

# Good Soil

A place for growth and nurture

## Session 3.4: TERRITORY

### INTRODUCTION: STEWARDSHIP - FAITH IN ACTION

In this series of four sessions, we are thinking about how we put our faith into action. What is our loving response to God? **How can we be good stewards of our *time, talents, treasure and territory*?**

These sessions have touched on many issues, perhaps challenging us about our lifestyles, habits, attitudes, and use of resources. They are not meant to be demanding or overbearing, but rather designed to gently lead us into a place where we can trust and serve God. Take and use whatever is helpful to you in this material. Most of all, enjoy the time spent sharing and thinking together.

### PREPARATION FOR GROUP LEADERS

Please remember to keep in touch with your group and remind them of the date and time of the session. As we come to the end of this series, please do ask the group for a bit of feedback. *What have they enjoyed or found useful? Have they felt able to share with the group or contribute? Have they felt they have grown in faith or commitment?*

A **group activity** suggested in this session involves drawing diagrams, so please be prepared with some A4 paper to offer round, and some good pens (felt-tips or markers, in different colours if possible).

## THINKING ABOUT TERRITORY (to read at home)

The final session on our series on stewardship looks at the theme of **territory**. It's not a topic we often discuss in church.

*What do you think of as being **your territory**? Your home? Your land? Your country? Your area of expertise? Your areas of responsibility, perhaps?* Territory can be a physical place with boundaries, or it can be an imagined realm where we have some control. It could be your job or vocation, your special subject, your classroom, your workshop, your club or church, your garden or kitchen, your sense of calling to a particular role. There are many things we might see as our territory. And of course, all of this takes place on the territory we share, the planet earth.

The Psalms tell us:

*The earth is the LORD's and all that is in it,  
the world, and those who live in it... (Psalm 24, verse 1)*

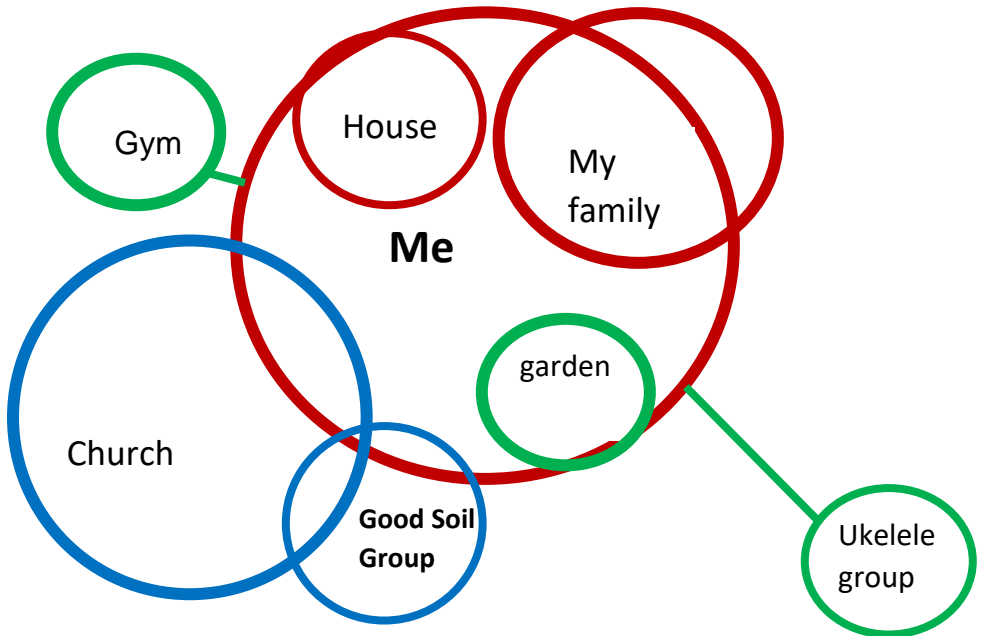
The Bible tells us that everything we have belongs to God. While we often think of things as 'belonging to us' (*my* possession, *my* area of control), Christians are encouraged to think of all things as being given to us by God, for God's purposes. This is stewardship.

Genesis reminds us (rather bleakly, in chapter 3, verse 19) that we are dust and to dust we shall return! Jesus offers us the gift of eternal life, and a place in God's house, but that does not mean that our *territory* will last for ever (no matter how hard we try to hold onto it). When Jesus looked at the grandeur and splendour of the temple in Jerusalem, he reminded his followers that it would not last forever (Luke 21:5-6. Mark 13:1-2). The temple was indeed destroyed in AD 70, and that area was to become disputed territory from then on.

In the Bible, **land** was an important marker of identity for the people of Israel, as well as being vital for their life and well-being. Disputes over territory still today cause great suffering and pain. We can find hints in the Bible of how the territory we have should be a blessing to be shared. There has never been a more pressing need to think carefully about the land we share, and how to respect and protect it.

