


Creation in **CRISIS**

A time for prayer and action

THEME



Photo: William.n 

Sermons

for the 5 weeks of Creation Time 2009

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These sermons are part of Churches Together in Britain and Ireland's programme of resources to encourage and assist churches to observe a Time for Creation between 1 September and 4 October each year.

Our theme for 2009, *Creation in Crisis - a time for prayer and action*, will particularly help churches, groups and individuals to focus on issues relating to decisions that will need to be taken at the UN Climate Change Summit in Copenhagen in December 2009, described by some as the "last chance for the planet". In this context, Christians are called more than ever to demonstrate their commitment to care for creation by living simply and sustainably themselves, as well as by pressing politicians to take the measures necessary at national and international level.

If we seek first God's Kingdom – his rule and his values – then our current crises fall into perspective. Christian hope is more than blind optimism; it is undergirded by the hope we share as Christians, based ultimately in God's good plans for his creation, the cosmic scope of Christ's saving work, and the Spirit's renewing power at work within and through human beings.

Week 1: 6 September

Creation in Crisis

Linking together the ecological, economic and social crises, and seeking God's alternative priorities.

Week 2: 13 September

Global Poverty

How Climate Change affects the poor hardest and why and how Christians are called to act.

Week 3: 20 September

What About Wildlife?

Why a healthy biodiverse environment is vital for human flourishing, and matters to God.

Week 4: 27 September

16th Sunday after Trinity (Proper 21)

For Generations to Come

Our responsibility to 'our children's children' and our grounds for hope beyond the crisis.

Week 5: 4 October

A Harvest of Hopeful Action

All-age Harvest talk looking at Joseph – an ordinary hero who listened to God and acted hopefully.

Author's introductory note

God's creation is in crisis. There is little argument about the facts on Climate Change any more, nor about the dominant role that humanity is playing in causing the crisis. Many churches, though, struggle to link Climate Change with their weekly worship and with all their other priorities – particularly as the world is now in a financial crisis too.

This series of sermons begins by linking together the crisis in creation with the financial and social shifts that are also taking place. Each week includes biblical reflection on current issues, and suggestions for response at the personal, community / church and political levels.


Revd Dave Bookless

Week 1: Creation in Crisis

6th September

Key passage: Matthew 6.19-34



Photo: Jeff Turner 

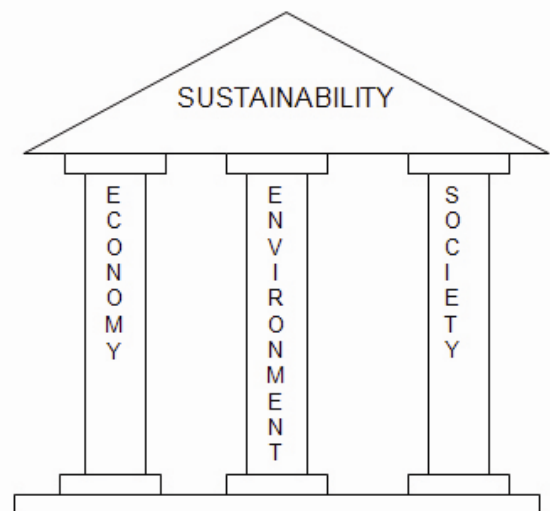
Summary

The current economic crisis is deeply linked to the social and environmental crises. The link is that our relationship with wealth and possession has become idolatrous – as a society we have been seeking happiness through things, rather than through relationships. The values Jesus proclaimed - God's Kingdom values – suggest that we should rather invest in relationships – with God, people and creation.

The Context – a Triple Crisis

2009 has been dominated globally by the Banking & Financial Crisis – so much so that Climate Change and other environmental threats have sometimes been pushed to the edge of the news agenda. Yet the credit crunch is deeply connected to our unsustainable use of the earth's resources, and the pressures this is putting on financial systems and also on human society. In a pastoral letter in October 2008, the Bishop of London stated: "It is becoming clearer how far we have been mortgaging our children's tomorrow to fund our today, both financially and in our use of the finite resources of the earth ... Free markets cannot flourish within a value-free environment." Both financially and environmentally we cannot keep borrowing from what is not really ours.

There is much talk currently of the three pillars of sustainability: economic, social and environmental. Today, all three are being profoundly shaken. Economically, the myth that unlimited growth could continue forever has been shattered. The global economy may be 5 times the size it was 50 years ago¹ but it is now running up against the twin buffers of unrestrained greed and the planet's limited resources. Oil will peak soon if it hasn't already. Rising carbon emissions are causing unpredictable weather patterns that make agriculture, transport and insurance highly unpredictable. Besides this, as we will see over the next few weeks – the social and environmental pillars on which we depend have been gravely weakened. In a world of economic boom, two billion people remained on less than \$2 a day and 60% of the earth's ecosystems are reckoned to have become degraded.



