

Creation Care 2010

It could probably fairly be said that we shouldn't be here today. That our gathering here ought to be redundant and pointless. Let me be clear: it could probably be said that we ought to have understood all this stuff a long time ago, and that now we should just be concentrating on putting what we already know into action. I'm also aware that I'm probably preaching to the choir, and that most if not all of you are here because you're already convinced of the case and the need for Christians to pay attention to these issues, to be passionate about them, and to take them seriously. Indeed, when Barry asked me to speak today, I wasn't sure initially what to say, since I'd already done this two years ago and I had the sense then that I was, to say the least, pushing at an open door. Hopefully, that'll be even more the case today.

For all that, we know that in many of our churches and in many of our conversations with fellow Christians, we're starting from base camp. One reason why it's so important to keep having days like this, and to keep showing up to them, is that we know we have a massive task still in front of us, to be evangelists amongst our own sisters and brothers in faith on this issue. Many, in society and the churches, still have trouble believing the evidence put in plain view in front of them. That evidence is now so compelling, so clear and so universally agreed upon by the world's leading scientists that I don't even want to discuss it here. Others might perhaps do so later. I'm assuming that we start from the assumption, that the climate is changing, that it's doing so largely if not solely because of human activity and that if we don't change, the earth will: it will change catastrophically, dramatically and in a way that destroys millions of lives and livelihoods, affecting the poorest the most. If you dispute that, there are those here today better equipped to explain it to you than me. Don't go without speaking to one of them!

My job is start from a different place. Beneath the title of this talk lies a simple question: 'why in God's name are we called to make a difference?'. That's the theology of creation care in a nutshell. What is it in our faith that not only invites, but compels us to do something about this, to atone for decades of abuse of the planet by treating it more fairly, more attentively and less violently? I hope that will form the basis for everything else we'll learn today. The experts have the 'what?' and 'how?'; I want briefly to sketch out the 'why?' of all this.

Peter Harris, the International Coordinator of the A Rocha Trust and faculty member at Regent College Vancouver, puts it succinctly for me. We start, when considering all these questions, with a basic premise: who is God? Who is God? And, in relation

to God, who are we? Primarily, the Bible tells us, before everything else, God is and was the Creator. God created: and it was good. Whether our model of creation follows Genesis 1, with humanity God's final thought, or Genesis 2, in which humanity stands at centre of the web of life woven by God, the picture is the same: we are not independent creatures, but rather a co-creation, with the plants and animals and birds and mountains and seas, of all that God made. Not for nothing did St. Francis call the whole of the created order his sisters and brothers. It's the witness of the opening verses of scripture.

Knowing that God is our Creator ought to give us a deep sense of our own belovedness, our own worth and infinite value in God's eyes as those brought into existence by him. One of the constant tasks of every pastor is to convince others of their innate worth. Too often we refuse to believe it, through sin or the circumstances of birth or genetic inheritance or whatever. But God made us, and God made us good, and we are beloved by our Creator. We know who we are, deeply, and essentially, by knowing who God is in relation to us. I hope that it's already obvious that beginning here means that we are brought immediately into a different relationship with the creation too. Brother Sun, Sister Moon, Uncle Coyote and Aunt Parakeet, Cousins Volcano and Rainforest, Great Aunt Ocean...well, you get the idea. We're related. We have common DNA, the essence we share of being co-creations of a loving, generous, painstaking God who is proud of everything – everything – she has made. Those who read 'dominion' language in the Bible as an excuse for raping and despoiling the earth mistake the matter. We need to retain a notion of 'heresy' for people like these, because they twist and distort scripture to godless ends. The Bible emphasizes that we are related to all that God made. Having the most agency and freedom web of life brings with it massive responsibility, not untrammelled power, still less license to kill indiscriminately.

So, Chief Seattle had a thoroughly Christian mindset when he wrote:

This we know: the earth does not belong to us;

We belong to the earth. This we know.

All things are connected like the blood that unites one family.

Whatever befalls the earth, befalls the children of earth.

This we know.

We did not weave the web of life; we are merely a strand in it.

Whatever we do to the web, we do to ourselves.

This we know.

