


Creation in **CRISIS**

A time for prayer and action

THEME



Photo: William.n 

Workshops / discussion groups

for the 5 weeks of Creation Time 2009

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These five workshops have been compiled to provide support to groups of Christians, particularly young adults, seeking to grapple with some of the issues thrown up by environmental problems today. They are designed to be used alongside the 'Creation in Crisis' sermons in order to prompt discussion on the same topics that the sermons cover.

In these crucial months, when our efforts to mitigate potentially devastating Climate Change are so important, the workshops aim to help us out of ignorance or apathy into prayer and 'care-full' action.

Week 1: 6 September

Creation in Crisis

Scripture: Matthew 6:19-34

Week 2: 13 September

Global Poverty

Scripture: Isaiah 58:1-14

Week 3: 20 September

What About Wildlife?

Scripture: Genesis 9:1-17

Week 4: 27 September

16th Sunday after Trinity (Proper 21)

For Generations to Come

Scripture: Proverbs 13:22

Week 5: 4 October

A Harvest of Hopeful Action


Scripture: Genesis 41:15-57

Week 1: Creation in Crisis

6th September

Key passage: Matthew 6.19-34



Photo: Jeff Turner 

Introduction

In church this week we have heard about the way in which the economic crisis is inextricably linked to ecological and social crises. This workshop will probably work best if you follow the plan set below. Re-read this week's scripture together, then the topical reading, before engaging in the discussion questions actively. It would be helpful to spend the bulk of your time engaging on the questions posed, so perhaps divide up the time you have now, making sure you have about two-thirds of the time for discussion. It will be best to focus any of your own questions on the scriptures suggested and how you (as individuals and a group) can respond to the ecological crisis in light of them. It may also be helpful to make notes during discussion so that it remains focussed and so that you remember the key points made and the actions you want to take as a result.

Topical reading

In this passage we see Jesus teaching his disciples not to store up worldly wealth and not to worry about money and possessions. He says 'you cannot serve both God and Money' (v24). And yet in our efforts to build 'a good life', we have as a society, and often as individuals, borrowed more than we can afford and ended up in debt. We are guilty of serving "Money", and now the economy which we served is in dire straits. The government is pouring more money into the economy in the hope that this will rectify the problem as we spend our way back into 'the healthy economy'. Since money is a man-made resource, if this approach does not work they will probably try different approaches to heal our sick economy.

But, look at the birds; God made them and gave us responsibility over them. Yet many species are threatened or dying out (see www.biodiversityinfo.org/sowb for details), millions of chickens and turkeys are squashed into industrial warehouses being force-fed so that they are ready for our Sunday / Christmas dinners. If they become sick they are pumped full of antibiotics which are then passed on to human beings, reducing the success rate of this ingenious medication. Indeed many believe that this kind of 'factory farming' may be partly responsible for devastating viruses such as swine flu that threaten human life as well.

And look at the flowers; God made them and gave us responsibility over them. Yet we have turned flower production into a massive industry that leaves lakes dry, emits huge amounts of carbon dioxide in the atmosphere, and leaves poor farmers without land on which to grow food. Of course, flower-farming in Africa is a complex issue and the needs of African economies for employment and foreign-exchange need to be taken into account. Yet, we have become so obsessed with flying flowers across the globe for loved ones on Valentines Day that places like Kenya suffer regular droughts and struggle to feed their own populations because much of the country's best farm land and many of its resources are used for the flower industry.

But Jesus says to 'seek first his kingdom and his righteousness' because our Heavenly Father knows what we need.

Discussion questions

- Looking at the bible reading, what reason does Jesus give for birds having no need to worry?
- Like Jesus in Matthew 6, most Christians are aware that God loves his creation (Psalm 104) but this does not always translate into caring for it ourselves. Why do you think this is?
- Can you see any similarities in the way we have acted in the financial markets and towards the creation?
- Look at Genesis 2:15. This is humankind's first 'job description' – how do you think we are doing at this 'job' of working and taking care of the creation?
- Can we bank on God bailing us out if we destroy what he has made and given us responsibility for?
- What difference, if any, can consumers make in changing the way our economy operates?
- How do we ensure that industries like flower-growing balance social, economic and environmental needs in a way that is just and sustainable?
- Would you consider lobbying government and businesses, or taking part in demonstrations that put care for the creation on the agenda of decision-makers? Why / Why not?

