

**Worthy Stewards of the Environment**  
The Rev. Prof. Ron Nicolson  
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Look at the birds of the air; they neither sow nor reap .. Yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Why are you anxious about clothing; consider the lilies of the field who neither toil nor spin.

I have tried suggesting that text to my wife. "Do we need to buy a new dress?", I ask. "Will the Good Lord not clothe us, as he promised, to make you even more beautiful than the lily."

Actually that's not fair and I just said it for effect. It's very hard to get a woman to buy a new dress, I find, because nothing in the shops ever fits. Everything is made for little Chinese ladies size 18aaa. But it's nevertheless of no use to rely on the Lord. He may clothe the lilies but he expects us to do our best to clothe ourselves at Miladys and Truworths.

I find it's of no use relying on the Lord to feed the birds either, or at least the birds don't think so. Instead of waiting on the Lord they let me know, if I am late to fill the bird table, that time's a'wasting. The wagtail taps at the window, the toppie squawks for his apple. Actually, come to think of it, the good Lord pretty much relies on me to clothe the lilies too, or at least to water them and if I don't their beauty soon fades.

And of course that's the point! The Good Lord relies on us. He gives us the potential wherewithal and expects us to take responsibility. We're into a month of Stewardship sermons in October, and today we're talking about stewardship of the environment.

And that's very fashionable right now. We're all into ecology. We've all seen Al Gore. We all know about global warming. The good Lord doesn't take care of the environment; he expects us to do that. And we haven't been very good at it.

Well, that's not my fault, we might say. I haven't cut down any amazonian rainforests. I don't have a factory belching smoke into the sky. But there's our cars. We shouldn't drive them because of carbon emission. And there's electricity - we might not own smoke belching factories but we use electricity via Eskom. Coal fired electricity is bad, nuclear powered electricity is worse - so try not to use electricity at all and just dry your hair by blowing on it in the sun! Or deodorant - every time you spray it you mess up the ozone layer. Or plastic shopping bags because we forgot the cloth one at home. Or little paper wrappings around the sugar when we could just ask for a sugar bowl. Or paper - you shouldn't buy the Sunday Times, 2/3rds of which you never read anyway. You'll probably throw away a whole tree's worth today. It's all very difficult, isn't it, and very tedious and all very inconvenient.

Why has it all gone wrong? The general theory is that its science, and

technology, and greed and commercialization and our desire for ease and convenience. Should we all go back to simpler lives with less consumption, less technology, less consumption? Cook by solar power? Ride a horse rather than drive a motor car?

But way back in 1967 a man called Lynn White, in a journal called "*Science*", said something very different. Now I don't know if you know - scientists among you certainly will - that to get a paper published in *Science* is a kind of life achievement. Its equivalent to discovering that  $E=MC^2$ . And Lynn White wasn't even a scientist. He was a scholar of medieval history. So what did he have to say that was so important? He said, its not better technology that we need, but better religion.

The article was called "The historical roots of our ecologic crisis". The historical roots of our "ecologic crisis" are not science or technology, he said, but religion,. And specifically Christianity. Yes, it is the marriage of science and technology over the past 400 years that has brought ecological disaster to a head, but it is Christianity, especially the Western form of Christianity, that prepared the ground for that marriage.

Christianity, he said, is the most anthropocentric religion in the world. It teaches us that man - I use the masculine word deliberately - is the centre of things. The universe was created for man. It teaches us that Man was told to be fruitful and multiply. And it's all these in the Old Testament lesson for today. "Fill the earth and subdue it; and have dominion over the fish and the birds and every living thing." So that's what we've done. We've filled the earth and dominated it. And now our earth is dying.

It's a kind of macho masculine attitude to life. Its about domination, not partnership. It's about control, not sensitivity. Its about arrogance. And on the basis of these attitudes, says White, Christians have assumed that the world is ours to master, to manipulate, to exploit for our benefit. Yes, science and technology have done it. But Christianity caused that mindset.

Well, you say, that's a bit unfair, really. These are just human failings; everybody has them. We all want to be the centre, we all want to control, we all want to dominate. It's not just Christian, it's human. And that may be true. But we can't deny that these attitudes are supported and encouraged by some traditional Christian teachings.

Of course that's not the whole of Christian teaching. White acknowledges that, and he remains a devout Christian still. That's really his point. There are other scriptural and Christian traditions which are much more hospitable to the environment. White points to St Francis and his teachings about sister moon, brother wind, mother earth, the idea that the whole universe is a sort of interdependent family unit. I can point you to today's psalm: "The earth is the Lords and all that is therein", or to so many of Jesus' parables with the theme that we are the stewards, the caretakers, caring for the farm or the business or the investments - Jesus uses all of these examples - on behalf of the master, the owner, the Lord who is God.

Or I can point you to today's epistle. It's not an easy passage in this letter from Paul to the Romans. "The creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the children of God; for the creation was subjected to futility not of its own will but by the will of him who subjected it - **in the hope for the day when creation will be set free from its bondage to decay and obtain the glorious liberty of the children of God.**" Not easy, but quite marvellous. Paul says exactly what needs to be said. God entrusted the universe to us. God knew the risk. It's like a father passing on a beautiful farm, so carefully planned, huge potential, but huge risk, for sons are rebellious and sons are headstrong and sons always think they know best so in all likelihood there will be some disasters. So Paul says, "creation was subjected to futility" by God's will! God took the risk of entrusting it to us. That was his will. But he did so in the hope that eventually we would learn how to nurture and care for and work with creation. And as the children of God recover from their bondage, their slavery to sin and selfishness and become truly the children of God and not rebels against God, so creation, which is now groaning in travail itself, will be set free along with a redeemed humankind.

What's the answer to the ecologic crisis, asks White. Better science? Cleverer technology? Genetic engineering enabling crops to grow in hotter and drier conditions? Seeding the clouds with silver iodide? Running our cars on water rather than petrol? Well, yes, says White, but actually its attitudes rather than techniques which need to be changed first. And to change attitudes we depend upon religion. Religion, a true understanding of religion, and here in Western culture a true understanding of Christian religion with regard to environmental issues, is the answer.

So what about us? We're just little folk. We can't change the world. We don't influence national policies. We don't control global technology. We can't nurture creation like Paul said?

Can't we? We manage our household. We manage our garden. We can nurture at least our little patch of creation. Stewardship month is important. It's a chance for us to get our minds right. And if we get our minds right we may, we just may, help a few others to get their minds right. Here's your little piece of the Universe. And mine. We don't own it, we look after it for God. Do I manage it with that in mind? And I don't just mean your garden and your veggie bed, but the impact that I and my family have on the wider ecology around us. Lynda Wyngaard, who prepared the outlines for us of this Diocesan Stewardship month, asks Have you been wasteful or careless in the use of the material goods entrusted to you?

Do you make an effort to recycle or re-use these materials wherever possible?

- Do you allow concern for the environment to influence your purchasing decisions and do you bother to educate yourself in these matters?

- Is there a step you could take to reduce the impact you have on the environment?
- Do you understand that stewardship of the earth and its creatures is a way of honouring the Creator and lead to a greater respect for our fellow human beings?

WHAT WILL YOU CHANGE, TO MAKE SURE YOU BECOME A MORE WORTHY STEWARD OF THE ENVIRONMENT?