The wisest Christians have always realized that knowing ourselves the creations of a loving Creator dramatically affects the way we see ourselves in relation to the rest of

the earth. I was reading an article this week by one of our greatest living theologians, the German Protestant Jurgen Moltmann. Moltmann's reminds his readers that one consequence of the difficult yet glorious doctrine of the Trinity is that we ought to believe that God is in everything that was made. The Bible tells us that God made the world, through the Son, by the energy of the Holy Spirit. The divine essence, or principle, which is made flesh in Jesus, is the same wisdom which was present at and a partner in the world's creation, the Bible tells us. And all of this is possible only by the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, which hovers over and under planet Earth even as it is breathed into Adam and Eve. God is everywhere. God's presence is already in all things.

Indeed, some Christians have been shrewd enough to observe that, given all this, treating the earth with contempt is not only like fratricide, but tantamount to treating to God with contempt. Ravaging its resources, polluting its environment and slowly but permanently wrecking its fragile ecosystems is in effect a slap in the face of God. It is practical atheism; it is sacrilegious. According to Moltmann, John Wesley made this point 250 years ago, though I haven't as yet been able to trace the reference.

Once reference I do have is to the 17th century *Centuries* of Thomas Traherne, an English Anglican mystic and poet, who sees the Creator in all things, and likens the failure to treat the earth with respect to the same insult to God, an error and failure to which even the ultimate punishment would be preferable:

You never enjoy the world aright, till you see how a [grain of] sand exhibiteth the wisdom and power of God: and prize in everything the service which they can do to you, by manifesting his glory and goodness to your Soul...Yet further, you never enjoy the world aright, till you so love the beauty of enjoying it, that you are covetous and earnest to persuade others to enjoy it. And so perfectly hate the abominable corruption of men in despising it, that you had rather suffer the flames of Hell than willingly be guilty of their error.

There's a second strand to this I want to emphasize in closing. It's perhaps more easy to hand, more obvious, to stress that we are all the more related to one another, if we remember this theological foundation. If it feels weird or hard to call the moon your brother or a cougar your sister, at least it shouldn't be too tough to realize that we are closely related to those created by God – like us – of our own race. And I'm struck again and again by how insulated and ensconced we've allowed ourselves to become here. If it isn't directly affecting us, it doesn't matter; or it doesn't exist. This too is heresy. This too is a scandalous, sacrilegious denial of

our faith and of the God who made us, a slap in the face to his handiwork and its intent.

“Poverty”, former Indian Prime Minister Indira Ghandi once remarked, “is the worst pollution”. It becomes more and more clear each passing day that poverty is not only a form of pollution, it’s the consequence of environmental degradation, and it’s the poor – always, always the poor – who are the worst affected by our intransigence, greed, casual destruction and thoughtless behavior. The poorest in our world, in Africa, in Bangladesh and India, on archipelagoes across the Pacific and islands in the Indian Ocean, are already feeling the effects of climate change, in drought, flood, hunger, and want. Within a few years, literally billions could be displaced, made homeless, starved or even killed by our behavior. If we can’t grasp our connection to the forests, prairies, lions, elephants and waterfalls, perhaps at least we can understand that we are kindred to these millions of innocents, upon whom we will foist the worst effects of our sin. We are all children of one God. We are all the temples of God’s Holy Spirit. We all bear the mark of the same Creator. That brings obligation and responsibility to one another, along with the joy of being family in this great and glorious world together.

William Blake put it perfectly:

To Mercy, Pity, Peace and Love,
All pray in their distress;
And to these virtues of delight
Return their thankfulness.

And all must love the human form,
In heathen, Turk or Jew;
Where Mercy, Love and Pity dwell:
There God is dwelling too.

I think that those of us fortunate enough to live here in the suburban US have the hardest time understanding our connectedness with, our being related to, the rest of the human race. It’s so easy for us to become isolated, to drown out the cries of the poor with all our technologies, to continue pillaging their fields for our own raw materials while they grow only poorer, to blindly and blithely rob them of the very life of the earth which should sustain them in order to increase our own standard of living. It’s so easy for us even to develop an *entitlement* about the way we live that can blind us to the effects it has on our far-distant sisters and brothers. This is not, I firmly believe, an authentic Christian attitude. We must find ways to allow the Holy

Spirit to open us up to the possible consequences of our very lifestyles on the earth, and on those who depend on the earth alongside us.

