



Green Month @ St Mary's, Ely Home Groups

Session 2: The Global Vineyard

Bible Readings

Mark 12: 1-12; The Parable of the Tenants

Psalms 24: 1-6; The Earth is the Lord's

Sermon

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.

We understand we can't directly attribute this summer's record temperatures, from Berlin to New York City, to global warming, but we can definitively say that over time global warming will increase the frequency and severity of such events.

Although God made a pact, sealed with a rainbow, to never again send a flood that covers the whole earth; that doesn't appear to provide immunity from floods, wildfires, droughts, and storms of our own making.

And unfortunately, those who will suffer the most in the decades to come are the most vulnerable, the most forgotten of God's precious children, the "least of these" who Jesus called his sisters and brothers. (Matthew 25:45). Tear Fund remind us that the poorest communities around the world are the most extremely vulnerable to climate change, because on top of the global factors, local environmental management compounds the problem.

Tearfund's partners in Africa report increasingly long and frequent periods of drought. Drinking water becoming less readily available and declining crop yields. There is migration towards cities, in search of work and better living conditions. Malaria and malnutrition are more prevalent. Traditional medicines are being lost, as biodiversity declines. The desert continues to grow between the Sahara and the Savanna, symptoms of global warming compounded locally by deforestation.

Tearfund's assessment is that yes, local activities contribute to climate change at a local level, but global human-induced climate change is, consistent with scientific predictions, exacerbating the problems and is a major impediment to achieving the Millennium Development Goals. Vulnerable communities are already struggling to cope, and things are set to get worse.

Let's hear Adelia's story from Mozambique. "We had no warning. We only found out when my sister came running to our house. We were all asleep in bed. She was frightened, saying the floods had started. People were screaming in the homes all around us. We just stood outside and watched the water rise. Then we tried to grab some of our stuff, but the river just took over. So, we ran. I felt so afraid, so sad. We lost everything in one night."

In 2018, the River Licungo in Mocuba, where Adelia and her family were living, rose by more than 40 ft. in one day. The floods swept in fast, displacing 60,000 people who lived along its banks. Those people now live in a resettlement camp on dry, barren land, where, ironically water is sparse.

Unpredictable weather conditions are certain to become a regular occurrence across Africa, Asia and Latin America, leading to more hunger, poverty, displacement and even conflict. Millions of people already living in vulnerable communities will be forced from their homes and become climate refugees. In the Genesis stories of creation God separated out the land from the water; however, his perfect ordering of creation is being disrupted by our everyday actions.

Please don't get me wrong, when it comes to honouring our Creator by honouring His creation, I am a flawed disciple. I am deeply complicit in the consumption of my generation. But the dawning realization of what lies ahead has jolted me awake, and what keeps me awake at night is the lack of political will to respond.

In our gospel reading we meet up with Jesus sometime between Palm Sunday and Good Friday. The cross is looming large and he's in the Temple having a not-so-friendly discussion with the religious elites of Jerusalem. They are challenging his authority, but Jesus is trying to wake them up to what God is doing in the world. And, as he so often does, Jesus tries to make his point by telling stories. ... And the point of today's allegorical story is a no-brainer. The religious honchos in Jesus' audience, know their scriptures, and have no trouble figuring out the landowner stands for God; the vineyard for Israel; the tenants for religious leaders; the servants for God's rejected prophets and the landowner's son for Jesus. And in very short order, Jesus' audience figures out he's talking about them. "When they realized that he had told this parable against them, they wanted to arrest him, but they feared the crowd."

But what is Jesus saying to us 2,000 years later through this story? Well one reading is that we should think of God's vineyard as the church and its mission and there are big lessons there but....

In Psalm 24 we hear this unequivocal assertion: "The earth is the Lord's and all that is in it." ... Not just the church, the whole earth ... actually the whole cosmos, including planet Earth; it's all God's. It's all God's vineyard; it all belongs to God. And if we think about God's vineyard as at least as big as the earth, the obvious question raised by Jesus' scary story is this: How have we, as in we human beings, how have we treated all that God has entrusted into our care? ... Do we remember that all creation is God's holy vineyard? That the land, sea and air and all life are from God? Do we treat all creation as holy and precious because God is the source and sustainer of all

that exists? ... Or like the tenants in the story, do we start to think and act like the vineyard — creation, land, sea, air, all life, belongs to us to be used and used up however we darn well please; that's it ours to trash and ours to burn. ...

And, by the way, I don't think most environmental degradation is willful; it happens by sheer neglect, sheer malignant neglect, taking the sustainability of creation for granted. But, of course, when we take creation for granted, we take the Creator for granted. ... Well, I don't know about you, but when I think about how we've treated God's holy vineyard, I find Jesus' punch line daunting: "He will come and destroy the tenants and give the vineyard to others."

