

Season of Creation - Sept 6th - Matthew 18:15-20

The Season of Creation is a time to renew our relationship with our Creator and all creation through repenting, acting, and rejoicing together. During the Season of Creation, we join our sisters and brothers in the ecumenical family in prayer and action for our common home. This year, amid crises that have shaken our world, we're awakened to the urgent need to heal our relationships with creation and each other. This is a time of restoration and hope, a jubilee for our Earth, that requires radically new ways of living with creation.

Collect

God, creator of the universe,

Fill us with your love for the creation,

for the natural world around us,

for the earth from which we come

and to which we will return.

Awake in us energy to work for your world; let us never fall into complacency, ignorance, or being overwhelmed by the task before us. Help us to restore, remake, renew. **Amen**

What? Another season in the church - beyond Advent, Christmas, Epiphany and Lent? Do we need a new altar frontal? Why do people keep adding things and changing things? Why do we need a Season of creation as well?

I'm afraid its the church playing catch up again - the church stood by while people traded slaves, in fact we got rich from it and even made theological reasons why black people didn't have souls. Eventually enough people read their bibles properly and started to press for change and justice, and we got there in the end.

But its such a pity that the church often seems to be in step with the world, rather than prophetically ahead of it. Like with women's equality or with sexuality.

Anyway, the point is - that in the bible - from Genesis to Revelation - there is a God who gives us nature and tells us to look after it, and a God who is involved in the redemption - the creation of a New Heaven and a New Earth - and calls us to be in that mission with him.

God gives us the world - says look after it. You'd think it would be pretty obvious, basic, to what being a Christian is.

Yet the church didn't help herself. For years we said - God gave us the earth, lets party - lets take all the coal and fossil fuels, lets take all the fish, or the birds that can't fly - God's given them to us it would be wrong not to use them - lets have the lot! In Genesis we emphasised the word "dominion" rather than "husband" as we gave a theological rationale for all those who wanted to exploit the earth.

And far from trying to use our in built wonder at the beauty of nature - we warned people against it - saying - "don't worship nature". You must worship the creator, not the creation. So we kept it as a distance.

Now finally, here we are playing catch up. Reading our Bibles - about the trees of the field praising God, about all those parables - the lilies of the field - and saying - oh, maybe this world is wonderful and if God's given it to us as a gift, we should appreciate it a bit more and look after it.

And the church is speaking up only just in time - or maybe not even in time..

The world has prioritised economic growth over human and planetary well-being.

There is environmental destruction on an unprecedented scale, bringing about the sixth great extinction, with over 50% of species threatened with extinction.

There are mountains of plastic, entering our food chain and poisoning both the natural environment and people.

Global warming is bringing about climate disruption, change in weather patterns, increased weather extremes with droughts, floods, hurricanes and cyclones reaching new levels of intensity.

Deforestation is bringing about the destruction of the lungs of the planet, with marine stocks plummeting and the very future of life at stake.

And what can the church say or do?

Well today's reading is perhaps not an obvious place to start - but you'll see how it fits..

How should we react "if your brother or sister", a member of the Christian Church sins?
("Against you" is a later addition)

It is raising the question of how we should react to a member of the Christian community or church who has sinned.

This shows the early church community, who were Jewish converts, grappling with the issue, so if a member does sin, members of the community should take action. If they listen, you have saved a brother or sister and restored them to the flock or family of the church.

If they do not listen, they will be excluded from the church in the way tax collectors and Gentiles were excluded from the synagogue.

What's interesting is that we often (rightly) say - don't judge, we mustn't judge others, or it's not our place to judge. But that's a classic case of misusing the Bible to say what you want.

We are certainly not allowed to judge people's souls, as God will judge all of us. And we should not judge those outside the church - they have not signed up to being called a Christian, have not been baptised and "died to themselves". But inside the church, the community, then we should and we must help one another to live in a good and holy way. If we see someone who is not acting as a Christian should, then we must do what it says in this passage - go to them one to one to convince them, take some others with us if that doesn't work. And if it still doesn't work we should exclude them from the church.

But, for a long time the Church has focussed on individual sins, particularly sexual sins.

And yet at the moment it's not that so much as our lifestyle that is destroying the web of life and hurting the most vulnerable of society.

We should be asking - how do we respond to Church members who are sinning against God's Creation?

The Patriarch of the Orthodox church says this:

"We have traditionally regarded sin as being merely what people do to other people. Yet, for human beings to destroy the biological diversity in God's creation; for human beings to degrade the integrity of the earth by contributing to climate change, by stripping the earth of its natural forests or destroying its wetlands; for human beings to contaminate the earth's waters, land and air - all of these are sins."

The question is deep - how do we challenge our brothers and sisters in Christ to stop sinning against Creation and the generations to come?

How do we love our neighbour in the current ecological crisis? For too long the churches theology, preaching and ministry has been involved in ambulance work, seeking to heal the damage done by self-centred misbehaviour. We know that we must feed the hungry - but the question today is "how do we stop people from becoming hungry?"

How do we establish justice and equity for people and all of life? There is enough on this planet for our needs, but not enough for our greed.

The destruction of planetary life is not God's will. This must be loudly proclaimed from every pulpit and Bible study around the world. Environmental care must become a priority.

The church in the past has been apprehensive that in caring for nature we might be accused of Pantheism - that is the worship of nature. What is needed is Panentheism, that is "God in everything". All life is sacred and we must recognise that we are inextricably part of the rest of life, part of the web of life. In the extinction which we humans are bringing about, we are unravelling this web of life which is leading to our own demise.

This is not God's will.

There are those who say they wish to hasten the second coming of Jesus. That can only be in God's time. As it is, it is we humans who are now bringing about "the end of the world" as we understand life on this planet. This is not God's plan. Let us recognise the need for urgent action to care for Life.

We are commanded to love our neighbour, the vulnerable, the future generations and the whole web of life. To do so, we must consciously seek to live in harmony with God, one another and the natural world. And we must be an example to all of humanity that we must stop being so selfish in the way we treat nature and our fellow human beings.

Here are 5 things we can do

Sign up to being an Eco-Congregation. This is a simple way of finding out how "green" we are and simple encouraging steps to be greener.

Cut down on food waste? 40% of food is wasted every day while two and a half billion people go hungry. Much of this is from supermarket food past its sell by date, but can we do more to reduce what we put in our compost bin?

Littering has been described as a contemporary form of blasphemy, "so much for your world God" as we throw our plastic out of the car window. Campaign for the end of all plastic packaging and advocate for responsible, returnable containers.

Why not advocate for the end of fossil fuels - switch to energy suppliers that are committed to being green, renewable. We have been given all the energy we need through renewable energy resources. It is blowing in the wind and shining on us daily.

As a vegetarian its easy for me to say - reduce your meat consumption. Modern meat production is both cruel and a major cause of greenhouse gas emissions, and is an incredibly inefficient way to feed ourselves. (The few cattle and sheep around Alderholt and Dorset are not the issue - they are doing a good job of preserving the environment - its the Amazon rain forest being destroyed at a football pitch every minute for cattle that is the problem).

We are all part of the problem, and we are all also part of the solution. Desmond Tutu said this - "We all need to come to terms with the forces that have created this crisis and the resources within our traditions that can motivate us to resolve the crisis. One of those traditions is our biblical heritage."

This is the Season of Creation, and in the words of Pope Francis, let us hear the "Cry of the poor and the Cry of the Earth" and commit to loving our neighbour.