

# God's Creation ...

## ... *Environmental Justice*

*The sermon given at the Parish Communion Service, on 20<sup>th</sup> October 2019 by the Curate, the Revd. Tim Kelly, in Beverley Minster.*

*Ezekiel 34:17-31; Matthew 22:35-40*

We're in the middle of a sermon series on the topic on the environment and creation. In particular today I want to talk about environmental justice.

Potentially, today's sermon could be very brief indeed. It could perhaps (as many sermons could) be wrapped up in the statement, "We need to do the right thing". Or I might even attempt to put it another way – "We mustn't do the wrong thing". There ... I've said it. Perhaps I can sit down now? Well, the problem, and perhaps the reason why I can't quite sit down yet, is that such an instruction requires a little unpacking.

*What do I mean?*

Famously Google – the internet search giant – had as their company slogan "Don't be evil". This is a good idea no doubt to many people. However, of course the problem arises when one has to work out what this actually means on a day-to-day basis.

Similarly, we've heard in today's gospel reading, what some call the '*Golden Rule*' from Jesus when questioned as to the greatest of the commandments. Second only to the commandment to love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul and mind is the commandment to Love your neighbour as yourself.

One of the authors I've been reading recently describes such a commandment as an '*Über-rule*' (or a 'Super Rule'). Rules that are so general as to apply in any situation, but also so abstract as to sometimes fail to immediately reveal challenge and conflict. Jesus' commandment is both universal and abstract. *We must work out what it means to love others as ourselves.* For example, what does it mean to love our neighbour as

ourselves when driving our car? What does it mean to love our neighbour when shopping for products on the high street or the internet?

Similarly, we – as Christians – must consider what it means (within the scope of the one world, the one planet we have and share) to love our neighbour as ourselves. Today's reading from Ezekiel provides us with some helpful imagery and food for thought. Although the verses from Ezekiel may have originally been written as metaphor when chastising the nation of Israel and their abuse of power and privilege, they also provide useful illustration of environmental injustice:

Environmental injustice is to have your fill of clean water whilst fouling the rest of the water. Environmental injustice is to feed on the good pasture whilst treading down the rest of the pasture for everyone else. Environmental injustice is when our care and use of the environment and the world's resources clearly show that we don't truly love our neighbour as ourselves.

I'm sure we would all understand that, for example, to have a clean and perfectly maintained garden at the expense of having simply thrown all our garden waste over the fence into our neighbour's now ruined garden is unjust and the opposite of neighbour-love.

Now this is a flippant example, but like our passage from Ezekiel it's a useful metaphor for the much more serious state of affairs that we now find ourselves facing today with our environment and climate.

We talk of today's society as a global one. But of course, in terms of the environment this has always been the case. The way that developed countries, such as ours, have historically ignored, and in some cases continue to ignore, the negative impact of climate change on their poorer neighbours is in direct conflict with a biblical view of justice (as we've heard from both of today's readings). The majority of scientists agree that in the developed world, our exploitation of fossil fuels and the benefits that we have enjoyed as a result, have been at the expense of climate change and rising global temperatures and sea levels, which will impact many of the world's poorer countries and people first. Those that are least able to cope are, in many cases, those hardest hit,

such as when drought sweeps across countries such as Ethiopia. In the period 1990-1998 poor countries accounted for 94 percent of the world's 568 major natural disasters and 97% of disaster-related deaths. Inequity is written large when countries such as the United States consume 40% of the world's fossil fuels, but yet only hold 4% of the world's population.

And, of course, our use and abuse of the environment isn't limited to climate change. A convenience for us – single use plastics – has ended up being at the expense of our oceans. A problem that may not be immediately washed up on our doorstep, instead creates problems for neighbours thousands of miles across the ocean, and of course all of the sea-life in between.

The justice that we seek as Christians is the one that restores ... makes right ... the relationship between each other as humans but also the relationship between humans and the nature (as communicated in the creation narrative of Genesis), a relationship that that has become been distorted by greed and misuse.

In my sermons recently I find myself again and again returning to the words that we say each week in the Lord's Prayer. *Your will be done in earth as in heaven.* Jesus came to restore righteousness. Or as one theologian NT Wright put it, to 'rightwise' things. To return things to the right way round. So, how can we begin to honour our side of the prayer when we restore righteousness, make things right, in our environment?

Many Christian organisations have increasingly recognised the importance of a Christian response to climate justice. One you may have heard of, and one I commend to you, is Christian Aid. One of their major campaigns is now Climate Justice. Alongside joining their campaign, they have many practical suggestions for how we can respond both individually and collectively as a church to tackle environmental justice – ranging from practical measures in our home such as attempting to reduce packaging and air miles in the food that we eat, to church initiatives such as undertaking an eco-audit as we have started to do in the Minster, to engaging in the conversation and debate amongst ourselves and with our local and national governments. Of course, we have seen again in the news this week the activities of *Extinction Rebellion*. Whilst we

may not all agree with their methods and approach, their actions provide a challenge to us as Christians as to whether we will simply stand by as the planet and its environment continues to degrade further and further from the one we were graciously given by God.

*Love your neighbour as yourself.* As I said at the beginning, such a simple yet demanding commandment. May each one of us continue to reflect on what this means when it comes to our relationship with the environment today.

Amen

## Reading Texts

Ezekiel 34:17-31

<sup>17</sup> As for you, my flock, thus says the Lord God: I shall judge between sheep and sheep, between rams and goats: <sup>18</sup> Is it not enough for you to feed on the good pasture, but you must tread down with your feet the rest of your pasture? When you drink of clear water, must you foul the rest with your feet? <sup>19</sup> And must my sheep eat what you have trodden with your feet, and drink what you have fouled with your feet? <sup>20</sup> Therefore, thus says the Lord God to them: I myself will judge between the fat sheep and the lean sheep. <sup>21</sup> Because you pushed with flank and shoulder, and butted at all the weak animals with your horns until you scattered them far and wide, <sup>22</sup> I will save my flock, and they shall no longer be ravaged; and I will judge between sheep and sheep. <sup>23</sup> I will set up over them one shepherd, my servant David, and he shall feed them: he shall feed them and be their shepherd. <sup>24</sup> And I, the Lord, will be their God, and my servant David shall be prince among them; I, the Lord, have spoken. <sup>25</sup> I will make with them a covenant of peace and banish wild animals from the land, so that they may live in the wild and sleep in the woods securely. <sup>26</sup> I will make them and the region around my hill a blessing; and I will send down the showers in their season; they shall be showers of blessing. <sup>27</sup> The trees of the field shall yield their fruit, and the earth shall yield its increase. They shall be secure on their soil; and they shall know that I am the Lord, when I break the bars of their yoke, and save them from the hands of those who enslaved them. <sup>28</sup> They shall no more be plunder for the nations, nor shall the animals of the land devour them; they shall live in safety, and no one shall make them afraid. <sup>29</sup> I will provide for them a splendid vegetation so that they shall no more be consumed with hunger in the land, and no longer suffer the insults of the nations. <sup>30</sup> They shall know that I, the Lord their God, am with them, and that they, the house of Israel, are my people, says the Lord God. <sup>31</sup> You are my sheep, the sheep of my pasture and I am your God, says the Lord God.

## Matthew 22:35-40

<sup>35</sup> and one of them, a lawyer, asked him a question to test him. <sup>36</sup> "Teacher, which commandment in the law is the greatest?" <sup>37</sup> He said to him, " "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.' <sup>38</sup> This is the greatest and first commandment. <sup>39</sup> And a second is like it: "You shall love your neighbour as yourself.' <sup>40</sup> On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets."