



Green Month @ St Mary's, Ely Home Groups

Session 1: Caretakers of the Earth

Bible Readings

John 1:14-18; The Word Became Flesh

Romans 8:18-27; Creation groans but the Holy Spirit intercedes!

Also: John 9:1-12; Phil 2:1-8; Genesis 1&2;

Sermon Notes

The aim of Green Month is to get us to think about the relationship that we have, as humans, with our planet. This isn't about making anyone feel guilty or bad for what they've been doing, but to get us all to think about how we're consciously or unconsciously interacting with our planet.

When he wrote Revelation, John had no degree in environmental biology. Paul planted churches not apple trees up and down the roads of the Roman Empire. John the Gospel Writer had no concept of global warming. They were not intending to publish 1st-century science manuals but rather to tell stories about Jesus and write letters of encouragement to struggling young churches.

Yet the New Testament writers have much to teach us about the world that we live in, where it came from, who sustains it, and where it is going; what it means to live on the earth as faithful disciples of Jesus Christ. As we investigate the overarching New Testament themes of Creation, Incarnation, Falling and Re-creation, we discover the "good news" of salvation is connected to the well-being of the cosmos and the natural world - it proclaims the message of God's saving purposes for all of God's creation.

Of course, everything starts with Creation, for us humans and for the planet we inhabit. Jesus himself prays "Father, Lord of heaven and earth" (Mt. 11:25). Remembering "the beginning of creation when God made humankind." (Mk. 10:6). Jesus' early followers call on God as "Sovereign Lord, who made the heaven and the earth, the sea and everything in them" (Acts 4:24).¹ John speaks of "Jesus the Living Word," who was there "in the beginning with God and through whom "all things came into being" (John 1:2-3).²

¹ For other New Testament references to God the creator.... See also: (Rom. 1:20, 25), (2 Cor. 4:6), (Heb. 2:10), (Jas. 1:18), (2 Pet. 3:5), (Rev. 4:24).

² See also: (Col 1:15-16), (Heb. 1:2), (Rev. 3:14).

These are amazing truths. But what difference does it make to us? Well it seems to me that if we love Jesus our call is to acknowledge God's good creation as a gift. Which means that as we partake in God's provisions and sustenance, we do so with gratitude and joy. Paul says, "All the bounty of the earth belongs to God. It is God's good gift to us to meet our needs. Receive this gift with joy and thanksgiving, so whether you eat or drink, or whatever you do, do everything for the glory of God". (1 Cor. 10:25-26,30-31).

Yes, the beauty and bounty of the natural world are to be touched and tasted, are to be handled with confidence and joy as good and nourishing gifts of God in whom "all things in heaven and on earth were created" (Col. 1:16). But we are called not simply to receive God's good gifts for our own nourishment and enjoyment. As children of the Creator God our call is likewise to share God's good creation with others, to make sure everyone, especially the poor and vulnerable have what they need.

But it's not just all about us - humankind - let's face it we human beings are a bit self-centered - the Genesis story gets really interesting when it starts being about us, doesn't it, in Gen 1:26. But it's a big jump from v1 to v26 - and God didn't think about us until Friday lunchtime (and you know what they say about cars made on Friday afternoon) - suggesting the whole created world, the light and sky, lamps and stars, sea and land, vegetation, sea creatures, birds and animals are not created just for us - indeed arguably we are created for them, to take to completion the process of bringing order to their lives and their interrelationship.

And creation continues to this day. Jesus says: "My Father is still working, and I also am working" (John 5:17). God is still engaged in the work of creation, bringing life and healing to those who are sick and suffering, through his Holy Spirit, and Jesus in turn passes this very same commission on to us. As Jesus healed a blind man he says, "As long as it is day, we must do the works of him who sent me." (John 9:4-5).

Jesus calls us to collaborate with Him in God's creative work of bringing life and healing to humankind. To participate with God in His ongoing works of redemption and healing, carried out in the name of God's "holy servant" Jesus and in the power of His Holy Spirit. This is a high calling. The calling that comes as we come to believe & serve the God who has created all things. (Acts 4:25, 29-30).

That God became one of us; that God has stepped into His own creation and walked on earth as part of the human family is ultimately what defines our faith as Christians. Jesus who "became flesh" "pitched his tent among us" in order to "make God known" (John 1:14, 18). "Incarnation" speaks of God's downward motion, moving into our world and taking on our flesh. There is nothing we can "do" to bring it about, it is a sheer gift in the person of Jesus that we are invited to receive with thankfulness and joy.

But "Incarnation" does not simply refer to the downward movement of God to walk with us. It also points to an upward movement. Ordinary earthly substances take on extraordinary qualities at Jesus' initiative. Water is transformed into wine (2:1-11); five barley loaves and two fish become a feast for five thousand people (6:1-15); a turbulent sea provides stable footing for Jesus to walk to his disciples in their boat (6:16-25); mud from the ground becomes the healing ointment for the eyes of a blind man (9:1-7); and a previously barren sea yields up 153 fish (21:1-14).

