

Hope for Creation

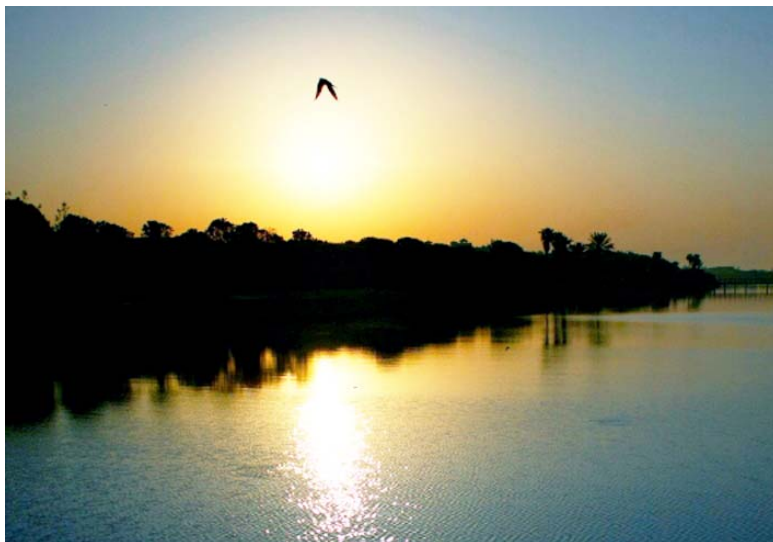



Photo: ED :-) 

A Time for Worship and Action

A 5 week framework for Creation Time 2008 using the Lectionary

*Prepared by Revd Dave Bookless, National Director, A Rocha UK,
for Churches Together in Britain and Ireland, Creation Time resources 2008*

Hope for creation is a vital theme today. Scientists and campaigners sometimes paint such an apocalyptic image of a future dominated by Climate Change that many are near to losing all hope. Some believe our hope lies in technical innovation, in new regulatory frameworks, or in political action. All of these are important, but they do not change human nature. Today it is being recognised increasingly that we also need a deeper and more profound change.

These materials are based on the hope that we have as Christians, based ultimately in God's good plans for his creation, in the cosmic scope of Christ's saving work, and in the Spirit's renewing power at work within and through human beings. Hope begins in creation, is guaranteed through the cross and resurrection, and is to be worked out in our responses today. Let us rediscover a biblical vision that, because of Christ's work, people can be changed, communities can be transformed, and creation can be renewed. Let us seek to put that into practice with actions that speak louder than words.

The Lectionary materials are full sermon outlines based on the set Gospel readings from Matthew 18-21, presented to us as the final block of teaching Jesus gave before his death and resurrection. These teachings are mainly directed towards his disciples – not to the crowds but to those who've chosen to follow Jesus. They are instructions for the journey. The five Sundays cover:

Hope for Creation in God's Character - Matthew 18.15-20

"Love does no harm to its neighbour" – Romans 13:10

Hope for Creation in God's Plans - Matthew 18.21-35

"The land is mine and you are but aliens and my tenants" – Leviticus 25.23

Hope for Creation in God's Kingdom - Matthew 20.1-16

"You also go and work in my vineyard" Matthew 20:7

Hope for Creation in Humanity's Renewal - Matthew 21.23-32

"For it is God who works in you to will and to act according to his good purpose." Philippians 2:13

Hope for Creation in Christ - Matthew 21.33-end

"I press on to take hold of that for which Christ Jesus took hold of me." Philippians 3.12

Week 1 - Hope for Creation in God's Character


7th September – 16th after Trinity

Theme

"Love does no harm to its neighbour"

Romans 13:10



Photo: youngrobv 

Readings

Ezekiel 33.7-11
 Psalm 119.33-40
 Romans 13.8-end
 Matthew 18.15-20

Introduction

Introduce 'Creation Time' as a new initiative from all the major churches across Europe, seeking to use the period from 1st September to 5th October (including Harvest and Sr. Francis' tide) as a season to reflect on God's purposes for the non-human creation. Explain that we have tended to see the Christian story, and read the lectionary, in a very human-centred (anthropocentric) way so this is a deliberate attempt to encourage us to consider God's purposes for the wider creation.

The set (lectionary) readings have not been chosen specially so are not the most obvious passages about creation, but, as we shall see, these passages illustrate how the whole of scripture includes God's purposes for humanity and the rest of creation bound together inseparably. We will be looking at familiar stories, but perhaps asking unfamiliar questions.

Today's Gospel

Our gospel readings for the next five weeks are from Matthew 18-21, the final block of teaching Jesus gave before his death and resurrection. These teachings are mainly directed towards his disciples, not to the crowds but to those who've chosen to follow Jesus. They are instructions for the journey.

