



Green Month @ St Mary's, Ely Home Groups

Session 3: The River of Life

Bible Readings

John 20: 19-31; Doubting Thomas

Revelation 22:1-2; River of Life

Psalms 72: 1-19; Fills the whole earth with His glory

Sermon

St. Thomas Aquinas said: "Any error about creation also leads to an error about God." If we properly understand our home planet, we can properly understand the nature and character of God. There is, in other words, an inner theological rationale for attending to the blue-green planet we inhabit with its plethora of other earth-creatures.

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.

The big numbers are running against us: this is not political – it's not left or right - let me offer four!

- The population of the globe has doubled in my lifetime – currently it's 7 billion – and it could reach 11 billion – that changes a lot of things – more people – pursuing more stuff.
- CO² has reached 400 parts per million in the atmosphere – it will go to 450 if we never burn anything else - we know we don't like it at 400 - at 450 we are going to like it even less.
- Most biologists believe we'll lose 25-50% of the species of the earth – in the lifetime of our current students – we are creating a threadbare earth.
- Oxfam reports that the richest 80 people on the globe have more net wealth than the poorest 3.5 billion people – that is a world that is designed for trouble

We will play your life out against this topography – the environment is THE issue for our children and our children's children – it will affect congestion; food; conflict; political instability and economic instability.

Martin Luther King Jr, when facing a different challenge, said, "We are faced with the fact that tomorrow is today. We are confronted with the fierce urgency of now. In this unfolding conundrum

of life and history, there "is" such a thing as being too late. This is no time for apathy or complacency. This is a time for vigorous and positive action."

When "Noah is commanded by God to take into his ark at least two of every living species in order to save them from the flood" to preserve biodiversity, it's a "kitchen sink" policy, doing everything all at once, oblivious to cost or necessity.

Ezekiel 33 and 34 are a rich illustration of the relationship between God, humankind and the land. Ezekiel encourages us to ensure we are ecologically literate, that we understand the interconnectedness of all creatures great and small; and the speed of the crisis that is upon us; the vital signs of our planet. After all a prescription is only as good as the diagnosis on which it is based. Christian ecological literacy acknowledges the theological insight that we are imperfect creatures living in a world of God's making – which leads to a humble and careful keeping of God's earth. In other words, a servant hearted approach.

¹⁵The LORD God took the man and put him in the Garden of Eden to work it and take care of it. Genesis 2:15. *dbad* means to serve the earth for its own sake, and *samar* means to protect the earth as one caringly guards something valuable. It's the motto on the door of every Chicago Police Car. 'Serve and Protect' We are called by God, in short, to be earth keepers.

Because we are made "after God's likeness", we are God's vicegerents, called to rule as God rules. Chosen by God to be as loving in our day-to-day dealings with the created order as God was in creating that order in the first place. We are unique, but our uniqueness implies not superiority but service.

We have a prima facie duty to preserve non-renewable resources and conserve scarce though renewable resources. We must live within our means. The ecologically temperate... joyfully say, "I have what I need."

We humans are not owners but earth keepers. We have a moral obligation to protect the creatures under our care whose existence is imperiled. To be so moved by love and gratitude that we witness to the hope that lies within us - the hope of God's wonderful future.

Peter tells us that "the day of the Lord will come like a thief. The heavens will disappear with a roar; the elements will be destroyed by fire, and the earth and everything done in it will be laid bare." 2 Peter 3:10. Peter uses the Greek verb *heurethesetai*, "to find," from which we get the English expression "eureka." After God's refiner's fire purification of the earth - the new earth will be "found", not burned up, "discovered", not destroyed. There will be a continuity of this world with the next. This world is our home, now and always, biblical eschatology affirms the redemption and restoration of creation.

If God will transform the earth we now have, this earth must be precious to God, and that proper stewardship of all creation is a task with eternal consequences.

In what may I hope? How in a world of wounds do I find hope? In this time of increasing cynicism and despair, there is no more important questions to ask. If "the hopes and fears of all the years are

met in thee tonight," as the old Christmas carol claims, then the Bible and its witness to a God who chooses to dwell among us offer just the hope we so desperately seek.