Moreover, the myth that more money would automatically make us happier is being challenged in most affluent western societies. The psychologist Oliver James has described the social virus 'Affluenza' whereby we are sucked into an addictive cycle of believing that buying more stuff will make us more

¹ Prosperity without Growth, Sustainable Development Commission, London, page 5, March 2009

happy², whereas it simply leaves us wanting more. Earlier this year, the singer Lily Allen had a number one single with 'The Fear' in which she talks about her desire to be rich and have "lots of money". In the song, she goes on to admit that she feels like "a weapon of massive consumption" but that it's not her fault, it's how she's "programmed to function". The song's chorus speaks of not knowing what is right or real any more, or of knowing how she's meant to feel, and of being taken over by 'The Fear'.³

Economic woes, social unease and environmental depletion – the three pillars on which our societies are built, are being shaken to the core, and people are searching for a different way of being, and of living.

Biblical Reflection

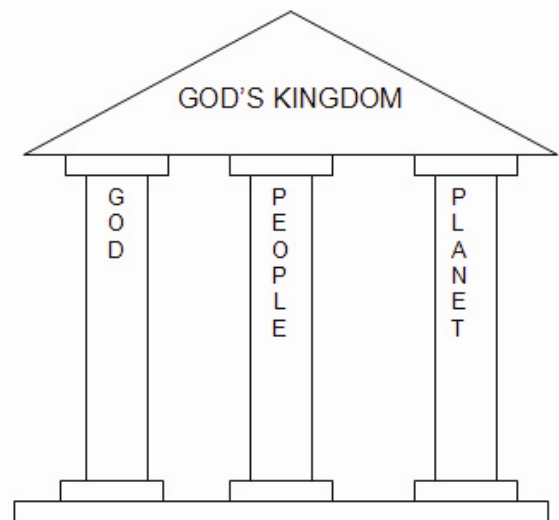
So, we have a context of creation in crisis – a crisis caused by humanity in crisis about its purpose and values. In this context what does our Christian faith have to offer? Recognising that too often we in the churches have simply mimicked the values of wider society, where should we be different?

In our reading from Matthew 6, Jesus offers a radically different approach to how we value the economic, the social and the environmental. "Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust destroy, and where thieves break in and steal. But store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where moth and rust do not destroy, and where thieves do not break in and steal. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also" (Matthew 6.19-21 NIV).

Jesus is clear – money and possessions can easily take God's place in our lives. You're probably all familiar with the old joke that the words 'In God We Trust' inscribed on every dollar bill should really read 'Ingot we Trust'!

Jesus' challenge to our current crisis is also clear. We have turned creation into commodities and people into units of production. We have been worshipping mammon - economic growth and prosperity, rather than worshipping God. In the Sermon on the Mount, of which this reading is a part, true values lie not in accumulating more material possessions, but in cultivating deeper relationships. Rather than our happiness depending on balancing economic, social and environmental sustainability, Jesus offers us an alternative model. Our true happiness (or 'blessedness' in the words of the Beatitudes in the previous chapter, lies in our relationships – firstly with God and his Kingdom values, and then with people and with the non-human creation.

If we seek first God's Kingdom – his rule and his values – then our current crises fall into perspective. Isn't it interesting that the worries of people in Jesus' time were so similar to our worries today - food, clothing, housing, saving for a rainy day – many of the universal human worries? Jesus does not say these things don't matter. Rather he says something a bit surprising: look at God's creation – at birds and at flowers. Become ornithologists and botanists!



² Oliver James, 'Affluenza', London, Vermillion, 2007

³ Lily Allen, The Fear from album 'It's not me, it's you', February 2009

In his wonderful paraphrase 'The Message', Dr Eugene Peterson puts these verses like this:

“Look at the birds, free and unfettered,
not tied down to a job description,
careless in the care of God.
And you count far more to him than birds ...
Walk out into the fields and look at the wildflowers.
They never primp or shop, but have you ever seen colour and design quite like it?
The ten best-dressed men and women in the country look shabby alongside them.
If God gives such attention to the appearance of wildflowers
- most of which are never even seen -
don't you think he'll attend to you, take pride in you, do his best for you?
What I'm trying to do here is to get you to relax,
to not be so preoccupied with getting,
so you can respond to God's giving.”

As we take our minds off our preoccupation with tomorrow's worries and deepen our relationship with God's Kingdom values, so everything falls into perspective. Spending time in God's creation – going for a walk, watching plants, birds, tides, the movement of the planets and stars, digging a garden – all of these can be ways in which God helps us to rediscover what is really important.

Our relationships with people – especially the world's poor - and with the non-human creation cannot be separated from our own welfare and happiness – or from our relationship with God. Over the next few weeks we will be looking at how a Creation in Crisis is affecting all of these, and how we can make changes to our values and our lifestyles in order to live by God's Kingdom values.