Today's Gospel from Matthew 18:15-20 is at first reading all about settling arguments between individual Christians ('brothers') as quickly and quietly as possible. Jesus encourages us not to avoid confrontation and let resentments rumble on, but to gently confront and deal with issues that arise. First, we should attempt to resolve issues face to face, not complain and gossip behind each other's backs ("go and show him his fault" and try to "win your brother over"). We should only involve third parties if we've tried and failed to resolve differences directly. Broken relationships break up churches, so Jesus is quite clear that if people refuse to listen, refuse to mend broken fences, in the end they exclude themselves from fellowship.

The passage finishes with two sayings of Jesus that are often taken out of context. First, "I tell you that if two of you on earth agree about anything you ask for, it will be done for you by my Father in heaven." This is not a licence to ask for anything we want, as if God were some heavenly sugar daddy just waiting to indulge our selfish whims. The 'agreeing about anything' is in the context of those who have been in disagreement and are now reconciled – who have made up their quarrel. God is promising to ratify the agreement of those who have restored their fellowship with each other. The last words of the passage: "For where two or three come together in my name, there am I with them" follow straight on. Although we can legitimately apply this to Jesus being present whenever Christians meet in his name, its direct meaning here is about God's special presence amongst those who come back together having been apart – those who are reconciled after disagreement.

Creation Time

So, what does this passage have to say about creation and the environment? The passage makes clear that our relationships with each other are closely connected to our relationship with God. If a person refuses to be reconciled with their brother or sister, it affects all their relationships – with everybody around them, and with God, because God's very character is relational. Father, Son and Spirit are a community of persons in the one Godhead. And because God is relational, it is not only humanity that is relational but the whole of creation – flowing out of the creative love of a relational God. There is an interconnectedness and an interdependence about all that God has made that reflects something of the relational character of God. Just as Father, Son and Spirit relate to each other in a community of being, so we are to relate to each other. That is why divisions and arguments are not just unpleasant; they also go directly against the character of a loving relational God.

In our Epistle reading from Romans 10 we read 'Love does no harm to its neighbour' (vs.10). Our neighbour is not only the person in our church, or who lives down our street, but those whose lives affect all over the world. One biblical term that sums up this relatedness of all people - and all creatures - on planet earth is the Greek word 'oikos' meaning household. It is the root word for a number of English terms including ecumenical – the household of Christian faith, and also for both ecology and economy. Ecology is about the relationships between living things in an ecosystem – a natural household, and the more we learn, the more we discover that all living things – ourselves included – are designed to need and depend on each other. Economy is not just about money – it is, or at least it should be, about how we carefully manage the resources within our global household. The biblical understanding of 'oikos' is not of human beings as autonomous individuals, but as persons in community. We are connected ecologically and economically with people all over the world, and with the other species God has created too.

Archbishop Desmond Tutu speaks of an African concept that is very different from our western individualism, but perhaps closer to the idea of 'oikos' or household. He says: "I want to suggest that the West might consider a small gift we in Africa just could offer. It is the gift of ubuntu ... It is the essence of being human, it declares that my humanity is caught up and inextricably bound up in yours... I am because I belong."¹

I am because I belong. We exist in relationship to each other and our relationship with God is connected to how we treat all our global neighbours. 'Love does no harm to its neighbour'. In our inter-connected, relational world, the lifestyle I lead, the energy I consume, the pollution I cause, the waste I discard can indeed cause harm to my neighbour. Plastic bags thrown away in England can be found in the stomachs of Albatrosses in the Pacific. Acid rain from Britain can harm forests in Scandinavia. Carbon emissions from the west can cause extreme weather, and even sea-level rise in Bangladesh or Malawi. Here in the UK our average emissions are approximately 9.5 tonnes of carbon dioxide per person per year. In Malawi the average emissions are about 0.1 tonnes, and in Bangladesh about 0.2.² As the UK Government's Stern Review on the economics of Climate Change puts it: "The impacts are inequitable: poor countries will be hit hardest and earliest, when it is the rich countries which are responsible for ¾ of Greenhouse Gases currently in the atmosphere."³

Conclusion

In our Gospel we heard 'If your brother sins against you go and show him his fault'. In today's world, we are being shown with increasing clarity that it is largely our fault in the West that over-consumption and over-use of fossil fuels are harming the world's poor, and harming the planet. If we know this and yet choose to do nothing about it, then we not only insult our neighbour, we are turning our backs on the character of God. God longs for us to love our neighbour as ourselves, yet love does no harm to its neighbour. Over these weeks, as we explore creation time, and open our eyes and ears to God's purposes for his whole world, let us also open our hearts and be prepared to be challenged about the way we live our lives.

