A biblical reflection
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Introduction
We find ourselves at a key moment in the story of humanity’s engagement with the earth and her creatures. The melting of polar ice sheets and mountain glaciers, a rapid decline in insect numbers and increasingly extreme weather patterns are just some of the symptoms of our negative effect on the rest of God’s creation.

Action is urgent, and needs to happen at all levels, in all societies. Individuals, communities, businesses, corporations and nations must all be involved. Any such change in behaviour must in part be inspired by analysis and ideas. The way that we view the world affects our behaviour towards it. And the Judaeo-Christian tradition is a rich resource for shaping such change.

Theological engagement with the issue is vital, and at Church Mission Society we are excited to be working in partnership with many who are involved in this combination of ideas and action to care for the earth. This reflection aims to be another resource in support of those partners, and to encourage this urgent work.

There are two versions of the great story of beginnings in the book of Genesis. This reflection looks at the version in chapter two. In this account the role of God and the place of humanity are both given dramatic emphasis. The creation is God’s, but we are given a key role in care for it.
These are the generations of the heavens and the earth when they were created. In the day that the Lord God made the earth and the heavens, when no plant of the field was yet in the earth and no herb of the field had yet sprung up – for the Lord God had not caused it to rain upon the earth, and there was no one to till the ground; but a stream would rise from the earth, and water the whole face of the ground – then the Lord God formed man from the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and the man became a living being. And the Lord God planted a garden in Eden, in the east; and there he put the man whom he had formed. Out of the ground the Lord God made to grow every tree that is pleasant to the sight and good for food, the tree of life also in the midst of the garden, and the tree of the knowledge of good and evil.

A river flows out of Eden to water the garden, and from there it divides and becomes four branches. The name of the first is Pishon; it is the one that flows around the whole land of Havilah, where there is gold; and the gold of that land is good; bdellium and onyx stone are there. The name of the second river is Gihon; it is the one that flows around the whole land of Cush. The name of the third river is Tigris, which flows east of Assyria. And the fourth river is the Euphrates.

The Lord God took the man and put him in the garden of Eden to till it and keep it. And the Lord God commanded the man, “You may freely eat of every tree of the garden; but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall die.”

Genesis 2:4–17
Reflection

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The opening of this account is an invitation to take a long view. To see creation from God’s perspective. Unconstrained by our limited notions of time and space. And to understand that earth and heaven are linked, the boundaries between them porous.

This invitation is absolutely not an excuse for inaction in care for the earth, but it is an encouragement to see our work as part of a greater story. With a deep past, a momentous present and a boundless future. There is a vital urgency to the work. But we can take encouragement from this long-term perspective. In God’s grace, deeper patterns of creation, re-creation, healing and flourishing are at work.

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Creation is God’s work. Before humanity was, the rest of creation came into being. The earth and her creatures – indeed the whole cosmos – have beauty, dignity and meaning before human presence. So to nurture awe at the wonder of creation is part of our calling. Look up into the skies, walk in the fields, stand at the ocean’s edge. Everything belongs, everything has beauty!

But humanity is also part of God’s creation. Formed “from the dust of the ground” we are people intimately connected to the earth. As living beings our life comes from the Creator God, whose breath animates us. These compelling images give weight to both the privilege and task of being human on the earth. What will we do with the breath that flows in and out from our bodies in the time that it is gifted to us? The passage hints that we have a role. To till the ground that is watered by the stream. To care for it, and to enable it to be fruitful.
And the Lord God planted a garden in Eden, in the east; and there he put the man whom he had formed.

The garden is such an insightful model for our care of creation. At its best a garden is both useful and beautiful, a source of sustenance and of inspiration. Our call is to be good gardeners, thoughtful, alert and diligent, working with the soil and with the rhythm of the seasons, caring for the creatures who find home and shelter in the garden.

There’s a symmetry here with Revelation 22 at the other end of the great story of Scripture. Here a river is pictured running through the heavenly city, with the tree of life on either side of the river, the leaves of which are “for the healing of the nations”. So the biblical story begins and ends with a flourishing garden, bringing healing to all.

In Genesis the first man is put in the first garden in the east. Each of us is put somewhere. Our care for the earth must begin wherever we are. Your garden is where you live and work. How will you care for it? How will you “till the ground”?

Out of the ground the Lord God made to grow every tree that is pleasant to the sight and good for food, the tree of life also in the midst of the garden, and the tree of the knowledge of good and evil.

The earth provides beauty to inspire us and food to sustain us. But its capacity to do so is under threat. We know that an immediate action we can take to help protect the earth is for all of us to eat less meat. What other actions might we begin?

In the Genesis account there are two trees in the garden. The tree of life and the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. Then first tree seems easier to understand, a symbol at the centre of the garden of God’s gift of life, of God’s commitment to flourishing and healing.

The tree of the knowledge of good and evil is perhaps more demanding to understand. But in our times perhaps it’s a reminder of weight of the choices that we make, for better or for worse. To care for the earth will demand much of us.
A river flows out of Eden to water the garden, and from there it divides and becomes four branches. The name of the first is Pishon; it is the one that flows around the whole land of Havilah, where there is gold; and the gold of that land is good; bdellium and onyx stone are there. The name of the second river is Gihon; it is the one that flows around the whole land of Cush. The name of the third river is Tigris, which flows east of Assyria. And the fourth river is the Euphrates.

This section of the Genesis story has a prophetic edge. In our times fresh water is already a contested resource, and it seems likely that in the future it may increasingly be fought over. How might we best get involved to make sure that fresh water flows to all?

The Lord God took the man and put him in the garden of Eden to till it and keep it. And the Lord God commanded the man, “You may freely eat of every tree of the garden; but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall die.”

At this point our calling as humanity becomes clearer. To till and to keep the garden. To care for the earth. To safeguard its future. To nurture and to share its resources. For the earth is a gift, providing food and sustenance so that all “may freely eat”.

The passage ends with a warning. Knowledge of what is true or untrue is of course not the problem. It’s what we do with such knowledge. Currently there seem to be many deliberate attempts to subvert, ignore or replace what is true with falsehoods masquerading as truth. Opposition to the science of climate change takes many forms. The warning of Scripture is stark, if we choose to eat of that subversive fruit of falsehood.
The Call in Action

As you reflect on what you might do to till and keep the garden, you might want to sign up for updates from or support these mission partners working to care for the earth:

Dave Bookless (UK/International) – churchmissionsociety.org/bookless
Kailean and Kim Khongsai (Southall, UK) – churchmissionsociety.org/khongsai
Andrew and Maria Leake (Argentina) – churchmissionsociety.org/leake
Eric and Sandra Read (Philippines) – churchmissionsociety.org/read
David and Heather Sharland (South Sudan) – churchmissionsociety.org/sharland

You can find more information from A Rocha, an organisation that partners with CMS:

A Rocha UK (www.arocha.org.uk)
A Rocha International (www.arocha.org)

Take the Eco Church challenge
Eco Church (https://ecochurch.arocha.org.uk)