Resources

- “Prosperity without growth? The transition to a sustainable economy” by Professor Tim Jackson, published Sustainable Development Commission, 2009 (www.sd-commission.org.uk)
- “Affluenza: How to be Successful and Stay Sane”, Oliver James, Vermillion, 2007
- “Planetwise”, Dave Bookless, IVP, 2008

Action Suggestions

- **Personal:** Print out a copy of Matthew 6 from 'The Message' or another modern translation and spend an hour outdoors in a garden, park or wilder place reflecting on it, allowing God to speak through the birds and the plants.
- **Church & Community:** Plan towards a Harvest lunch or supper, using local produce as far as possible and perhaps inviting people from beyond your regular members – deepening your relationships with other people and with God's creation locally.
- **Political:** Seek out the most recent manifesto of the party you last voted for. How do its priorities compare with Jesus' values in the Sermon on the Mount? What would be different in practical policies if relationships between people and planet were put before economic success?

Week 2: Global poverty

13th September

Key passage: Isaiah 58.1-14
(and Luke 4.16-21 if Gospel required)



Photo: Darcie Condie

Many Christians in the UK are rightly passionate about tackling global poverty. Christians were at the heart of the Jubilee 2000 Campaign and of Make Poverty History, two of the most effective popular campaign movements of recent years. Organisations like Christian Aid, Tearfund, CAFOD, SCIAF and Trocaire are amongst the largest and best-supported Christian organisations in Britain and Ireland.

Moreover, the Bible and Christian teaching are clear that religious behaviour without a commitment to justice for the poor is hypocrisy. As Isaiah 58 puts it so clearly:

"Is not this the kind of fasting I have chosen:
to loose the chains of injustice and untie the cords of the yoke,
to set the oppressed free and break every yoke?
Is it not to share your food with the hungry
and to provide the poor wanderer with shelter –
when you see the naked, to clothe him,
and not to turn away from your own flesh and blood?
Then your light will break forth like the dawn,
and your healing will quickly appear;
then your righteousness will go before you,
and the glory of the Lord will be your rear guard." (Isaiah 58.6-8 NIV)

Throughout the Bible God has a clear commitment to the poor, the dispossessed, the vulnerable and exploited – and so should we. In the New Testament Jesus confirmed this with his 'Nazareth Manifesto' in Luke 4 – taking words from Isaiah and applying them to his own ministry – "good news to the poor ... freedom for the prisoners ... recovery of sight for the blind, to release the oppressed, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour" (Luke 4.18-19).

Today there sometimes seems to be a clash between caring for the poor and caring for the planet. All the talk about tackling global warming, about carbon footprints, greener lifestyles and the need for renewable energy might seem to take us away from focussing on justice for the world's most vulnerable people. Yet this is a false dilemma. The fact is that it is the world's poor who are suffering first and suffering worst in a world affected by avoidable Climate Change. Here is what some experts are saying about this:

- 'The Stern Review' - a report commissioned by the UK Government on 'The Economics of Climate Change' stated "The impacts are inequitable: poor countries will be hit hardest and earliest, when it is the rich countries responsible for ¾ of Greenhouse Gases currently in the atmosphere."⁴

⁴ www.occ.gov.uk/activities/stern.htm

- Climate Change is already leading to changes in weather patterns around the world. Dr. Elaine Storkey, President of Tearfund explains why this matters so much: “Inevitably the poor are picking up the tab. The poor are there when the hurricane hits, when the tornado comes, when freak weather conditions are there. 98% of those killed and affected by natural disasters come from developing countries.”⁵
- In a Christian Aid report on ‘The Climate of Poverty’, a Bangladeshi development expert stated: ‘Forget about making poverty history. Climate change will make poverty permanent.’⁶

What we do here in the UK, the way we drive, the way we use energy, the way we shop, has a direct effect on the lives of the world’s poorest. We simply cannot pretend that it is enough to give an occasional donation to help the poor, whilst we carry on living lifestyles that cost the earth and change the climate.

One British Christian agriculturalist working in Pakistan found that year on year the changing climate and the uncertainty of weather patterns was making life unbearable. Farmers would complain that the crops they and their ancestors had always planted at the same time of year were no longer reliable. Nobody knew when the rains would come or whether they would come at all. In the end this Christian agriculturalist made a hard decision. Rather than helping Pakistani farmers fight a losing battle against changing weather, he would tackle the problem at its source – by returning to the UK and helping British people live a less damaging lifestyle.⁷

Those of us living here in Europe easily forget how dependent we are on a healthy environment. If there is a crop failure in one part of the world, we simply import from somewhere else, but for the poor that is not an option. Our definition of a water shortage is when we can’t use our hosepipes for a few weeks, whereas in some places it may mean walking for many miles simply to get a drink. Dr. Stella Simiyu, a Kenyan Christian who is a world-class botanist and a Trustee of Christian environmental charity A Rocha puts it like this: “The rural poor depend directly on the natural resource base. This is where their pharmacy is, this is where their supermarket is, this is in fact their fuel station, their power company, their water company. What would happen to you if these things were removed from your local neighbourhood? Therefore we really cannot afford not to invest in environmental conservation.”⁸

Response

Christians who are concerned about the poor need to take action on Climate Change. The kind of fasting that God wants from us is not simply to give up a luxury for a few weeks in Lent each year. As Isaiah 58 reminds us, true fasting means loosing the chains of injustice, setting the oppressed free and breaking the yokes that hold the poor in servitude. Climate Change is an issue of justice, because of how it adds to the inequalities in the world and makes the poor even poorer through no fault of their own. As Christians we are called to take action at every level from the political to the personal.

⁵ Dr. Elaine Storkey at A Rocha UK’s ‘Hope for Planet Earth’ conference, November 2007

⁶ Nazmul Chowdbury from Practical Action, quoted in Christian Aid, The Climate of Poverty, May 2006, p.34

⁷ Morris Connor, formerly with CMS in Pakistan

⁸ Dr. Stella Simiyu, from videoed interview for A Rocha www.arochoa.org.uk

- Politically, we should campaign for the British and EU Parliaments to reduce our carbon emissions. Many UK Christian organisations (A Rocha, Christian Aid, CAFOD, Christian Ecology Link, the Church of Scotland, MRDF, Operation Noah, SCIAF, the Scottish Episcopal Church and Tearfund) are part of the Stop Climate Chaos coalition (www.stopclimatechaos.org). Stop Climate Chaos is campaigning for policies that will stop the climate warming by more than 2 degrees centigrade this century and will also protect the world's poorest and most vulnerable people.
- Politically we should also encourage our Governments to help fund poorer countries in tackling the impacts of Climate Change – which industrialised nations have largely caused.
- Personally we need to look at our own lifestyles and begin to make choices that lessen our impact. There are several Christian-based initiatives that can help with all the practical issues this raises, including CAFOD's Live Simply (www.livesimply.org.uk) and A Rocha UK's Living Lightly (www.livinglightly24-1.org.uk).

Finally, Isaiah 58.10 leaves us on an encouraging note. If we pour ourselves into working for justice, if we spend ourselves on behalf of the hungry and satisfy the needs of the oppressed, then God promises that our light will rise in the darkness and our night will become like the noonday. Our relationships with the world's poor, our relationship with the earth and its resources, and our relationship with God are all deeply connected. Righteousness is all about right relationships. How we react to the poverty in today's world and to Climate Change are closely linked to our own welfare and to our relationship with God.

Resources

Poverty & Environment:

Christian Aid – Climate of Poverty report www.christianaid.org.uk

Tearfund – Dried Up, Drowned Out report www.tearfund.org

Lifestyle:

CAFOD www.livesimply.org

A Rocha UK www.livinglightly24-1.org.uk

Action Suggestions


- **Personal:** join CAFOD's *Live Simply* or A Rocha's *Living Lightly* initiatives (see websites)
- **Church & Community:** Research what local organisations are doing on Climate Change and see if your church can join in (e.g. Transition Towns, Friends of the Earth etc)
- **Political:** plan to take part in Stop Climate Chaos' December 5th March www.stopclimatechaos.org

Week 3: What about Wildlife?

20th September

Key passage: Genesis 9.1-17
And Matthew 10.28-30 if Gospel required



Photo: Supriya 'n' Subharghya 

On the edge of Bangalore – one of India's fastest growing cities – people are facing a big dilemma. As in many other places, rapid population growth and urbanisation have put a huge pressure on wildlife. Bangalore is now a global centre for high-tech industries. As the city has grown it has sprawled right up to the edge of a protected forest area – Bannerghatta National Park – where there are still populations of wild elephants. Human-elephant conflict has now become a huge issue – wild elephants leave the forest to raid crops or to follow migratory routes that are now disrupted by buildings and roads. Sometimes elephants get killed, and sometimes people get killed or their livelihoods destroyed. And that's what causes the dilemma: which should come first – people or wildlife?

Generally, Christians have sided with people – helping poor villagers whose lives and livelihoods are threatened, even if it is at the expense of wildlife-protection. After all, it's sometimes argued, doesn't God always support the poor? Yet perhaps that is not the whole biblical picture. After all, who made the elephants?

In Bangalore, one Christian organisation – A Rocha India (www.arocha.org) – has been wrestling with the dilemma of human-elephant conflict and trying to find ways of protecting both. If God cares about both poor people and the rest of his creation, surely we should too? A Rocha India has worked to research the extent of the problem – looking at where and when elephants are on the move and in what numbers. Perhaps this is the only occasion where counting piles of elephant dung has been an expression of Christian mission! Having learned the extent of the issue, A Rocha India has been working to find suitable methods of keeping people and elephants apart at key times of the year – such as when crops are coming to fruition.

In the experience of A Rocha India, the dilemma of whether people or planet should come first is a false one. God is creator and sustainer both of people and of wildlife. Surely God cares both for people and planet – for the human and the non-human – and we should too? We should seek wherever possible to find win-win solutions – ways that balance the needs of human beings and other species.

From the familiar biblical story of Noah, we can learn some important things to guide us today as we seek to tackle the big issues of Climate Change and environmental destruction without harming human well-being.

