

Looking afresh at our world

A sermon preached on 13 October (Pentecost 21) by the Very Rev Jim Mein

How odd it is that there has never been a season of Creation-tide in Church lectionaries. Surely, God the Creator, is at the heart of our religion. Perhaps it is because when the main world religions developed in the axial age round about 2,600 years ago, the creation was so overwhelming – it was just there, the background to everything, beyond our under-standing, beyond any actions of puny humanity to affect it.

Then we could praise the wonders of God's creation, and we could fear its power; but it was simply the canvas on which our lives were lived. I know that in the first creation story God is reported saying "Fill the earth and subdue it; have dominion over the fish of the sea and the birds of the air and over every living thing that moves on the face of the earth". Humanity was seen as the crown of creation – the point to which all was directed, the species that gave meaning to it all. From that perspective it was easy to devalue creation, see it merely as a means to an end, something to be used for our benefit.

The alternative story in Genesis 2 is similar: there man is created first, then the garden is provided for food, then the animals for company, and finally a woman to be his mate. But again, all the rest of creation is there for man's benefit.

What has become increasingly clear in recent times is that humanity has developed such powers, and spread so widely, that we are now a real threat to the rest of creation. Our species has become so dominant that we are multiplying virtually unchecked, using up many of the world's finite resources, destroying many of the delicate checks and balances that keep creation's equilibrium.

This can't go on. We may argue about how much our actions contribute to global warming; we may disagree as to when the oil and gas will run out; we may discuss whether the earth can support 6 billion or 10 or 15 billion people. The truth is that our species has become too dominant, and we have been and are, too greedy - and our children will have to pay a heavy price. At last our Churches are just starting to take this seriously, and, as I say, many congregations set aside October to fill out harvest festival with thinking about our relationship with the rest of God's creation.

In this we need to be cautious and very humble. Our record is not great: there are many outside the religious faith communities who are well ahead of us in this thinking. Indeed some would argue that the Churches have held back the taking of our responsibilities seriously. They might point to the Roman Catholic Church with its opposition to sensible, responsible birth control methods; or to the rich Tea Party Christians in America who seem to promote unchecked economic growth. But none of us have clean hands – and there are unconscious temptations for us:

- For instance, if we believe this world is merely a staging post for humans on the way to heaven we may be tempted not to care too much about it.
- Or if we believe God micro-manages all that happens we may be tempted to think he will take care of it and we don't need to worry.
- Or if we believe the creation is simply here for our benefit we may think we can treat it as we like.

I hope we reject all those thoughts – and also reject the more human temptation to close our minds and enjoy our very comfortable present lives – simply hoping that someone else will find the answers.

I have no answers to give you this morning but I do want to point towards one attitude I believe is important. We need to think of God creating rather than having created. If God is the creator then evolution is God in action. Evolution has not only brought us to where we are but is taking us to where we will be. Beyond God resting on the seventh day comes the work of the following week.

This is why, although I have friends amongst them, I despair at biblical fundamentalists and those who think our doctrines never change. Of course the Bible has important insights and yes, the creeds we repeat every week are important markers on the journey of our Christian understanding, but to think that they contain all that is true or useful for all ages just bewilders me. Why are we given creative, inquisitive minds if all we are meant to do is accept without question the ideas of 1,500, 2,000 or 3,000 years ago? Does all that science has taught us and all we have experienced in the last few hundred years have no influence on the ways we understand and describe God?

This is important because frankly the Bible does not have much detail about how to deal with the issues our world faces today – not much about fossil fuels or nuclear power or global warming; it was a very different world when the Bible was written. But the Old Testament is clear about saving good seed for next year, and about rotating the crops to keep the soil fertile.

Jesus himself did not provide answers, either in his teaching or in a book, but there is no doubt he felt humanity was close to the natural world, as is clear in so many of his parables.

And he promised the Spirit, who would live and work within us. In other words, our religious faith, just like all other branches of human knowledge, builds on the past, grows and develops to meet new situations – sometimes taking a wrong direction but being brought back to struggle on again.

The Churches, with their fundamental commitment to there being value and purpose in the world; to the idea that love and community and responsibility can point us towards a just and creative future; that in Jesus have an example of one who gave himself for others and thereby gave us all hope; Yes, the Churches do have a contribution to make – but with humility, and in partnership with others.

And just finally, as we sometimes look back and wonder at the barbaric practices of early civilisations; look back and wonder at the practices that they thought were morally acceptable – slavery, our treatment of women and so on – I sometimes wonder what generations that follow us will look back and wonder at how we behave now.

And one area I suspect will be our treatment of animals and the natural world. The Church today needs a season when we look at our world and pray that God's spirit might lead us to find ways to mitigate all that threatens our world in the 21st century of Our Lord.

Ed: for Christians concerned about environmental issues, a wealth of internet material is available. Why not start with:

www.ccow.org.uk/

www.earthingfaith.org/

www.ecocongregationscotland.org/

www.operationnoah.org/