

The 6<sup>th</sup> century missionary monk, St Columbanus wrote

“If you wish to understand the Creator then first understand his creation”

Members of the monastic tradition founded by St Columbanus continue to raise interest in issues of ecology, climate justice and our care for the world within the Catholic church today.

This is the first of three occasional sermons which will engage with environmental issues through a Christian perspective.

Others will follow at Harvest and in the New Year. We will be taking as our starting point three elements – water, earth and air –thinking about issues such as pollution and biodiversity; fair resourcing and environmental justice; climate change and human legacy.

The Church of England’s environmental campaign is called “Shrinking the Footprint” and we are a little ahead of the C of E’s intention to recognise the month of September as a season for creation – but, as they say, the early bird catches the worm! (and, by the way, worms are really important in the world of biodiversity)

Here are some water related facts:

Only 3% of the world's oceans were described as free from human pressure in 2014.

Fish are being exploited as never before, with 33% of fish stocks harvested at unsustainable levels in 2015

Live coral cover on reefs has nearly halved over the past 150 years.

According to the United Nations, ingestion of plastic kills an estimated 1 million marine birds and 100,000 marine animals each year.

In addition, more than 90%of all birds and fish are believed to have plastic particles in their stomach. It’s because plastic breaks up into tiny pieces in the sea, which are then consumed by fish and other sea animals.

Research from Plymouth University has found that close to 700 species of marine life are facing extinction due to the increase of plastic pollution.

Did you know that the average time that a plastic bag is used for is ... 12 minutes.

12 minutes, ...but then it takes up to a thousand years to decompose.

Even if you didn’t watch that Blue Planet episode back in January 2018, you will be aware of how it highlighted the problem of plastics pollution.

It prompted a flurry of awareness and activity, a “sea change”, you could say.

But plastics pollution is only a part of a much bigger issue.

The earth has always suffered from the actions of humans, but over the past fifty years this has escalated from mild scratches to deep scars, so says a United Nations report published last month, a three year global assessment by the IPPBES

(Intergovernmental Science Policy Platform on Biodiversity and Eco system.)

since 1970

- the population of the world has doubled;
- the global economy has increased four-fold;
- international trade has increased tenfold.

Three key factors which have contributed to the escalation of destructive human impact on the environment.

*[Short news film from BBC watched here]*

The film and the IPPBS report highlight the need for a global transformative action.

But that should not stop us from thinking about what we can do locally, both as individuals and community.

There’s a human response needed here, but more than that, as Christians, we are called to respond.

It is something we should take seriously and actively as an integral aspect of our response to God.

The reading we heard from Deuteronomy, outlined a harsh lesson about the consequences of not following the expectations God sets for us.

Within it are references to the ways in which our blessings (and indeed our curses) are drawn from the created world in which we live.

The message highlights a sense of stewardship, the way in which mankind’s work when in tune with Gods work will ensure provision in terms of crops, livestock, bread - in other words the things needed to sustain a healthy life and provide energy.

The passage also contains a contrasting, bleak picture, one of a scorched, un-giving earth where life is unsustainable.

It cannot be denied that there are parts of our world today which are already beginning to mirror that picture.

A stark example is found in Uzbekistan.

There, over the past twenty years, the Aral Sea has completely dried up.

Then it was the world's fourth largest lake, at 25,000 square miles, home to 24 species of fish and surrounded by fishing communities, lush forests and wetlands.

Today it is an infertile, dry sea bed. Its water diminished as intense irrigation for cotton production increased, to meet the demands of the fashion industry, - already one of the most polluting industries in the world.

The passage we listened to from Paul's letter to the Colossians, is one of hope.

We are first reminded that Christ whom we are called to follow is the visible face of God, in whom, and through whom, all things were created.

We are then reminded that God is the creator who holds all things together and who seeks to reconcile all creation to himself.

It is not just people whom God cares about, it is the whole of creation.

We are an integral part of creation, not distinct from it, made within it to reflect the image of God.

Made within it as servant stewards, providing protection and care.

I was privileged recently to visit the 16<sup>th</sup> century Capuchos Convent in the Sintra Hills of Portugal.

Built as a place of retreat and renewal for the itinerant Franciscan Friars, the ethos was one of discovering God in the natural environment within which it was set.

I was reminded of those moments when I have been out walking in beautiful woods, or heard the birds singing at dawn and found myself uplifted, rejoicing with nature.

Such a moment provides a glimpse of the delight that God has in his creation.

Delight that leads him to bless it with abundance.

Just as these words from psalm 65 remind us – “you care for the world, you enrich it abundantly....you soften it with showers and bless its crops.”

In Romans chapter one, verse twenty Paul also writes --“since the creation of the world, God’s invisible qualities-his eternal power and divine nature-have been clearly seen, being understood from what has been made, so that people are without excuse.”

If we understand that the world was made lovingly by God as a place of fruitfulness and abundance then we must also understand the importance of taking care of it – not just because of God’s gifting to us, but because it reflects his glory.

By caring for his creation we offer an act of worship to our creator.

Conversely by neglecting and damaging his creation, we mar the reflection of God’s glory that it offers, our worship is defiled.

That message of full reconciliation which we heard in the letter to the Colossians echoes the message threaded through the book of Isaiah, particularly in chapters 43 to 66.

I would encourage you to put on your “ecological” glasses and read those chapters through the framework of our relationship with God and with our environment. Here’s a taster from chapter 43

“I am doing a new thing.....I am making a way in the desert and streams in the wasteland. The wild animals honour me, the jackals and the owls, because I provide water in the desert and streams in the wasteland, to give drink to my people, my chosen people, the people I formed for myself, that they may proclaim my praise.” (43.v19-21)

There is a hint of symbiotic relationship in these words, and the chapters in Isaiah go on to describe human prosperity, justice and security as part of the creation tapestry along with ecological fruitfulness and environmental sustainability.

This underlines for us today our ethical and moral obligation to care for and protect all creation, as people of God.

In the midst of these chapters from Isaiah is the seminal chapter (53) which tells that the wholeness of all creation is achieved by an act of unmatched sacrifice, by way of the cross.

As Christians we seek to share in the cost of that sacrifice, made for us by Jesus.

Part of that cost, you might call it a cost of repentance, involves doing things differently, both as individuals and community.

What does this mean in practice?

In their book, *Christianity, Climate Change and Sustainable Living*, Nick Spencer and Robert White identify eight Christian principles for sustainable living. Here are just three of them:

1. We should value and protect creation, seeing that as a joy rather than a burden  
*e.g. Thinking about the impact of our lifestyles on biodiversity, from our gardens, our neighbourly wildlife to the global impact*
2. We should reflect the close bonds between society and environment in our decisions  
*e.g. Lobbying our politicians for change, learning more about the issues and solutions, understanding how the products and food we buy has been produced*
3. We should express commitment to our immediate environment and favour local solutions  
*e.g. the way we travel, where we shop, how we encourage and make the most of green-wise solutions in our homes and locality; re-use, re-cycle, re-duce*

Let's make our worship of God count – not just here as we are gathered, but each day in what we do and how we care for the world in which he lovingly placed us

Just take a moment to share with those sitting close to you some things that you do or have thought about doing, and then in about three minutes Margaret and I will share some practical ideas that we already do, or could do, here at St Nicolas or as individuals