

Sunday 5th October - Creation Sunday

READING: *Genesis 2: 4b-9, 15-25*

A reading from the book of Genesis

These are the generations of the heavens and the earth when they were created.

In the day that the Lord God made the earth and the heavens, when no plant of the field was yet in the earth and no herb of the field had yet sprung up—for the Lord God had not caused it to rain upon the earth, and there was no one to till the ground; but a stream would rise from the earth, and water the whole face of the ground— then the Lord God formed man from the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and the man became a living being. And the Lord God planted a garden in Eden, in the east; and there he put the man whom he had formed. Out of the ground the Lord God made to grow every tree that is pleasant to the sight and good for food, the tree of life also in the midst of the garden, and the tree of the knowledge of good and evil.

The Lord God took the man and put him in the garden of Eden to till it and keep it. And the Lord God commanded the man, ‘You may freely eat of every tree of the garden; but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall die.’

Then the Lord God said, ‘It is not good that the man should be alone; I will make him a helper as his partner.’ So out of the ground the Lord God formed every animal of the field and every bird of the air, and brought them to the man to see what he would call them; and whatever the man called each living creature, that was its name. The man gave names to all cattle, and to the birds of the air, and to every animal of the field; but for the man there was not found a helper as his partner. So the Lord God caused a deep sleep to fall upon the man, and he slept; then he took one of his ribs and closed up its place with flesh. And the rib that the Lord God had taken from the man he made into a woman and brought her to the man. Then the man said,

‘This at last is bone of my bones
and flesh of my flesh;
this one shall be called Woman,
for out of Man this one was taken.’

Therefore a man leaves his father and his mother and clings to his wife, and they become one flesh. And the man and his wife were both naked, and were not ashamed.

This is the word of the Lord. **Thanks be to God.**

Psalm 95: 1-7

O come, let us sing to the Lord; let us make a joyful noise to the rock of our salvation! Let us come into his presence with thanksgiving; let us make a joyful noise to him with songs of praise!

For the Lord is a great God, and a great King above all gods.

In his hand are the depths of the earth; the heights of the mountains are his also.

The sea is his, for he made it, and the dry land, which his hands have formed.

O come, let us worship and bow down, let us kneel before the Lord, our Maker!

For he is our God, and we are the people of his pasture, and the sheep of his hand. O that today you would listen to his voice!

GOSPEL: Mark 12: 28-34

Hear the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ according to Mark.

Alleluia...

One of the scribes came near and heard them disputing with one another, and seeing that he answered them well, he asked him, "Which commandment is the first of all?" Jesus answered, "The first is, 'Hear, O Israel: the Lord our God, the Lord is one; you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength.' The second is this, 'You shall love your neighbour as yourself.' There is no other commandment greater than these." Then the scribe said to him, "You are right, Teacher; you have truly said that 'he is one, and besides him there is no other'; and 'to love him with all the heart, and with all the understanding, and with all the strength,' and 'to love one's neighbour as oneself,' — this is much more important than all whole burnt offerings and sacrifices." When Jesus saw that he answered wisely, he said to him, "You are not far from the kingdom of God." After that no one dared to ask him any question.

This is the gospel of the Lord. **Alleluia...**

I asked Fr. Wayne if I could choose the readings for this morning, and he kindly agreed, but I have to confess that hasn't proved entirely straightforward. It's not a case of too narrow a choice, but an abundance of riches. Because our Bible is stuffed, if that isn't too disrespectful a term, with Creation. Certain books are overloaded with it; the beginning of Genesis, Psalms, Job and the prophets immediately spring to mind.

In the NT, we have the parables and teachings of Jesus (a sower went out to sow, consider the lilies of the field, God clothes the grass which tomorrow is thrown into the fire, God sees the meanest sparrow fall). There are stories about Jesus (the miraculous catch of fish, the Samaritan woman drawing water, the disciples eating ears of wheat on the Sabbath, praying and teaching on the hills, fishing on Lake Galilee, turning water into wine, a

crucifixion on a cross of wood). And I'm not even touching on Paul, and the creation waiting in eager expectation for the children of God to be revealed (Romans 8:19), or the new heaven and the new earth of Revelation.

Which readings to go for? You already know what I chose. One of the creation stories, a psalm and Jesus' teaching about the two most important commandments.

It strikes me that, despite all this, sometimes the natural world in scripture seems invisible to us, just a backdrop against which the really important stuff happens; the human side of the Biblical story; what God did in the past and does for us today. As if God had an intimate relationship with everything he'd made in the beginning, but now concentrates just on us. And as if what we can do for God isn't almost as important.

Changing the name we give to this Sunday from Harvest Festival to Creation Sunday subtly shifts the emphasis from thinking solely about what God does for us in providing our food, to considering the whole of creation, and our responsibility to care for it in the way that God does.