In John's Gospel the everyday stuff of life is what God chooses to use to reflect His own glory and to meet the urgent needs of humankind. The world we have at our fingertips is the stuff of divine presence in our world; the means for facilitating God's grace to all those who need it.

Our calling is to offer the grace of God to humankind as the stuff of life passes through our hands to others. Vividly expressed as the disciples feed the crowds with the bread and fish (Mt. 14:13-21). The power does not belong to the disciples. They do not multiply the loaves of bread. The Holy Spirit does that; but the gifts of God, the tangible earthly stuff of life, passes through their hands on its way to meeting the needs of a hungry humanity.

And Jesus pronounces His blessing on us as we do this “Come, you that are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world; for I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me” (Mt. 25:34b-36).

The God who comes to be with us and touches our physical world with grace calls us to offer that grace to all who have need through the stuff of life that passes through our hands.

But all is not well in God’s creation. Even in Roman times Paul speaks of the creation as caught in the snare of “bondage and decay,” and “groaning in labour pains” (Rom. 8:20-22). What is striking is that Paul links the precarious world of human existence with the well-being of the cosmos itself. The redemption of humankind and the redemption of the universe are profoundly connected to each other: “For the creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the children of God; for the creation was subjected to futility, not of its own will but by the will of the one who subjected it, in hope that the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to decay and will obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God” (Rom 8:19-21).

Whatever Paul understands scientifically about the world, he knows that the destiny of humankind and the destiny of the cosmos are inseparably linked and that they both are waiting for deliverance and ultimate redemption.

The culture into which most of the economically richest parts of the world have drifted is no worse than the past in its selfishness but seems to have fewer natural brakes and more illusions. (Justin Welby).

Paul invites us to genuine lament, even as we place our hope in God’s ultimate redemption of us and our world. (Rom 8:23). John pushes us one step farther in his call to repent. Throughout the book of Revelation (Rev. 2:5, 16, 21, 22; 3:3, 19; 9:20, 21; 16:9, 11) and to “give God glory” (16:9).

Here is where our calling lies and where our work begins as we face the crisis of our present world.

Devastation is not the last word. God will one day redeem creation. Beyond death lies resurrection. And beyond the fall lies God’s re-creation of a cosmos, mangled and abused by human sinfulness. And here again, as with “Creation,” the role of Christ is crucial. Christ, who was the Agent of Creation now becomes the Agent of Re-creation.

We were made to serve the ground in partnership with God. Genesis 1 has a big panorama and we are invited to ‘master’ the earth. But Genesis 2 begins with a simple bare landscape where nothing is growing, no wild berries or other wild plants – it has not yet rained. But a spring of water is rising offering potential for fruit – but for that a farmer will be needed.

Our role is to serve the ground. We are both master of creation and servant of creation in a relationship of mutual dependence. We cannot do without nature; nature cannot do without us. The test of our mastering the Earth is whether we are serving its interests – Gen 2: 4b-7

We have two choices. In Deuteronomy the leader says: “I have set before you life and death– now choose life so that you and your children may live.” And the people shout, “We choose life! We choose life! We choose life!” Deuteronomy 30:19-20. It’s a highly charged moment; a powerful reminder of our covenant with God and our commitment to the “chosen life” to be instruments of the care of creation.

Our historic biblical (OT & NT) values, applied in the twenty-first century, have significant bite not only for our generation but also for those as yet unborn, including our responsibilities and obligations towards them. (Justin Welby).

Issues relating to climate change (largely accepted as proven) and the environment are economic and moral as well as scientific. Human activity, which has contributed significantly to current problems, is out of step with faith-based understandings of responsibility for the planet and needs to change.

The combination of economic, scientific and moral issues, as well as the need for global partnerships in response to climate change, help to explain the incendiary nature of the subject.

We have an economic interest in helping to lead the development of a ‘greener’ economic system, which need not be a threat to our own well-being nor to that of other human beings.

We have a moral responsibility to those as yet unborn, as well as a duty to the whole of creation, to address our stewardship of the planet. (Justin Welby). To serve.

Discussion Questions:

- Are humans creatures within creation or beings set above the rest of creation?
- On Being Caretakers of the Earth: What kind of people ought we be, and why should we strive to become such people?
- Given that the various kinds of animals and plants that populate the earth are created by God, are they valuable, irrespective of their usefulness to us? What difference does that make to us?
- How should the knowledge that the earth and its creatures are finite influence our behaviour?
- Can we be certain about anything in the future? How does the answer to that question come to bear on our political decision making?
- In what do we see hope in our current environmental crisis?
- How do we deal with those who view environmentalists with suspicion, apathy or malice? How do we follow the pattern of Christ in this?