Week 2: Global poverty

13th September

Key passage: Isaiah 58.1-14



Photo: Darcie Condie 

Introduction

This week we are looking at the ways in which issues of social justice link with environmental problems. Again, it will probably work best if you follow the order laid out below, spending most of your time on the discussion part. As with last week, try to keep focussed on the issues raised in the specific scriptures given, and make note of any action you think may be appropriate.

Topical reading

Fasting usually means a time of 'voluntary abstinence from food for spiritual purposes'¹. However, although this is certainly a good biblical discipline, from our reading this week it is clear that it is not the full biblical understanding of fasting.

Like many of the prophets, and Jesus himself, Isaiah is challenging the idea that our worship is confined solely to personal holiness ('Is it only for bowing one's head like a reed and for lying on sackcloth and ashes?'). He invites us to see that caring for the poor is a vital element of our worship, and that as we share, provide for, and clothe those who need it, we shine out the glory of God and find healing for ourselves too! Jesus echoed this sentiment throughout his life and teaching: he called us to 'love your neighbour as yourself' and even put himself in the shoes of the poor saying, 'whatever you did for the least of these brothers of mine, you did for me'.

Christians will often draw a distinction between loving our neighbour and caring for the creation. However, in our globalised world it is becoming increasingly hard to distinguish between the two. Climate Change provides a particularly stark example of this problem as the richest nations in the world have polluted most, yet the poorest feel the effects of climate change most. There are thousands of instances where we have seen the poorest people already suffering the impacts of climate change they have so little if any responsibility for causing: the islanders of Tuvalu in the Pacific Ocean who are planning to vacate their land as sea-level rises, the poorer residents of New Orleans who were unable to escape when Hurricane Katrina struck, the small-scale farmers in Africa who face regular droughts and cannot provide food for their families.

The farmer and essayist Wendell Berry sums this up by saying, 'it is a contradiction to love your neighbour and despise the great inheritance on which his life depends'². In other words, how can you love your neighbour if your life diminishes theirs?

Discussion questions

- Often fasting is a practice reserved for Lent and involving healthy living choices that we feel unable to make at other times of year. Do you feel challenged by this scripture?
- Who are the oppressed, the hungry, the poor wanderers, the naked, today? Who will they be in twenty years time, do you think?
- Who is your neighbour? See Luke 10:29-37
- Looking at Wendell Berry's words, do you think the way you interact with the creation diminishes your neighbour's quality of life?
- How can you care for those neighbours who you know are in need? Are there any actions that you can take to simultaneously benefit local neighbours in need and the local community of animals, birds, insects and other parts of the nonhuman creation?

¹ Don Whitney, *Spiritual Disciplines of the Christian Life*, p152


² Wendell Berry, "The Gift of Good Land," *The Gift of Good Land: Further Essays Cultural and Agricultural* (North Point Press, 1982), pp.273-274

Week 3: What about Wildlife?

20th September

Key passage: Genesis 9.1-17



Photo: Supriya 'n' Subharghya 

Introduction

This week we are looking at human interaction with non-human species. Follow the same approach as the past two workshops, making sure you have about two-thirds of the time for discussion. There are several scriptures to look at this week so perhaps designate one person to be responsible for finding and reading out the suggested verses.

Topical reading

The Polar Bear has become the poster-child of climate change as temperatures rise threatening their icy habitat. Species in polar regions are certainly endangered, but they are hugely outnumbered by the myriad of species in tropical climates that may be even more threatened. According to a worldwide report called the Red List (see www.iucnredlist.org) about 40% of all species examined on planet earth are in danger of extinction, including 21% of mammals, 37% of fishes, and 86% of mosses. Mass extinction poses a massive threat to human survival, perhaps even more so than its contributor, global warming. How will we respond?

In 1967, a US professor called Lynn White published an article entitled 'The Historical Roots of our Ecological Crisis' in which he argued that Christian theology was fundamentally exploitative of the natural world. He argued that the Genesis command to 'rule over' creation (Gen 1:28) made it possible for humankind to exploit nature with indifference. This has been a widely-held view in secular circles and, with many Christians so clearly indifferent to the fate of the nonhuman creation, it has been hard to counter.

