

6. GOD, THE WORLD AND US

A Theological Basis for Environmental Action and Hope

The ecological crisis can lead us to ask big questions which do not have easy answers. How should we live? Is there any hope for humanity? What is the church's task in the light of what is happening in the world? The Bible and the church's theology down the centuries will not tell us how to deal with issues like climate change but they do give us essential insights and wisdom.

Creation

The world is God's creation and in contrast with many mythologies we are not locked in a struggle with demonic natural forces. The creation is good. The heavens declare God's glory. The earth is filled with the Lord's unfailing love. Humanity is a part of God's creation, made from the earth, and a part of the landscape (1).

But humanity has a particular role. 'Let us make humanity in our image,' says God. (Gen 1.26). To whom is God speaking? One rabbi has suggested that he is speaking to the rest of creation. (2) But, more important, to whom or what is this image meant to portray God? Surely, to the rest of creation. Humanity is to show God's creative love in the world.

Dominion?

In Gen 1.28 humanity is given 'dominion' over the rest of creation. This is echoed in Psalm 8 and reflects the simple fact of humanity's power within the life systems of the earth. A power we recognise, but now possibly frightens us.

But what is dominion? Is it that of a tyrannical king or of a caring shepherd? In the New Testament Jesus is the supreme king and a model of dominion. He, 'the image of the invisible God', is one who loves, and who serves others. (3)

Stewardship

Many people find stewardship a helpful way of thinking about our role within creation. The concept has been derived from Gen 2.15, where God gives Man the task of looking after the Garden of Eden. The same words in Hebrew are used of the Levites' duties towards the tabernacle, there translated as 'to care for and protect'.

We are to think of ourselves as stewards of creation, caring for it and protecting it on God's behalf. The world is not ours. It belongs to God. We are to use our power responsibly, with this in mind. (4)

Continual involvement

As the Bible story unfolds God makes covenant agreements with the world, with Abraham, Israel, David, and through Jesus with all people. God's relationship

with the world is one of commitment, and it is continual. God has not simply set the world up and then left it

The books of the Law, the Prophets and the Wisdom writings, address questions of how to live. Proverbs depicts the wisdom of God as intimately involved in the process of creation. (5) True wisdom is not in opposition to the life of the world but in harmony with it.

The prophets see beyond the mundane to the activity of God, and from that vision have a message. Sometimes the world provides images of God, as it did for Jesus in his parables. At other times world events are agents of God: a drought, a famine, a plague of locusts.

But there is not a great plan. The future is open. It can be different from what the prophet sees. God can change his mind. Israel, or humanity, can change its ways. People and peoples can repent, and do things differently. We can turn to walk humbly with the loving God whose desire is liberating justice, healing and peace.

Incarnation

In Jesus the word (or wisdom) of God is made flesh. (6) Jesus breathed, ate, moved, thought, spoke, and suffered. 'The image of the invisible God' is Jesus Christ, who is crucified.

For centuries the church had an idea of God who was incapable of suffering but that was a Greek concept. It was not the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, of Moses, Isaiah, Jesus and Paul. God's engagement with the world is total.

God is not a remote observer. We suffer. Humanity suffers. Creation suffers. And God suffers with us.

The Kingdom of God

In the gospels Jesus is not just a teacher but the bringer of a new order: the Kingdom of God.

It is portrayed as both breaking in, and still to come. It includes a human community shaped so that it is in accord with God's values, and based on God's creative love.

This new order contrasts with the great organisation of Rome. Jesus is not 'The New Emperor' he is the 'Son of Man.' And he taught that if we focus on God's kingdom and his justice the things we worry about, like food, drink and clothing, will follow. (7)

Resurrection

When Jesus was crucified and cried out to his Father, God did not intervene to stop what was happening. Jesus died. But out of Jesus' death came his resurrection: an affirmation of who he was and what he said and did,

and also a new way of being. Jesus was taken into the life of God beyond the confines of space, time and matter.