There is nothing radical or new in what I'm saying. Centuries ago, the prophet Jeremiah commented that the rich cannot be relied on to take caring for their poorer kindred seriously, and that the earth's goodness is destroyed as a direct result of their behavior. Witness chapter 5:

Then I said: "These are only the poor, they have no sense;
For they do not know the way of the Lord, the law of their God. Let me go to
the rich and speak to them: surely they know the way of the Lord, the law of
their God."
But they all alike had broken the yolk, they had burst the bonds.

This people has a stubborn and rebellious heart; they have turned aside and
gone away.
They do not say in their hearts,
"Let us fear the Lord our God, who gives the rain in its season, the autumn
rain and the spring rain, and keeps for us the weeks appointed for the
harvest."

Your iniquities have turned the rains and harvests away, and your sins have
deprived you of their good. For scoundrels are found among my people; they
take over the goods of others.

All of this is about the ways we worship God. The Bible, in fact, enjoins the whole created order many times to join with us humans in praising God. I'm often left thinking that it does its job much better than we do. One of the earliest Church theologians thought that flowers, elephants and waterfalls were praising God by doing what God made them to do: blooming, reveling in the watering hole, flowing over the rocks. My dog Mollie was most herself, most excited and happy and overflowing with joy, when chasing tennis balls across the park. Watching her elegant, ecstatic chase, I often used to think how naturally and with what gratitude she praised God.

It's essential, in reconnecting to our relationship to God as creation to Creator, that we are constantly in worship. Woe betide us if we prevent one of our sisters or brothers in their worshipping life. And woe betide us if, in our careless selfishness, we deprive our human family of reason for gratitude or joy, or of occasion to praise

God that, along with all creation, they are fearfully and wonderfully made. As Psalm 148 urges us, we are called to praise God together:

Praise the LORD!

Praise the LORD from the heavens!

Praise him from the skies!

Praise him, all his angels!

Praise him, all the armies of heaven!

Praise him, sun and moon!

Praise him, all you twinkling stars!

Praise him, skies above!

Praise him, vapors high above the clouds!

Let every created thing give praise to the LORD,

for he issued his command, and they came into being.

He set them in place forever and ever.

His decree will never be revoked.

Praise the LORD from the earth,

you creatures of the ocean depths,

fire and hail, snow and clouds,

wind and weather that obey him,

mountains and all hills,

fruit trees and all cedars,

wild animals and all livestock,

small scurrying animals and birds,

kings of the earth and all people,

rulers and judges of the earth,

young men and young women,

old men and children.

Or, as poet Marie Perle puts it, if we refuse to praise God, nature itself will continue to do so for us...

'Te Deum Laudamus'

High in the steepled church the shining bells

Swing tongues unmuted to delight the air

With calls to praise, that anyone awake

Might now begin this dawning hour with prayer.

*Deep in the wood, the hermit thrush,
In spiralled ecstasies to greet the dawn,
Loops silver sounds for God's own sake alone,
Flings his Te Deum now the night is gone.*

*If we, bell-beckoned, should refuse to sing
Te Deum Laudamus to begin our days,
The very stars would ring, the rocks would shout
As now thrush, lark and linnet spill God's praise.*

We are members of a family even bigger than we knew. We are related to all that God has made, in relationships of tenderness, beauty and trust. Perhaps if we can begin to see this, begin to understand how sacred a responsibility has been laid upon us to be sisters and brothers who care, who take thought, who remember their indebtedness and their connectedness to all that God made along with them, we'll begin to avoid the catastrophe the prophet warned us of over two and half thousand years ago. If we cannot, it won't just be because we've failed in our humanity or our science or our politics. It'll be because we have disastrously failed in our theology. It'll be because we've chosen to be deaf to God's cries, ignorant of God's character and nature, and resistant to God's perpetual call to us, to define who we are by taking seriously the ways in which God has already revealed who God is to us, as Creator, Redeemer and Sustainer of the whole created order.