



A time for celebration and care

Sermon

for Creation Time 2010



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A sermon preached at Holy Trinity, Headington Quarry, Oxford, June 2010, made available for inclusion in Churches Together in Britain and Ireland's Creation Time resources.

Creation and Holistic Mission

I want to start with a big question. Actually it is **'the'** big question, and it drives much human endeavour. **Why are we here?** You can tell it's a big question because it has many different kinds of answers. At a personal level you might say, 'I'm here because I got up this morning and got on my bike, so here I am', or because 'I just had to hear today's sermon' (dream on), or 'because the church is dear to me, I love it because it refreshes and sustains my soul', or simply 'because I was born'. But you might answer **'why are we here?'** by saying why you were born, or how you are the latest in a unique line of wonderfully evolving life-forms whose ancestry reaches back unbroken two billion years to some slimy substances in a rock pool that would one day become life, or even that from the earliest moments of the universe's existence 13.5 billion years ago, when the spirit of God swept over the face of the waters and God said let there be light, the universe was seeded with the potential for life in all its fullness, richness, colour and diversity.

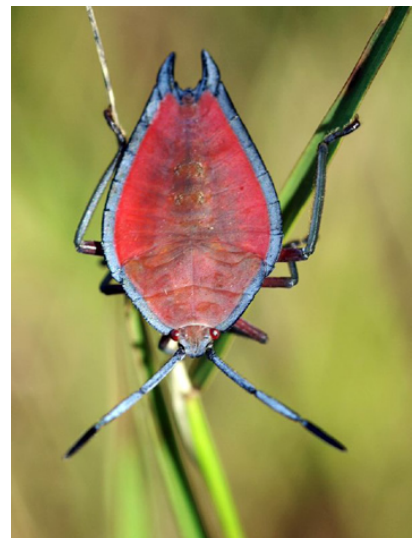
Let's call the question **'why are we here?'** Adam's question, because amongst all the myriad species on Earth, it seems to reflect a uniquely human concern (other animals just get on with living), and because the moment Adam asks it, as does every human, he changes forever the relationship between his kind, God and Creation, and so he changes the very nature of life itself. So Adam's question is one of truly cosmic proportions and profundity.

All these answers to Adam's question are valid, though none is complete in itself. But notice two other things about it. First it is really two questions: 'How did I get here... and what am I here for?' So Adam's question is answered with a sense of purpose. The Universe, Creation, is so extraordinary, given that nothing *has* to exist, that we intuitively sense that it must have a purpose, and if it does, this must be God's purpose. I must even recognize God as that which gives anything purpose, and if humans have emerged with this sense, then God must have a purpose for each one of us. It is no coincidence that real atheism is nihilistic; it has to deny that life has purpose and so it leads to that dark night of the soul expressed vividly in the *Book of Ecclesiastes*. So our answer to Adam's question is intuitively and intimately tied up with a sense of mission. The second thing I want you to notice about our answers to Adam's question is that they span both those that are unique to each one of us, and those which connect and bind us into a greater unity, but not just with our fellow humans, but with all life on Earth. So while each one of us has a unique lineage that connects back to the very seeding of creation, we share a common history with our non-human relatives, with other primates, other mammals, some small dinosaurs, some early amphibians - ancestors of today's frogs and newts, with boney fish and so on.

I'd like you now to look at your neighbour. What do you see? Do you see a friend and brother or sister in Christ? I hope so. But do you also see that he or she, like you is the product of the most miraculous evolving adventure there has ever been. Like you, they are part of the Grandest Narrative, a 13.5 billion year long story. And do you see that they, like you are stardust: the atoms that compose your physical being were forged billions of years ago in the white-hot furnace of a star's core. While we get on with the seeming mundanity of daily life, we, like all other living creatures, are simultaneously miracles, we are part of God's Grand Narrative of Creation, and we are stardust.

God's wisdom in Creation is **holistic**. What does this mean? It means that the evolving development of Creation through the outpouring of His love shows integrity. While we might look at the emergence of individual parts, beetles or humans, that is not the whole story, it is not the way God has thought in Creation, and it cannot alone reveal His purpose in Creation. I want to give you a poignant example to show what I mean, which also offers a parable for our difficulty in discerning God's purpose and His purpose for us.