We're all in the same boat

Noah's Ark can be seen as a picture of planet earth today – a planet where all of us are squashed together, often competing for space and resources, yet also a planet where God has made enough for all if we recognise our interdependence. God has made a world where the welfare of each species is

dependent on the welfare of many other – where complex ecosystems interact. As 21st century human beings we sometimes deceive ourselves that we can make it on our own, but we can't. We are as dependent on healthy ecosystems as the smallest plant or insect ... or as the poorest subsistence farmer in a developing country.

To take one example, in recent years there has been a lot of publicity about rapid declines in honey-bee populations. The causes are complex and uncertain: in some parts of the world previously unknown viruses have killed 90%+ of bee populations, in other places it appears that neuro-toxin pesticides, or direct environmental pollution seem to be responsible. Whatever the causes – and to what extent human beings are directly responsible – we are now realising how closely our welfare is tied to the humble honey-bee. It is estimated that 70% of all crops are pollinated by bees, and in the unlikely but scary event that they became extinct, it is estimated that many ecosystems would collapse – and some people claim humanity would be threatened with extinction too. Whether or not that is scaremongering, it illustrates just how closely our welfare is tied to that of other parts of God's creation. Without bees there would certainly be no land flowing with milk and honey. In God's creation, all our relationships, within the whole of creation, are essential.

God cares about all his creatures!

In the story of Noah's Ark we see that God is equally interested in rescuing the human and the non-human from the threat of disaster. In fact the Ark is largely full of all the other species – with only very few human beings on board! God also makes it clear that the animals, birds and creeping things are not simply included for Noah's sake, but because they have value in their own right. They are to be included "to keep their various kinds alive throughout the earth" (Genesis 7.3). In other words the God who made every creature and who sustains all life on earth is committed to what today we would call 'biodiversity conservation'.

Moreover, when God sends the rainbow as a sign of his Covenant promise, it is a promise that includes more than Noah and his descendants. Time and again in Genesis 9, God repeats that his covenant is with 'every living creature on earth', with 'the earth' (v.13) and with 'all life on earth' (v.17). Somehow, our salvation theology as Christians has got too small. It has focussed largely on God's saving plans for me and people like me, and forgotten that God might have a bigger picture. Noah reminds us that God has plans that are far bigger than us. As St. Paul reminds us in Colossians 1, Jesus' saving work was "to reconcile to himself all things, whether things on earth or things in heaven, by making peace through his blood shed on the cross" (Colossians 1.20). 'All things' includes the non-human creation, reconciled - brought back into relationship - to God through Christ's saving work.

Human beings have a job to do

The final thing that Noah reminds us is of how we human beings fit into God's bigger plans for the whole creation. From God's perspective we are not simply one randomly evolved species amongst the millions of others. We have been set apart with a particular role and calling within creation. At the time of the great flood God had a plan to save people and other animals, and he could have implemented that plan by himself. However, he chose to use a human being – the creature made in his image – to fulfil his plans. Noah was the first great conservationist, but in another sense he was also the first great missionary. He was the first person God gave a specific calling and job description to – a mission to fulfil. Noah's mission was very specific – you and I are probably not called to build large wooden boats. Yet the wider picture - looking after God's creation – is something we are all called to. Back in Genesis 1 and

2, the creation accounts show God's very first words to human beings as a call to responsible leadership within creation. In 'The Message' version of Genesis 1.26-27 God says:

"Let us make human beings in our image,
make them reflecting our nature
So they can be responsible for the fish in the sea,
the birds in the air, the cattle,
and, yes, Earth itself,
and every animal that moves on the face of Earth."

This responsibility for creation's welfare is fundamental to who we are as human beings. It is not about having a 'dominion' that results in domination and exploitation. It is rather about reflecting God's image in how we exert our rule and responsibility for creation's well-being. Therefore we can truly say that wildlife conservation is an essential expression of Christian mission. The increasingly well-known and widely adopted 'Five Marks of Mission'⁹ explore how following Christ means a full engagement with all that God calls his people into his world to:

- To proclaim the Good News of the Kingdom
- To teach, baptise and nurture new believers
- To respond to human need by loving service
- To seek to transform unjust structures of society
- To strive to safeguard the integrity of creation and sustain and renew the life of the earth

Therefore, to return to where we started, as Christians we must resist the pressure to choose between helping people and helping wildlife. Seeking God's Kingdom on earth as it is in heaven means holding to a vision of all creation working together harmoniously. We must seek lifestyles and policies that both help the world's poor and also protect biodiversity, and resist pressures to drive a wedge between these goals.

