

This To strive to safeguard the integrity of creation and sustain and renew the life of the earth.

Sermon 10am Sunday 19th February 2017
2nd Sunday before Lent

This week we come to the fifth mark of mission – It is to strive to safeguard the integrity of creation and renew the life of the earth. Some churches abbreviate the five marks to five simple to remember words: TELL – TEACH – TEND – TRANSFORM – TREASURE. The mission of the Church is therefore summarised as to Treasure our creation.

However I want to start with a story: A newly appointed priest who went to visit the home of a congregation member. Upon arriving there the minister discovered his host was an avid gardener, and was only too delighted to show his pastor around the garden, a magnificent sea of greens, purples, blues, whites, yellows and pinks. Wanting to set the relationship off on a strong, positive note, the pastor said, “Praise God for the beauty of his handiwork”.

But his host replied in a somewhat offended tone, “Now pastor, don’t go giving all the credit to God. You should have seen this garden when the Almighty had it to himself!”

Whilst we may want to laugh or smile the gardener in fact had very good theology. God has designed the world in such a way that God works in partnership with us, and we with God, to achieve God’s ends.

Our reading this morning comes from the creation narrative that opens up the Old Testament these opening chapters of Genesis remind us that Humans, made in God’s image, have a unique responsibility for the well-being of creation in all its variety (Genesis 1:26, 2:15). We are called to care for the earth because it is a gift, the product of God’s love towards us.

As we look back through history and even listen to the news in our own time human beings have always had the capacity to both appreciate and destroy our environment. Unfortunately the earth is not always the recipient of service-oriented stewardship by humanity. Land degradation, extinction of species, air and water pollution, dumping of chemicals and toxins – we lament this widespread abuse and destruction of the earth’s resources, including its bio-diversity, and repent of ways in which we

may have intentionally or unintentionally contributed to the earth's degradation. Global warming, open cast mining the destruction of the rain forest, pollution the list is almost endless in the creativity we use to damage our environment. God world is both fragile and very vulnerable.

As one writer puts it

This mark of mission is the one which has been most neglected throughout the history of the Church. Our thoughts about God's mission have been dominated by a people-centered view of salvation. When we heard, "God so loved the world, that he sent his Son...that the world might be saved through him," we imagined only the world of human beings — God at work saving us humans.

But the Greek word for "world" is "Cosmos." God so loved you and me and all our human brothers and sisters – but also the mountains and streams, the humming birds and the whales. "God so loved the Cosmos that he sent his son...that the Cosmos might be saved."

Paul writing to the church in Rome points out that God himself is revealed in creation 'For since the creation of the world God's invisible qualities – his eternal power and divine nature – have been clearly seen, being understood from what has been created, so that people are without excuse.' Rom 1:20

Paul is clear the creation reflects not just God's glory but his very nature, our world and its environment is an expression of whom God is. Jesus too understood the relationship between the creation and its creator. At his entry into Jerusalem when he was welcomed as a king by the crowds the Pharisees try to get him to silence the crowd but Jesus responds by saying if the crowd is silenced then the very stones, literally the ground will cry out in praise to its creator. *'I tell you, he replied, 'if they keep quiet the stones will cry out.'* Luke 19.40

So how do we express the mission of God at work through the Church in regard to salvation? In short how do we express our relationship to creation. I am going to suggest three ways we can understand our role first named by the Church in Scotland.¹

¹ Faith in the Countryside p14 1990

1 We are stewards of God's creation. A steward cares and supports the world around him or her to enable the natural world to flourish, grow and be sustained. A steward does not exploit or exhaust the resources in their care. The steward takes responsibility to protect the present but also has an eye to the future. If we want creation to sustain us, we need to care for creation. If we want creation to feed us, we need to steward creation appropriately.

2. We are trustees or custodians of God's creation. A trustee is responsible for what is in his or her care. A trustee tries to leave the inheritance in at least the same condition it was entrusted to him and ideally in a better state than it was given. Creation is given to us in trust and as custodians we should not allow it to be degraded, neglected, abused or exploited.

3. We are Companions. We are companions with God, we are interdependent and coexist with the world around us. As companions we are called to respect and love the creation, confrontation and control are laid aside.

John Walton in his commentary says:

*'Those who claim the support of the Bible for their self-indulgent rape of the environment are no different from the Crusaders, Inquisitions, slavers or white supremacists who exploit the Bible in order to justify their own, antibiblical agendas. The stewardship model leads us to think of people more as priests of the cosmos rather than kings over it.'*²

The Biblical understanding of our role as people of faith is to care for creation – the Hebrew word is *shamar* which can be translated as watch, guard or protect – specifically this indicates we are to give attentive and protective tending. World Vision the aid agency has the following to say:

If dominion is responsibility to care for creation, then stewardship describes how we exercise this dominion. We govern creation for the good of humanity and other parts of creation, not in a domineering, selfish and exploitive manner, but by nurturing creation, preserving it and helping it to function as God intended.

The Bible says God's intention is that humans exercise dominion best by adopting the approach of being stewards – appointed caretakers who

² The NIV Application Commentary Genesis John H Walton p141

follow instructions from God the owner – over creation. Stewardship is **how** we exercise dominion as God intends.

The mission of God is therefore expressed in our careful stewardship of the world around us as with so much else in the journey of faith it is lived out in practical action which stands against the excess of our consumerist society. It requires a change of heart not just a change of lifestyle. We can all do our bit by recycling, adopting greener energy, long life light bulbs etc. However it is the radical change of heart through a relationship with Christ that will make the real difference. The marks of mission do not simply give us the option of choosing which we will adopt and which we can ignore.

We are to

- To proclaim the Good News of the Kingdom – point people to Christ
- To teach, baptize and nurture new believers – to make disciples
- To respond to human need by loving service – to serve our world and neighbour
- To seek to transform unjust structures of society, to challenge violence of every kind and to pursue peace and reconciliation – to fight injustice and stand up to principalities and powers in our society
- To strive to safeguard the integrity of creation and sustain and renew the life of the earth – to treasure and be stewards of God's world for the good of all.