



A sermon preached at St Andrew's Parish Church, Headington

By Rev Tim Howles

Reading: Genesis 1, Revelation 21:1-5, Mark 4:38-42

You don't need me to spell out the environmental crisis we're facing these days. The facts and figures are everywhere:

- The concentration of carbon dioxide in our atmosphere is the highest it has been in 3 million years.
- Seventeen of the eighteen warmest years on record have occurred since 2000. Arctic sea ice coverage has shrunk every decade since 1979.
- Two-thirds of the Great Barrier Reef has been damaged as a result of climate change.
- Last year the world's superpowers—China, the US, the UK, Germany and Japan—used 7x the amount of energy they produced.
- And a recent report has suggested that, were the rest of the world to consume natural resources at the rate of the US, we would need approximately five planets to sustain our lifestyles.

As one scientist recently wrote in *The Guardian* newspaper: “my training has taught me to be dispassionate, but when I look at the facts about climate change, I just want to cry out to the world: *don't you realise the mess we're in?*”

We're living in the midst of an environmental crisis. We get that. And many of us are already doing wonderful and significant things to be part of the solution.

But this morning I want to ask: where does religion fit with all this?

Some people, believe it or not, actually blame religion for all this. For example, the American historian Lynn White has accused Christianity of encouraging people to think they had the right to use the resources of the natural world however they wished. This goes right back to the book of Genesis, Lynn White argued. Here we find man seemingly assigned the role of “master” over nature. Is it any surprise, then, that societies taking their cue from Christianity have consumed the resources of nature and caused the environmental crisis we now face?

Here is his conclusion:

We shall continue to have a worsening ecological crisis until we reject the Christian axiom that nature has no reason for existence save to serve man.

But this morning I'd like to suggest that quite the opposite is true. I'd like to show that when we actually look at the Bible, we find a call upon Christians to relate to the world not as its *masters*, but as its *stewards*. Care for the environment is therefore right at the heart of our faith. And in fact, living this way is part of the mission we have as a church to bless our local community.

And to do that, we're going to do a bit of a Bible study! I want to show you (1) some insights from the beginning of the Bible's storyline; (2) some insights from the end of the Bible's storyline; and (3) something that happens in the middle.

1. Insights from the beginning of the Bible's storyline

In Genesis chapters 1-2 we read that God created the world. He set the sun, moon and stars in place. He established the sea, the sky and the land. And then He populated the Earth with birds and fish and animals of nearly infinite varieties. And after every creative act, he stood back from the scene, took a deep breath and said: "it is good".

It's important to note how radical all this was in its context. Greek and Hellenistic views of the time understood the material world as something to be left behind, transcended and overcome. And yet here, the book of Genesis says something quite different: the material world is to be celebrated for what it is. All of creation is seen as having an innate worth and dignity. In fact, in Psalm 148 creation is described in poetic language as giving glory to God simply by being what it is:

Praise the Lord, you sun and moon, praise Him, you shining stars!
Mountains and hills, fruit trees and cedars, beasts of the earth and cattle,
let them praise the name of the Lord! For He commanded and they were
created. (Psalm 148:3, 9-10)

God created the world. And He declared it to be "good".

Then, on the sixth day, God made human beings. "Be fruitful and multiply", God said, "fill the earth and subdue it; have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds" (Genesis 1:26).

Aha! Doesn't this imply that human beings have the right to rule the Earth as they wish? Isn't that what Professor Lynn White was talking about?

Not at all! The Hebrew word used in this verse is *radah* (רָדָה). It's a word that describes gentle, loving care that puts the interests of somebody else or something else ahead of your own. For example, in a very different context, in Ezekiel 34, God says this to the priests in his temple: "if only you had *radah-ed* my people with compassion, as I wanted you to do; then the world would know that I am the Lord".

That's exactly what the word means here in Genesis. Human beings were created to *radah* our natural world; to be stewards of it, to nurture and protect it, to live in harmony with it, all as a way of glorifying God, our Creator. That was the original plan. That was how things were supposed to be.

But, of course, that's not how it turned out. Things don't stay that way. Just one chapter later, in Genesis 3, Adam and Eve rebel against the God who made them. Sin enters the world. And as a consequence human beings are banished from the garden. And from that day on, the Bible tells us something has been out of joint with nature itself. There are earthquakes, hurricanes and storms. "The whole creation has been groaning as in the pains of childbirth right up to the present time", as it says in Romans 8:22.