¹ M. Desmond Tutu, "Towards Koinonia in Faith, Life and Witness", in T.P. Best and G. Gassmann (eds) *On the Way to Fuller Koinonia* (Geneva: WCC, 1994, p.101).

² Figures from Tearfund's 'Carbon Fast' materials

³ Sir Nicholas Stern - www.hm-treasury.gov.uk/media/A/8/stern_speakingnotes.pdf

Week 2 – Hope for Creation in God’s Plans

14th September – 17th after Trinity (*Holy Cross Day to be celebrated on 15th*)

Readings

Genesis 50.15-21, Psalm 103.8-13
Romans 14.1-12, Matthew 18.21-35

Theme

“The land is mine and you are but aliens
and my tenants”

Leviticus 25:23



Photo: fergusfleming 

Introduction

Today in Britain we are in the midst of a debt crisis. The average household debt in the UK is £8,816 not including mortgages, and if we include mortgages, the average adult is in debt to the tune of over £28,000.⁴ When debt gets out of control, it can have massive damaging consequences on people’s physical and emotional well-being, and put enormous stress on relationships.

Globally though, our individual debts in the UK pale into insignificance besides the debts of developing nations towards the banks and governments of Europe and North America. According to the Jubilee Debt Campaign, The poorest 53 countries have debts totalling between US \$290 and US \$380 billion, whilst for the poorest 149 countries, it is over US \$2.6 trillion.⁵ Much of this consists of loans from the 1970s and 1980s where the annual interest payments now vastly outweigh the original amount owed. Although the UK has taken the lead in encouraging other major governments to cancel debt, and has cancelled debt from a number of the poorest and most indebted countries, it still holds more than 2 billion dollars of debt from other poor countries.

Today’s Gospel

Today’s gospel reading from Matthew 18:21-35 is all about debt relief. It tells the story of a man who has been forgiven ten thousands talents; a sum equivalent to many millions of pounds in today’s money – but who refuses to forgive somebody else who owes him 100 denarii. This was not a small sum either – a denarius was a day’s wage, so this was more than three months pay. Often, sermons on this passage interpret it entirely spiritually. To an extent this is quite valid. Whenever we use the Lord’s Prayer we ask God to forgive us *as we forgive those who sin against us*. All of us need the forgiveness of Jesus – none of us can stand in God’s presence without receiving the full and free pardon that is possible because of Christ’s death and resurrection. We are called to forgive all those who upset, wind-up and annoy us, deliberately or innocently, and whether in word, deed or attitude. Spiritually, an attitude of unforgiveness is like a blockage in a stream that prevents the river of God’s mercy flowing.

However, we would be wrong to only interpret this parable spiritually. It also has something very powerful to say to today’s situation of massive personal and international debt. When Jesus started telling his story of cancelled debts, his Jewish hearers would have immediately thought of Leviticus chapter 25 – God’s provision of a year of Jubilee. In fact, there is a clue in Peter’s question which provoked Jesus’ story – suggesting forgiving somebody seven times. In the Old Testament, the year of Jubilee was to be held every 50th year – 7 x 7 plus one. Jesus responds to Peter’s question by saying that his followers are to forgive their debtors even more – not 7 x 7 but 70 + 7. Of course he’s not saying you can stop forgiving on the 78th occasion! He is simply using symbolic numbers to tell us we must forgive over and over and over again – without ceasing.

⁴ Figures from Credit Action (www.creditaction.org) dated June 2007.

⁵ www.jubileedebtcampaign.org.uk, accessed April 2008.

Jubilee

So what is the year of Jubilee about? What relevance does it have to us today, and how does it link to our five-week theme of 'Creation Time'?

Firstly, Jubilee is God's way of restoring God's justice. Much of the time, the world's 'justice' only works on behalf of the rich and powerful. They can profit – often quite legally – from the misfortune of the poor, by buying up their property or land at knock-down prices. They know how to work the system; they can afford the best lawyers. Gradually, inequalities build up – the rich get richer and the poor get poorer. It happens within any society, and it happens globally today in our joined up global village. Today a few of the world's richest individuals own more than the world's poorest countries. The world's richest 20% (which statistically includes everybody in the UK) have an income 74x greater than the world's poorest 20%. The principle of Jubilee is about restoring a level playing field. It is God's justice working on behalf of those who have suffered and failed – whether by their own fault or not. Property, freedom, and the ability to earn a living from the land are returned every 50 years.

