

Sunday, 13th September 2020

Genesis 2, 15

5th June was World Environment Day, well three months and a week later we have a sermon series on the environment. Better late than never.

The environment, climate change, plastic pollution, air quality – many of these issues have inspired people to take action and there is widespread concern about how we treat the world, use resources etc. The relationship of Christianity as a whole and the environment has not always been a good one.

In order to see what the relationship should be like we need to look at the beginning of the Bible, the first two chapters in the book of Genesis. There we find the creation stories, tales of deep significance which convey universal truths as explained in the Oxford Bible Commentary. They are deep and meaningful tales which need to be examined for their overall significance and be read with the whole of the Bible in mind rather than be taken literally and at face value.

For many centuries Christian teaching focussed on Genesis 1 and emphasised verses 26 – 28: humans are to dominate the world. The words ‘rule’ and ‘subdue’ were taken to mean that humans can exercise total control and use (or should we say abuse) the world as they thought fit. We can see examples of this still all around us: the ruthless exploitation of natural resources, the abuse of animals, the destruction of habits and species. With the rise of technology nature was seen as something to be conquered and put into use for the benefits of humans. Hostile landscapes were put into service, railway lines built through remote areas, electricity cables and gas pipelines disturbing untouched regions. There was no attention paid to valuable habitats of animals and plants. Gangs of workmen and later bulldozers moved in and put the land into use for humans.

In 1967 the American historian Lynn White Jr argued that Christian beliefs promoted the domination and exploitation of nature and were not compatible with environmentalism. In the USA in the 21st century more than half of Protestant and Catholic Christians believe that climate change is not man-made. Conservative evangelical Christians are still more likely to embrace the idea that climate is not real. This world is seen as only a temporary vessel, to be used and then discarded and not as something which needs to be preserved.

However, mainstream Christianity has moved to a different view, based on Genesis 2, 15. Here the focus is on stewardship, looking after creation. Humans have a special task and responsibility of taking care of this world. By doing so, love for God is expressed. Looking after the world becomes a sign of love for God, you honour the giver and creator of life by respecting and preserving the world. Christian leaders of all denominations are now promoting this view of stewardship as a way of putting into practice the great commandment of loving God and loving one’s neighbour.

Archbishop Justin Welby said: “Reducing the causes of climate change is essential to the life of faith. It is a way to love our neighbour and to steward the gift of creation.” It is now well known that pollution has a negative effect on people. Poorer regions and countries are more adversely affected by the ruthless exploitation of resources and the weak and vulnerable often bear the brunt of pollution.

It is good to see that the Church of England, together with the wider Anglican Communion, has as its 5th Mark of Mission: "To strive to safeguard the integrity of creation and sustain and renew the life of the earth. As it says on the Church of England website, this refers not only to individual, personal action but has a lot to do with how Christian congregations, churches, act as a whole. It makes a difference how church buildings are heated or lit. These buildings can be modified to become energy efficient and meet the Church of England target of becoming carbon neutral by 2030. There is the need for tangible action on an organisational level as well as how we all live individually.

Many are concerned about single use plastics, and church congregations as a whole can set an example by not using disposable plastic plates, beakers and cutlery. The All Saints' women's group has set such an example. In their annual quiz night, the guests need to bring their own cutlery and glasses so that there is no need to use plastic items. It also avoids unnecessary washing up.

We give thanks to God for his gift of creation and need to work together to be good stewards. We don't do this on our own, but we remember God's gift of Jesus, the saviour, whose death on the cross brings forgiveness and new life to all. Because of Jesus we can repent and confess our guilt with regards to the environment, as individuals and as the institution church, and in the light of the forgiveness received can work on the task of preserving this world.