

Sermon – Creation Care

Readings

Genesis 1 (can shorten to 1:20-31) and optionally Matthew 6:19-34 and Psalm 24

Sermon

Do you believe Genesis 1 describes a literal chronological truth? If not, what can it tell us about the relationship between God, creation, and humankind?

From our modern scientific perspective it can be easy to dismiss Genesis 1 as not being an historical account of how the earth and the richness of life on it came into being, but that would be missing the point. The ancient God-inspired Israelites who first wrote this down, weren't attempting to write a factual account of what happened but were writing an account demonstrating God's transcendence over creation and his love for it, at each stage noting that God saw that it was good, and the special role that humans have in creation.

A key verse is Genesis 1:28: "God said to them, 'Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth and subdue it; and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the air and over every living thing that moves on the earth'. There's a lot packed in that one verse: what's meant by "filling the earth", "subduing it"? or by "dominion"?

Let's consider dominion. Some interpret dominion (or rule in some other translations) as domination and use that as a justification for humankind to exploit and have absolute control over the earth's resources and in particular other creatures and plants. This view was prevalent among some of those exploiting the earth's natural resources during the Industrial revolution and is still held by some Christian groups, especially in America.

An alternative interpretation of dominion is of caring stewardship. Earlier in Genesis 1, God had created the plants and living creatures of every kind, **blessed** them and encouraged them to be fruitful, thus demonstrating God's caring creative nature. Then in verse 26 "God said "Let us make humankind **in our image according to our likeness**; and let them have dominion..." which suggests that in giving humankind dominion God is expecting them to carry on his caring and creative work on the earth. Throughout the Bible we have examples of God both caring for his creation and entrusting humankind to care for it. Jesus refers to the lilies of the field clothed in glory and the humble sparrow as examples of how far God's love extends to all creation. In biblical times sparrows were numerous and were considered at best as unimportant or worse as annoying, but they were still remembered by God. Then there's Noah, told by God to gather and care for all creatures both those useful for food and **those which weren't**, so man's role isn't purely utilitarian. In Leviticus, God instructs the Israelites that the seventh year shall be a year of rest for the land. In Genesis 2 man is told to "till the garden of Eden and keep it", again implying caring stewardship rather than ownership, exploitation, or control.

Going back to verse 28, there's that phrase 'Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth'. Well humankind has certainly multiplied since Genesis was written down (which was probably during the exile in Babylon), and it could be said that we have filled the earth. The world population around 500 BC is estimated to have been around 100 million, which has multiplied about 80 times to around 8000 million now, but with the most significant growth and increasing growth in recent history: with (a 10-fold increase in the last 250 years and) a doubling in the last 50 years.

There are various projections on future growth and what the earth can support, which depend somewhat on how humankind and nature react to issues relating to climate change and pollution. There are some who suggest that we have already reached the population that the earth can sensibly support, partly because those in developed countries typically over-consume and many in less developed countries are malnourished with poor life quality: it has been calculated that if the world's total ecological capacity were shared equally among the current population, everyone would have little more than the current resource consumption of someone living in Mali. OTOH others suggest the earth could support a trillion people by concentrating people in high rise cities and devoting all available land to food production with loss of much of the rich biodiversity of God's creation. (We're already using 44% of the world's habitable land for agriculture.)

But earlier in Genesis 1, God had blessed the other creatures and told them to be fruitful and multiply. So did God really intend that humankind dominate the planet while driving some other species to extinction? There are some who believe that in Genesis 1 God gives humankind carte blanche to do what it likes, but throughout the Bible we see God's love for all creation. Even if God placed man above creation, if humankind is in the image of God it should care for creation, because God does.

Going back to caring stewardship. What does caring stewardship mean for us individually? We live in a complex technological society using the earth's resources in ways inconceivable 2000 plus years ago. Many inventions have benefitted humanity, but sometimes at a very high cost to the rest of creation.

It's easier to care for something we relate to, so it's good to start by getting outside into the natural world if you can: listen to birds singing, appreciate the beauty of those "lilies of the field" and give thanks for the wonderful diversity of creation.

Caring for creation includes caring for humanity, and we live in a world of extreme inequalities, both in terms of living conditions and of how much of the world's resources people consume. A typical UK resident will consume more than 16 times as much of the world's resources than someone living in sub-Saharan Africa. Affluent countries consume more resources and create more waste and pollution than poorer countries, but those in poorer countries are often those most affected by environmental changes. This disparity brings to mind the parable of the rich man, and Lazarus, the sore-ridden beggar at his gate: the rich man isn't said to have committed any particular actions against Lazarus: his sin was that his wealthy comfortable lifestyle had made him oblivious to the suffering and deprivation of the poor man at his gate. Should we feel uncomfortable?

As an aside, there's a complex relationship between poverty, resource consumption, pollution and population growth, which I'm not going to try to cover here!

Many of us live reasonably comfortable lives, but others are living on the edge, and the effects of environmental pollution or climate change tend to have most impact on the poorest. It can feel overwhelming when we see pictures of deprivation and damage from around the world. As individual stewards we can't be responsible for the whole of creation. So what can we do?

We live in a consumerist society which is part of a global economic system which encourages a desire for stuff, more stuff, the latest, prettiest, most advanced stuff, the best stuff. In Luke 12 Jesus says: 'Take care! Be on your guard against all kinds of greed; for one's life does not consist in the abundance of possessions.' Greed might have been a problem for some of Jesus's listeners, and they weren't surrounded by advertising encouraging consumption! So, how much stuff do we need? A young Australian woman successfully followed a whole year "fashion-fast" of not buying any new clothes, shoes, or accessories, even when attending a friend's wedding, and found it grew her faith in unexpected ways.

Is there something you consume that you can live well with less of? I've become aware that I have far more stuff than I actually need, and more than I can sensibly use and enjoy! So how do we deal with the advertising pressures of our consumerist society to tempt us to buy the latest and best, and then discard the previous sometimes barely used? I've been trying to think more consciously "do I need this" or "can I make good use of this". We're coming up to Lent in a couple of weeks' time, which is traditionally a good time to review how we live our lives including what we consume. A Lenten review might lead to longer term benefits.

In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus tells us not to store up treasures on earth, but instead to store up treasures in heaven. "Where your treasure is, there your heart will be also". We all need some stuff, but more joy may be found in relationships, with loved ones, with God's creation and with God through Jesus and the Holy Spirit. Caring for creation will usually mean caring for your fellow men and women.

God saw that his creation was good and entrusted it to humankind. As caring stewards we need to appreciate and enjoy it, but we also

need to ensure that our use of it is sympathetic with all of creation. Psalm 24 reminds us “The world and all that is in it belong to the Lord, the earth and all who live on it are his”. As stewards we need to use it carefully! How much stuff do you need?