

The Bible and the Environment

Why do denominational leaders believe the environment is of particular importance to Christian belief and practice? For example Roman Catholics are instructed to undergo an 'environmental conversion'. While Anglicans around the world have as one of their five key tasks: *"To strive to safeguard the integrity of creation and sustain and renew the life of the earth."*

I thought today we might look at a few things the Bible has to say about the issue – Why do the churches see it as so critical to a truly Christian life? What are some of the principles in scripture that can guide our Christian relationship to Creation?

Firstly then, what is our context?

In Psalm 24:1 we read: *"The earth is the Lord's and all that is in it, the world and all its inhabitants."* And there are similar statements elsewhere.

This is a foundational concept: The earth is the Lord's: the earth does not belong to human beings, no matter who they are, be they individuals, companies, governments, or international agencies. We do not 'own' our properties. Farmers do not 'own' their farms, miners do not 'own' their mines, government agencies; for example National Parks rangers or State forestry foresters, do not own their areas, Greenpeace or the UN do not own the planet: *The earth is the Lord's*.

We see the same idea but expressed differently in 1 Chronicles 29. Here we read how God would not allow David to build the temple. So, being David, he set up the resources needed for Solomon to build it when he became king by organising all the necessary materials. The chapter lists the resources collected. It was a capital fund drive – very successful and oversubscribed by the people; so much so that David had to call a halt on the collecting.

David does not then stand up in front of his major donors as we would do (to soften them up for next time) to thank everybody for their generous donations. What he does is stand up, and he prays: *All things come from thee, and of thine own have we given thee....* What would major donors think if they were reminded it wasn't their goods that they were giving for some good purpose, but that God was the ultimate owner?

So the first thing we always need to remember is that all we are and all that we have fundamentally belong to God.

To move on: If the earth is the Lord's, what was his intent in creation?

In Genesis 1: 20-22 we read: *"God said, 'Let the waters bring forth swarms of living creatures ...' God created the great sea monsters, and all the living creatures of every kind that creep, which the waters brought forth in swarms ,,, And God saw that this was good. God blessed them saying, 'be fertile and increase'."*

From the perspective of the authors of the Hebrew Bible, there are two points to make. Firstly, creation has a purpose. It is to develop and support life. Not a little bit, but swarms of living creatures. Creation was intended to provide an abundance of life – at the present time perhaps 8 million species. Jesus also said he came to support an abundance of life. Not a little bit, or a moderate amount, but an abundance. Further in the Genesis passage (Gen 1:30) we read: *“And it was so and God saw all that He had made, and found it very good.”* All that He made - not just humans but the whole of creation – a powerful affirmation. He loved every stage and aspect of earth history.

The second point from these passages is the word ‘good’. This does not mean ‘nice’ or ‘comfortable’. The Hebrew actually means something like ‘fit for purpose’, or ‘suitable’, or ‘proper’.

Thus the passage actually means: ‘God saw that the whole of creation was fit for the purposes he intended’. And that purpose was ‘to bring forth an abundance of life’.

So God had intent in creation, and as a consequence, we must ask ourselves; what is our intended place in a universe that was made ‘fit for purpose’. What is our role? How should we act in response to God’s creative action?

Other passages can help us answer this question.

Firstly we need to recognise our true place. And for this we can start with Job challenging God in Job chapters 38 and 39. He rips into God about the terrible situation he finds himself in. He is angry because he knows he has done nothing to warrant such appalling treatment. He demands answers as a right. God listens to him and then responds: *“... the Lord answered Job out of the whirlwind: ... Gird up your loins like a man, I will question you, and you shall declare to me: Where were you when I laid the foundations of the earth?”* Job’s final response is to recognise what he is – not a free agent who can do what he wants, independent and self-centred, but a creature standing before its creator. *“... Then Job answered the Lord: ...See I am of small account: what shall I answer you? I lay my hand on my mouth, I have spoken once, and I will not answer twice.”* The hand action was the legal way at the time of saying I have nothing more to add in a court case.

Job realises he only exists because of He who has made and sustains a universe that is utterly beyond Job’s comprehension and power. His final response when he recognises this is to bow in awe and humility before his Lord.

What is our response to such a God? Are we like Job was in the beginning? or at the end? Do we recognise that our very existence is entirely dependent on God? Do we accept this and live accordingly? As individuals, are we in awe and humility our response to God? Is worship central to all aspects of our lives?

