There was severe overcrowding which had long term socio-economic and environmental consequences.

Added to that -

Workers on private farms have always been insecure about their rights on the farm [even though many are treated well they still don't own the land they live on] and thousands have been evicted over the years.

Plus -

Migration in pursuit of work has led to gross overcrowding in townships and informal settlements and in inhumane living conditions. These conditions degrade the environment and breed crime, ill-health and resentment as we saw recently.

Access to land is one of our most socially and politically sensitive issues and it has the potential to explode at any point. May not hit us that much in the city but anyone connected to the land knows. We've had land invasions in Zim, and the 2005 Land Summit here. Now we have removal of land for restitution purposes which is not being done well or fairly which is causing anx to all parties - plus the debate over

foreign ownership like the sale of the entire waterfront – all these are raising the profile of the land issue in all sectors.

And this isn't only about land in the country side of course. People were forcibly removed from the best parts of the towns and cities too. It is very evident as we drive around ct today that certain people can afford different areas. The drive out on the NT is a very clear reminder. No mater what your salary is its very hard to sell your house in Khayelitsha and buy into a suburb near the best schools. In short we have abused the land – and one another's access to it.

How did we get to this highly sensitive and unstable situation? Because if we look at what the Bible says about land there are 4 principles that ought to govern our use of land.

Firstly – Land is a gift from God – to be justly shared for the benefit of all.

Secondly – Ownership is not absolute – we are stewards of God's land can't run off with bits of and do with it what we like.

Thirdly – the 50 year Jubilee tradition ensured that land stayed evenly distributed. Every 50 yrs land reverted to the original owner – and the land had been equally distributed between the tribes. This meant that one group did not own the majority of the land or over accumulate.

And lastly – the Sabbath year left the land fallow for a year and let it rest. It is not God's will that we strip the land of its fertility robbing future generations.

These 4 principles protect us from one another and the land from us. But we don't live by these. What principles govern us? Judging by the state of things – it seems to be fear and greed. As we look at the stock market crash around us it seems clear that a lot of people are driven by greed. [they may have responded in sheer terror in the recent months but it was greed that got the markets to the state they got to]

But I think for most of us it is fear that effects us. We are afraid that we won't have enough so we harbor more. We put our trust in what we can see in our accounts – not God's provision. This makes us

accumulate more than we need. It motivates us to hang onto what we don't use. Fear makes it hard to think about the needs of others. What if I don't have enough one day??

In contrast, in this morning's reading the early believers shared all that they owned. And there were no needy people among them. Barnabas sells a piece of land and gives all the proceeds to the benefit of the Christian community. This is highlighted against poor Sapphira & Ananias in Acts 5 who only give some of the proceeds of their land and get zapped. Always a great text for evangelism don't you think – have a relationship with a loving God who only kills you if you withhold half your property. Real winner. This text needs explanation – it was not that they withheld some of the proceeds but that they lied. They pretended to have brought everything as a gift but they had kept money for themselves. They lied to the HS in front of what was up till then pure Christian community. Some have likened it to Adam and Eve's sin – for the first time sin was brought into this shiny new world or in this case – new start. It was not the bringing only some – which is after all very generous – it was that they introduced deception and very importantly motivating that, they had not trusted God enough. They had wanted to hang onto their own money. Lack of trust and lack of truth. Hence the swift and strong reaction.

Barnabas, however, had acted with total trust, dependency and generosity. He was saying he trusted in God to provide, he would depend on God totally and could therefore be totally generous. He didn't need anything of his own. And he was right - Barnabas would soon have no need of land because he ended up traveling with Paul.

So – am I about to suggest we all go home and sell our houses and give our proceeds to the church? Certainly make John Mcp very happy. But we're not living in the same situation as the first Christians. Not establishing a new community. Sad in a way but rather nice not to worry about death by stoning or being a lion snack. No we are in an entirely different situation and looking at the problem of land and fair access to it. Would we deal with this problem today by selling our properties? No – they'd only be bought

by those that could afford them which would not be the point. And to give them away? Even I am not that naive. There are lots of agendas out there and Zim is hardly an encouraging example.