However, when God made us 'to rule over' creation he also made us in his image. These two characteristics of humankind are inseparable. In which case, if we are to 'rule over' in the image of God, we need to 'rule' in God's way. Our best example of God's way is his son, Jesus, who said 'I am among you as one who serves' (Luke 22:27) and according to St. Paul, took on 'the very nature of a servant' (Philippians 2:7). Indeed, when this is seen alongside Genesis 2:15 which says 'The Lord God took the man and put him in the Garden of Eden to **work it and take care of it**,' it provides a solid basis to disagree with Lynn White's argument; instead we can state that, biblically, humankind has a unique position of responsibility to serve and care for all creation. Noah is a good example of a man demonstrating this role in desperate circumstances.

In the face of the huge threat of mass extinction of species, including birds, flowers, insects and mammals, how will we respond?

Discussion questions


- Look again at the Genesis 9 reading – do you find it odd how many times God emphasises that his covenant is with 'all living creatures' and 'with the earth'? (vs 10, 12, 13, 15, 16, and 17)
- What species of animal, bird, insect live in your local area? Do you feel that the way you interact with these creatures is similar or different to Noah?
- What do you think can be learned from the story of Noah about how God calls us to relate to 'all living creatures'?
- How could you relate to the 'living creatures' in your area in a more biblical way?
- Jesus' Great Commission in the gospel of Mark reads, 'Go into all the world and preach the good news to all creation'. How could you help the gospel become good news for all creation, not just people?
- Look at Colossians 1:15-23. Does it surprise you that St. Paul says that in Christ 'all things' are reconciled to God (vs 20) and that his gospel is to be proclaimed to 'every creature under heaven' (vs 23)?
- Finally look at Romans 8:19-21. Why do you think the creation is being held back from the 'glorious freedom of the children of God'?

Week 4: For Generations to Come

27th September

Key passage: Proverbs 13:22



Photo: shortie66 

Introduction

The questions raised this week have to do with how our choices now will affect the lives of future generations. The topical reading this week is a bit longer than usual but it shouldn't affect your discussion time since the scripture is so short! Again, the best approach is to focus on the suggested scriptures, and spend some good time on discussion.

Topical reading

This proverb brings to mind the recent financial crisis which has left the nation billions of pounds in debt. It is likely that the young among us, and maybe even our children's children, will inherit this debt and be responsible for making the nation solvent again. Some have commented that we are "sacrificing tomorrow for the convenience of today" in dealing with the crisis. When we look at how we have acted towards creation the same can easily be said: in the past few decades we have "sacrificed tomorrow for the convenience of today" in our use of the earth's resources.

In the book *Collapse: How Societies Choose to Fail or Succeed*, the geography and physiology professor Jared Diamond does a comparative study of different societies that have collapsed in human history. He demonstrates that in almost every case the root cause of collapse is the unsustainable use of resources by the people of that society. Growth and consumption by each society exceeds the practicable carrying capacity of their environment and they ultimately make it impossible for future generations to survive. Looking at the proverb, we need to ask ourselves what kind of world we want to leave for our children's children.

Climate change is the biggest challenge facing this generation and, according to most scientists, we are now at the crucial point where we can severely limit the effects of the phenomenon for our children and their children. There seems to be no doubt now that there will be some devastating impacts from climate change, but there are still actions we can take now to reduce these.

One of them is to reduce our use of fossil fuels, like oil and coal, which contribute massively to global CO2 emissions and hence climate change. The fact that fossil fuel reserves are also finite is another reason to conserve them. They have been described as 'ancient sunlight' because they contain the sun's energy trapped in living creatures and plants many years ago and then, through compression and heat, formed fossil fuels under the earth's surface. They contain more energy than we can source directly from the sun, wind or waves and yet they are fundamentally finite resources. Some scientists believe we are on the cusp of 'peak oil' – the point at which production of oil is at its highest, and after which production will rapidly decline. If we want to provide our children and grand-children with an economy that functions, it will need to be founded on resources that do not cause climate change and, furthermore, that will not run out.

In Psalm 103:15-18 we read: 'as for man, his days are like grass, he flourishes like a flower of the field; the wind blows over it and it is gone, and its place remembers it no more. But from everlasting to everlasting the Lord's love is with those who fear him and his righteousness with their children's children – with those who keep his covenant and remember to obey his precepts.' The Psalmist juxtaposes the brevity of human life with the eternal nature of God's love and righteousness, demonstrating that obeying God in the present benefits us and future generations.

