

The Environment ...

... *What's Gone Wrong?*

A sermon given on the Sixteenth Sunday of Trinity, 2nd October 2022 – by the Vicar the Revd Canon Jonathan Baker, in Beverley Minster

Ezekiel 34:17-24; Luke 20:9-19

This morning, we are continuing our series, looking at the relationship between Christian faith and the natural world, so faith and the environment. And today we're looking, rather somberly, at the question of 'What's gone wrong?' 50 years ago, when I was at school, we knew that there was a problem in our relationship with the environment. In geography lessons, we learned all about the hole in the ozone layer, about soil erosion in the United States prairies, about the pollution of the seas and the rivers, and about the melting ice caps. It was all there 50 years ago. 30 years ago, one of the first sermons I ever preached was on the occasion of the Earth Summit in Rio de Janeiro in 1992, which was the first time an environmental conference really hit the headlines. And people were saying, "We've got to do something urgently, otherwise climate change is going to be a real problem for the whole world." So the question we face today expresses a puzzle. If we have known about the damage the human race is causing planet Earth for so long, why has the action taken been so inadequate? If we've known for over half a century that we are sawing through the branch upon which we are sitting, why can't we stop sawing? And in the light of all the scientific evidence about the consequences of global warming, and all the rising public concern about what many are now calling a 'climate emergency', why does our government still think it's a good idea to talk about issuing new licences for drilling in the North Sea and about reversing the ban on fracking? Is the answer to the rising cost of fuel really just to saw through the branch faster?

There are, of course, many reasons why it has been so difficult for human beings to make the environment a political priority. But perhaps the biggest reason has to do neither with the environment itself nor with politics. Maybe the reason we find it so difficult to change our attitudes towards the environment, towards God's creation is at bottom, a spiritual problem. And it's all to do with those all-favourite sins, pride and greed. Nobody deliberately sets out to saw off the branch upon which they are

sitting. And nobody is deliberately trying to destroy planet Earth. But if you think there is good money to be made from sawdust, you might be tempted to keep sawing. And if you can convince yourself that the branch won't snap just yet, or that if it does snap, it'll be the people at the other end of the branch who hit the ground first, you might think it won't cause you any harm to keep sawing. And so the damage continues to be done. Neither of this morning's readings has much to say about climate change or the environment as such. But they do have something relevant to say about pride and greed.

In the Gospel reading, Jesus tells a parable about a vineyard where the tenants manage to convince themselves that they are not really tenants at all. They start to imagine that they are the landlords; that they own the vineyard outright; that they can do what they like with it without any consequences, even to the point of killing the owner's agent and even his own son.

The point Jesus is making in this parable is that the tenants are delusional. Their sense of entitlement has seduced them into a fantasy where they think they are God. And the problem with living in a fantasy is that sooner or later reality catches up on you. The tenants are inviting destruction and eventually they will lose the vineyard altogether.

Now, Jesus told that parable against the leaders of Israel, but it could equally well apply to humanity today: the vineyard is the earth; you and I are the tenants; the slaves who were ignored or abused are the scientists trying to sound the alarm. But rather than question our own hubris, we have rejected God and have already crucified his Son so that we can be free of any higher claims. We don't need any old man in the sky telling us what to do, we say. And so our own pride sets us on a course of self-destruction.

And the Old Testament reading hints at the environmental damage caused by greed. *"Is it not enough for you to feed on the good pasture?" says the prophet, "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? And must my sheep eat what you have trodden with your feet and drink what you have found with your feet?"* The prophet is outraged that the strong are thriving at the expense of the weak.

And the point was made many years ago that the issue of caring for creation is at bottom an issue of justice, because the people who are suffering most because of climate change are the communities on marginal land where increasing drought means you can't grow anything. And the communities in coastal areas at risk of rising sea levels and flooding - they tend to be the poorest people in the world who have done least to cause global warming in the first place.

It's simply not fair - the people perched precariously on the twigs at the end of the branch are not the ones doing the sawing.

And one of the delusions we labour under in the west is the delusion of unlimited growth: such is our collective greed as a species, that we have convinced ourselves that on a finite planet with limited space and limited physical resources, you can still have unlimited growth, year upon year.

But in the Bible the first responsibility of government isn't to grow the economy - in fact, I can't think of any passage in the Bible where the King is held responsible for economic growth. It isn't to provide tax breaks for the very rich and to encourage a culture of greed that the state exists.

The first responsibility of government in the Bible is to provide justice, to stop the strong from exploiting the weak and to prevent the wealthy from profiting at the expense of the poor. And if our modern governments focused a little more on that, the environment would be under a lot less pressure. So the climate emergency is real, but in the end it's a spiritual problem. It's about pride and greed.

And the Christian antidote to pride and greed is repentance. It's about taking a long, hard look at ourselves and asking whether we are on the right track. Am I living in a way that promotes harmony with my Creator, with my fellow creatures, and with the wider creation of which I am part? Is there more we can do individually and collectively to seek justice, to love mercy and to walk humbly with our God? Get the relationship with God and neighbour right, and our relationship with the natural world will find a better balance.

But before that can happen, hearts and minds have to change. There has to be humility to rethink what we're doing. There has to be repentance. And then maybe we can stop sawing.

Reading Texts

Ezekiel 34:17-24

¹⁷ "As for you, my flock, thus says the Lord GOD: Behold, I judge between sheep and sheep, rams and he-goats. ¹⁸ Is it not enough for you to feed on the good pasture, that you must tread down with your feet the rest of your pasture; and to drink of clear water, that you must foul the rest with your feet? ¹⁹ And must my sheep eat what you have trodden with your feet, and drink what you have fouled with your feet? ²⁰ "Therefore, thus says the Lord GOD to them: Behold, I, I myself will judge between the fat sheep and the lean sheep. ²¹ Because you push with side and shoulder, and thrust at all the weak with your horns, till you have scattered them abroad, ²² I will save my flock, they shall no longer be a prey; and I will judge between sheep and sheep. ²³ And I will set up over them one shepherd, my servant David, and he shall feed them: he shall feed them and be their shepherd. ²⁴ And I, the LORD, will be their God, and my servant David shall be prince among them; I, the LORD, have spoken.

Luke 20:9-19

⁹ And he began to tell the people this parable: "A man planted a vineyard, and let it out to tenants, and went into another country for a long while. ¹⁰ When the time came, he sent a servant to the tenants, that they should give him some of the fruit of the vineyard; but the tenants beat him, and sent him away empty-handed. ¹¹ And he sent another servant; him also they beat and treated shamefully, and sent him away empty-handed. ¹² And he sent yet a third; this one they wounded and cast out. ¹³ Then the owner of the vineyard said, 'What shall I do? I will send my beloved son; it may be they will respect him.' ¹⁴ But when the tenants saw him, they said to themselves, 'This is the heir; let us kill him, that the inheritance may be ours.' ¹⁵ And they cast him out of the vineyard and killed him. What then will the owner of the vineyard do to them? ¹⁶ He will come and destroy those tenants, and give the vineyard to others." When they heard this, they said, "God forbid!" ¹⁷ But he looked at them and said, "What then is this that is written: 'The very stone which the builders rejected has become the head of the corner'? ¹⁸ Every one who falls on that stone will

be broken to pieces; but when it falls on any one it will crush him." ¹⁹ *The scribes and the chief priests tried to lay hands on him at that very hour, but they feared the people; for they perceived that he had told this parable against them.*