But the good news is this and massive good news it is: Jesus didn't just tell the story; he lived the story. The tenants of the vineyard do seize the Son and set him up to be killed. It all works out just as Jesus said, except instead of being evicted, the tenants are embraced; instead of being condemned, they are forgiven; instead of being rejected, they are empowered for a new chance at faithfulness. Apparently, amazingly even abject unfaithfulness doesn't get us evicted from God's holy vineyard. We are all give more chances – so let's grasp them!

Psalm 72 says "May [the King] judge your people with righteousness, and your poor with justice. May the mountains yield prosperity for the people, and the hills, in righteousness." The psalm continues interweaving appeals for justice with hopes for an abundant and fruitful land. Social justice and ecological health are bound together. Just as they are throughout the bible. They are integral features of God's world of shalom. We have the moral obligation to treat others fairly, giving special care to those creatures who by virtue of circumstance require it.

Such a faith is a bold witness in our troubled world. Such a faith stands in striking contrast to the pervasive fear, indifference, and hopelessness that characterize our age. Such a faith, in short, is gospel indeed. "But such faith is also more than a bit dangerous, for the sleeping god may wake and take offense, or the waking god may draw us out to where we can never return." Annie Dillard.

The risen Lord Jesus bears the wounds of the entire vineyard in his wounds. He bears the sin of sinners, the suffering of the sinned against, and the wounds of every slaughtered whale, every destroyed forest, every polluted stream, every flooded coastland, every drought-parched field, and every endangered species; the wounds of all creation.

Biblical scholars like N.T. Wright and scientist theologians like Robert Russell remind us to think big about the promise of God's new creation ... not just a heavenly escape for human beings, but the reconciliation of all things. Maybe the amazing thing about the promise of the New Creation is not that other parts of creation might be included, but that in spite of everything we're still included in its promise. We still have a place; we still belong; we are still embraced as God's beloved ... amazing grace indeed.

Having brought this world of wonders into existence, covenanted with it, and persistently worked to redeem it, God does not give up on it. We are given a vision of a new heaven and a new earth – but the Greek here connotes new in quality rather than contrasting to what is old. So the advent of the heavenly city does not abolish all human efforts to build a decent earthly civilization but fulfils them. God does not make "all new things," but "all things new" (21:5).

Nothing from the old order which has value in the sight of God is excluded from entry into the new. John's heaven is no world-denying Nirvana, into which man may escape, but the seal of affirmation on the goodness of God's creation. The treasure that men find laid up in heaven turns out to be the treasures and wealth of the nations, the best they have known and loved on earth redeemed of all imperfections and transfigured by the radiance of God. Nothing is excluded but what is obscene and false, that is, totally alien to the character of God.

The vision is not about binning the old earth and producing a new one, like a magician bringing a fresh white rabbit out of a top hat. Rather, it is argued, God is in the process of making all things new (Rev 21.5), and this implies that humans should indeed care for creation, joining in with the purpose and activity of God to transform the earth to a place where righteousness, justice and peace are at home.

So, there is much work to be done. Our planet is in a world of hurt and it's going to take a lot of truth facing, truth telling, and hard, sacrificial work to effectively deal with the mess we've made. But, of course, the good news is that we are not alone in the work. The Risen and Wounded Lord of the Vineyard comes to us, here and now, comes to us, not to evict us or condemn us, but through the Spirit's power, comes to liberate us from our willful denial, immobilizing fear and self-destructive idolatries. With a Lord that faithful in our midst, there is no need to brood or despair. With a Lord that faithful in our midst, we can indeed be people of hope who face what needs to be faced and do what needs to be done.

We are to fulfil our calling to be caretakers of the earth, regardless of whether global warming is real, or there are holes in the ozone layer, or three nonhuman species become extinct each day. Our vocation is not contingent on results or the state of the planet. It is simply dependent on our character as God's response-able human image-bearers.

Discussion Questions

- What is our response to this sermon? Personally? As a church? As a nation?
- Why do you think the Psalmists list so many different beings praising God? In Psalm 148, Humanity comes last in the beings praising God – why do you think this might be?
- What's your favourite thing about creation? How do you praise God and give thanks for creation?
- When has an experience of the natural world had a healing effect on you or someone you know?
- If God will redeem the earth and transform it to a renewed creation, do we need to worry about the impact of our own actions?

Practical Questions

- And very practically. **What should a Church Green Team do?** Please share this with the church leaders or better still volunteer for the Green Team!
- What practical ideas do you have to express your faith in these areas? Please share this with the church leaders!