



A time for celebration and care

Sermon

for Creation Time 2010



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Readings

Job 38:1-27 (or Job 38:1-11, 22-27 for a shorter passage)

Luke 6:43-49

“Environment ... oh that’s SO last year ...!” In our media-driven age, obsessed with the latest 24-hour news, it is easy for vitally important long-term issues to simply be shelved as ‘old news’, or – especially when they challenge our culture’s idols – to be quietly forgotten. So it is that, according to poll ratings, Climate Change has dropped right down people’s list of priorities – and in 2010 more of the public now are ‘sceptical about the science’ than last year. The disastrous Climate talks at Copenhagen in December 2009 and the storm over ‘dodgy evidence’ have confused and disillusioned many. With such a fundamental shift in opinion, some are talking of a new environmental age: BC = before Copenhagen and AD = after denial. What’s going on here, and how should Christians react to these trends?

Firstly, it’s vital for Christians to read the signs of the times and not to allow a few well-funded sceptics to pollute the evidence. Despite a few sad examples of poor or confusing research it remains the case that the overall picture of climate chaos largely caused by the burning of fossil fuels is accepted unequivocally by all the leading scientific academies, by the UN, and by major governments of every political hue. More urgently, evidence is accelerating of the growing impact of a changing climate on the world’s poor and on vulnerable wildlife (coral reefs, rainforests). If it is suddenly unpopular to say this, surely Christians should be prepared to stand up and be counted rather than follow our culture in avoiding an inconvenient truth?

But secondly, surely for Christians Climate Change is only one part of our environmental calling and if we simply jump on and off the bandwagon when it’s politically convenient we are rightly accused of hypocrisy. Whatever our opinions on global warming, our primary driver is surely not the whims of the media but rather an unchanging God and the eternal truths of the Christian faith revealed in the scriptures and the collective wisdom of the church down the ages.

Whatever the polls say about climate change, it remains the case that planet earth is God’s beautiful creation entrusted to our care. Less palatably, whatever our opinions on global warming, it also remains the case that human activity is depleting and damaging God’s world. Whether it’s biodiversity loss, deforestation, chemical pollution, over-fishing, waste or simply over-consumption in western nations, nobody disputes the evidence ... we simply ignore the facts. Christians are called to be environmentalists because ‘the environment’ is God’s precious creation, made by and for Jesus.

That's why all the member churches of Churches Together in Britain and Ireland, and their partners right across Europe, have proclaimed 1st September – 4th October as a Time for Creation not just this year but every year – to remind us of the unchanging truths of God's love for all creation and of our responsibility both to celebrate and to care.

This year's title for Time for Creation: "Creation Flourishing – A Time for Celebration and Care" - has been chosen because 2010 is the UN's International Year of Biodiversity (www.biodiversityislife.net). However, in the light of the massive BP oil-spill in the gulf and of other disasters around the world, 'creation flourishing' might seem a strange choice of title. How can we speak of creation flourishing when all the evidence is that the planet's ecosystems are struggling under the effects of what the great theologian Jurgen Moltmann has called "the wounds we inflict on the body of the earth"¹? Let us turn to our bible readings to see what we can learn about creation and its flourishing ...

God has designed creation to flourish

Job 38-42 contains a wonderful overview of nature's beauty and diversity, truly putting Job and all other human beings too in their place. God has set the boundaries and limits for creation – the skies, the earth, the seas, the climate and its weather patterns. God is also the author of biodiversity – Job talks of Lions and Ravens, Ostriches and Horses, Hawks and Donkeys – each unique, distinct and, to human eyes, somewhat mysterious or even absurd, but each designed and cared for by God. The earth is full of extraordinary creatures – abundant and flourishing, amazingly adapted for environments from the driest deserts to the deepest oceans to the depths of rainforests. Everywhere on earth creation flourishes and changes and adapts.



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During 2009 the Christian environmental organisation A Rocha was asked to coordinate some research into biodiversity in remote parts of Papua New Guinea – working in partnership with local tribal Christians who form the majority of the population. Initial results suggest that a significant numbers of species new to science have been discovered. Even in the 21st century there are still new discoveries being made as we find out more about the extraordinary biodiversity of this planet.

In his latest book "The Greatest show on Earth", Richard Dawkins focuses as a scientist on the extraordinary story of biodiversity and how it has emerged on this planet. As long as you're prepared to ignore his sideswipes against Christianity it is actually a very well-written book, often waxing lyrical at the beauty and sheer variety of life.

Of course Job 38 and other passages do not try to address the questions that modern science attempts to answer – about the processes that God used to create such astonishing and abundant biodiversity. Their focus instead is on the fact that this is a truly miraculous planet full of amazing creatures. Not even the atheistic Dawkins can avoid stepping back in wonder at life's fecundity and diversity. Science may be able to understand some of the processes involved, but there is something beyond the scope of science in the beauty, the complexity and the imagination revealed in the flourishing of creation.