A second dimension of who we are is that we are part of a worshipping community. For example in Psalm 148: 6-11 we read:

*Praise the Lord from the earth,
Fire and hail, snow and frost, stormy wind!
Mountains and hills, fruit trees and cedars!
Wild animals and cattle,
Creeping things and flying birds!
Young men and women alike, old and young together!*

*Let them praise the name of the Lord,
For his name alone is exalted:
His glory is above earth and heaven.*

The choir of creation consists of *all* of creation, not just humans. It was *all* living things that God saw as good – not just us. A key concept of the Eucharistic liturgy of the early church and so of the Orthodox Church today is that we are called to be the voice of the whole of creation in worship: What a wonderful role we have been given – not just to worship ourselves, but to speak in adoration and awe to the Creator on behalf of the whole of creation that was made ‘fit for this purpose’. Here is humanity’s true place in creation.

However as creation is despoiled, so is its capacity to worship and so the worship is diminished. Given our role in this despoliation, I wonder how we will answer when we stand before the judgement seat? How do we offer full and true worship now?

Finally, as creatures with the understanding and power that we have: how are we intended to act?

Again we can find aspects of this in the first chapters of Genesis. In 2:15 we read: “*The Lord God took the human creature and placed him in the Garden of Eden to till it and to tend it.*” Till and tend – what connotations would these words have had to Hebrew readers? ‘Till’ is translated elsewhere as ‘serve’ or ‘protect’; for example in Joshua 24 ‘as for me and my house we will *serve* the Lord’. ‘Tend’ is translated elsewhere as ‘keep’ or ‘look after’: Aaron says ‘may the Lord bless you and *keep* you’, for example. So the passage more clearly could be translated as: “*The Lord God took the human creature and placed him in the Garden of Eden to protect and to look after it.*’ This has very different connotations doesn’t it? We now find it is a relational interaction. Could we see the way we presently treat the earth as a relational interaction? As protecting and looking after creation?

This brings me to the last Old Testament passage I have time for today: the dreaded dominion passage. In Genesis 1:28 we read: “*Be fruitful and multiply ... and have dominion over ... every living thing that moves on the earth*”. The word translated ‘*have dominion over*’ has the sense of : ‘has responsibility for’. The sense is of a steward having dominion over the household, that is, a delegated authority with

associated responsibilities. But one day the Lord of the steward will come and demand an accounting of his stewardship, as Jesus constantly warns.

So then we have: *Be fruitful and multiply ... and have responsibility for ... every living thing that moves on the earth.*

We have been given great power in creation – but is this the right of selfish exploitation, or the responsibilities of managing a relational interaction and of acting as the voice of a vibrant and entire creation in worship?

So we must ask ourselves how should we, and are we, using the ever-increasing power that we have over nature?

To finish I would like to touch very briefly on three well-known New Testament sentences on the place of Christ in creation.

In John 3:16 we read: *“For God so loved the world that He gave his only-begotten son ...”* Now the Greek word translated as ‘world’ here is ‘kosmos’ and this means the entire universe, not just our bit of it. So it actually reads: *“For God so loved the whole universe that He gave his only-begotten son ...”* The renewal of creation at the end of time is of the whole of creation - not just a little playpen for us.

In John 1:14 we read: *“And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us”*. Now there are two words for flesh in Greek. ‘Anthropos’ means human flesh; ‘sarx’ means flesh of any and all living creatures. The word used in the passage is ‘sarx’. Christ’s identity is not just with humans but with the entire created order.

In Colossians 1:15-20 we read. *“Through him God was pleased to reconcile to himself all things ...”* God’s salvation is not just for humans but is cosmic (kosmos) in scope. All creation is to be reconciled, not just humanity. So, *“the Word became part of the universe and dwelt amongst us”*.

As followers of Christ then, we are called to follow his example using what we are taught in scripture as a basis. As God’s stewards of the earth, we are to work to reconcile all things; we are to work to protect and to look after the earth; we are called to be the voice of all creation in worship.

I will let Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew of the Orthodox Church have the last say: *“We are treating our planet in an inhuman, godless manner precisely because we fail to see it as a gift inherited from above. Our original sin with regard to the natural environment lies in our refusal to accept the world as a sacrament of communion, as a way of sharing with God and neighbour on a global scale. It is our humble conviction that divine and human meet in the slightest detail contained in the seamless garment of God’s creation, in the last speck of dust.”*