God’s Planet – Our Responsibility

Genesis 1. God saw that it was good – and it was very good. From the original Hebrew this would be better translated as wonderful, breathtaking, magnificent, fantastic, astonishing and amazing!

Let us think for a moment of the truth behind this sentence.

God creates the Universe before creating the Earth. God creates the Earth before creating the creatures which inhabit the Earth. God creates the plants and animals before creating humans. God creates humans before creating the Church.

So the purposes of the God we worship go back a long time. Divine intention did not begin when I was confirmed, or you were baptized, or with the Reformation or when this lovely Cathedral was built. The will of God goes back to the beginning of time – to the origins of life itself.

It is too easy to believe that we are so important, and that history or the world is less so. This we may call arrogance or even hubris, and it is sinful because it can blind us to what God deeply wants of all life…

The Genesis story – or more accurately stories – set out a picture of a God of hospitality… God makes, shapes and forms that which was inhospitable – diverse elements in an evolving void – are transformed into a planet which is able to hold and sustain life.

Creation therefore offers a home for rich abundance. Hospitality is or should be a key element in our Christian faith. We open our houses to be welcoming to others, just as God the Creator opens the Earth to be welcoming of living beings…

The Psalms (including 95) speak of the beauty of the earth, recognizing the touching hand of the Creator. They tell of a God who continues to mold the rocks and the mountains, the rivers and the plains, the plants and the beasts to be a part of a diverse interconnected web of life. Not only is the Body a metaphor for the Church, as St. Paul points out, but it is also a metaphor for the planet. And that of course is the message of the science of Ecology – that all life is inter-related and interconnected.

To damage one element is to affect the whole. The minerals, trees, birds, bacteria of a particular habitat or ecosystem are all linked, and the same is true of the Earth itself. A miraculous globe in space with its God-given laws of life affecting every inhabitant alike.

This is God’s Creation – it is the place of God’s plans and it is also the place of God’s revelation. God is revealed through the natural beauty of the world. The Creation reflects the Creator.

As Martin Luther reminded us, God gives us two books – the Book of Scripture and the Book of Nature. They together form a whole text for faith and life.
Furthermore, for us as Christians, the world is the space of God’s incarnation in Jesus the Christ. It is into this physical environment that the divine takes human flesh – not in any kind of spiritual or meta-physical realm, but in the earthiness of the Earth.

In summary, therefore, God’s planet is to be seen as holy and sacred and to his people from Adam to us are given particular guidelines for our behaviour, not only to one another, but also to their wider relations and especially with the land.

The Land is seen as a gift to the people of Israel and they are to treat it in careful ways for the sake of the well-being of all. These ‘instructions’ are outlined in the books of the Torah, and repeated throughout the Bible.

I would suggest for Climate Week that there are three particular insights from this rich tradition which give us a framework for thinking and acting at this time and beyond….

**Firstly**, the Biblical emphasis sets this out in the general terms of a ‘Covenant’. Genesis 9, for instance, relays how Noah is called into a three-way relationship between God, humanity and all living creatures. In today’s English we may translate this as being a partnership of God’s promise, nature’s sustainability and human responsibility. This is the foundation of Christian environmental and ecological ethics. And this trait continues on in the reading from Colossians where God in Christ reconciles all things in heaven and on earth in the new covenant (or partnership) offered by Jesus.

**Secondly**, I return to our first reading which concluded that on the seventh day God rested from the work of creating that he had done and reflected on it. This of course is embedded in the tradition of having one day off every week – for us a Sunday – for a Sabbath or Shabbat time.

The principle of a period of rest is deepened in other parts of the Bible – for instance in letting land lie fallow every 7 years. In particular, it is expressed in the importance of having a Jubilee Year – every seven times seven years.

This is the year of God’s favour in which captives are to be liberated, debt written off and land ownership redistributed. God’s living creation needs to be restored and refreshed.

This Sabbath tradition stands today as totally counter-cultural. In a 24/7 economically-driven society a day of no working or no shopping is simply unacceptable. Yet Biblically speaking it is clear we are called to make time when we focus not on producing or consuming but on our personal relationships – that which we deeply value in life, including our faith in God.

To take Sabbath seriously means challenging a society in which we emphasise “what we do in order to have” (more possessions, etc.) and stressing instead “who we are in order to explore who we might become…” **Being is more important than doing!**

**Thirdly**, the God of the Bible is a God of love and justice. We are continually called to love our neighbour, our brothers, our sisters, our children, our enemy. We give priority not to the rich but to the empty – to those who hunger, those who thirst and those without shelter.

It is clear that as systematic environmental destruction worsens, this will increasingly include climate refugees and those facing disruption and conflict because of seriously declining natural resources.

I was very privileged four years ago to have been attendant at the COP15 negotiations on Climate Change in Copenhagen. There I met a number of vulnerable people from Lapland,
from Bangladesh, from the Andes, from Kenya, from the Pacific – from countries and communities already losing lives and livelihoods because of global warming.

Yet these very people are some of those whom God calls us to love and therefore to live more fairly that the dangers of climate change are reversed. This has to be at the heart of Climate Justice ….. a change in our lives here, that others elsewhere may live at all.

I conclude:

- God calls us to recognize the holiness of the Earth. It is seen as very good - a place of awe and wonder – with which we are integrated and integral partners.

- God calls us to break regularly with continuous, un-relenting consumerism which is not healthy for us, or for the poor or for the planet. This is how we re-assess our priorities for living.

- God calls us to care justly about what is happening to the world and to care for those who face uncertainty and loss. Whether close to home or in distant lands those with little voice are already suffering because of global warming.

This is God’s planet and the cumulative effects of our industrial lifestyles are threatening the processes which underpin life itself. We cannot all survive global temperature rises of between 2° and 6° due to growing greenhouse gas emissions. We cannot go on living as if there were no tomorrow.

Our faith calls us to act responsibly in different ways and to set out steps for a future in which there is hope not despair. We can change ourselves rather than the climate. We should live by faith rather than by fear.

There are many examples of living differently – of reducing our energy footprints, of sharing food together, of travelling less, of engaging in fairer trading systems, of expressing simplicity, solidarity and sufficiency. These are elements of building God’s reign here and now and giving hope for our children’s children. Another way is not only possible, it is what God invites us to participate in.

We are called to heal the brokenness of the world and to transform it into the Kingdom of our God, here and now and forevermore - in the name of the Creator, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.

Martyn Goss