

THOUGHT FOR THE DAY – TUESDAY, 23RD APRIL 2024
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This week, to mark World Earth Day, the Hindustan Times offered its readers 20 inspiring quotes, as “a powerful reminder of our collective duty to protect and cherish our planet.” It included Mahatma Gandhi’s well-known observation that “The earth has enough for everyone’s needs, but not for everyone’s greed.”

I’ve just returned from a trip to Canada, which included a spectacular rail journey across the Rockies from Banff to Vancouver. I’d given a talk at the University of Calgary on the story of creation in the Book of Genesis, and the need to rediscover a sense of our human place within rather than over and against the natural world.

I reflected on this as the train trundled from snow-capped mountains through verdant springtime meadows, past rushing rivers and sparkling lakes. In such landscapes, the words of Genesis ring out with glorious clarity: “God saw all that he had made, and it was very good.” (Genesis 1:31)

But the freedom to travel is a luxury available only to citizens of wealthy nations, and it comes at a high environmental and social cost. As the climate crisis intensifies, with the spiraling threats of war, poverty, drought, and famine, ever more people will be forced to flee, with fewer and fewer places of refuge. Rich nations will become fortresses, and the poor will have no place of safety on this earth.

Traveling through the Rockies we saw forests that were ravaged by fires last year - spreading suffocating smoke over large parts of Canada and the United States. Nature is no respecter of border controls. Ultimately, we are all vulnerable to the devastation caused by floods and fires, storms and droughts. Might today’s affluent tourists become tomorrow’s homeless refugees, and who will offer us refuge?

In the Book of Genesis, humans are given responsibility for the rest of creation, with a finite freedom in relation to nature. We’re told not to eat of the tree of knowledge of good and evil, or we’ll surely die. I see this as a warning not to violate what Pope Francis calls “the intrinsic dignity of the world”.

This is the borderline that constrains our hubristic desire for godlike power over nature. Today, it’s the only border that really matters, if we are to avert a looming catastrophe. Only by uniting across all our artificial human boundaries and barriers will we be able to rediscover our place of belonging within this earth, which has enough for everyone’s needs, but not for everyone’s greed.