For the rich and powerful the canceling of debts and the returning of property may not seem like justice. (Surely they've earned what they have fair and square?). But they are forgetting one vital thing. As Jesus' parable of the unforgiving servant reminds us, all of us are in debt to God. In Jesus he has cancelled debts millions of times greater than any that we are owed – the debt of our rebellion and sin against God – something we could never buy our way out of. If we are to be able to receive the forgiveness God offers in Jesus, we no longer have any rights to withhold forgiveness from those in debt to us. To receive forgiveness we must also show forgiveness. To have our debts cancelled we must be prepared to cancel what we're owed too.

Secondly, the year of Jubilee is about the connections between people, land and God. In Leviticus 25 it was instituted as a time when debts were cancelled, slaves were freed and land that had been sold if somebody fell into poverty was returned to its original owner. Tim Atwater writes, "In the Jubilee, there is release for those enslaved because of debts, a Sabbath rest for land and people, redistribution of lands lost because of debt, and a reordering of prices for land and labour based on proximity to the next Jubilee."⁶ Jubilee is a reminder of what we looked at last week – that God, people and land are bound together in relationship – that we are part of the same 'oikos' or household. Unless we have a system such as Jubilee we will inevitably end up with massive imbalances in our world.

Thirdly, central to the idea of Jubilee is the radical belief that all property – all money, all cattle and possessions, and all houses and land – do not ultimately belong to their human 'owner' but to God. As Psalm 24:1 says 'The earth is the Lord's and everything in it'. Even God's chosen people, living in their promised land, cannot treat the land as they like. In Leviticus 25:23-24, the Lord speaks to his people with these words: "The land must not be sold permanently, because the land is mine and you are but aliens and my tenants. Throughout the country that you hold as a possession, you must provide for the redemption of the land."

'The land is mine' says God, not Israel's – and not ours. You – we – are simply 'tenants' within God's land, and as a sign of that God insists on provision of 'the redemption of the land' – in other words that it can be bought back, returned to the tenants God has given it to. Today we urgently need to recover a sense that the world and everything in it is not ours, but God's. What we call 'resources' – oil, gas, coal, wood, water, crops – are not ours ultimately but God's. We need a new relationship with earth – our home but God's land – no longer seeing it as an inexhaustible toy store, but as a precious and fragile gift held in trust.

Conclusion

Jesus' story of the unforgiving servant ends with a stern warning – the servant is turned over to the jailors to be tortured until he can repay his debts, and we are warned God will do the same with us if we refuse to forgive. God's judgment on those who neglect the poor and vulnerable is clear. In a similar way, those who treat creation in a selfish and destructive way will also be judged. In Revelation 11.18 God states, bleakly, "I will destroy those who destroy the earth". Today, as the poor and the planet itself become poorer, we need to take these warnings seriously, and recover the real meaning of Jubilee – of sins forgiven, debt cancelled, and land treated as if it really belongs to God not to us.

⁶ Debt Cancellation: Biblical Norm, Not Exception" by Tim Atwater

Week 3 - Hope for Creation in God's Kingdom

21st September – 18th after Trinity
(St. Matthew's Day to be celebrated on 22nd)

Readings

Jonah 3.10 - end of 4
Psalm 145.1-8
Philippians 1.21-end
Matthew 20.1-16

Theme

"You also go and work in my vineyard"

Matthew 20:7



Photo: Robert Wallace



Introduction

In the Lord's Prayer we say 'Your will be done, your Kingdom come on earth as it is in heaven.' 'Your Kingdom ... The Kingdom of God is one of those phrases that we hear over and over again in the Gospels. In many ways Jesus' message was built entirely around the idea of God's Kingdom. His parables were parables of the Kingdom. In Matthew's Gospel it's 'the Kingdom of heaven' – but the phrase is used interchangeably. Matthew was simply being sensitive to his Jewish readers who did not want the name of God mentioned, so he used 'heaven' instead.

But what do we understand by this phrase 'the kingdom of God', or 'kingdom of heaven'? And if Jesus spent all this time talking about heaven, why are we in the middle of a 'time for creation'? Surely if our focus is on heaven, this world doesn't really matter?

God's Kingdom

When Jesus is talking about the Kingdom of God and the Kingdom of Heaven, he's not speaking about something up in the sky or about something in the far distant future. It is clear that in Jesus, God's Kingdom has broken into this world, this space-time continuum. God's Kingdom is 'amongst you' or 'within you' says Jesus – not somewhere out there but here and now. It is not a Kingdom with borders and armies but about God's Kingship – his rule – being re-established where it has been usurped. It is about God's rule in our relationship with him – the Kingdom is within us. It is about God's rule in our relationships with each other – in churches, communities, societies – God's Kingdom is amongst us. Yet it is also about creation – about the environment – Jesus clearly teaches us to pray for God's will to be done and his Kingdom come *on earth* as in heaven. God's kingdom is about the earthing of heaven.

