

Loving Transformation

Sermon at St Mary-le-Tower Ipswich 19th February 2017

Preached by Revd Canon Charles Jenkin, Vicar, 2nd Sunday before Lent (Year A).

Genesis 1.-2.3; Romans 8.18-25; Matthew 6.25-end

Introduction

How should Christians be relating to the natural world? There are huge issues to contend with; environmental degradation, loss of species, serious climate fears, population pressures, the power of scientific knowledge, and so on and so forth. And these throw up significant theological issues too; particularly arising from the impact of the vastly increased scientific knowledge on traditional Creation theology. Underlying all this is the root question for anybody who believes in a single intelligence behind all creation, "How does God relate to the natural world?" In order to answer the first question about how Christians should be relating to the natural world, we must answer the deeper question about how God is relating to the natural world.

Four Main Answers

Jesus gives four main answers to this question, to which whole Bible witnesses, including all our readings today.

1. Creation is fundamentally good.

Creation is fundamentally good however much goes wrong and however much people may suffer. It can be hard to hold on to this when life is tough. But this is the optimistic vision behind our Gospel reading today, and the underlying goodness of God's Creation is the central message of Genesis chapter 1, with the repeated refrain, "And God saw that it was good."

This means that Christians must first and foremost always look for the good in Creation, even if this is only really its potential for good, for this is how God sees our world, his world. Jesus always looked for the good in the people around him, by encouragement or challenge. Often it is the potential for good that is most important thing to notice. This is not about being blind to evil, far from it, but it is about seeking to recover or bring out the good; like with errant children; or managing the prison system; or facing up to an evil system or oppressive regime.

Jesus said he didn't come to condemn but to save (John 3.17). This is the fundamental approach for Christians too, even though sometimes such recovering of the good will demand great sacrifice.

2. The deep love of God for his creation.

God deeply loves his Creation. This avoids more complex questions about how God actually directs his Creation. God deeply loves his Creation, even the bits that have gone wrong, just like parents love their children. Whatever aspect of Creation you care to mention, God loves it, deeply. "God so loved the world;" the world, not just a few people, the whole world; "that he sent his Son to give up his life....." (John 3.16)

This means that Christians need to show that they, we, love God's creation too, as God's children; in our care for our environment, in our care for people especially difficult people, in good stewardship of all the good gifts we have been given, including sharing our resources with poor and marginalised. All these things are important, everyone one of them and not just one aspect, because God loves all of his creation, and we must too.

3. Nevertheless the world has fallen deeply into sin.

This is a serious matter. Sin divides us from God, and from one another, and from a healthy relationship with the natural world. And the sin of the world has truly awful consequences in poverty, in injustice, in wars, in oppression, and in greed; in spoiled environments, in abusive relationships, in selfishness, in fear, in worry, and so on and so forth. There is much of course that we human beings can do in struggling against the sin of the world, in terms of repenting of destructive behaviour and in learning how to be good neighbours. And clearly a great deal of the world's sin is indeed the result of human sin.

But not all. The deeper sin that is an inherited part of human nature is a different matter, and well, this is something only God can deal with, and he has, in Jesus on the Cross. It used to be said that that this deeper sin only entered creation with humanity, and then somehow infected the rest of creation, but this rested on the perception that humanity was part of the created order from the beginning.

Of course we now know that creation is very much older than humanity itself, and that humanity is deeply sinful basically because of our evolutionary heritage. Nature didn't inherit sin from humanity, it was the other way round, and this is why without God we are powerless to fix it. The sin of the world is a serious and desperate matter, and Christians know that without God this flaw in Creation cannot be fixed.

4. And so God is working to transform Creation.

Creation is not finished, not perfect, and the *status quo* is not necessarily something that has to be defended at all costs. The world is work in progress. The Church is work in progress. Christians are work in progress. We are not yet finished. Maybe one reason Jesus took children as an example of faith, is that children know they are not finished, whereas adults fear they might be.

This means that Christians are called to work with God to transform creation, transform broken lives, transform unjust structures, transform cultures where ignorance and bad habits destroy lives, and transform whole communities by rescuing the poor from grinding poverty and exclusion. These are the signs and wonders to which the Church of Christ is called, that have drawn people through the ages, and will continue to draw people to Christ, and to the love of God, and to the Church; the evidence of lives and communities being transformed.

This is the essential meaning of the signs and wonders that Jesus did, his healings. Jesus transformed people's lives to show the world that transforming Creation is God's primary work, not just sustaining it or judging it. So Jesus demonstrated the character and purposes of God, and so people listened to him.

The Church is called to continue this work of transformation today. Sadly a Church that is uninterested in seeing lives transformed, is simply not one that will be listened to, or which will not grow. Every one of us here today will have some story to tell about how lives have been transformed in some way by God, by Jesus, by God's love, though perhaps not necessarily yourself. We need to have confidence in those stories and be able to tell others about them.

And we celebrate this transforming work of God every Sunday, in the Holy Eucharist, where bread and wine is transformed into the substance and life of Christ, which in turn inspires God's work of transformation in you and me, in the Church, and in the world.

These are the four principal answers that Jesus gives in his teachings about how God relates to the natural world, and which must be the essential guide for Christians too. The Whole of Creation is fundamentally good. Even though it has fallen seriously into sin, God deeply loves it all, and is at work transforming his creation.