And in Revelation we find some hints: "And the angel showed me the river of the water of life, bright as crystal, flowing from the throne of God and of the Lamb through the middle of the street of the city. On either side of the river is the tree of life with its twelve kinds of fruit, producing its fruit each month; and the leaves of the tree are for the healing of the nations." Revelation 22:1-2 Our job is to be healed, formed and reformed by God; as clay in the potter's hands. To imbibe and express God's values. Conduct flows from character and our character is formed as we place ourselves at the feet of Jesus. Ecological theology leads us to ask not "What do we need to do?" but rather "Who do we need to be?"

We might do well to start by spending three days in silence in the presence of the Holy Spirit: one day in the forest; one day on the seashore of the sea; and one night in a field gazing at the stars. In Christ the divine economy is one. Redemption is the restoration of creation; the renewal of creation not its annihilation. Salvation is not escape from the earth but the earth's reclamation. The divine purpose is to restore the harmony of the original creation, to bring into renewed oneness and wholeness "all things," "whether things on the earth or things in the heavens."

And in Christ the restoration and renewal of creation has begun. Christ took on human flesh so matter matters. Christ died on a cross, so we don't seek to dominate - we rule by serving others, including the earth. Christ is resurrected so creation's goodness is vindicated. Christ is the first fruits of the harvest so we are confident that God's good future will come. In Christ the restoration and renewal of creation has begun which will lead to God's good future of shalom.

Over these three weeks we have looked at this from a number of different angles – and before we end let's take one more.

The sabbath rest is built into the fabric of God's economy. For example, in Leviticus 25 God's people are told to give the land a sabbath rest every seventh year. So that "the land will yield its fruit, and you will eat your fill and live on it securely" (v. 19). Life on the land goes better when one observes the rhythms God has built into creation. "To proclaim the year of the Lord's favour" (vv. 18-19). Jesus the Messiah proclaims that the kingdom of God he has come to inaugurate has elements of redistribution and rest. Such intentional rest and nurture of creation fits our nature and helps resist the relentless use and exploitation that drives much of modern society. We have a duty to put contingency and rest into our employment and industry in appropriate ways.

All creation needs sabbath rest and rejuvenation, which can only come when as a society as a whole we value what we have, live lives with thankful hearts and take our foot a little off the economic pedal so that all may have what they need – health, education, shelter, work, family, faith and community without the need to plunder the planet beyond that which it can offer sustainably.

Thomas' response to being told about Jesus' resurrection is rather human. We can't blame him for wanting some evidence? For Thomas, seeing isn't enough, he needs to feel Jesus' wounds, demanding a visceral confirmation that his mentor, rabbi, and friend was indeed crucified and risen.

What do you imagine Jesus' wounds looked like? Partly healed or rough, scabbed, blood-stained? It could not have been easy to look upon the wounds of Christ, let alone feel them.

So too, with the wounds of climate change. Drowning polar bears and the struggle of our fellow humans, living in lands that were already tougher than our own, facing bone parched soil, waist high floodwaters and wildfires visible from space. Injustice is hard to look eyes with especially if we feel we bear some of the responsibility.

But we must face it. Climate change is happening and is being accelerated by human activity. Unlike Thomas with Jesus, this crisis is not a matter of belief, rather it's an issue that our faith calls us to address, to get stuck in with.

We are the Church. Together, we form the body of Christ through which God is at work in the world, through which all things are possible. As people of the resurrection, tasked with tending God's garden, we are messengers that the world needs. We can provide leadership to navigate from apathy and despair to hope and vitality. We can present the moral obligation. We can resource and support good stewardship. We can inspire faithful advocacy to spark systemic change. To be real, we'll probably end up having some hard conversations with modern day doubting Thomases. (*Our man in Marina Bay in Boston! 99% but I've managed to find stuff on YouTube.*) But don't give up.

This Sunday, simply start, or continue, the conversation. Chat with someone over coffee, include the environment in your prayers, or help us recruit for the Green Team.

Values-based conversations and stories will take root in people's hearts and minds. That's why we need to root this in the theology of the Bible – expecting we, the Church, to play a leading role in restoring creation.

Discussion Questions

- Apart from the River of Life, which biblical references to water do you find most powerful? How many can you list?
- How do the principles behind Sabbath and Jubilee play into the current crisis?
- How do you personally reconcile the stories told by the Christian community and scientific communities? Does there need to be better alignment?
- Do you agree that contemporary Christian narratives about how the world came to be alienate humankind from nature? Could a belief in the ability and duty of God to set things right detract from the imperative to protect the earth now?

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!