

Sunday 27th January 2018

10.30am Church Centre

Environment &
Responsibility

1 Introduction

It's easy to say we ought to care for the environment, but what does that mean for us as Christians? Why should we be concerned about the environment? I want to try and answer these questions today.

I think it has only been within my lifetime, post 2nd World War that the Government and society as a whole has taken concerted action to protect the environment. For instance, after the 2nd world war we became concerned about air pollution from coal burning fires and the choking smogs that occurred.

Then internationally there was a realisation that you couldn't keep on testing nuclear weapons into the atmosphere because of the long-lasting effects of radiation fall-out. And the corollary to that was that nuclear war could destroy all life on this planet.

Global Warming is now seen as the biggest global issue that could impact everyone. There is now a general consensus that global warming is being exacerbated by humanity – ignoring the Trumpites, who in the post-modern way of thinking, have simply decided not to believe the accumulating evidence, and instead make their own truth.

Views of Christians on caring for the environment

Christians have a variety of views about care for the environment and how it relates to their faith. Dave Bookless in his book 'Planetwise' identifies three – helpfully all beginning with the letter 'I'

- 2 Firstly – 'insidious'; that is ecology and environmental issues are a bit dodgy – something that New-age and Green movements get involved with; lots of tree hugging and worshipping nature.
- 3 Secondly – 'irrelevant'; caring for the earth is not important for Christians, after all:
 - Isn't the gospel just about spiritual, and not material matters?
 - God's prime concern is about our souls not our bodies so shouldn't we focus on evangelism rather than worrying about the planet;
 - Our focus should be on heaven not earth;
 - isn't the planet going to be destroyed anyway at the second coming.

This last point is actually seen as a reason by some Christians in America to pollute as much as they like to hasten the second coming – things will get so bad God will have to bring in the second coming. President Reagan's first interior secretary – an evangelical Christian - said: *"God gave us these things to use. After the last tree is felled Christ will come back"*.

- 4 Thirdly 'incidental'; I am glad someone's caring for the planet, but it doesn't have to be me. It's just for the

enthusiasts – special interest groups. In other words, this is just a peripheral issue, not something special like prayer which everyone has to be involved with.

Before I get any further into this sermon, I want to drop the word “environment”. It is nicely vague and doesn’t help us in relating our world to God. Instead I want to talk about creation – that is God’s creation, our relationship to it, and involvement in it.

Theology and Biblical Exposition

So, let’s start with what the Bible has to say. If we look at Genesis chapter 1, part of which was read to us, we learn that:

God created the universe – how he did it we are not told, and that is not what the Bible is for – sufficient to know that by whatever means God was the instigator and is the sustainer of creation.

Some important theology streams from this.

Firstly, creation is separate from God. So God doesn’t equal creation as pantheists believe - in other words everything is God. Neither did God simply set it up and let it run of its own accord – as you used to wind up watches. He cares for it. Listen to some words from Psalm 65 v 8-9 speaking of God:

5 ⁸ *The whole earth is filled with awe at your wonders;
where morning dawns, where evening fades,
you call forth songs of joy.*

*⁹ You care for the land and water it;
you enrich it abundantly.*

*The streams of God are filled with water
to provide the people with corn,
for so you have ordained it.*

God is still at work sustaining creation.

Secondly what God made was described as good or very good. A good creation can only be the work of a good God, it witnesses to his nature and character. That goodness was declared at the beginning before we were around to see it.

God's creation includes the possibility of development, growth, change and decay, and even time itself. It follows then that creation is not yet complete. It also allowed the possibility for sin to enter at the fall when Adam and Eve rebelled against God.

6 Romans 8v19-21 speak of this incompleteness:

For the creation waits in eager expectation for the children of God to be revealed. ²⁰ For the creation was subjected to frustration, not by its own choice, but by the will of the one who subjected it, in hope ²¹ that the creation itself will be liberated from its bondage to decay and brought into the freedom and glory of the children of God.

In some mysterious way the existence of beauty and ugliness, construction and destruction, floods and earthquakes, ordered chaos and purposeful randomness are all built into creation as it fulfils God's purposes.

Creation is still good and will be very good when complete. We trust in a good God to make it so.

Thirdly humanity alone, of all the creatures, is made in the image and likeness of God – both male and female are made in the image and likeness of God. We are not just simply created creatures developed from others but have something unique. And that uniqueness is in what or who we are, not what we possess - it defines us as humans.

Fourthly, God gave us plants and seeds and everything that has the breath of life. In v28 we find humanity was given the tasks of being fruitful, multiplying, and subduing and tilling the ground. In other words, continuing God's creative work.