Jesus' disciples came to see themselves as following him both now, in carrying out his work of bringing in the kingdom, and beyond death, in the life of God in eternity. Paul spoke about a new creation: the whole creation being made new; possibly (like the kingdom) something happening now and to be completed outside time. (8)

New Possibilities

In damaging God's creation and in failing to be what God intends we cause God pain and we frustrate his creative love. And in damaging the world we damage ourselves. But in Jesus we see how God's creative love overcomes the destructive forces of humanity: indifference, greed, hatred, jealousy. From our own failures to love, our own destructiveness and acts of greed and jealousy, we can move on with God's forgiveness to new possibilities. And do so empowered by God's Spirit.

God is continually active in the world by his Spirit. To live by the Spirit is to be responsive to God. To respond to God is to live by the Spirit. The picture is of us being caught up in the life of God: with the Father, the being of God, beyond space and time; with the Spirit, the energy of God, within space and time; and with Jesus, the Word, the Son, within human society and history.

Love

Jesus repeated the Hebrew instruction that we should love God with our whole self and our neighbour as ourselves. Clearly if we love God we will treat God's creation with care and respect. Jesus would not have us draw boundaries between those we were to love and those we weren't.

We are therefore called to help whoever we can who is suffering as a result of the present ecological crisis.

And this love for God and others cannot be divorced from a love for oneself. It comes from knowing oneself to be of value to God, simply because of God's love.

Justice

In the scriptures we see God working to rescue people who suffer from those who are causing their suffering. God's love works itself out in justice. Inasmuch as we cause the suffering of others through our greed or negligence we stand condemned by God. But God offers the possibility of forgiveness and a new start, and that new start involves working for God's justice, rather than against it.

Now we are able to anticipate the suffering of future generations if we continue to live in a way that causes climate change, a shortage of resources, pollution, or soil loss. To do so is to fail to love our neighbours. Developing a sustainable lifestyle is therefore a Christian imperative, not simply an option. There is no ethical neutrality here. We go with the flow or we change direction.

Hope in God

However, when we consider the magnitude of the crisis we face and the forces we are up against we can feel powerless. We can wonder whether it is worth doing anything. But we are not called to do the impossible. We are called to follow Christ, doing what we can in response to the love of God as we see it in him and in others around us and before us.

A sense of powerlessness has often been the experience of God's people down the ages. And we are not alone in this now. We are one with millions of people across the world who often feel overwhelmed by what we face. But our hope is in God, at work in the world now and whose life and love reach beyond time into eternity. That love is creative. Like the resurrection of Jesus, it is full of surprises.

Isaiah and Revelation speak of 'a new heaven and a new earth'. This can be seen in a number of ways. Some will see it as suggesting that the world we have is to be completely replaced by something else. Some will see it as pointing to God's continual renewing of the earth and sky. Others, while seeing the creation of the world as a continual process, see these visionary statements as pointing to the process of healing and renewal extending beyond time into eternity. But whatever we make of these visions of a new creation, there is no suggestion in Isaiah or Revelation that God's present creation should be treated as of little consequence. (9) Instead, they are suggesting that however damaged this world may be, there is continually hope in God the creator.

Shalom

This vision, given us by prophets like Isaiah and characterised by Jesus' relationships with the world and with other people, is summed up in the Hebrew word *shalom*. Shalom is health, it is also peace. At the end of the first creation story in Genesis, God rests and appreciates all that he has made. Here is an image of what we work towards, and also a pointer to what we can experience now.

We can experience Sabbath shalom now in our appreciation of the mystery and beauty of the world which we care about, in the companionship, friendship and the support of others who share our concern, in the ingenuity and creativity of people developing and using their gifts for the good and enjoyment of others and in celebration of the wonderful gift of life.

References

- (1) Gen 1, Ps 19, Ps 33, Gen 2, Ps 104
- (2) Jonathan Sacks, *Faith in the Future*, (DLT, 1995) p208
- (3) Col 1.15.
- (4) Gen 2.15, Num 1.50, Ps 24.1
- (5) Prov 8.22f
- (6) John 1.14
- (7) Matthew 6.25f
- (8) Rom 8.19f
- (9) Isaiah 65.17f, Isaiah 66.22f, Rev 21.1