

Sermon

Creation Covenant Sunday 2018
7 October, 2018

Lessons

Genesis 9: 1 – 13

Colossians 1: 15 – 20

St John 1: 1 – 5

Prayer of Illumination

Sacred Spirit, through imagination, intuition and reflection, through word and silence, bless our meditations, and comfort us. Amen.

The life of the Church must be continually renewed, refreshed and responsive to the world in which we live. The theological and ethical concerns of those in the Church who have gone before us may still be of concern to us but, with each successive generation, there will be new insights and perspectives on God and life that need to be articulated. We learn from the past but are not bound by it. In the Jewish tradition, it is said that the past has a vote, but not a veto. What are *some* of the concerns for the Church in our time?

In the 21st century, the Church must continue its commitment to the poor, the excluded and the oppressed

whoever they may be. Having spent the last decade working hard to find justice for people in the LGB communities, it will not be long before the churches have to find justice for people in the transgender community. Scripture says, 'God created humanity male and female', but it may not be that simple any more.

For many churches, equality for women, truly acknowledging and releasing the gifts of women in the church and for every office of ministry, is still a road to be travelled. Recently, Lady Hale, the President of the Supreme Court, said that women do not make better judges than men but that they bring different gifts to the court: their life experience is different from that of a man and so they hear different things and therefore, the quality of decision-making is enriched. True for the court, this is true for the churches. Our sisters and brothers in the Catholic Church need to hear this. If human sexuality and equality for women are two prominent 21st century issues for the

churches, then a third is what Pope John Paul II called 'ecological conversion'.

Global warming, environmental degradation and destruction of ecosystems lead to increased flooding, soil erosion, a lack of trees, and melting glaciers. In an ecosystem, everything relies on everything else: plants, animals and every living organism. Coral reefs are rapidly disappearing due to ocean acidification, water pollution and illegal fishing. Continuous deforestation leads to extinction for many species and habitat loss is affecting lions, tigers and polar bears. The rapid explosion of the human population is demanding resources at a faster rate than the planet can replenish.

Pope John Paul II said:

If one looks at the regions of our planet, one realises immediately that humanity has disappointed the divine expectation. Above all, humanity has unhesitatingly devastated wooded plains and valleys, polluted the waters, deformed the earth's habitats, made the air unbreathable, upset the hydro-geological and atmospheric systems, blighted green spaces, implementing uncontrolled forms of industrialisation,

humiliating the Earth, that flowerbed that is our dwelling.

One commentator has said, 'When human beings cause the extinction of other species, they destroy creatures made by God. They damage a mode of God's self-revelation'. What does ecological conversion mean? What might an informed ecological theology look like?

It is utterly thrilling and wonderful to discover something of the complex nature of the cosmos, of the universe and its origins. The first person to suggest that the origin of the universe was a primordial fireball was the Belgian priest and astronomer George Lemaître. Though smaller than a single grain of sand, Lemaître said that this cosmic egg was the physical source of life; this 'Big Bang' gave life to infinity, to an ever-expanding evolutionary universe. The 13.8 billion year history of the universe is our history. We are made of hydrogen from the early universe together with the carbon

and other elements which came into existence much later.

The theologian Denis Edwards says:

Each carbon atom in the blood flowing through
my veins and in the neutrons firing in my brain
comes from a star. We are made from stardust.

The Astronomer Royal, Martin Rees, tells us that a carbon atom in a cell of a human brain has a heritage that extends back to the birth of our solar system 4.5 billion years ago. Creation's history, from the first atom to the first Adam, can be plotted through every molecule, cell, and living thing culminating with us - and perhaps others too - in creatures of consciousness. An informed ecological theology begins with our connectedness to the universe: we are constituted from the very fabric of creation's cloth.