Resources

- Planetwise Pack (DVD & CD-Rom bible studies, sermon outlines etc) available from www.arocha.org.uk/planetwise
- 21M – Church Mission Society DVD on the Five Marks of Mission, available from www.cms-uk.org/21M
- Future Shape – DVD resource produced by Baptist Union, BMS World Mission, A Rocha - www.bmsworldmission.org/futureshape (also available in Welsh)

Action Suggestions

- **Personal:** Visit a local nature reserve or park and reflect on God's care for creation and the interdependence of God's creation
- **Church & Community:** Could your Church be involved in a local conservation project (churchyard, school, in partnership with local group)? A Rocha UK (uk@arocha.org) helps churches with this.
- **Political:** Deforestation is devastating for biodiversity and a major cause of Climate Change. Ask your MP what their party is doing to tackle deforestation – especially regarding Palm Oil and biofuel production.

⁹ <http://www.anglicancommunion.org/ministry/mission/fivemarks.cfm>

Week 4: For Generations to Come

27th September

Key passage: Proverbs 13
Gospel: Matthew 18.1-6



Photo: shortie66 

In Proverbs 13.22 we read, “A good man leaves an inheritance for his children's children, but a sinner's wealth is stored up for the righteous.” The big question for us is: what kind of inheritance are we leaving for the children of today and for their children?

Earlier this year, in his Ebor Lecture in York, Archbishop Rowan Williams stated that: “Ecological questions are increasingly being defined as issues of justice ... both to those who now have no part in decision-making at the global level yet bear the heaviest burdens as a consequence of the irresponsibility of wealthier nations, *and to those who will succeed us on this planet – justice to our children and grandchildren.*”¹⁰ In other words, what we are doing to the planet now is not only hurting poor people and other species today; it is storing up unthinkable problems for future generations – and this is a real issue of inter-generational justice.

As we approach Harvest time, we do well to think of the seeds that our actions, our lifestyles, and our political choices today are sowing, and what kind of Harvest future generations are likely to reap as a result. The projected statistics of a world affected by human-induced Climate Change are truly terrifying:

- According to the World Health Organisation we are likely to see by 2030 an additional 300,000 people a year dying as a result of the famines, crop failures, floods and other disasters caused by a changing Climate.
- The UN High Commission on Refugees predicts at least 200 million environmental refugees by 2050. This only includes trans-border migrants, and does not include the millions of internally-displaced people as large low-lying and desertified areas of the world become simply unliveable.
- The IUCN – the World Conservation Union – has suggested up to a million species of wildlife could be extinct by 2050.
- Perhaps most terrifying of all, the current Chair of the Inter-Governmental Panel on Climate Change, Rajendra Pachauri, talks of “abrupt & irreversible” Climate Change, and adds, “If there's no action before 2012, that's too late. What we do in the next two to three years will determine our future. This is the defining moment”.

¹⁰ Bishop Rowan Williams, Ebor Lectures on Theology & Public Life, Renewing the Face of the Earth: Human Responsibility and the Environment, York Minster, March 25th 2009

In a letter to London clergy in October 2008, the Bishop of London, stated: "It is becoming clearer how far we have been mortgaging our children's tomorrow to fund our today, both financially and in our use of the finite resources of the earth." Our consumer-driven lifestyles and our choices based on greed do not take place in a vacuum. They all have an effect on the children of tomorrow – children to whom we have a responsibility.

In the Gospels, Jesus is very clear about the welcome God reserves for children. Jesus says "Whoever welcomes a little child like this welcomes me" (Matthew 18.5). However, he also goes on to warn that anybody who causes a child to sin or to stumble would be better off throwing themselves into the sea with a large millstone hung around their neck. The past fifty years have seen a race for ever-increasing wealth without giving heed to diminishing resources and disappearing beauty. As a result we are leaving many stumbling blocks for the children of tomorrow – the stumbling blocks of financial instability, social confusion and environmental depletion (see Week 1 sermon). We are leaving as an inheritance a world that is impoverished, unstable and dangerous.

Yet this isn't the end of the story. All the predictions about the likely effects of Climate Change come with a caveat – it's not too late to change things, yet. There is still a window of opportunity, albeit one that is closing with each successive year. All is not lost, yet. Of course, even if we do make massive changes now we will not prevent some of the terrible climatic effects we have unleashed. There is a time-lag between reducing emissions and improvement in the climate – after all, the tanker we are trying to turn round is the size of a planet.

We began with Proverbs 13.22, "A good man leaves an inheritance for his children's children, but a sinner's wealth is stored up for the righteous." We have looked at the damaging inheritance that we are in grave danger of leaving for our descendants. However, earlier in the same chapter – in verse 12 – we read something else: "Hope deferred makes the heart sick, but a longing fulfilled is a tree of life." Today we are living in a time of deferred hope – a time of necessary anxiety and heart-sickness about the future for our children's children. Yet Christian hope is more than blind optimism, and the second half of that proverb – 'a longing fulfilled is a tree of life' – could perhaps serve as a motto for our future. We believe in a God who is committed to creation – who is the Creator, Sustainer and Saviour of all things, who longs to set creation free from its bondage to decay (to quote St Paul in Romans 8). Whilst we are right to be in mourning for what we have already set in motion for our children and our children's children, we are not without hope for tomorrow. Now is a time for prayer and action.

