

THE ENVIRONMENT

Julia Denny-Dimitriou - 7th September 2003

Genesis 1:1-25; Psalm 104:25-36; Acts 2:42-47; John 1:1-14

The topic of the environment is a source of so much bad news. It is a regular cause for anxiety, potential guilt and shame.

Without denying reality and the validity of all that, I want to try and take a more positive approach since we are doing something constructive today by planting trees.

I want to do two things: to encourage everyone and anyone who does anything out of concern for the environment. I also want to remind us that caring for the environment is theologically sound, an activity deeply rooted in our faith. Comment briefly on today's OT and Gospel lessons.

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First to encouragement: I am encouraged by the many people who are only too aware of the environmental crisis and do try to make an effort in this regard. People do all kinds of things – recycle as much of their waste as they can; try to use environmentally-friendly products; devote time to clearing alien vegetation from waterways; try to reduce the use of toxic chemicals in the home; give financial support to environmental organisations; try to garden with minimal use of garden chemicals; members of organisations like Wildlife Society, Crane Foundation or Conservancy groups; try to teach their children and grandchildren not to litter; some try to live simply by using as few of earth's non-renewable resources as possible.

I want to encourage us in all these and other efforts, I say well done, keep it up, perhaps try even harder. If you not doing anything, I want to encourage us to consider one activity that would contribute to leaving something of the earth we know and enjoy for our great grandchildren.

I want to encourage this activity because it matters. We all know it matters from the media coverage of the parlous state of the planet. It also matters because God cares about the earth and God cares about what we do with and to the earth.

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One of catchphrases of Johannesburg is "Think theologically" always encouraging people to reflect on the God dimension of any matter. I want to think theologically about the environment and remind us briefly of two elements of the God dimension of the need to care for the earth.

OT lesson so well known one of ones in which we switch off to think about household chores like whose turn it is to wash the dog today! It forms a prologue to the book of Genesis which sets out who God is and how God relates to the world. It gives us a key to the interpretation of Genesis and indeed to the whole of the Bible. God is, as we

recite Sunday by Sunday in the Nicene creed, “the Almighty, maker of heaven and earth, of all that is seen and unseen.”

The prologue is carefully arranged - 10 divine commands result in eight acts of creation spread over six days, with days 1 – 3 corresponding to days 4 – 6. The climax occurs on day six with the creation of humanity, the crowning feat of creativity. We are “a little lower than the angels”, God’s representatives on earth and its caregivers, to use current terminology. We are supposed to be stewards of creation.

In addition to our understanding of God and God in relation to the world, this Genesis narrative also sets out a pattern for our understanding of individual and group identity. The OT has a strong recognition of the fourfold web of relationships that constitute an individual and a community: a relationship with God, with self, with others and with the earth. Scripture thus presents a model of personal and corporate identity as inextricably tied up with the earth. Whether as nomads at the beginning or as settled pastoralists later, the people of God recognised their dependence on the earth, and ultimately on God, for their means of survival.

To be blessed by God was to enjoy peace and prosperity in all areas of life. Ideas of ‘the good life’ embraced harmony in all relationships – with God, self, others and the earth. The earth was so closely woven into the corporate identity of Jews that to abuse or misuse it was, in a sense, to commit corporate suicide. Which is pretty much what contemporary humanity is doing by exploiting the earth.

So, the OT lesson reminds us not only that we ought to care for the environment because God created it, but also because it is a part of who we are, individually and corporately.

[A comment in passing – the architects of Grand Apartheid failed to understand the importance of earth in human identity, especially the identity of indigenous peoples, the policy of forced land removals could not work. The work of the Land Claims Court, and the land restitution process therefore cannot be underestimated, and deserves our support.]

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Today’s Gospel lesson has a similarly mind-concentrating reminder. It offers us another insight into why the earth is important and why we should be concerned about it. These wonderfully lyrical words with which the Gospel of John opens, echo the first words of the Bible we heard in the OT lesson. Probably deliberate on the part of the writer as he is writing about a new creation and a new beginning, so he uses words that recall the first creation. I want to focus on verse 14, “The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the One and Only, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth.”

This expresses one of the deep mysteries of our belief system, one of its essential principles, one which sets it apart from all other major religions, and that is the doctrine of the **incarnation**. The term comes from the Latin *in carne* meaning ‘*in flesh*’. This is, as one commentary puts it “the astonishing fact that the Word of God,

correlation between the way society treats the body of Mother earth and the bodies of women/children – exploitation, abuse, degradation etc etc etc

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I conclude with a note on a subject about which much being written and said – post-modernism. A great deal of important debate about how Church will respond to its newly post-modern context, what Christianity will be like in 40, 50 years' time. Some people are wondering if it will even exist in 50 years' time. I want to leave you with a quotation from a book on this topic that is being widely read and discussed. *A New kind of Christian*. It presents an interesting and hopeful perspective on the importance of the environment, our role as care-givers to earth:

“Modern men and women have lost their connection with creation. We’re always insulated from it by shoe leather, ... glass, metal, plastic... and screens of many kinds! Some of the things I miss most are (my change) the joy of living with open windows ... with spiders building their webs, lizards darting across your path, getting wet when it rains. These are gifts from God, and I can’t help but believe our souls are starved for the company of God’s creatures.

“If I could live another life, I ... would devote it to ecology, because I believe that this is a truly spiritual and Christian work. Genesis begins with our mandate to take care of God’s creation, and never has our failure to do so been more acute than now. Learning to live as caretakers of creation and friends to our fellow creatures must be at the core of a new kind of Christianity.” “A new kind of Christian” pg 119.

Amen