Together with other faith traditions, we need now to look into our sacred texts, into our sources of spiritual insight, to discover new meaning that will help shape an ecological theology. In the Book of Genesis, we are told that humanity

is made in the image and likeness of God. We are told also that humanity shall have dominion over every living thing. Traditionally understood, 'dominion' has had negative connotations: it implies power exercised carelessly for the sole benefit of human interests. However, properly understood, in Genesis dominion is to be exercised *by humanity*, by creatures whose very being is made in the image and likeness of the Divine; we are to cultivate and care for every living thing in the manner of God, like God, in the place of God.

In the third creation narrative, in the story of Noah, we are again told that humanity is made in the image of God. In this narrative, God makes a covenant with humanity, with every living creature and with the earth itself. In the Orthodox tradition, humanity becomes the priests of creation: as God-bearers, we are to lift up creation, in all its beauty and suffering, to God. In our search for an ecological theology, we begin with the stories of Genesis and find that

as bearers of God's image, we are charged with caring for every living thing and for the earth itself in the manner of God, in place of God.

It is possible that Christianity's flawed understanding of humanity's place in God's creation, our exercise of powers as self-interest, have played a part in the destruction of species and ecosystems but, alongside Christianity, so too have the Enlightenment, the rise of capitalism, the industrial revolution, uncontrolled corporations and unrestrained greed. In an informed ecological theology, God is at the centre, not humanity and humanity must acknowledge the covenant God has with the Earth. We are to respect the value, the intrinsic value, of all living things: each one is a revelation of God.

St Francis of Assisi is the patron saint of ecology. Francis saw God's creatures as interconnected in one family of creation. In his Canticle, he sang of other creatures as our

sisters and brothers. Not in any naïve or sentimental sense, but he wanted people to understand our kinship with every living thing. More than 99% of our active genes are identical with those of chimpanzees. In the 1860s, a cartoon appeared of a gorilla in a zoo looking out from behind the bars. The caption above its head read, 'Am I my keeper's brother?' Yes is the answer!

The theologian Elizabeth Johnson puts it this way:

Woven into our lives is the very fire from the stars
and the genes from the sea creatures, and everyone,
utterly everyone, is kin in the radiant tapestry of being.

Older than the tradition of Francis, St Benedict said that love for God's creation means responsible farming and preservation of the land. He sought to cultivate and care for the good things God had made.

It is important that, as Christians, we connect our ecological theology to the living memory we have of Jesus. St Paul

described Jesus as the image of the invisible God, the icon of God. The fourth evangelist described Jesus as the Wisdom or Word of God. In Jesus, the One who made all things come into being was made flesh. With the inner eye, the eye of the soul, the followers of Jesus came to see and understand that the very energy and essence of God was in Jesus. We might say that the God of the Big Bang, the Cosmic Egg, the star formations, the Milky Way Galaxy, the planet Earth, the bacteria, the elephants and the eagles, the very same life-giving Spirit, the Originator of all things, can be seen in the face of Jesus of Nazareth.

But the Gospel of John tells us more than that: the Word became flesh. In this context, flesh is more than the limbs, muscles, sinew and skin of the human frame. Flesh means all fleshly life; it means the world of matter; it means the entire universe; the whole material cosmos. Flesh means that, in Jesus, the Word, the essence and energy of God, was present in the interconnected, inter-related world of

organisms, of all living things; united with matter itself. The Word could not become flesh without being connected to the hydrogen of the primordial fireball, to the carbon, the nitrogen and every single cell that ever was.

The Danish theologian, Niels Gregersen writes of God present in the Cross, in the death of Jesus. God's presence, he says, is:

An incarnation into the very tissue of biological existence....The death of Christ becomes an icon of God's redemptive co-suffering with all sentient life as well as with the victims of social competition. God bears the cost of evolution, the price involved in the hardship of natural selection.

For our purposes, evolutionary history is our history. The Transcendent is present in the very fabric and fibre of matter. From within, God empowers the universe to be. The climax of evolution is the possibility of love. In looking out at the horizon, the mystic Teilhard de Chardin said he saw the sun rising, the light of a new day, but more than

that: he saw the fire of God touch the earth, and the love of God.

I hope I have offered something of an ecological theology!

Amen.