

## **Sermon (#6)**

Sunday 29<sup>th</sup> April 2018. Gospel Reading: John 15: 1-8

### **The Inexpressible Loneliness of Man.**

There's been a great deal in the news recently about plastic pollution and about how plastic waste is chocking our rivers and oceans. There have been pledges from commercial companies to reduce plastic packaging and to make more of the plastics we use suitable for recycling or composting. This is all good news of course but it serves to remind us, should we need reminding, that our human impact on the environment grows with every passing day.

In today's gospel reading we heard the allegorical account of Jesus the true vine. We heard Jesus tell us that he is the true vine and the Father is the vinedresser or vine grower. In the King James Version of the bible, vinedresser is translated as Husbandman, a term we don't hear very much today for a variety of reasons, but one that means 'tiller of the ground' or 'worker of the soil'; in modern parlance we might simply use the term 'farmer'. However, we do still use the word 'husbandry' and what is evoked by this word is someone who manages resources judiciously, someone who demonstrates careful management and conservation. Implicit within this gospel reading is the notion that we have to be 'husbandmen', and 'husbandwomen', for the resources God has created, we have to be good custodians of the natural world, to watch over it, to work with it, to nurture it and sustain it so that it bears fruit. So, what I want to talk about today relates to our commitment, within our community rule of life, to show care and respect for the natural world.

Our diocesan Bishop, the Right Reverend Nicholas Holtman, also happens to be the Church of England's lead Bishop for Environmental Affairs. When he was appointed to this position he said this: 'There is an urgency about environmental issues. They press hard on all of us...Christianity is about our turning to a way which is life-giving. The environmental challenges facing us can seem insurmountable, but our deepest resources can renew the hope that we will act to sustain and renew the life of the earth'<sup>1</sup>. Why? Why should we act to sustain and renew the life of the earth? Well, there is, of course, the glaringly obvious self-interested need to protect and preserve the only home we've got. This means that there is a pressing need, to put it mildly, to address climate change and global warming, to address the melting ice caps and the rising sea levels, and to address the entrenched poverty and famine that blights the lives of millions of our brothers and sisters around the world. But I'd like to suggest that there are also theological reasons why we should act to sustain and renew the life of the earth and I'd like to start by sharing a few biblical observations.

Psalm 24 makes it clear that 'the earth is the Lord's and all that is in it'<sup>2</sup>. In Colossians we read that in Christ 'all things in heaven and on earth were created' and in Christ 'all things hold together'<sup>3</sup>. In the Gospel of John we're told that 'God so loved the world that he gave his only son'<sup>4</sup>. In Genesis we're told that 'the Lord God took the man and put him in the garden of Eden to till it and keep it'<sup>5</sup> and, in a

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<sup>1</sup> Church of England Media Centre (2014) *New Lead Bishop for Environmental Affairs*. 16 Sept.

<sup>2</sup> The Holy Bible, Psalm 24:1

<sup>3</sup> The Holy Bible, Colossians 1:16-17

<sup>4</sup> The Holy Bible, John 3:16

<sup>5</sup> The Holy Bible, Genesis 2:15

surprisingly prescient piece of advice, we're told in the book of Job to 'ask the animals, and they will teach you; the birds of the air, and they will tell you; ask the plants of the earth, and they will teach you; and the fish of the sea will declare to you. Who among all these does not know that the hand of the Lord has done this? In his hand is the life of every living thing and the breath of every human being'<sup>6</sup>.

So, what's all this telling us? Well, perhaps we can sum it up by saying this...

...That this world is God's, not just ours; whilst we are the temporary custodians of this small blue speck of God's creation, it's not ours to exploit, abuse and exhaust.

...That God created everything through Christ and Christ holds creation together; 'Christ is all and in all'<sup>7</sup> or, as Richard Rohr explains 'Christ is whenever the material and the divine co-exist – which is always and everywhere'<sup>8</sup>; Christ is incarnate in all of creation and we are one with creation through Christ; 'God, people and nature are interconnected'<sup>9</sup>.

...That God loves *the world*, all of it, not just human beings but all sentient life, all creation animate and inanimate.

...That our role is to till the earth and keep it, to care for it and respect it, and that it is arrogant in the extreme for us to think that we can learn nothing from the animals, birds and creatures of the sea who co-inhabit this earth with us. We can learn so much from them about how to utilise the earth's finite resources conscientiously, wisely and sustainably.