Now is also a time for clear vision of the kind of world we want for future generations. The bible gives us just such a prophetic vision. At a time of disaster and threat for God's people in the Old Testament, God spoke through his prophets to give a vision of a time beyond disaster, a time of renewal for people in their relationships with God and with each other, and a time for renewal within the whole created order. Hosea 2.18-23 contains just such a vision:

"In that day I will make a covenant for them
with the beasts of the field and the birds of the air and the creatures that move along the ground.
Bow and sword and battle I will abolish from the land, so that all may lie down in safety.
I will betroth you to me forever;
I will betroth you in righteousness and justice, in love and compassion.
I will betroth you in faithfulness, and you will acknowledge the Lord.

"In that day I will respond," declares the Lord
"I will respond to the skies, and they will respond to the earth;
and the earth will respond to the grain, the new wine and oil, and they will respond to Jezreel.
I will plant her for myself in the land;
I will show my love to the one I called 'Not my loved one.'
I will say to those called 'Not my people, ' 'You are my people';
and they will say, 'You are my God.' "

Notice how God's covenant – his saving promise – includes the beasts, the birds and the other creatures – just as at the time of Noah. His covenant includes the skies and the earth responding to God's justice, love and compassion. It is an all-encompassing covenant with the whole of creation. It also includes an end to the fear and destruction of war – bow, sword and battle abolished. Underlying all of this is a renewal of God's relationship with his people – a relationship that in Hosea is compared to the intimacy of marriage.

Here is an all-embracing vision for the future to inspire us and to guide us in our prayer and action. God is committed to his people, and God is committed to his creation. As we think about generations still to come – about our and our friends' children's children – we should certainly repent of the ugly inheritance of pollution, destruction and climate instability that we have stored up for them. But we should also pray and act in hope, and be inspired by a vision of creation's healing, of God's redemptive plans for people and planet, and of renewal and restoration beyond the coming storms.

Action Suggestions

- **Personal:** Make a list, or look at pictures of your children, grandchildren, nieces, nephews, or children within your church. Pray for each of them, imagining the world they are growing up in, and recommitting yourself to acting for a vision of a better world.
- **Church & Community:** Martin Luther is reputed to have said "If I knew Christ was to return tomorrow, I would still plant a tree today." Planting trees can be a sign of hope for future generations – an investment that will produce fruit in decades to come. Could your church help coordinate either a local tree-planting project or support reforestation in parts of the world that have suffered recent catastrophic deforestation? Climate Stewards (www.climatestewards.net) is a Christian organisation that can help with this, or you may be able to use your church's existing Mission links.
- **Political:** If you haven't already, why not plan to take part in Stop Climate Chaos' December 5th March www.stopclimatechaos.org? It might be that local churches could coordinate transport.

Week 5: A Harvest of Hopeful Action

4th October

Key passage: Genesis 41.28-57

Gospel: Luke 13.18-21



Photo: DWinton

The whole story of Joseph provides useful background to this Harvest talk (which can be used as part of a series or as a stand-alone talk). It would be especially good if the story could be dramatised or at least presented as a dramatic reading (with narrators and characters reading the parts).

Most Harvest services are all-age, often with children bringing forwards gifts, so this sermon has been written assuming an all-age congregation. It will work best where there is inter-action and children are given questions to answer.

An Ordinary Joe?

What do you know about Joseph? Try and solicit answers from children (and others if necessary!). Some will know the story better from 'Joseph & the Amazing Technicolour Dreamcoat' than from the Bible. You could use the 10 bold headings below written on large pieces of card, and get children to arrange them in the correct order on a board to retell the story.

- **Daddy's boy** – favourite of 12, with special coat
- **Dreamer** – had strange dreams and able to interpret dreams
- **Bullied** – picked on by brothers
- **Sold** – taken as a slave to Egypt
- **Bounced back** – became trusted servant to wealthy Potiphar
- **Betrayed** – falsely accused by Potiphar's wife
- **Imprisoned** – spent years in a smelly Ancient Egyptian prison
- **Picked from prison** – asked to interpret Pharaoh's dreams
- **Promoted** – became the 2nd most important person in Egypt
- **Hero** – rescued Egypt and other nations from terrible famine

Retell the Story

Tell the story of Genesis 41ff in a lively (and ideally illustrated) way, emphasising the following key points:

- Pharaoh had two dreams, one about 7 thin cows eating 7 fat cows, and one about 7 dried up skinny heads of grain swallowing 7 healthy heads of grain. What could they mean?
- Pharaoh asked all the wise people in Egypt but nobody could help. Then Pharaoh's cup-bearer remembered that Joseph, who was in prison, could interpret dreams
- Joseph was called, and explained that the dreams were both about 7 years with good harvests and plenty of food being followed by 7 years of famine and shortage ... and that they were a warning from God.

