

God's Creation ...

... *Look after it*

The sermon given at the Parish Communion Service, on 13th October 2019 by the Vicar, the Revd. Canon Jonathan Baker, in Beverley Minster.

Genesis 1:20-31; John 1:1-14

Well there are not many issues getting a look in at the present with all the excitement over Brexit, but one issue that does surface quite a bit is the environmental crisis. And the Sundays in October are sometimes designated 'Creationtide', an opportunity for the church to think about what the Bible has to say about our relationship with the natural world. So last week we had Harvest Festival, and today and over the next couple of weeks we've got a special sermon series looking at different aspects of our relationship with the environment. I don't know what you made of Gretta Thunburg's speech at the UN summit on climate change the other week, warning that we are in the beginning of a mass extinction; or what you make of the protests in London and other cities this week by Extinction Rebellion. And I wonder how your Christian faith has informed your opinion on such matters?

As disciples of Christ, we are called to develop a Christian Mind, so that we can apply our faith to the world around us. As Saint Paul says in his letter to the Romans, "Be transformed by the renewing of your minds" - and nowhere is that more important than in our thinking about the environment. Now it's possible this may be news to you: it may not have occurred to you that Christianity has anything to say about the environment. But there are certainly people outside the church who are quite clear that it does: back in 1967 an American academic called Lynn White published a very influential paper blaming the emerging ecological crisis, as it was back then, on Judeo-Christian teaching and especially the Book of Genesis, which he claims encouraged the view that human beings are superior to nature and are told to have dominion over it and to subdue it and are therefore given permission to use it for, quote, "Our slightest whim." I wonder do you

think that's correct? Is Christianity really to blame for encouraging people to exploit and destroy the natural world?

What I think is fairly clear is that the destruction of our natural environment is the result of what you might call 'dualistic' ways of thinking and since this is something that has influenced Christianity, it's worth exploring it a bit. So I'm going to work you hard this morning, so you need to sit up straight and listen carefully. It's been said that the world can be divided into two sorts of people: those who divide the world into two sorts of people and those who don't; and that in a nutshell is 'dualism'. It sees life in terms of two kinds of reality in tension or conflict with each other, and often with some sort of imbalance between them. It goes back to the ancient Greeks where Plato taught that there was a tension between the spiritual realm on the one hand which was good because that was the realm of perfection, and the material realm on the other hand which is bad because that's the realm of evil and death and imperfection.

So heaven is seen as more important than Earth, the soul is seen as more important than the body - and you can see how this has influenced Christianity, especially before the Reformation, where life was sometimes seen just as a preliminary to the much more important business of getting to heaven, and when at death, the soul would outlive the body that could just be discarded as a sort of useless husk. And that led to a downgrading of the physical body and the whole physical world. And dualism is still around in the church today, where Christians sometimes seem more interested in their own interior spiritual life than they are in being a sign of God's concern for the poor, for example; or where, in some parts of the church in the United States people say, "We're all going to heaven anyway so the Earth doesn't matter and in fact the sooner the earth burns away the quicker we will get to heaven." - so there's no need to do anything about the environment: that's a good example of bad theology.

But a much wider influence in the modern world is the teaching of the 17th century philosopher Rene Descartes, and other philosophers of the European Enlightenment who taught not that the soul was better than the body but the human reason was more important than the body and its physical senses: his insight was summed up in the phrase, "I think, therefore I am." Rather than, "I act, therefore I am" or "I love, therefore I

am." "I think, therefore I am." There's a dualism between the mind and matter, and because of the primacy given to human reason, in the end there is a dualism between human beings and the rest of creation which is regarded as existing simply for human benefit. Since the emphasis on reason contributed so much to the rise of science and technology, it's also contributed to the environmental crisis by encouraging us to think of the physical and animal world simply as a source of raw material to serve human interests. Because it has no reason of its own, the natural world has been downgraded: it has no essential value; no meaning or purpose of itself.

The opposite of dualism is 'Monism' - bear with me - which says basically everything is one and has the same value: it's the idea of 'pantheism' that you find in some eastern religions, that the Earth itself is divine and God isn't to be found outside the natural world - there is no creator as such - but the Earth itself and all life is suffused with divinity and has value.

I once saw an interview with an animal rights activist who had disrupted an angling competition, believing that it was cruel to fish and indeed to the maggots that were used as bait. He was asked by the interviewer if he was willing to go to jail for the sake of a fish, and he said yes he was. And then he was asked if he would risk jail for the sake of a maggot, and he said yes he would. But surely the problem with saying that a maggot is worth as much as a person is that you're also saying a person is worth no more than a maggot, which at least politically sounds like a very dangerous idea, especially if you think of those situations where people have been described as vermin or as lice or as cockroaches. So while 'Monism' might be better for the environment, I think it's probably not so good for human beings.

And none of these views actually does justice to what the Bible itself really says. An Orthodox Biblical doctrine of creation says that God made the world out of nothing. Consequently, the world itself is not divine because it is distinct and separate from its creator. But neither is it bad, because it's entirely God's handiwork and God doesn't make junk. The Genesis account is shot through with an affirmation of the created world's goodness - 'And God saw that it was good.' It's like a refrain running through the Genesis 1 story after each of the six days of creation. God loves the world. He's

committed to it, the non-human bits quite as much as humanity. And as his son Jesus Christ, he has entered into it: taken human flesh; become part of the physical world He has made. And part of the message of the incarnation of Jesus the Son of God is that there is no separation into different realms of spirit and matter. Body and soul are both together part of God's good creation and are blessed by him. And although the world is not divine in itself it is closely dependent upon God.