If we were to sit down with a highlighter and work our way through the scriptures, marking every reference to the natural world, including the things it gives us such as food and clothing, I think we'd be surprised at just how colourful our Bible ended up being!

A similar idea produced "The Green Bible" published in 2008. According to Wikipedia, reception among church leaders was mixed. Some praised the concept but felt that the environmental message de-emphasized the Bible's central message of salvation. Richard Land, then head of the Southern Baptist Convention's Ethics & Religious Liberty Commission said: "Sure it's important, but when they asked Jesus what was most important, he said, 'Love your God, and love your neighbour as yourself.' He didn't say anything about creation".

I beg to differ. Some of the commands in the Bible are explicit, while others are implicit. The eyes of Christians through history have often been closed to creation, either deliberately or in ignorance. God's creation is the foundation of everything we read in our Bible. Our treatment of our neighbour and our love for God are tied up with how we treat the good things which God has given us.

The Genesis reading is a long one, and a series of sermons would be necessary to mine its meaning fully. Today we're focussing on just verse 15. 'The Lord took the human and put him in the Garden of Eden to till it and keep it'. The two Hebrew words '**abad** and **shamar** which are often translated 'till' and 'keep' (NRSV) or similar, only appear together as a pair on one other occasion in the whole of the Hebrew Bible (our OT). They're also used of the Levites who were responsible for enabling the worship of the Jewish people. So that word pairing has connotations of holiness, something done to glorify God, not just a practical task. It says there's a relationship between worship and care for the creation.

We as Christian believers are from the royal priesthood, seeking to make our worship the best it can be, both in church and in our lives. That especially relates to how we care for the temple of God's creation.

John H. Walton writes "In ancient thinking, caring for sacred space was a way of upholding creation. Maintaining order made one a participant with God in the ongoing task of sustaining the equilibrium God had established in the cosmos.

(Walton, John H. (2015) *The Lost World of Adam and Eve: Genesis 2-3 and the Human Origins Debate*. IVP Academic: An Imprint of InterVarsity Press).

God didn't need us, the Trinity was complete and sufficient and in perfect relationship - but like the best of human relationships not exclusive, but generous. Even in that perfection something must have been felt wanting. The ancient Jewish creation myths are not like other creation stories of the region, where humans were created to be slaves for the gods. We are created as full partners. How exciting is that!

Everything was made and pronounced 'very good' BUT not perfect. That leaves room for us to be god-like carers and creative beings. (Many centuries later, Teresa of Avila would write:

Christ has no body but yours,
 No hands, no feet on earth but yours,
 Yours are the eyes with which he looks
 Compassion on this world,
 Yours are the feet with which he walks to do good,
 Yours are the hands, with which he blesses all the world.)

In his book “Planetwise” Dave Bookless says, ‘Let us rediscover that the gospel, the good news, does not begin with the birth of Jesus. It begins with the good earth that God made through Jesus (as the pre-existent Christ). Let us celebrate it again in all its richness’. (p. 25)

Moving on to our gospel reading, we discover that the two greatest commandments are very much related. We are commanded to love God with everything we have and are. We cannot pretend to love God if we don’t also try to love our neighbour, and that’s not a gritted teeth sort of loving, but a love as generous as we might extend to ourselves. We’re not loving our neighbours when we live in abundance and others are in poverty. We cannot be loving God if we trash his creation instead of caring for it, and many are in need because of the ways our environment has been exploited.

Seeing creation care as something God tasks us to do can help free us from that overwhelming compulsion to focus on the size of the problem and turn our attention instead to our own individual responsibility as part of our discipleship. It’s better for our mental health too.

To look not to do as little as we think we can get away with but as much as we are capable of. Consider what it’s like when we love someone. We don’t think, “I’ve done enough now for that person”. We keep looking for more and better ways to show our love. It’s about looking for ways to be increasingly faithful to God’s agenda. When I’ve done what I can, what could I do next?

Eco Church as an organisation seeks to raise that awareness, and our group at St John’s tries to highlight things we could do to aid each of us in our discipleship, both as a church and as individuals. We’ve chosen to be an Eco Church not because we want to feel good about a label or an award but because it’s a prompt for us to do the work of God in the world. It’s some sort of yardstick to measure ourselves against, and a resource to give us inspiration. That’s why we keep repeating that this is an initiative for the whole church, not just a few people. It’s part of what we stand for.

In a way, the word ‘eco’ as in Eco Church is not helpful, because it suggests a disconnect between human beings and the rest of creation,

when all is connected. We can only be faithful followers of Jesus if we maintain those connections. As a human race we cannot survive without the rest of creation; as individuals we can't flourish without our human family, rejoicing in our diversity. God's bias to the poor and for peace with justice appears again and again in scripture. Our care for God's world includes every person, particularly the poor, vulnerable and marginalised.