- Joseph told Pharaoh he needed to choose a wise person to look after the land of Egypt, and to save as much grain as possible during the good years, so that people would be OK in the bad years that would follow.
- Pharaoh chose Joseph to be 2nd in command of all Egypt.
- Joseph looked after Egypt and saved up so much grain in the good years that it was more than anybody could count.
- When the bad years came, there was plenty of grain for everybody in Egypt, and enough to sell to other countries around as well – even to Joseph’s brothers who had sold him as a slave many years before.

What can we learn from Joseph?

Put up a picture of Planet Earth. Today we live in a world with many environmental problems – ask for ideas as to what some of these are (e.g. Climate Change, pollution, deforestation, wildlife dying, dangerous chemicals).

We have had many ‘good years’ – like in Egypt – years where people (at least in some countries) got richer and the shops had more and more things to buy.

Now we are having a much harder time. Everybody will have heard of the ‘credit crunch’ – it’s not a new cereal bar but a time when many people have lost a lot of money. We have also been using up the planet’s resources more quickly than we should. However it’s not too late to save the planet. Perhaps we can learn some lessons from Joseph and how he helped save the people of Egypt ...

1. **We can’t make it on our own** (or as U2 would say ‘Sometimes you can’t make it on your own’) Lots of people are working really hard to try and save the planet today. Plenty of other people are carrying on as if there’s nothing wrong ... as if we can spend and consume as much as we like. Both are wrong. When Pharaoh asked Joseph to interpret his dreams, Joseph replied: **“I cannot do it, but God will give the answer”** (Genesis 41.16). As we face huge challenges today – especially in tackling Climate Change - that should be our attitude. We can’t do it, but God can and together we need to act on what he says.
2. **Enough is enough – God’s creation has limits!** Already in some parts of the world fresh water is running out. Oil and gas may be reaching their peak. Forests are being cut down. When times are good and we have plenty, that doesn’t mean we should still keep trying to get more and more. That’s the mistake that was made by some Banks. When times are good, we should save for a rainy day, or gamble to try and get more. Joseph said to Pharaoh: **“This food should be held in reserve for the country, to be used during the seven years of famine that will come upon Egypt, so that the country may not be ruined by the famine.”** (Genesis 41.36). Today, we need to work within the limits of God’s creation. We need to show restraint in how much we eat, how much we buy, and especially in how much we pollute. God’s creation has limits.
3. **Have a global picture** – When times are tough people often become more selfish – only looking after their own family, or own country. Joseph made sure that Egypt had not only enough grain for itself but we also read, **“All the countries came to Egypt to buy grain from Joseph, because the famine was severe in all the world.”** In other words, Joseph showed international responsibility. Today we in Britain are not suffering yet from Climate Change in the way that many countries are. In some parts of the world people have no food in their shops or their fields and no water to drink – whilst we have plenty. We have a responsibility to help the parts of the

world that are more affected by Climate Change – especially as our pollution and our greedy lifestyles have caused so many of the problems.

4. **See God’s hand and give God the glory** – The famine Joseph faced was a global disaster, but there was a personal story at the heart of it. The famine made Joseph’s brothers – who had sold him all those years before – come to Egypt to buy grain and... to cut a long story short ... they and Joseph became friends again. The brothers were deeply upset for what they had done, but Joseph’s attitude was different. He said: **“Do not be distressed and do not be angry with yourselves for selling me here, because it was to save lives that God sent me ahead of you”** (Genesis 45.5). In the mess that we are in today, with a planet in peril, it would be easy to beat ourselves up by feeling guilty ... and not actually do anything. Yes, we have been selfish, and made mistakes, but God can use this situation. It may be that God is calling some of us here to be like Joseph, to take leadership in helping the people and wildlife that are threatened by Climate Change.

In some ways, Joseph was rather special – a boy with a wonderful coat who became the man that saved Egypt. In another way he was just like all of us – an ordinary Joe – somebody for whom life brought all kinds of ups and downs. We may not have such an amazing life story, but each of us can be like Joseph in:

- recognising we can’t make it on our own – we need God’s help
- living within creation’s limits – being satisfied with enough instead of always wanting more
- having a global picture and making sure we help the world’s poorest and most vulnerable
- seeking God’s hand in all that is taking place and giving him the glory. At this Harvest time we should be grateful to God for all that we have and also recommit ourselves to living wisely and more simply in his beautiful and bountiful creation.

Action Suggestions

- **Personal:** Aim to grow something for next year’s Harvest – whether in a window box, a cottage garden or an urban allotment. Use the experience of clearing, sowing, weeding, watering and nurturing as a spiritual journey too.
- **Church & Community:** Have a Church Harvest meal: ethically sourced, using local or Fairtrade produce. If possible include people from the local community – maybe inviting those who are working or campaigning for the environment. Strike a balance between celebrating God’s generosity overflowing in creation, and remembering and sharing with those who have no Harvest this year.
- **Political:** As this is an all-age Harvest service, why not invite local political leaders to your Harvest supper and include a presentation of your concerns about climate change, poverty and the environment? It would be excellent if children’s pictures / letters / poems / short dramas could be included in this presentation.

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Dried mud texture: Ioan Sameli 