## STARTING THE SESSION: FINDING OUR ROOTS

Individually, on a piece of A4 paper, draw a large circle in the middle and label this 'Me' (or write your name in it). Then think of all of the different 'areas' of your life, for example: family, home, church, work, volunteering, responsibilities, hobbies. Try to draw these as smaller circles, in or around the larger circle that is you. Where you feel you own or have responsibility for something, let that circle overlap with yours. If you are completely in control of it, place it fully inside your circle. If you have a link to an item but no responsibility for it, place it outside of your circle, but with a line drawn to connect it. (Some might have lots of circles, and some not as many, but try to think of as many as you can.) Here is an example:



You might like to use colours to shade the areas of overlap, or to do different boundaries in different colours. Spend about five minutes on this. When you've made a diagram, talk to another person in your group about yours, listen to them, and compare diagrams. The whole exercise should take about 15 minutes in total.

## A PRAYER

Creator God, giver of all good things,  
as we think about the areas of life you have blessed us with and  
those things you have given us to look after,  
help us to open our hearts to you and to one another,  
to be good stewards of all you have made,  
and to tread lightly on this earth, with hands willing to share.  
We pray in the name of our Lord,  
who had no earthly place to call his own  
and was faithful with all you had given him, Jesus Christ.  
Amen.

## READING THE SCRIPTURES AND DIGGING DEEPER

We will look briefly in this session at three different types of territory: **our homes**, where we will think about the importance of hospitality, **our planet**, where we will think about environmental sustainability, and **our callings**, where we will reflect on how we share in God's work and co-operate with others.

### (1) HOME

#### Reading: 1 Peter 4: 7-11 (New Revised Standard Version)

*The end of all things is near, therefore be serious and discipline yourselves for the sake of your prayers. <sup>8</sup> Above all, maintain constant love for one another, for love covers a multitude of sins. <sup>9</sup> Be hospitable to one another without complaining. <sup>10</sup> Like good stewards of the manifold grace of God, serve one another with whatever gift each of you has received. <sup>11</sup> Whoever speaks must do so as one speaking the very words of God; whoever serves must do so with the strength that God supplies, so that God may be glorified in all things through Jesus Christ. To him belong the glory and the power for ever and ever. Amen.*

This is one of several mentions of **hospitality** in the New Testament (verse 9), and sets it in the context of good stewardship: serving one another. Hospitality is something that was already a well-established Jewish practice, and is very important to many other faiths. A well-known story is that of Abraham and Sarah who welcomed three visitors to their tent, showed them good hospitality, and they turned out to be messengers from God (Genesis 18:1-15). This is alluded to in a verse from the Letter to the Hebrews:

*Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by doing that some have entertained angels without knowing it.* (Hebrews 13:2, NRSV)

The Bible suggests that hospitality to **strangers** is just as important as hospitality to friends. *How easy or difficult do we find this? What do we need to be careful of? Is it perhaps safer and wiser to offer hospitality to strangers in pairs or groups, rather than as individuals?*

*How much do you think of your home as being a place of **hospitality**, or is it simply a place where you live?*

*When you welcome friends and family to your home, what do you do to show them hospitality? If a friend (or church visitor) comes to your home unexpectedly, how easy do you find it to be hospitable?*

As a church community, the house that we share is our church building. It is a place of worship, but also a place of community and hospitality. *Do you think of the church as being a place you can invite friends to? What do we do as a church to show hospitality to friends and strangers alike? In what other ways could we show hospitality? Do you feel you are a giver or receiver of our church hospitality?*

Hospitality is also an issue for our country. Asylum seekers and refugees are people in desperate need, who are begging for hospitality and a place of refuge. *In the light of our Christian faith, the teachings of Jesus and the Bible, what is our responsibility to care for and show hospitality to our fellow human beings? Does it matter that they are*

strangers or from other countries? Can it ever be right to actively legislate against hospitality, or to say ‘you are not welcome’?

## (2) PLANET

For this second part of thinking about our territory, we go back to one of the creation accounts in Genesis.

### **Reading: Genesis 2: 4-9 (New Revised Standard Version)**

*In the day that the LORD God made the earth and the heavens, <sup>5</sup> 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; <sup>6</sup> but a stream would rise from the earth, and water the whole face of the ground— <sup>7</sup> 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. <sup>8</sup> And the LORD God planted a garden in Eden, in the east; and there he put the man whom he had formed. <sup>9</sup> 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.*

Verse 5 says, ‘*there was no one to till the ground*’. The earth had been created but there were no gardeners. Who would look after the creation? So, God created human beings. In the first chapter (when we get a different perspective on the creation story), the emphasis seems to be on human beings ‘dominating’ the animals and ‘subduing’ the earth (Genesis 1:28). We have to bear in mind the overall character and purposes of God in understanding our purpose as God’s image-bearing people. But, in chapter 2 it is much clearer that God placed us in a garden to be gardeners – for the flourishing of the planet.