It's Personal

All this is deeply personal stuff. It's not just stuff about what is out there somewhere, but about our own human physicality too. The New Testament readings today are best understood not as definitive spiritual laws of nature which can be analysed, but as the deep personal wisdom of Jesus and of St Paul; about their own physical experience of themselves in God's Creation.

In the Gospel we hear the message about how Jesus puts his own seeking of God's Kingdom above his personal needs, and finds that God meeting these anyway. This is the personal experience of Jesus. It's about his confidence in God's love, and his confidence in the basic goodness of God's creation which comes to flower as people seek the kingdom of God. This is a key bit of spiritual wisdom for Christians. Remember Jesus was teacher of spiritual wisdom, not of religious law.

In St Paul's letter to the Romans: we hear of Paul's own experience of himself as work in progress, groaning in travail as he grows into the freedom of the children of God, and how he sees this reflected in the physical world around him. This is rich stuff from the later part of Paul's ministry. Earlier in other letters he is much more dismissive of his past, much more confident that his new faith has completely transformed him. But this is more real.

And it's personal for us too, as we relate to our bodies, to their infirmities, temptations and burdens, and we enjoy our bodies, and as we see and hear and touch and taste and smell the physical world around us. The way we perceive the world around us, is intimately bound up with how we think and feel about our own physicality.

When we are fascinated by nature or fearful of it, it is because we are part of nature, and we are in truth looking at part of ourselves. When we are fascinated by science or fearful of it, it is because we are engaging with the unsettling mystery of our own existence and power. When we rejoice in a sunset or mountains or scenery, it is partly because we are rejoicing in something of which we are a product. When we marvel at the beauty and procreation of nature, it is partly because we too share as living beings in all the new life of nature. When we stare in amazement at the Milky Way, our own galaxy, with even more wonder than our forebears because we know so much more about it, we marvel at how our sun and our planet and our lives are part of a truly vast purpose.

Avoiding Dualism and Pantheism

Because it is all so personal too, Christianity carefully and absolutely avoids two spiritual extremes, two heresies, which when we fall into them, as we easily do, obscure for us the essentially Christian vision of how we should be relating to the natural world.

The first is Dualism. This is the idea that the spiritual and the physical are essentially separate things. This is a Greek idea that was very much around in time of Jesus, that the human soul is kind of trapped in our physical bodies and physical world, and released at death. But this is emphatically not a Biblical perception. Hebrew and Christian thought throughout the Bible conceives of human beings as body, mind and spirit all wrapped up together, and indivisible. Interestingly modern science has very much returned us to this perception. We are body, mind and spirit all wrapped up together and indivisible, together with our environment.

The basic trouble with dualism is that rests on the false value that the physical is not really important, which can then lead to things like indifference to suffering, the marginalisation of those who are different, exploitation of the physical world, physical cruelty, and even self-loathing of our own physicality. Burning people alive at the stake, and terrorist attacks on civilians going about their daily lives, are just two extreme examples of what can happen when people fall into dualist heresies about the physical world.

The second heresy is Pantheism. This is the idea that nature herself is divine, or that it is nature which most fully reflects the character and purposes of God. This is simply not true. In Old Testament times, the chief struggle of the Israelites was to distinguish themselves from the surrounding pantheistic religions and to establish a fundamentally different kind of faith. In early Christianity, much Christian expansion was about displacing pantheistic pagan religions. And in the current waning of Christianity in Europe, it could be said that a basically neo-pagan outlook is returning. I would suggest that the modern obsession with sex is part of that.

Again modern science is actually backing up the Judao-Christian perception, in this case the wholesale rejection of pantheism. Nature is what nature is. It does not necessarily reflect the divine. Rather it reflects its evolutionary heritage, the complex results of a mix of mutation and context, which has produced an astonishing array of life on earth. Indeed for every beautiful thing we marvel at, there are other destructive things which we hate and fear. And nature is ever transient and changing, and far from fixed.

The basic trouble with pantheism is that it rests on the false value that nature is somehow perfect and that the kingdom of God is the same as the kingdom of nature. This can also lead to indifference and paralysis in the face of suffering, to the acceptance of violence because nature is violent, and to acceptance of inhumanity and injustice, because nature is all about competition and the supremacy of the fittest. Pantheism also leads to the enthroning of human nature rather than to an appreciation of its profound need for repentance and transformation. Perhaps one of the most stark modern examples of the excesses of pantheistic heresy is Nazism.

The spiritual extremes of Dualism and Pantheism, are both firmly rejected by Christian tradition. Instead Christianity firmly teaches that the whole of Creation is fundamentally good; and even though it has fallen seriously into sin, God deeply loves it all, and is at work transforming his creation, and calling humankind to work with him in this project.

Conclusion

Foremost for Christians and the Church must be this transforming work of God. This is the real focus for both our New Testament readings this morning. God is renewing his creation, and bringing in his Kingdom, and what we need to be most concerned about above all else, is being left out by our own fear and worry and lack of hope. The whole purpose of the Church is to be part of this transforming work of God. The whole purpose of being a Christian is to be transformed ourselves and be an integral part of the transforming work of God in the world. And in such ways to draw others to the fire of God's love.

Today on the second Sunday before Lent, we celebrate God's purposes in Creation and for its transformation. Next Sunday we celebrate the transfiguration of Jesus himself as he prepares for his journey to Jerusalem and the Cross. And then we begin our own journey through Lent, when we learn to enter more deeply into the Easter mystery, which is the key to understanding the character and purposes of God in all our lives. Amen.