Verse 28 also speaks of humanity subduing creation and having mandate to have dominion or rule over the rest of creation.

This is where we start to get into trouble. Some Christians take this as a mandate to do what they like with creation making it serve their own ends, whether destroying vast tracts of virgin forest to feed the wealthy with meat or ravaging and polluting the landscape to extract minerals to support our lifestyles.

Some theologians and Biblical scholars try to get around this concept of dominion by using the word stewardship. Someone who doesn't own what they are tasked with

caring for but rather cares for it on behalf of someone. Yet that is not a word found in our passage.

Remember this mandate precedes the fall. In the Old Testament the Godly image of a ruler was one who was caring of his subjects, ruling wisely and serving their needs. That is the image we need to hold in our mind. Dominion is correctly exercised by a servant king with the interests of his subjects foremost.

The mandate we have brings responsibility – creation is not ours to do what we like with. And, if we are made in the image and likeness of God, then we should exercise rule in the way God does, with justice and love, taking care that we don't destroy what God has created and exercises care over. In Matthew's Gospel Jesus talks of God feeding the birds, clothing the grass of the field.

Frequently in the Old Testament God warns that sinful actions on humanity's part will also affect the land - part of God's creation. Our sinful lifestyles have consequences for our planet – God's creation.

- 7 To sum up, there is a triangular relationship between God, humans and creation. While both humanity and creation reflect something of God's character and nature, only humans were made in the image and likeness of God. This interrelationship is broken when any one of the individual links is broken.

So when sin entered humanity it wasn't just our relationship with God that was affected but our relationship with one another, our relationship with creation, and creation's relationship with God.

Where will creation end up?

We also need to do some thinking on what is the end state for God's creation? If you simply go around picking out verses on the end times you may be left with the idea that the present earth and heavens are due for destruction when Christ comes again. Careful study of all the Bible has to say on the subject leads to the idea of a 'renewed creation - similar but different. Look at some of the images in Isaiah 65 or Revelation 21.

Jesus relationship with creation

- 8 So how does Jesus relate to creation? In Paul's letter to the Colossians chapter 1v15-20 he writes:

For in [Christ] all things were created: things in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or powers or rulers or authorities; all things have been created through him and for him. ¹⁷ He is before all things, and in him all things hold together. ¹⁸ And he is the head of the body, the church; he is the beginning and the firstborn from among the dead, so that in everything he might have the supremacy. ¹⁹ For God was pleased to have all his fullness dwell in him, ²⁰ and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether things on earth or things in

heaven, by making peace through his blood, shed on the cross.

There we have it, Christ as creator, sustainer and reconciler for all of creation.

Christ's earthly ministry was one of wholeness, in mind body and spirit, and also one of rule of creation, whether creating bread and wine or calming the sea.

Our God given task

So having established some basic principles about us and creation let's look at our God given task. It is more than the great commission at the end of Matthew's gospel, it is to build for the Kingdom of God on earth. Jesus inaugurated God's Kingdom reign and rule and we as his disciples contribute to that mission - not our mission, but the Mission of God.

9 The Anglican church has identified five marks of that mission:

To proclaim the Good News of the kingdom;

To teach and baptise and nurture new believers;

To respond to human need by loving service;

To seek to transform unjust structures of society, to challenge violence of every kind and to pursue peace and reconciliation;

To strive to safeguard the integrity of creation and sustain and renew the life of the earth.

These are not either/or parts of God's mission but key parts of the whole. They can be found in the commands and purposes of God and in the ministry of Jesus.

- 10 So hopefully you will have got the message that:
- Caring for God's creation is not some insidious new age liberal idea - it is fundamental to our identity as being in the image and likeness of God and as Christians, being in Christ, the creator, sustainer and redeemer;
 - Caring for God's creation is not incidental to our task, we must care for all creation just as Jesus does;
 - Caring for God's creation is not irrelevant and subservient to preaching the Gospel - it is part of our whole ministry as we build for the Kingdom of God as Christ's workers.

In practice

How the five marks of mission work in practice can be seen in the disadvantaged parts of the world. Parts of the world where climate change and lack of care for creation is having a devastating effect on everyday living.

- 11 Listen to this story from a village in Senegal on the banks of the river Senegal, an area in the transition zone between desert and tropical forests. It has only 100mm-500mm of rainfall a year and that is decreasing.

'There has been a huge change. Until 1970 we had a

really good life, with lots of forests and bushes and wild animals. My grandfather came here because of the proximity of water so he could cultivate the land. There was a lot of rain back then, the river was full of fish, and whatever you grew was successful. Then came the drought in the 1970s and desertification.