Think about the amazing diversity of plants and insects in tropical forests. In the Western Ghats of India for example there are more than 100 tree species, and each has a number of plant-eating insects that occur on no other tree. As it is not in the tree's best interests to have its leaves eaten, over time, these feeding insects have caused the production of compounds, which make the leaf distasteful or even toxic to most of them. This has been the driver for some insects to evolve resistance to these compounds, from which by the way we derive many drugs, but the overall effect has been an exuberant proliferation of plant and insect diversity, in a continuous 'arms race' played out over millions of years.



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We might ask of any individual species what is it for, but we may miss a greater point if we do so. It is this. As those plant-adapted insects eat the leaves, they release some of the plant compounds that evolved to deter other insects. Some of these compounds are volatile, and when released into the atmosphere they form the nuclei for water droplets to coalesce. This is an essential part of the process of rainfall formation, and the rain is essential to the functioning of the whole forest system. So here is a holistic vision of Creation in which the evolution of plant and insect diversity contributes to the wellbeing of a greater whole, but also, because of the vast extent of these forests, it contributes beneficially to the global climate on which we all depend. No single, plant, insect or species could see this as their purpose, but it is surely part of God's greater purpose for them.

I said this was a poignant example because these rainforests are being destroyed at a rate of up to 10,000 square miles a year in Brazil alone, together with thousands of unique plants and animals. Much of the forest is being burned, releasing millions of tons of CO₂ into the atmosphere. Why? Well in Indonesia especially, it is to make way for oil-palm plantations for first-generation biofuel production aimed at reducing CO₂ emissions!

With this new perception in Christ let's now think on mission. What is God's great mission for humanity? Well it was clearly stated before we started asking questions: Genesis 2:15 *The Lord God took the man and put him in the garden to till it and keep it...* that is, to be stewards of the Earth, having not ownership of the Earth which clearly we did not create, but having responsibility for it as we must be responsible for our own actions. So this is a matter of justice. The very fabric of Creation has been fractured by Mankind's search for purpose because if when we ask Adam's question we do not see that the answer is to love all of the Creation of which we are but a part, as God loves it, that search leads us to the idolatry, greed and materialism, which are literally costing the Earth. If we understand that Christ's great mission of salvation is to bring us back to that right sustaining relationship with God and His Creation, then the Christian's mission is clear. We are to Love God and our neighbour as ourselves, to be a light in the world and to heal a Creation fractured by Mankind's search for purpose and fulfillment while denying God and His.

And so, the Anglican five marks of mission are:

- To proclaim the good news of the Kingdom;
- To teach, baptize and nurture new believers;
- To respond to human need through loving service;
- To seek to transform unjust structures of society;
- To strive to safeguard the integrity of creation and sustain and renew the earth.

All these things together constitute the Holistic Mission of the Living Faith.

So how do we go forward? First, know that this is not a new realization, it is a path that others have trodden and many friends long to help us. In 1983, after three years as Curate in a parish on Merseyside, Rev. Peter Harris was granted permission to establish a field studies centre in the Algarve as a mission-funded project. And so, together with his wife Miranda, the A Rocha project was born. Based on the five Cs of A Rocha's commitments - of Christian, Conservation, Community, Cross-cultural, and Co-operation - A Rocha's success and growth have been truly remarkable, and there are now A Rocha community projects in 18 countries bearing witness to the significance of this mission.

In the UK, A Rocha also manages the Eco-Congregation scheme. Eco-Congregation is 'an ecumenical programme helping churches make the link between environmental issues and Christian faith, and respond in practical action in the church, in the lives of individuals, and in the local and global community'.

[More information at www.ecocongregation.org/]

This year is the UN International Year of Biodiversity, by when, the 1992 Rio Earth Summit aimed to stop the rot of extinction. Yet as each year has passed, we have seen greater and greater loss. I pray that we might be that light in the World and make a difference.

Peter Harris describes his family's experiences in setting up A Rocha in the book *Under the Bright Wings*, whose name was inspired by Gerard Manley Hopkins' wonderful poem, *God's Grandeur*. I think it a fitting way to end:

God's Grandeur, by Gerard Manley Hopkins

*The world is charged with the grandeur of God.
It will flame out, like shining from shook foil;
It gathers to a greatness, like the ooze of oil
Crushed. Why do men then now not reck his rod?
Generations have trod, have trod, have trod;
And all is seared with trade; bleared, smeared with toil;
And wears man's smudge and shares man's smell: the soil
Is bare now, nor can foot feel, being shod.*

*And for all this, nature is never spent;
There lives the dearest freshness deep down things;
And though the last lights off the black West went
Oh, morning, at the brown brink eastward, springs —
Because the Holy Ghost over the bent
World broods with warm breast and with ah! bright wings.*



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