That's why I feel Eco Church and Inclusive Church sit very happily together. Our commitment to these initiatives says something about us as a church family. I value St John's, among other reasons, because I'm a better Christian for coming here. If everyone is accepted for who they are, then so am I. Imagine if we had Inclusive World as well as Inclusive Church!

We can't do everything, and if we try to we will get discouraged, but we can all do something. So maybe a good start is to look at the things we are good at, or which bring us joy.

If you like cooking, be creative with leftovers and avoid food waste

If you enjoy sewing or knitting, find things to do with scraps and oddments

If you're a DIY fanatic, what can you do to upcycle or re-use?

If you love wildlife, feed your garden birds, dig a pond, volunteer on a nature reserve or sponsor a tiger

When I was growing up there were few charity shops. We had jumble sales, but apart from those we just put everything in the dustbin and thought no more about it. I had a revelation when someone said to me, "There's no such place as 'away'". All those years we'd been throwing things 'away'; where exactly had they gone? They hadn't disappeared - the problem had just gone somewhere else. Once I'd had that thought, I couldn't 'unthink it'. It's changed for ever the way I think about waste.

We also need to change the broken systems that run our world, not just apply sticking plasters to the problems. The environmental as well as the human cost of the continuing wars in Israel/Palestine and Ukraine is off the scale. The environmental cost of rebuilding will be enormous. For the love of all creation we must find better ways to deal with conflict. Part of loving God with our minds is to increase our awareness, read, listen, find out, make our own decisions and allow our assumptions to be challenged. We don't have to think a particular thing just because some politician tells us to. We know in our heart of hearts that big problems can't have simplistic solutions.

Politicians with agendas of their own want us to believe that caring about the planet is a niche interest. But the People's Climate Vote in 2024 asked people across 77 countries how they wanted their leaders to respond to the crisis. 80% of respondents wanted their governments to act more decisively and 86% wanted governments to set their differences aside and work together. This is a striking result in the current global context of the rise of nationalism.

So as Christians we aren't jumping on the bandwagon of concern, an accusation that is sometimes levelled at the church. Many who wouldn't call themselves Christians had already jumped on, before we realised that the bandwagon was actually ours all along.

What could it mean for you and me to live as if we love God with every fibre of our being?

How do we love God as we make the everyday choices of our lives?

Because worship on a Sunday or a Wednesday is only part of it. The first humans were worshipping as they cared for what God loves. Creation was their sacred space.

One way could be to ask myself a question about what I'm planning to do. For example, do I really need the item I want to buy? Is it cheap because someone else has paid with low wages and poor working conditions? As a new parent, could I consider re-usable nappies? Do I need to take the car for this short journey? Could I make soup from these leftovers?

But remember these are our questions about our individual motives. We mustn't judge others for making different choices when we don't know their full story. But maybe others will be inspired by what you're doing. Now I always keep a flask by the kettle to contain any water that was left over; it's amazing how much energy and water I save just by making a very small change - and that's a tip I got from someone here.

I believe we need to recover a joy in God, and hence in God's creation, which is so often missing from our discipleship. The Westminster Shorter Catechism says (and forgive the non-inclusive language):

1. What is the chief end of man?

Man's chief end is to glorify God, and to enjoy Him forever.

2. What rule hath God given to direct us how we may glorify and enjoy Him?

The Word of God, which is contained in the Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments, is the only rule to direct us how we may glorify and enjoy Him.

However much we try, we so often fall into the trap of thinking we must DO more - I think we need to BE more. More like God in his love for our planet and its people. Enjoying the wonderful gift we've been given. And seeking to be more like God, to seek to re-align our priorities with His. This is the time for the Christian church to be truly counter-cultural, as the loudest voices in our world scream for violence, hatred, greed and injustice. Time to listen to the still small voice of the God who speaks with love.

In the parable of the Good Samaritan, Jesus answered the question, "Who is my neighbour?" Our neighbour is anyone in need, even our enemy. We could do worse than return with intention to those familiar words in today's gospel: Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength.' and 'Love your neighbour as yourself.' There is no commandment greater than these.

Father Paul has challenged me to sum up my message in a sentence, so here it is - God says, "Look after my creation in the loving and creative way that I do". The instruction is clear; the need is urgent. So what are we waiting for?

A prayer by Saint Ignatius of Loyola
 Teach us, good Lord,
 to serve you as you deserve,
 to give and not to count the cost,
 to fight and not to heed the wounds,
 to toil and not to seek for rest,
 to labour and not to ask for any reward,
 save that of knowing that we do your will.
 Amen.