Desertification was caused by the drought, but also by human action. At the time of French colonisation it was forbidden to cut down trees, but after independence in 1960 the Senegalese government allowed it and the whole area became totally bare. Even worse, as woodcutters produced charcoal, it burnt and damaged the soil, leaving it infertile. If you look at what's happening in the world today, there is also a lot of industrial pollution. We now see the effects of ships transporting chemicals. And there is just one atmosphere that affects everyone.'

Christian Organisations such as Christian Aid and Tearfund care about climate change because they see a responsibility to care for God's world, and because climate change is trapping people into poverty. And it is an injustice that it is the poorest communities that are hardest hit by climate change when they have contributed least to it.

Tearfund, a relief and development charity, works specifically through local churches and Christian organisations. They have major work in Burkina Faso where they aim to reduce the physical and spiritual poverty of 250,000 people in Burkina Faso by 2022.

These churches will engage with their communities through the church and community transformation process. This training will change attitudes to corruption and justice, sexual and gender-based violence, including female genital mutilation/cutting. This work will encourage the restoration of people's relationships with God, with each other and with the created world. God's mission working in all areas of the five marks of mission

What can I do?

You're probably by now wondering 'what can I do the problems are so large. It's all too overwhelming. Remember the saying; the march of 1,000 miles starts with the first step.

I was struck by two programmes on television in recent months about the pollution caused by our overuse of plastics.

The scientist presenter Liz Bonin got completely overwhelmed and distraught by the impact of plastic pollution on the sea and sea life.

Contrast this with Lucy Segal who presents for the One Show. She tackled the same issue from the other end - What can I do to reduce plastic consumption? - and got a campaign going around recycling plastic bottles and the use of plastic drinking straws. Simple small steps. And I

recollect she also got people to go and litter pick plastic from the coastal shore lines.

12 There are four things we as individual Christians and as a Church can do:

Reduce our consumption of things that are adversely affecting and polluting creation. This may be by using our cars less often, or reducing how many we own; installing insulation in our homes to reduce energy consumption;

ensure that all our light bulbs are low energy;

not leaving equipment on in standby mode;

make best use of our water consumers like washing machines and dishwashers;

perhaps more controversially, reduce our consumption of red meat;

buying clothes wisely and for their longevity

think about changing from disposable nappies and wipes;

Then think about what could be re-used such as bottles, plastic bags, paper.

Recycle what we no longer need, whether at the local tip or via the website freecycle.

Compost uncooked food waste.

Collect rainwater in butts to use for watering plants.

Finally, reject options that use up excessive amounts of precious resources or pollution. Think of how you travel, avoid fruit and vegetables with excessive packaging.

As a church we need to apply these principles to our buildings. Our Church Centre wastes an enormous amount of heat through its single glazed windows and little or no insulation in its roof. To correct this costs money, but we save energy. Maybe install solar panels on the roof.

What about how we recycle within the building, are there clearly marked bins? What do we do with paper coffee cups?

If I had time I would stop right now and have a brainstorm of ideas.

How do we start? The first place to start is prayer, asking God to show us one thing that we could change in our lifestyle. Dave Bookless describes how he and his wife started this process by praying and the thing God brought to their mind was nappies. They did some research and for their newly expected baby they used washable ones. Washing is still cheaper than buying new ones with non-biodegradable plastics.

13 So, remember

- You and I are responsible for how we treat God's creation because we are made in his likeness and image.
- Care of creation is not an optional extra it is part of God's mission
- Individual small steps come together to make a real difference.

Pray and start with one change to your lifestyle.

We are going to close with a short time of quiet and then a prayer of confession and commitment. After which we will take communion together remembering Jesus Christ, creator, sustainer, redeemer and reconciler, and go home encouraged.

- 14 We confess our sin, and the sins of our society, in the misuse of God's creation.

God our Father, we are sorry for the times when we have used your gifts carelessly, and acted ungratefully.

Hear our prayer, and in your mercy:

All **forgive us and help us.**

- 15 We enjoy the fruits of the harvest, but sometimes forget that you have given them to us. Father, in your mercy:

All **forgive us and help us.**

We belong to a people who are full and satisfied, but ignore the cry of the hungry.

Father, in your mercy:

All **forgive us and help us.**

- 16 We are thoughtless, and do not care enough for the world you have made. Father, in your mercy:

All **forgive us and help us.**

We store up goods for ourselves alone,
as if there were no God and no heaven.

Father, in your mercy:

All **forgive us and help us.**