The Bishop of Durham, Tom Wright, in his book '*Surprised by Hope*' writes about this with clarity. He argues that the Christian hope is not about 'going to heaven when you die', but about the joining of heaven and earth – as God's heavenly rule is re-established here on earth. In the ministry of Jesus we see signs of this, in his miracles which demonstrated that God could put right, could heal, all that has gone wrong on this earth. Supremely, in Jesus resurrection we find hope, not just of life beyond death, but of a renewed and restored creation – just as his body was resurrected and renewed. Today, in the life of Christians and in the ministry of the Church, we should be expecting to see further signs of this – anticipations of the future completeness of God's Kingdom.

Tom Wright puts it this way: "What you do in the present – by painting, preaching, singing, sewing, praying, teaching, building hospitals, digging wells, campaigning for justice, writing poems, caring for the needy, loving your neighbour as yourself – all these will last into God's future ... They are part of what we may call building for God's Kingdom."⁷

⁷ Wright, N. T., '*Surprised by Hope*', SPCK, London, 2007, p.205.

God's Vineyard

That brings us to today's Gospel reading from Matthew 20:1-16 – the parable of the workers in the vineyard. Jesus introduces it by saying 'the Kingdom of Heaven is like this' ... so it's clearly about God's purposes in bringing renewal to this created order – to people, to communities, and to creation. The story presents a landowner who needs to employ labourers to harvest grapes in his vineyard. Today in Britain the nearest equivalent would probably be the migrant agricultural workers who are used to keep our vegetable and fruit prices cheap. The employer agrees a fair and reasonable wage, but as the day goes on he realises he needs more workers. Perhaps the forecasters were predicting bad weather and he wanted to get the grapes in quickly. Through the day he took on more and more workers, some of them only doing a couple of hours work by the end of it. Then he gathered them around to be paid, and to all their surprise gave the same amount to each. Those who'd been slaving away all day felt hard done by. Surely they should get a bonus? Surely it should be payment by results? Jesus is clear that the landowner has the right to pay as he wishes – it's his money.

So what does this have to say to us? The vineyard is surely the world – God's creation. As we saw last week, the earth is the Lord's – the vineyard belongs to him and not to us. As Margaret Thatcher once rightly said: "We have a repairing leasehold on planet earth".

Secondly, we are the workers in God's vineyard. Our task is to bring forth the fruits of the earth. In a real sense this passage takes us right back to Genesis 1, where God makes human beings and then gives us a very clear job description – our first Great Commission. God tells us to 'have dominion' over the earth and its creatures, and to rule over them all. 'Dominion' is not about domination but about Godly rule – about the good and gentle kingship we ultimately see modelled in Jesus, who washed his own followers' feet.

Over the centuries, and particularly in our rush to exploit the earth's resources for our own comfort and wealth, we have largely ignored this vital creation ordinance. God is clear. It is his first requirement of human beings that we should look after the earth and its creatures for his sake. We are simply his tenant farmers, or in this parable, his day-rate labourers.

Thirdly, the parable of the workers in the vineyard's central point tells us something further, something absolutely vital about God's provision in creation, which is that we are to receive creation's fruits as gift not as something we have earned. In God's vineyard, God's Kingdom, none of the labourers actually deserve what they are paid. The reward they each get – whether they have worked all day or just for one hour – is from the generosity of the owner. It is all about grace, not about works.

This is a hugely important point. If I plant a seed in my garden or allotment, and nurture it carefully, ensure it has enough sunlight and water, and it grows into – say – a tomato plant and produces good tomatoes, whose tomatoes are they? I may quite reasonably feel pleased that I have played my part, and I may be able to enjoy their delicious taste, but I must never forget that it is God who gives the growth. The miracle that transforms the seeds into tomatoes is God's, not mine. Thus, this passage teaches us about grace and thankfulness for the fruits of God's creation. In the offertory prayer of the Anglican Eucharist we state: "all things come from you and of your own do we give you", and that's exactly right.

Seeking to pursue God's Kingdom means a radically new relationship with our possessions and with the earth itself, recognising that everything we have is gift, is by God's grace, and nothing is deserved.