However, what Barnabas and the early church did is still relevant to us: being generous, making what we have available to others, holding on to what we have lightly and acknowledging that it ultimately came from God, being dependant on him - can only be a good thing. Good for the communities in which we live and good for us. Think of how letting go of things benefited Barnabas.

Like the early Christians we need to trust more, to depend more and hence to be able to be more generous. Most importantly we need to put God's agenda ahead of our own.

How do we do this? esp in these financially difficult and politically uncertain times? Tendency to want to batton down the hatches and hang on tightly to what you have. How do we become more trusting and able to be more generous? Well its like that daft kids joke – how do you eat an elephant? One mouthful at a time.

2 things we can do to help with those mouthfuls -

1/ We can encourage one another to do that by hearing how trusting God has worked for others.

Because most people have a story to tell. And by listening to one another's stories and having people tell us what is happening in their lives when they trusted, we will be encouraged to trust too. Barnabas was originally called Joseph but was given his new name because it meant 'encourager'.

[Sally Bingham's testimony ]

This is not the prosperity gospel. Look at the early church – look at Jesus. Nowhere does it say follow Jesus and you'll get rich. It says trust God, put him first, do the right thing and you'll know his love for you. He won't let you down.

Another encouraging story is Gerry Adlard's. Great things he hath down.

2/ Taking stock of our own lives.

Because when we stop and take stock we'll see we are probably already doing things that are generous and require trust and we'll see how God has honored that. This will encourage us to step out more.

It happened in our family recently. Most of us have been affected by the down turn and a family member was slow at work when they were offered a nice lucrative deal. But being Christians they were concerned about the company's ethics. So with much anxiety they turned it down. 2 weeks later they were with us saying they could not believe how much work they had. It had come crawling out of the wood work from all over! We didn't see the link straight away but realised later that God had honoured their trust and pointed it out. That was very encouraging. So listen to others but also look back – sometimes a long way – and Take stock.

I'm going to tell you my own perhaps rather silly story.

By reflecting on God's work in our own lives, by listening to God's work in other people's we will be encouraged to trust God more, to depend on his provision not our own bank accounts and therefore be free to be generous with what we have and live by his grace.

Now those of you that are concentrating will have noticed that I started looking at soil erosion and am now saying trust God and be generous. And you're probably wondering how I'm going to pull all this together! I wondered myself at times!

but here goes.

We have a massive problem with land in this country. The way it's been treated and the way we have treated one another in relation to it. This later injustice has worsened the condition of the land. Our actions were motivated by fear and largely continue to be so. We got here by not trusting God and by pursuing our own agendas. Pursuing profits and pursuing the rights of some whilst abusing those of others. Because we didn't trust God to provide.

So what can we do? Firstly we need to stop living lives of fear. We need to build our trust of God. We say he is in control and cares deeply about our needs. Lets act on that. This is not a prosperity gospel – we may not live as lavishly as we'd like – but putting God first, and that inevitably includes one another - is the only right way to live. We know that. So we must put the fear aside and learn to depend on his provision. Who'd trust the markets now anyway? To help build ourselves in this it helps to share stories and take stock. will this undo the crisis? Well the 2 are connected but different. environment and injustice. We won't solve the environment by sponsoring a disadvantaged child thru school. But we will help with injustice. Won't solve the whole problem either – the land issue won't dissolve over night because a few of us make an effort - but its like Craig said bring your loaves and fish and let God work. Let him heal relationships in this country.

But in terms of the environment what can we do? Become aware - you may be all awared out – don't get jaded. Support good policy. Help implement it.

And pray. As you did before 1994. pray for God's intervention and power. Pray we can heal our land and avert a full blown crisis over land.

So lets build up our trust in God and his provision. Lets support good and just policy and lets pray and know that God can work a miracle.