Sermon for Climate Sunday 29 August 2021

May the words of my mouth and the meditation of all our hearts be pleasing in your sight, O Lord our rock and our redeemer.

I don’t think I need to tell you how urgent the need for action on climate has become – but maybe it would be helpful to explore just why we are here in church thinking about it. There is a theology which suggests that we are just passing through our earthly lives on our way to heaven, where physical things will no longer matter. In this way of thinking we might even say ‘Bring on Armageddon now’, so we can escape worldly troubles and be done with it all! However, this view is not actually based on the Bible, and would have seemed very alien to the Jews and the first Christians to follow Jesus. It owes its existence to Greek philosophy, but I regret to say that it has also come in handy for powerful cultures when dismissing the needs of others – very convenient to say that downtrodden people will get their reward in heaven!

Jesus spoke of the Kingdom of God as both here, and still to come. He was certainly not divorced from physical existence – in fact his parables are very much the stories of a country boy, someone intimately familiar with crops, weeds and livestock. He celebrated with his friends around the meal table, not just in the synagogue. He knew that God’s creation is good, and that it has things to teach us all about God’s nature. In our gospel reading, he tells us that he is the gate to fresh pasture, wide open so that we might have life in abundance. That is not a pie in the sky promise – Jesus invites us to live here and now filled with God’s love, so that we may relish all the good things he has provided for us, and share them with others.

But our beautiful world is in trouble, and we need to do more than simply appreciate it. In Genesis 1 we learn that humans were commissioned to fill the world and subdue it, and have dominion over all living creatures. Well you would think that we have certainly done that! Western culture in particular has been so self-orientated that we have behaved as though the resources of the world were infinite, and existed only for ourselves. But this interpretation of the Genesis account completely misses its context. God created humankind in his image – to be his representatives, to carry out his will in relation to the rest of creation. We are to behave towards creation as God behaves to us – nurturing, encouraging, protecting. There is nothing in God’s nature that sees us as just products for consumption, and so there is nothing in his commission to us to control, disrespect or just use the rest of creation. We are to be shepherds to the animals, fish, birds and plants, tenderly caring just as Jesus demonstrates as he talks about being our shepherd.

I think that we are no longer the arrogant owners of all that we survey from days of the British Empire. I think that we have come to appreciate the complex ways in which we depend of the health of the world around us, and we have learnt to value the natural world for itself, and not just for the use we can make of it. However, I think we are still hard wired to consume, to demand more, and to take what we want without regard for other people, let alone the rest of creation. To change will be hard, and it will cost us. But it is a deeply biblical challenge, and therefore we can be certain that we are in on what God is doing. His word does not return to him empty; it accomplishes what he intends and succeeds in what he set out to do. So do not lose heart!

One way to be clear and focused in our determination to be better stewards of God’s creation is to sign up for specific goals. Some of you may have already heard of the EcoChurch award scheme run by the Christian environmental charity A Rocha. It provides a survey of church life, broken down into five areas – worship and teaching, management of church buildings, management of church land, community and global engagement, and lifestyle. We will be discussing the first five goals in our PCCs, but with old, listed buildings we may be limited in what we can achieve. However, the church is emphatically not just the buildings! It is embodied in the life of its people, you and me, and if we all make changes in our lifestyles that will have far more impact than turning down the temperature in church (not that I would want to do that!).

So today, those of us in the EcoChurch group have brought some ideas and information about changes we have been making to inspire you. In a moment we will invite you to come and talk to us and see if there one or two changes you might feel you can take up. This is not an exercise in making us miserable! God calls us to simplicity of living but not to hair shirts! Changes may be less convenient than our existing life style – and we need to be aware that our culture has made convenience a goal that trumps all other considerations. Changes may be a bit more expensive than our previous decisions, so each of us needs to decide for ourselves what we can afford – remembering that costs to the environment rarely show up in the cost of cheap goods.

Each of you will have been given a card leaf and a pen – when you are ready, ask God what changes you feel called to commit to. Keep it simple and specific, and don’t choose more than two commitments. You may not feel ready to go ahead with some decisions but may be able to commit to finding out more – that’s equally valid. At the end of the service, as we go out, hang your leaf on our tree, as we make it go green with promises. If you are reading this sermon at home, create your own paper leaf, and make your commitments at home – next time you come to church, you will be able to hang your leaf up. Our tree of life will visit each church and remain as inspiration for visitors.

Let’s go into our time of commitment with a prayer:

Lord God, you bless us with all the beauty, all the resources, all the diversity that we need. Help each one of us now to listen to your voice, calling us to respect what you have given us and to share it more fairly with others. Free us from defensive or judgemental thinking, and help us to see how we can take another step on the road, however small, to honouring you by protecting our planet.

In Jesus’ name we pray. Amen