*Do we think of the planet as being our responsibility? Or should we just leave looking after it to others?*

*How important is it to try to leave this earthly territory ‘as we found it’ or are we content to leave it in a worse condition for future generations?*

*What ways can you think of to make small positive differences to the environment around you?*

*Now that we know more about the ‘good and evil’ we can do to the planet, does this give us greater responsibility? How can we deal with the mental burden of knowing how to make the world better but, as a society of 8 billion people, struggling to make much headway? What is needed as an international community to make more positive difference?*

*What do you love or enjoy about the environment around you? How can you make that part of the earth more fruitful, joyful or welcoming?*

### **(3) CALLING**

We are all called to be human, in God’s image. Jesus invites us to be his disciples, and to use our gifts and talents for God’s purposes and the common good. Our next passage takes us to the first Easter Day:

#### **Reading: John 20: 19-23 (New Revised Standard Version)**

*<sup>19</sup> When it was evening on that day, the first day of the week, and the doors of the house where the disciples had met were locked for fear of the Jews, Jesus came and stood among them and said, ‘Peace be with you.’ <sup>20</sup> After he said this, he showed them his hands and his side. Then the disciples rejoiced when they saw the Lord. <sup>21</sup> Jesus said to them again, ‘Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you.’ <sup>22</sup> When he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, ‘Receive the Holy Spirit. <sup>23</sup> If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained.’*

‘As the Father has sent me, so I send you’ (verse 21). Jesus makes it clear to the disciples that he is inviting them to be part of the *continuation* his work and the work of God the Father. Ultimately, it is

God's work. They received the Holy Spirit for this ministry, and the Spirit is available to us today. When Jesus sent out his disciples on mission, he usually sent them out in pairs (see Luke 10:1-2). Working *together* in ministry and mission has always been the Jesus-way.

But often, when people have a 'calling', it can be easy to slip into thinking of that vocation in terms of 'ownership', not 'co-operation'. Sometimes, we can get very defensive about the things we have been called to (or asked to do by the church), and this 'territorial' attitude can be detrimental to the work of the church, or off-putting to others.

*Do you recognise any of this tendency in yourself? How do you feel when others 'trespass' on your area?*

*How can we take seriously our callings and responsibilities, while being open to others sharing in that work? What are the benefits and blessings that can flow from allowing others to share freely in our work and even to allow them to make mistakes and learn? And when is it actually important to take responsibility for what you have been appointed to do?*

*Do we set boundaries on our mission as a church? What are the limits of God's love, and how has Jesus broken down barriers?*

*Finally, how comforting or daunting do you find it to know that you are sharing in God's work? How can we know God's help in the tasks we feel called to do?*

## PRAYING TOGETHER

- Thank God for this planet, for our homes, and for the ways God calls us to share in making the world a better place;
- Pray for those who are struggling find a place to live, or to keep a roof over their heads;
- Pray for an increasing and abundant sense of hospitality in our neighbourhoods, our church, and our country;
- Pray for those who are in need of refuge or hospitality;
- You might like to say **the Lord's Prayer** together.



*Some words of a hymn to reflect on:*

One human family God has made,  
and all for each to care.

One world, to be the home of all,  
with all its wealth to share.

One Christ, to manifest on earth  
love's ultimate design.

One Church to know the mystery  
of broken bread and wine.

One race, one world – yet torn apart,  
we spurn the way of love.

But still ahead, the Christ leads on  
and calls his Church to move  
from love of power to power of love,  
to give the world to all –  
to trust the love that conquered death,  
outside a city wall.

And are we brave enough to join  
with that great company –  
the cost not less than all we have  
and are or hope to be –  
the bitter cup of human sin  
to drink with him who died,  
and take his love outside the wall  
to all the crucified?

Claim him who claims us for his own,  
to share his pain and grief,  
to bear the scars that stamp us his –  
the hallmark of belief.

As partners of the living Christ,  
who risk the path he trod,  
with wondering love we find we share  
the timeless joy of God.

by **Rosemary Wakelin** (born 1932),  
Taken from *Singing the Faith*, no. **687**.

## **SUGGESTED SONGS TO LISTEN TO (or your own choice)**

You can find these by searching on  **YouTube**

or clicking on the links below:

***Heal our Land***, by Kari Jobe.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4fq8ffjcEcU>

***Heal our Land (Come and Move)***, by Maverick City Music.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2uTMdWYQQeE>

**COMING SOON in GOOD SOIL...**

**Session 4.1: FAITH**

**Session 4.2: HOPE**

**Session 4.3: LOVE**

**Good Soil:** Material written and produced by Andrew Murphy & Melissa Wheeler  
© 2023 East Mercia Methodist Circuit (except where indicated).