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<sup>6</sup> The Holy Bible, Job 12:7-10

<sup>7</sup> The Holy Bible, Colossians 3:11

<sup>8</sup> Rohr, R. (2015) *The Cosmic Christ*. Daily Meditations, Thursday Nov. 5, 2015.

<sup>9</sup> Hodson, M. R. (2011) *Uncovering Isaiah's Environmental Ethics*. Grove Books.

As with so many of the biblical words we read today in English, their meaning can often be richer and deeper when we explore how the word was understood in the original language. So, when we read in Genesis that ‘the Lord God took the man and put him in the garden of Eden to till it and keep it’<sup>10</sup>, we might understand ‘keep’ to mean tend and it is rendered as ‘tend’ in some translations. To tend in this context can mean to manage or cultivate but, of course, it can also mean to look after or to care for and here we start to draw closer to its meaning in the original Hebrew. The word for ‘keep’ in Hebrew is ‘shamar’ which means more than just to manage or cultivate. It also means to preserve, to protect and also to observe, to watch over or guard. So, in ‘keeping’, we are called to preserve and protect the Earth, to guard and watch over it and, by inference, to act upon what we see. So, when we see God’s creation being wounded and overexploited, it is incumbent upon us to respond in a way that seeks to redress the damage, so that we can sustain and renew as Bishop Nicholas has said.

Now some people may think...that’s all well and good but we’re told in Genesis chapter 1 verse 28 that ‘God blessed them (meaning humankind), 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’<sup>11</sup>. Well yes, it does say that and some people have taken ‘dominion’, or ‘mastery’ as it’s sometimes translated, to mean that we can ransack our living planet and recklessly consume its natural resources for our own benefit

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<sup>10</sup> The Holy Bible, Genesis 2:15

<sup>11</sup> The Holy Bible, Genesis 1:28

and profit without a second thought. But if, as we're told, we are made in the image of God to have dominion over God's creation here on earth, then surely we have to exercise that dominion in God's image, we have to have dominion as God has dominion, we have to sustain, preserve, nurture and love God's creation as God does. In my view, having dominion does not give us the right to abuse or kill sentient life, or to ravage the resources of our planet for our own personal gain and without a second thought for the consequences. We do, however, have a clear responsibility to manage our natural resources ethically and sustainably, to safeguard and enrich the environment for its own sake and for the benefit of all created life, and to shepherd not just humankind, but all of creation, towards wholeness, integrity and justice. In so doing, 'we join him in his work and share in his joy'<sup>12</sup>.

We, as a church, have started to consider what the Diocesan Environment Policy and its 'Aims for 2021'<sup>13</sup> means for us. We are, along with other churches in Devizes, utilising the Eco Church resources to assess how well we are contributing to the care of God's world within our own parish and beyond. We are seeking to be good stewards of God's creation, and to identify what we can do better to enhance the environment in which we live and work. So, as individuals, and as a responsible and compassionate Christian community, let us show care and respect for the natural world by celebrating all life, by preserving and cherishing our planet, by honouring its incredible beauty and immense diversity. Let us, as Christians, seek to live in harmony with God's creation and turn to a way of living which is life-giving. Let us strive to understand, and to see, that everything within creation holds the very being

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<sup>12</sup> Gross, B. (2009) *Living the Christian Year: Time to Inhabit the Story of God*.

<sup>13</sup> Church of England, Diocese of Salisbury (2017) *Diocesan Environmental Policy*.

of God and 'all the glory of God'<sup>14</sup> radiates from every facet of creation. When we see God in all things, how can we do anything other than cherish and reverence creation in all its manifestations?

Today's gospel reading reminds us that 'the branch cannot bear fruit by itself'. There is a unity to life, we are not isolated, we are in relationship with all created things. We do not grow only from our own roots, but from the recognition that our origins lay within the roots of all creation. We must not stumble blindly into what Farley Mowat<sup>15</sup> called the inexpressible 'loneliness which man, having made himself the ultimate stranger on his own planet, has doomed himself to carry into the silence of his final hour'. We must work with creation, with God, and with each other to rectify the damage we have done and restore an equilibrium to the natural world. Solutions to our current environmental challenges are possible, and national, international and global initiatives are, of course, vital. But we as individuals have a responsibility too and, in essence, the solutions start here and now, they start with us, with you and me, and they start with the choices we make today and every day.

Amen.

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<sup>14</sup> The Holy Bible, Revelation 21:11

<sup>15</sup> Farley Mowat (1979) *A Whale for the Killing*. London: Pan Books.