Discussion questions

- What kind of world would you like to leave your children, and their children?
- Look at Psalm 103:13-18. What do you think is the first step to a sustainable life?
- What do you think would happen if your church began to lead the way in living lightly?
- In what ways can you make your 'footprint' smaller, as individuals and as a community?
- As well as making lifestyle changes yourselves, are you willing to challenge businesses too? (The CEO of a major carpet producer in the USA, Ray Anderson of Interface, changed his business strategy after seeing how unsustainable it was. He said, "unless we can make carpets sustainably, perhaps we don't have a place in a sustainable world")
- Do you think the government is acting on these issues satisfactorily? What can you do to make sure it does?

Week 5: A Harvest of Hopeful Action

4th October

Key passage: Genesis 41.15-57



Photo: DWinton

Introduction

In the final week of these workshops, as we celebrate Harvest and think about the Joseph story, let us remember everything we have learned and been challenged with.

Topical reading

In this reading we see a hopeful biblical example of a response to climate change; the Egyptians heeded Joseph's warnings of the imminent drought and took actions that saved Egypt and her neighbouring countries, including God's chosen people, from disaster. Although the climatic changes suffered by Egypt and her neighbours were minor in comparison to what we will probably experience, we can learn some key lessons from Joseph's story.

First of all though, it is important to recognise a key difference between the Joseph story and our own: The drought suffered by the Egyptians was probably not directly caused by their imperial and agricultural practices, whereas climate change today is widely recognised to be a result of our actions – our power stations, our deforestation, our 'factory-farming', our flights, etc. Furthermore, ours has increasingly become an issue of justice and righteousness for us as the poor suffer the impacts of climate change first and often worst, as about 40% of the earth's species are threatened by extinction, and as future generations have to deal with the consequences of our actions. As Isaiah put it – 'the earth lies polluted under its inhabitants; for they have transgressed laws, violated the statutes, broken the everlasting covenant' (Isaiah 24:5).

Therefore, the issue for us is not purely one of action; it requires prayer and repentance first. When God spoke to Solomon after he had built the Temple he said, 'if my people who are called by my name, will humble themselves and pray and seek my face, and turn from their wicked ways, then I will hear from heaven and will forgive their sin and **heal their land**' (2 Chronicles 7:14). This is a good starting place.

Following this, we can seek God's will to discern what to do in our situation. When Joseph is asked to interpret Pharaoh's dream he first acknowledges that, 'I cannot do it, but God will give Pharaoh the answer he desires' (vs16). As a young man Joseph had been a dreamer, and his visions were fulfilled. It was his trust in the prophetic that enabled him to interpret dreams and prophesy about the impending drought in Egypt. No doubt there were people in the royal court and elsewhere who scoffed at Joseph and would have wanted to continue life as normal rather than store a fifth of the harvest each year. But, probably in the face of sceptics, Joseph trusted his prophetic gift and interpreted the dream as a message from God.

Prayerful planning and action are equally important in our response. We can often rush directly into ineffective and careless actions unless our strategy is thought through. Egyptian Pharaohs were considered to be deities whom the people trusted to save them from all uncertainties, perhaps in the same way that some people today believe that presidents or technological innovation will save us from climate change. However, Joseph's strategy in dealing with the Egyptian drought demonstrates the wisdom of focussing on basic needs (i.e. food) and sharing surplus harvest (vs33-36) rather than depending solely on the powers of rulers and technology - a common sense and simple solution. Once this strategy was implemented, the disaster was averted and people came from all over the world to share in Egypt's harvest!

As we celebrate the harvest together let us repent, pray, plan and act to avert catastrophic climate change in our generation, just as Joseph did in his.

Discussion questions

- Since it is harvest time why not reflect as a group on where the food you have in your homes has come from? Can you see any connections between this and the present climate crisis?
- Do you pray and ask God for direction in responding to climate change? If so, what does he say? If not, why not?
- What do you think you can learn from Joseph in dealing with the present problem of climate change?
- What dreams or visions do you have for your local area that might have relevance to climate change? Why not brainstorm a strategy to realise those visions with your group?
- What role do you think the church has in a time of crisis like the present? If you think it has a prophetic role then how can it be more prophetic?