Conclusion

Finally, if this planet is God's vineyard and we are the workers, how well have you been doing your job? Are you one of those who has been working away since the start, saving the planet, reducing your carbon, living an eco-lifestyle? I guess the message of Jesus' parable is not only one of well done, you've been doing your job, but also a challenge not to think God owes you extra because of what you've been doing. Keep going, but beware of the danger of being an eco-pharisee. Your reward is God's pleasure. And for those of you – perhaps most of us – who know we're joining all of this rather late in the day, the parable gives us real encouragement. It's not too late – get involved even if the day is nearly over. The last can still be first, and the first last in God's Kingdom. For all of us the message is actually a hopeful one. This is God's vineyard, and he's in charge. He calls us to be his co-workers in caring for planet earth.

Week 4 - Hope for Creation in Humanity's Renewal

28th September – 19th after Trinity

Readings

Ezekiel 18.1-4, 25-end, Psalm 25.1-8
Philippians 2.1-13, Matthew 21.23-32

Theme

“For it is God who works in you to will and to act according to his good purpose.”

Philippians 2:13



Photo: fotdmike 

Introduction

In his book “A Short History of Nearly Everything”, the American writer Bill Bryson gives an entertaining and highly informative popular overview of the history of science. He skips through hundreds of years of innovation, dedication, experimentation, with a good few stories of the eccentricities, escapades and arguments that took place along the way. Towards the end of the book he reflects on all that humanity has achieved in terms of science and technology, and all that we still need to do. He describes the problems that we still face, and not least the environmental disaster that we have stored up for ourselves through our disregard for the balance of nature or the finite limits of our earth. Our track record has not been great. Finally, Bryson says this: “If you were designing an organism to look after life in our lonely cosmos, to monitor where it is going, and keep a record of where it has been, you wouldn’t choose human beings for the job. But here’s an extremely salient point – we have been chosen, by fate or providence or whatever you wish to call it. As far as we can tell, we are the best there is.”⁸

Putting People in their Place

Today, we face the real possibility that our own actions as human beings could – unless we turn things round very, very soon - bring about the collapse of all that we have tried to build. Our waste, our pollution, our profligate burning of fossil fuels, our deforestation, the mass extinction of wildlife, the damage wreaked upon water, air and soil have together brought us to the point of a global crisis. There needs to be urgent change.

Yet, at the same time there is amongst many a crisis of confidence in our ability as human beings to make the changes we need. Environmentalists point out that governments and scientists have known what we are doing for years and yet very little has happened to change things until recently. Even today some are in denial – the truth is simply too inconvenient when it affects our lifestyles and may interfere with our comforts. It seems there is something profoundly self-destructive about human nature itself. Is anything capable of changing people and societies, of dealing with our selfish genes, of transforming human nature? If, as Bryson says, we are the best there is, what hope is there?

Humanity Transformed?

At the heart of the issue is this. If there is a crisis of confidence in humanity’s ability to make a real difference to the environmental crisis, can Christian faith help? Over the past few years there have been an increasing number of senior leaders, often not people of personal religious faith themselves, who have made open appeals for Christian and other faith communities to get involved in tackling the environmental crisis. There is a growing recognition that technology, science, innovation and political will can only get us so far, because this is at root a moral and spiritual crisis.

⁸ Bryson, W. ‘A Short History of Nearly Everything’ London: Black Swan, 2004, p.572

Christian faith believes that it is possible for people to change. The good news at the heart of the gospel is that we do not have to stay lost forever in the mess we have made – whether that mess is in terms of our relationship with God, or in terms of the state of the planet. Our readings today focus on the possibility of change. Ezekiel 18 states that God takes no pleasure in the death of a sinner, but that rather he wishes them to repent – to start all over again with a clean sheet. Our Epistle from Philippians 2 encourages us to have the attitude of Christ Jesus who gave up the glories of heaven to be born, to live, to die for us. It challenges us to have the servant attitude that Jesus had. Applying that to the care of creation, it is a challenge to work out our dominion over the earth and its creatures with the same attitude of humble servant-hearted sacrifice that Jesus displayed.

Philippians 2 goes on to make the amazing assertion that the same power that was in Christ can be at work in us – transforming us from the inside out. 2:13 says: “It is God who works in you to will and to act according to his good purpose.” God working in us: that surely is the hope of glory. On our own we do not have much hope of solving the mess we have made of planet earth, but God working in us to achieve his good purpose. That is something worth believing in and committing ourselves to. If the Creator of the universe can work through ordinary people like us, then there really can be hope for the planet. If we abandon ourselves to God, if we allow his Lordship in our lives, he can renew us from the inside out, transform our selfishness into the selfless service that Jesus displayed.