As the Gospel reading says, "All things came into being through him and without him not one thing came into being." It's utterly dependent upon God's will. And according to Genesis, human beings were put into the world not to exploit it selfishly, but to act as God's co-creators and stewards, bearing his image, so that we could care for the earth, sustain it and make it as fruitful as possible.

The language of 'subduing the earth' and 'having dominion' is the language of good government: of establishing order in place of chaos; of ensuring that everything has opportunity and space to flourish. But there are also boundaries: the teaching in Genesis about the Sabbath, makes clear that the Earth is not an endless factory for production; there are limits; it has to be allowed to rest; it isn't just an economic commodity we exploit for our own benefit. And above all the biblical view of creation is that God made the world out of nothing and put us in it simply as a gift. He didn't have to make it. Nobody forced him, and certainly not us, and he doesn't owe anybody. So the creation exists as a result of God's undeserved grace, and we should inhabit it in the same spirit as those who have received a precious gift and who should treat every part of it as evidence of God's abundance and unfailing love.

So I wonder, is that how you look at the natural world around you? Do you appreciate it as a fragile token of God's love for you, to be received with wonder and thanksgiving.

Theology matters. Many Christians have unwittingly embraced a dualistic way of thinking and are so focused on heaven and the things of the spirit that they don't realise our faith should be shaping the way we see the world, the way we live, the way we make our daily choices. But in Jesus Christ the 'word became flesh'; heaven and earth came together; and a second Adam came to show us how we might live together in the

garden once more, calling us to a change of heart to see creation as the theatre of God's glory, charged with his presence as a gift where, if we could only see, we would receive it as a token of his own eternal love.

The medieval scholar Abelard of Bath (I'm sure you know him well) once wrote, "If we turn our back on the beauty of the universe, we should indeed deserve to be driven from it."

Theology matters, and it can help us to look after the world God has given us in the way he intended us to do.

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Reading Texts

Genesis 1:10-31

¹⁰ God called the dry land Earth, and the waters that were gathered together he called Seas. And God saw that it was good. ¹¹ Then God said, "Let the earth put forth vegetation: plants yielding seed, and fruit trees of every kind on earth that bear fruit with the seed in it." And it was so. ¹² The earth brought forth vegetation: plants yielding seed of every kind, and trees of every kind bearing fruit with the seed in it. And God saw that it was good. ¹³ And there was evening and there was morning, the third day. ¹⁴ And God said, "Let there be lights in the dome of the sky to separate the day from the night; and let them be for signs and for seasons and for days and years, ¹⁵ and let them be lights in the dome of the sky to give light upon the earth." And it was so. ¹⁶ God made the two great lights—the greater light to rule the day and the lesser light to rule the night—and the stars. ¹⁷ God set them in the dome of the sky to give light upon the earth, ¹⁸ to rule over the day and over the night, and to separate the light from the darkness. And God saw that it was good. ¹⁹ And there was evening and there was morning, the fourth day. ²⁰ And God said, "Let the waters bring forth swarms of living creatures, and let birds fly above the earth across the dome of the sky." ²¹ So God created the great sea monsters and every living creature that moves, of every kind, with which the waters swarm, and every winged bird of every kind. And God saw that it was good. ²² God blessed them, saying, "Be fruitful and multiply and fill the waters in the seas, and let birds multiply on the earth." ²³ And there was evening and there was morning, the fifth day. ²⁴ And God said, "Let the earth bring forth living creatures of every kind: cattle and creeping things and wild animals of the earth of every kind." And it was so. ²⁵ God made the wild animals of the earth of every kind, and the cattle of every kind, and everything that creeps upon the ground of every kind. And God saw that it was good. ²⁶ Then God said, "Let us make humankind in our image, according to our likeness; and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the birds of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the wild animals of the earth, and over every creeping thing that creeps upon the earth." ²⁷ So God created humankind in his image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them. ²⁸ God blessed them, and God said to them,

"Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it; and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the air and over every living thing that moves upon the earth." ²⁹ God said, "See, I have given you every plant yielding seed that is upon the face of all the earth, and every tree with seed in its fruit; you shall have them for food. ³⁰ And to every beast of the earth, and to every bird of the air, and to everything that creeps on the earth, everything that has the breath of life, I have given every green plant for food." And it was so. ³¹ God saw everything that he had made, and indeed, it was very good. And there was evening and there was morning, the sixth day.

John 1:1-14

¹ In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. ² He was in the beginning with God. ³ All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being that has come into being. ⁴ In him was life, and the life was the light of all people. ⁵ The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it. ⁶ There was a man sent from God, whose name was John. ⁷ He came as a witness to testify to the light, so that all might believe through him. ⁸ He himself was not the light, but he came to testify to the light. ⁹ The true light, which enlightens everyone, was coming into the world. ¹⁰ He was in the world, and the world came into being through him; yet the world did not know him. ¹¹ He came to what was his own, and his own people did not accept him. ¹² But to all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God, ¹³ who were born, not of blood or of the will of the flesh or of the will of man, but of God. ¹⁴ And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father's only son, full of grace and truth.