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Creation's Flourishing Flows from God's Character

This biodiverse world that we call our environment isn't merely a backcloth for our relationship with God. It is part of how we relate to God. In Romans 1.20 St Paul reminds us that "since the creation of the world God's invisible qualities - his eternal power and divine nature - have been clearly seen, being understood from what has been made." In other words, by studying biodiversity we are studying God's character at work. Biology is a branch of theology!

¹ Jurgen Moltmann, 20th May 2010, in lecture entitled "The Church in the Power of the Spirit" at Holy Trinity Brompton, London.

We see this clearly in Job 38. Here creation reveals God as:

- **Architect and designer** – the one who brings order out of chaos, who puts clarity and structure into a universe that would otherwise be random and meaningless. In the poetic language of Job 38, God is the builder who lays the foundations, puts in place doors and windows, the potter who shapes the formless clay, the designer who cuts the cloth of creation. God is immensely, unfathomably creative.
- **Parent** – verses 28-29 read “Does the rain have a father? Who fathers the drops of dew? From whose womb comes the ice? Who gives birth to the frost from the heavens?” God’s relationship with nature is not simply that of artist and project. It is far more intimate – God brings creation to birth. Just as a father takes pride in his offspring, just as a mother is umbilically tied to her child – so God is wrapped up in his love for creation. And the key thing to realise here is that this love, this deeply personal relationship is not only with humanity. We are not the only creatures that God has designed this world for. Job 38:25-27 explicitly talks of God watering and providing grass in “a land where no man lives, a desert with no one in it.” In other words, God’s world is not simply here for humanity to enjoy and exploit. We live in an era where urbanisation and our increasingly virtual, on-line lifestyles make us feel disconnected from nature. Not only do we need to remember that we are part of biodiversity, we also need to re-learn that we are not the only part that matters to God! God is interested in the fullest variety of life – in its biodiversity – and we should be too.
- **Wisdom-giver**– verses 36-38 show God as the source of all natural wisdom. “Who endowed the heart with wisdom or gave understanding to the mind? Who has the wisdom to count the clouds?” This is why the natural sciences are truly about thinking God’s thoughts after him. The wisest man who ever lived, King Solomon, realised this: in 1 Kings 4:33 we read that Solomon’s wisdom included describing plant life, from the cedar of Lebanon to the hyssop that grows out of walls, and teaching about animals and birds, reptiles and fish. Today many people have very little understanding of the most basic things about the natural world – how to grow potatoes or carrots, which bird species are in their garden, what fruit and vegetables are in season. When we lose this knowledge, we lose something of God’s wisdom.
- Finally, **Provider** – Job 38 describes God finding food for the lions and the ravens (verses 39-41). Jesus talked about how our heavenly father provides for the flowers and the birds. In this notion of God’s creation flourishing because God actively chooses to provide for his creatures we find important clues for helping our attitudes today, at a time when biodiversity is under such threat.

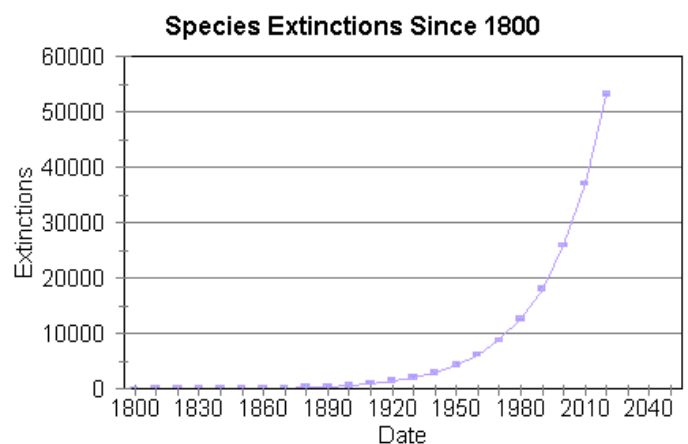


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So, we’ve learned that God has designed creation to flourish and that our biodiverse world shows God’s character. Thirdly we must look at our place as humanity within God’s flourishing world.

We can inhibit creation’s flourishing

Today there is no doubt that human activity around the planet is negatively affecting creation’s flourishing. There are various ways of measuring this. In terms of extinction, it is generally accepted that today’s rates are roughly 1,000 times higher than the natural underlying rate of extinction. The great American biologist E O Wilson estimates that about 27,000 species of all types are becoming extinct each year, which will lead to about 22% of all life on earth being extinct by 2020.² Another way of looking at the data is in terms of abundance of particular species – here the World-Wide Fund for Nature (WWF) has kept a ‘Living Planet Index’ since 1970 and by the year 2000 had 30 years worth of information. According to their estimates, the abundance of land-based, freshwater and marine organisms fell by a total of 40% over just that thirty year period.³



Based on a mathematical model by E O Wilson et al.