Back to the Vineyard

What about our Gospel reading? In last week’s Gospel from Matthew 20, we saw that the world is compared to God’s vineyard, with ourselves as workers within that vineyard. Today’s Gospel from Matthew 21:28-32 continues the same theme with the short story of two sons who are asked by their father to go and work in his vineyard. One refuses, but later changes his mind and does go to help. The other agrees to help but doesn’t bother to follow through with his promise. At the immediate level, Jesus’ story is directed to the people around him. The respectable religious leaders are like the son who makes empty promises, whilst the son whose beginning is not so promising but gets there in the end is compared to the despised tax collectors and prostitutes who were beginning to respond to Jesus’ teaching.

How do we apply this to our situation? It is clearly about God’s unexpected, upside-down Kingdom, where sometimes the most unlikely people respond more deeply and honestly than the conventional religious types – there is room in God’s Kingdom for all, including those the rest of the world has rejected. It is also clearly about actions speaking louder than words. Words are seen to be totally empty unless they lead on to action. It is more important to care for the vineyard than to talk about caring for the vineyard.

We can apply that pretty directly to our environmental crisis. Over the past ten years, churches around the world including here in the UK have made many statements about the importance of the environment – about the place of creation in Christian theology and worship. ‘Creation Time’ is part of that rediscovery of creation’s place. The uncomfortable challenge of this bible passage is to ask whether all of this has been much more than empty words? Have the Synod and Council resolutions yet turned into tangible differences in the carbon emissions of churches and their congregations? Has the hot air of conference debate simply added to global warming?

Of course there are some good examples around and it is important to recognise and commend these. An increasing number of churches have taken the EcoCongregation materials and worked out practical applications of environmental Christian discipleship and witness. Many people have signed up to campaigns such as CAFOD’s ‘Live Simply’ (www.livesimply.org.uk), Tearfund’s ‘Carbon Fast’ (<http://www.tearfund.org/>), and A Rocha’s ‘Living Lightly 24-1’ (www.livinglightly24-1.org.uk). There have even been Bishops who have given up flying! All of these things are good, although it does feel as if we are still only just scratching the surface of what’s needed.

Conclusion (Week 4)

If the churches are to be seen as more than makers of bland statements and empty promises, then we need to see some very practical examples of the care of creation. If we really believe that the power of Christ can be at work within us to will and to act according to his good purpose, then we should expect to see evidence of this - examples of profound and radical lifestyle change amongst Christian leaders and amidst ordinary congregations. Let us rediscover a biblical vision that, because of Christ’s work, people can be changed, communities can be transformed, and creation can be renewed, and let us seek to put that into practice with actions that speak louder than words.

Week 5 - Hope for Creation in Christ

5th October – 20th after Trinity

Readings

Isaiah 5.1-7, Psalm 80.8-16
Philippians 3.4b-14, Matthew 21.33-end

Theme

“I press on to take hold of that for which
Christ Jesus took hold of me.”

Philippians 3:12



Photo: Kyle M

Introduction

Every now and then something happens which gives you a completely new perspective on life. It may be an experience – from the wonder of falling in love to the pain of dealing with bereavement, or it may be a new concept or idea. Sometimes a scientific discovery is made which changes how we see everything. Imagine how threatening it was when Copernicus realised that the earth was not the centre of the universe but that it – and all the other planets - revolved around the sun. At that time, some church leaders accused him of heresy and for many more it was a profoundly uncomfortable shift in their world view.

Today we are at one of those moments. As a global community we need to change completely the way we see planet earth and our place upon it. As Christians, we also need to change how we see the ‘Gospel’ and our ‘mission’. In both cases we have been guilty of putting ourselves as humanity right at the centre, of seeing everything revolving around us. We have seen the earth simply as resources for our consumption. We have seen the Gospel as simply the story of God and people. In both cases, we are beginning to realise we’ve been wrong and need to change.

God’s Big Picture

For the third week running, our Gospel reading is one of Jesus’ parables about a vineyard. This time it’s the end of Matthew 21, and often described as ‘the Parable of the Tenants’. That’s our first example of misreading God’s story. Calling it ‘the Parable of the Tenants’ puts us as people right at the centre of it. It’s actually the story of God’s vineyard. Do you see the difference? The focus is not only on us, but on God’s big picture. The vineyard is not simply the stage on which we act out our drama – it is a vital part of God’s – the landowner’s – purposes. In fact you could say that the landowner is really more interested in the fate of the vineyard than he is in the fate of the tenants!