So according to the Bible, the problems we have caused for our natural environment today are not to do with God's original plan. They've been caused by the way we've turned away from God's original plan.

And the rest of the Bible's storyline can be read as one long wait. Will God do anything to put right what went wrong? What does he intend to do with His world?

Well, what do you think? To find out, we need to fast-forward to the end.

2. Insights from the end of the Bible's storyline

At very end of the Bible in the book of Revelation, the Apostle John has a vision:

Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth; for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea was no more. And I saw the holy city, new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God. (Revelation 21:1-2)

Now, what is this?

The Apostle John is giving us a glimpse of the future that God has in store for His creation. It's a glimpse of what God is going to do in the end.

So what is God's big plan? Is it for human beings to go up into a cloud, and to float around in white clothes? Oh no! God's plan is to restore, to renew, to heal His original creation. "Then I saw the holy city, new Jerusalem, *coming down* out of heaven from God". Heaven doesn't mean going up into the sky; it's to live here on Earth ... but this Earth transformed and made as it was always supposed to be. That means trees; it means rivers; it means fields; it means sunsets and clouds; it means mountain ranges and barrier reefs. It means that end of mourning and crying and death. And best of all, God Himself will be with us, just as He used to walk with Adam and Eve in the garden in the cool of the day.

You see, God does not intend to write-off the world He created. He intends to heal it and make it whole again. He intends us to enjoy it the way it was supposed to be. That's the vision of the end that Christianity gives us.

So we've looked at the beginning and at the end. But how do the two connect up?

So finally, let's look at something that happens in between.

3. What happens in the middle?

One day, about 2,000 years ago, an obscure man living somewhere in the Middle-East began to do some miracles. He healed the sick, he made the lame walk, he opened the eyes of the blind. And he even had power over nature itself: "who is this man", said his disciples, "even the wind and waves obey him" (Mark 4:41).

Many people didn't understand what was going on. What do all these displays of power mean?

But they had the wrong idea. The miracles of Jesus were not just displays of power. They were glimpses of the future.

Why did Jesus heal the sick? He was anticipating a time when our broken bodies would be healed in the new creation. Why did Jesus calm the storm? He was showing us what the world would be like when the seas were no longer in turmoil and when people wouldn't have to fear being hit by an earthquake or tsunami. Jesus' miracles were brief glimpses of how things were supposed to be and how one day they will be again.

Here's how the German theologian Jurgen Moltmann puts it:

Jesus' miracles are not supernatural events breaking into the natural world. They are the only truly *natural* things in a world that is unnatural, broken and wounded.

Do you see: Jesus came into the world to give us a trailer of what will one day will be true for all creation. God is no going to abandon this world He created. Through Jesus, he is beginning to put it right.

So what does that mean for us, here and now, in St Andrew's church?

Well, may I put it this way? I wonder if sometimes we have an understanding of Christianity that is too small...

To be a Christian is to be part of God's cosmic plan, not just for us as individuals, but for the whole of creation. And that means that Christians can and should be at the forefront of caring for our environment now.

Now, I know that many of us are already doing that now. Actually, I think it's something we do really well and from the moment I arrived here at St Andrew's a year ago I admired that part of what we do as a church family. We care for our churchyard. We do what we can in our homes and in our businesses.

But here's the challenge I'd like to offer as I finish now. *Can we do those things out of love for Christ and as part of our mission to show the world what it means to be a Christian?*

Here are some practical thoughts.

- Can we take this vision out into our community? Are there people in Headington or Northway who are struggling with their gardens, perhaps because of age? Can we organise a working team to go round; not only to be of practical assistance, but also to show them something about our part in God's cosmic plan for the world?
- Or how about this... In a few weeks' time, Tuesday 30 October, we have a little event in church here to think about what the Bible says about God's creation. Can you invite someone to that? And, afterwards, why not invite them out for a coffee and share with them why your faith makes a difference?

There are many ways in which we can relate our care for the environment to our faith and bring glory to God in so doing.

Finally, do be praying for the world around us. Today of all days, as we read the terrible news from Indonesia, with the terrible earthquake and tsunami that has hit the city of Palu and surrounding areas. Tree/ tags.

Let's catch the vision of God for our whole creation. He made it. He intends to make it right in the end. And he calls us to be his instruments to do just that.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Sermon preached on Sunday 30 September 2018, a special service for "Creationtide"