



Good Fruit

We live what we believe. Do we believe the earth is the Lord's?

BY JAMES READ

We say, “The earth is the Lord’s, and everything in it” (Psalm 24:1), but do we believe it? I know some people act to save the earth, not just talk about it. Unfortunately, their efforts are frequently forgotten or tokenized.

For instance, Sunbury Court, famous in Salvation Army history as the place where the first High Council was held, needed major renovations in 2013. A new accommodations building was constructed with LEED environmental standards, including a green roof to absorb CO², and bat houses in the walls to protect the local habitat. But last year, when I wanted to find out more about the rationale for adopting these standards, the staff I asked unfortunately knew nothing of this history.

In Norway, the territorial leadership has encouraged corps to join the Green Church movement. I was told the corps sergeant-major who had been tapped to lead a working group was an “eco-restauranteur.” He is an agronomist with international experience, whose years in Namibia made him aware of the fragility of the environment. Now back in Norway, he wrote to say, “We were involved in a national Green Church

focus some years back, but only a few of our corps became involved and none of them have this on the agenda today. This has been taken more seriously and to a much higher level in other churches. We are lagging behind.”

My home corps in Winnipeg may not be a lot better. Thanks to the initiative of a few, we now use fully recyclable, compostable plates, cups and cutlery, and the cups are filled with fair trade tea or coffee. People seem to agree that although this may cost a little more, it’s the right thing to do. But we have stopped there. Debbie Clarke, one of the determined spirits who led the way at our corps, also heads the Prairie East emergency disaster services (EDS) ministry. About five years ago, she wanted to make the EDS community response unit “green” (and has done so since), but at the time was only able to get coffee cups with the Red Shield logo in Styrofoam.

I know there are individuals who translate the sentiment of Psalm 24:1 into action, but they seem too rare a breed. We turn them into superheroes to admire rather than exemplars to follow. Why is that, I wonder?

Perhaps we tell ourselves that ecological problems are so large and com-

plex that whatever we do (or don’t do) can’t make much of a difference. That’s probably true. On my own I can’t heal the earth. That is why policy, regulation and laws—carrots and sticks that apply to everyone—are so important. When gas at the pump dropped 40 cents a litre because of COVID-19, it made me happy rather than sad. Suppose government regulations incentivized electric vehicles instead (e.g., by making them cheaper to buy than cars fuelled by gas). The behaviour of whole nations would change.

Perhaps it’s our trouble with thinking long term. Sometimes news of the latest superstorm seems apocalyptic and I despair of any efforts to salvage things. Other times, the things scientists advocate (e.g., keeping climate change under a 2 C increase) seems so small and slow moving that I relax, knowing I’ll be dead before the limit is hit. If only I could hear Scripture as more than poetic hyperbole when it says that God cares to the thousandth generation (see Deuteronomy 7:9), perhaps my attitude would change. I may not be able to imagine the thousandth generation, but surely I can imagine the world of my grandchildren.

Perhaps it’s that I figure God will take care of it because it’s his, and that I don’t have to worry because not one sparrow “will fall to the ground outside your Father’s care” (Matthew 10:29). Some Christians seem to count on the scriptural promise God will sovereignly create a renewed heaven and earth overflowing with abundance for all (see Revelation 21). I am reminded, however, that Scripture also says God assigned people the job of taking care of the first garden he planted (see Genesis 2), and that God expected people to care about the welfare of plants and animals even after the Fall (see Exodus 23:10-11; Luke 14:5). Caring for creation is part of what being made in God’s image means. And if I don’t know how to take care of the earth now, how will I know how to do it in the New Jerusalem?

Jesus said, “You will know them by their fruits” (Matthew 7:16 *NRSV*). By that measure, don’t I have to wonder whether I really believe the earth is the Lord’s? ☹

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