³World Wide Fund for Nature (WWF), published in the Millenium EcoSystem Assessment. (<http://www.millenniumassessment.org>)

² <http://www.whole-systems.org/extinctions.html>

Even if biodiversity did not matter to God these would be very worrying statistics because our own well-being and our long-term survival depend on nature's health and the ecosystem services it provides – fresh air to breathe, clean water to drink, unpolluted land to grow crops and so on. However, the fact is that God does care about every single species on this planet – look at the story of Noah's ark if you want evidence of that – and that sending even one species unnecessarily towards extinction clouds the clarity of God's character as displayed in nature.

The sad fact is that if, as human beings, we fail to allow creation to flourish, we cast shadows on the light of God's self-revelation in nature, we dull our senses to the wisdom that God has revealed uniquely in every single species, and we ultimately make our own future untenable. However, that's not the end of the story. Finally,

We can enhance creation's flourishing by working in God's strength

Our Gospel reading from Luke 6 includes the well-known story of the two house-builders – one who builds on rock and the other on sand. We often hear fairly spiritualised interpretations of this passage. Actually however, Jesus is clear that the story is simply about whether or not those who hear God's words obey them or not. It's about all of life and how we live it – not just the spiritual bits but how we treat the world around us – how we use resources, how our lifestyles are constructed, how we choose to travel, to shop, to relate to our fellow creatures.

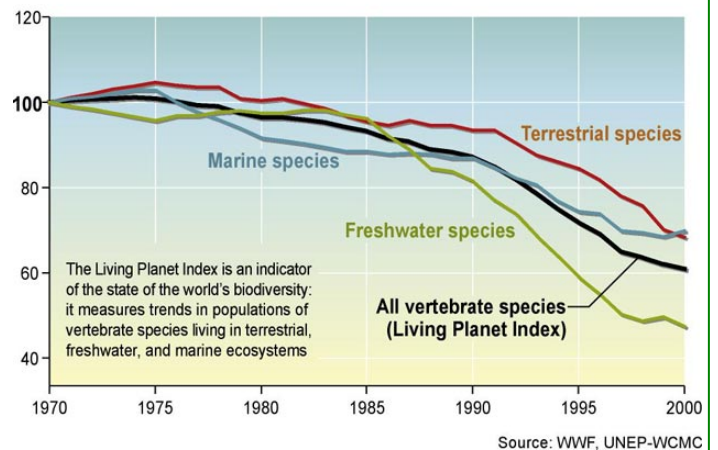
Where are our foundations? Are we building on the sandy floodplain of materialism with its shallow foundations into self-fulfilment and disposable addictive consumer lifestyles? Or are we reaching down to a deeper level - building on the solid rock of God's word with its clarity about the value of all life, not just human life?

It has been said that what we need today is not just an ecological movement. We need an ecological Pentecost – an outpouring of God's Spirit on all flesh, to completely re-orientate our thinking and our living. As Christians we need to rediscover and celebrate the beauty of nature – the flourishing that is already there in creation. It is surely tragic that most churches only worship indoors and sometimes even work hard to keep God's creation outside – battling against bats in the belfry or pigeons in the pulpit when just perhaps God might be seeking to say something to us through his creation!! God is not remote from us, but active in sending the Holy Spirit and renewing the face of the earth (as Psalm 104:30 puts it), providing for all of life including humanity. The vision of the Bible – in Genesis, in Job, in the Psalms and in Jesus' teaching is profoundly relational – creation living in sustainable balance because of God's creating, caring, sending, sustaining and rejoicing. We need to recover that sense of God's transforming presence in all creation – naming it when we sense it, and seeking to encourage nature to flourish so that all can discern God's presence.

People working with Christian environmental charities often find that when people see Christians actively involved in caring for creation, it frequently triggers a deep response. There are many, many people who dimly discern something of God's presence in creation but who would never go near a church. However, when Christians link creation to Christ, the penny starts to drop. When we see a beautiful sunset, or a snowdrop pushing up through the wintry soil, or a tiny bird that has just migrated thousands of miles from Africa to England – we are glimpsing something of God's creating, sustaining, transforming work in creation.

God has created this astonishingly diverse world in love, and it reveals his character. He is not just creator, but also sustainer – something we desperately need in our search for sustainability – and so we are called to be his co-workers in protecting, conserving and enhancing creation's flourishing. If we do so, then we too can begin to flourish in new ways as God's Spirit fills us and as we find out more of God's character revealed in creation's flourishing.

Population Index = 100 in 1970



Graph from <http://www.greenfacts.org> based on Millennium Ecosystem Assessment