

**Sermon**

Sunday 27<sup>th</sup> September, 2009

Lessons                      Genesis 9: 1 – 17      Romans 8: 18 – 25      St Matthew 6: 25 – 33

Let us pray.

O Christ our King, grant that, as we look for the Lord, we may this day and every day make a straight path for You; and in our hearts prepare a home, where so mighty a Guest may come. Grant this prayer for Your Name's sake. Amen.

**God spoke to Noah and his sons, saying: 'Behold, I establish My covenant with you and your descendents after you, and with every living creature that is with you: the birds, the cattle, and every beast of the earth with you, of all that go out of the ark, every beast of the earth.'**

*Genesis 9: 9 - 10*

**Jesus told his disciples, 'Seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness, and all these things shall be added to you.'**

*St Matthew 6: 33*

In 2007, James Jones, the Anglican Bishop of Liverpool, in an address delivered in St George's Chapel, Windsor, made an eco-confession. The Bishop said:

I think that it is important to preface any talk about the environment by a simple confession that we're all hypocrites. Very little human activity has no impact on the environment. I confess that I too have flown by budget airlines! Not so long ago I was clutching my easyJet ticket, dressed casually (not in a 'dog collar') and boarding a plane in Belfast to fly to the John Lennon International Airport in Liverpool. The storm clouds were gathering. We flew through the most almighty storm. Nobody spoke, nobody moved as we were thrown around the skies. On landing the man next to me began talking: 'I knew this would be a bad flight,' he said, 'but I didn't want to frighten you! Actually, I'm an airline pilot. What do you do?' 'Actually,' I said, 'I'm a priest but I didn't tell you because I didn't want to frighten you!'

We are all affected by the issue of climate change and we are as individuals and as a species complicit in its cause. The Scottish writer and campaigner for social justice and environmental sustainability, Alastair McIntosh, wrote,

‘Crudely expressed, human impact on the planet is the product of population and consumption.’<sup>1</sup> McIntosh notes that world population levels throughout human history have changed very little until the late Bronze Age when agriculture got underway. But it was not until modernity, until very recent times, with the advent of industrialisation, that numbers rose exponentially. ‘During the reign of King James, worldwide population stood at about half a billion – 500 million. Even as late as 1800 it had reached only 1 billion. By 1955.....it had risen to 2.5 billion and in July 2007 it stood at 6.6 billion.’<sup>2</sup> By the middle of next century, world population is expected to hit 10 billion. McIntosh wrote, ‘With rates of consumption escalating and climate change adding to the pressures, life support systems are likely to become more stressed.’<sup>3</sup> So much for population: the World Wildlife Fund points out that if everyone in the world lived like an average Indian we would require on half a planet. If everyone lived like Europeans we would need three planets and if everyone lived like Americans we would need seven planets.<sup>4</sup> The West, ourselves included, blame the East for their rising carbon emissions but a quarter of China’s carbon emissions come from its exports to the West. Human impact on the planet is directly the result of population explosion and consumption overkill. We are being presented with a material problem for which there is, if not a solution, then certainly a spiritual diagnosis and

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<sup>1</sup> Alastair McIntosh *Hell and High Water* p188

<sup>2</sup> *ibid* p188

<sup>3</sup> *ibid* p189

<sup>4</sup> *ibid* p187

response. Jesus said, ‘Seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness and all these things shall be added unto you.’

Bishop James Jones of Liverpool says that we are all hypocrites. In 1985, the Episcopal Church in America ran a proselytising advertisement. There was a large portrait of King Henry VIII and the caption read, ‘In the church started by the man who had six wives, forgiveness goes without saying.’<sup>5</sup> Despair is a debilitating response to climate change. The Victorian theologian, Oswald Chambers, wrote of the Discipline of Disillusionment. Chambers said that ‘most of the suffering in human life comes because we refuse to be disillusioned.’ Disillusionment, dissatisfaction with the way things are, is an engagement with truth and a refusal to accept the wisdom we are being offered. Truth, said Chambers, leads us to compassion. Those who value truth no longer accept at face value what we are being told. Alastair McIntosh is a spiritual writer in the sense that the spiritual matters to him. Listen to this:

To activate the inner life means to deepen the capacity for presence. Presence applied to what we consume means a savouring of things, a drawing out of the full satisfaction that something can give us because our attitude receives its totality. For example, when I hold in my hand a glass of good malt whisky I don’t just gulp it down. At least, not on the first glass! I cradle it around and warm it with my hand. I’ll spend several minutes before tasting a drop, just enjoying the aroma. It is the distillate of the land that I imbibe – the essence of barley, peat, the sea and our people who worked it.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> ibid p215

<sup>6</sup> ibid p233f

There is little point in beating ourselves up with the notion that modernity and industrial and scientific progress have been bad in themselves. Who of us with toothache does not give thanks for a dentist with all the latest equipment? The huge industrial, medical and scientific advances over the past two hundred years or so are indeed advances but in some cases these advances have come at a price. Despair is not helpful; the discipline of disillusionment, the engagement with truth is. We are best to accept the forgiveness of God and start afresh, this time living the truth, the whole truth, understanding all of the costs of our actions, and acting with compassion. Human impact on the planet, climate change, is directly related to population growth and personal consumption. We are all complicit: hypocrites, each with our own excuses of why our lifestyle choices can be justified. The best way forward for us is the discipline of disillusionment, an engagement with the truth, the whole truth about the consequences and impact of our lifestyle choices.

Today is Creation Covenant Sunday. It would be truer to say that I have called today 'Creation Covenant Sunday.' I feel that it is a wider term than Harvest Thanksgiving. In the 21<sup>st</sup> century, we do not see in the same way the cyclical nature of farm production. For example, we have strawberries all year round. But more than that: Harvest Thanksgiving has a very human-centric focus and a theology which over-emphasises that the Earth is here for us. These days of climate change and the knowledge that the planet and the universe seem to be

indifferent to our presence should give us some cause to reflect. In the Book of Genesis, there are a number of creation stories. Immediately we recognise the first of these in Genesis Chapter 1: In six days God made the world, the stars and humanity. In Chapter 2 and 3, we recognise the myth of Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden. And in Chapters 6 to 9, there is another, a different, creation narrative. In this third narrative we read:

God spoke to Noah and his sons, saying: ‘Behold, I establish My covenant with you and your descendents after you, and with every living creature that is with you: the birds, the cattle, and every beast of the earth with you, of all that go out of the ark, every beast of the earth.’

‘I set My rainbow in the cloud, and it shall be for the sign of the covenant between Me and the earth.’

Notice in this creation narrative the covenant which God makes is to the whole Earth. Jesus said, ‘Seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness, and all these things shall be added unto you.’ In his Letter to the Church in Rome, St Paul wrote of creation, not just humanity but creation, waiting for the return of Christ and the consummation of history. If we get our mindset right, if we have a living and thriving spirituality, then we will want to engage with the truth, engage with the whole truth, and it will matter to us and matter dearly the impact and total cost of our actions, all of our actions, upon the Earth. The spiritual challenge which we face as a result of climate change is made all the more difficult because those parts of the world which are most responsible for

that change are the ones least likely to suffer its most direct effects, at least in the short to medium term.

What is incredibly interesting about this third creation narrative is the cause of the flood. The ancient world, with so many of its cities on the coast, feared the possibility of flood against which it had no defence. In the story of Noah, the writer tells us that God sends the flood because the Earth was corrupt and filled with violence. God said to Noah, ‘The end of all flesh is come before me; for the earth is filled with violence.’ Violence here means hubris, insolent presumption; it means a narrowing of vision, a departure from truth, and a turning away from God. The writer has successfully tied together self-centred human action and ecological disaster, which is perhaps more applicable now than it was when first written. In Old Testament book of Ezekiel we read, ‘You were in Eden, the garden of God, but in the abundance of your trade you were filled with violence, and you sinned.’ The prophet connects excessive consumption with hubris and with sin.

Alastair McIntosh wrote:

Our call is to continue doing all the things we need to learn to do – the recycling, the energy efficiency, looking at what we eat, how we travel, and so on. Even if these are not enough to make much difference now, they may become invaluable patterns and examples for some post-apocalyptic future. We therefore need to develop a peculiar combination of being both level-headed and idealistic.

If we do as Jesus commands, if we seek the kingdom and its values, we will seek the truth, we will acknowledge our hypocrisy for what it is, we will not be duped by consumerism, even green consumerism, we will accept the forgiveness God offers, and we will live as best we can a spirituality that is compassionate towards our fellow human beings wherever they may live and is respectful of the Earth, the Earth with which God has made a covenant.

Amen.