Throughout the Old Testament, God’s people were meant to be an example to the nations around them, to the rest of the world, of how to relate to God and how to live within the land. Today’s Old Testament readings from Isaiah 5 and Psalm 80 remind us that the Jews were very familiar with vineyards, and for centuries had seen themselves and their land, as God’s special vineyard. However, God is not best pleased with the way they have treated his land – they have only produced sour grapes and so God has allowed their vineyard to become abandoned and overgrown. Jesus in his story goes even further and warns the people, in verse 43, that “The kingdom of God will be taken away from you and given to a people who will produce its fruit.”

The big picture of God’s purposes that we glean from Matthew 21 is in many ways a summary of the central story of the Christian Gospel. Today it is valid for us to see the vineyard as the whole of God’s creation. It is the world and all that is in it – it’s the environment. This vineyard, this earth, is something God as owner cares for and wishes to see fruitful – he has put a wall around it and made a watchtower to protect it. He has dug a winepress in anticipation that it will be fruitful.

Then God lends – rents out – his world to us as human beings. We are tenant farmers within God’s vineyard. This takes us directly back to Genesis 1, where we are made to image God in looking after his

world. This is the very first command and commission humanity is given – to be God's deputies, his stewards, in developing and caring for creation. At every stage it is clear that God has not abandoned his vineyard, but rather he has trusted us with it.

When God – the owner – sends servants to collect the fruit of the vineyard, what do we do? We beat, stone and kill them. All God expects from us is that we recognise that all the fruits of creation are his, not ours, that we offer them back to him in gratitude for him to bless before we use what we need. Yet instead, we have tried to usurp God's place. We have acted as if we own the earth – the vineyard – and as if its produce belong to us to use and abuse. We have ignored the voices of the prophets who cried out – and still cry out – that our misuse of creation is an act of rebellion against God.

Finally, the owner sent his own son, and he too was killed by the tenants. God's own son, Jesus, was sent to earth to show us how to live in right relationship with God, our neighbour and creation, yet he too was killed by a selfish humanity, ultimately by all of us. Jesus' story of the vineyard ends at this point – with the killing of the Son and the judgement that the owner will bring upon the tenants. It is a pre-resurrection story. But what happens if we continue the story in the light of the rest of the New Testament?

Hope for creation in Christ

Looking at this story from the other side of Easter, we know that the Son did not remain dead, but rose triumphant. We also know that his death and resurrection enable human beings to make a new start with God. But what about the vineyard, the world that has played such a big part in God's purposes? Bishop Tom Wright of Durham puts it like this: "God will redeem the whole universe; Jesus' resurrection is the beginning of that new life, the fresh grass growing through the concrete of corruption and decay in the old world. That final redemption will be the moment when heaven and earth are joined together at last, in a burst of God's creative energy for which Easter is the prototype and source."⁹

God's big picture is that in Jesus we have hope for transformed people, but also for a transformed creation. The Kingdom of God has broken into this world and the resurrection makes possible our hope that all things can be renewed in Christ Jesus. What that means in practice is that we – as failed tenants in God's vineyard – are given a second chance to find our purpose, to recover our role. One New Testament passage that conveys this eloquently is Romans 8:19-22. Here, St. Paul compares the whole creation to a pregnant woman in the pains of childbirth. Those pains are agonising, but they are also deeply hopeful, because of what is to be delivered. Creation, we are told, is waiting for two things. It is longing to be set free from its bondage to decay – for the renewal that will come when God's Kingdom is fully here, but secondly, and amazingly, we read in verse 19 that "The creation waits in eager expectation for the sons of God to be revealed."

The sons (and daughters) of God are of course us. They are the tenants of the vineyard who have failed in the commission they were given back in Genesis 1. However, now creation is waiting in hope for us to be revealed. What can this mean? Quite simply it means that we are invited to rediscover our role in God's purposes as creation's care-takers, and that this is what the world is waiting for. It is an exciting if somewhat overwhelming discovery. Today's environmental crisis is waiting for the Church to recover its vision and mission and to take the lead in caring for God's world. We do not do this alone, but with the power that comes from Christ, whose resurrection demonstrates and guarantees that creation can indeed be renewed.

Conclusion

There is hope for the planet. That hope does not lie in better science and technology, although those will help. It does not lie in political decisions, although those are vital. It does not lie in frantic, desperate attempts to save a sinking ship. It lies in the person and work of Christ, the one by whom and for whom all things were made, and in whom all things hold together (Colossians 1:15-17), and it lies in Christ's people rediscovering their vocation. In our Epistle Paul says "I press on to take hold of that for which Christ Jesus took hold of me." (Philippians 3:12). Let us recommit ourselves to doing that together, to being those for whom the creation is waiting in eager expectation. Let us be God's people working in the vineyard of his creation to his glory.

⁹ Wright, N. T., 'Surprised by Hope', SPCK, London, 2007, p.135.