



Rev Diana Rattray
Poipoia te ao
Care for the earth
Romans 14: 1-12
Matthew 18:21-35
Year A Creation 3
17 September 2023

Recently I heard a panel conversation on Radio New Zealand. There was a representative of the Restore Passenger Rail climate activist group who had once again stopped the early morning commuter traffic in Wellington to highlight the need for reinstatement of local and regional train passenger services. The debate was about whether the action was justified as it endangered the lives of commuters, the protestors and law enforcers sent to try and remove them from a great height. There is also increased frustration and subsequent poor driving of people held up and late for work and meetings. Interestingly listener feedback suggested 70% were in support of the activists. Two protestors have been given electronically monitored bail, with strict curfews. One of those protestors is a 64 year old woman who concreted herself to the road and spent two weeks in Arohata Women's Prison before being granted bail. Her defence lawyer spoke of the increasing effect of climate change in New Zealand and across the globe, saying the actions of the woman in her protest were out of concern for humanity. He concluded "New Zealand has a long history of provoking change through protest."

As we conclude our three weeks of the season of creation I have chosen to use the lectionary readings set down for the day. The reading from the Letter to the Romans on judgement and the gospel

of Matthew on forgiveness and the parable of the unforgiving servant, give opportunity for us to reflect on our actions.

There has been a fair amount of social science research on forgiveness. It turns out that forgiveness is good for you. People who forgive have lower levels of anger, anxiety, and depression, are more agreeable and emotionally stable, and may also have gained some health benefits.¹ The readings on forgiveness can also be read in regards to our action - or lack of action when we think about the Care of Creation. Perhaps they are asking us to pause when we react to, or judge others on their climate action - or indeed inaction.

On the first Sunday of Creation we sat in a circle. Cate mentioned we might have had some discomfort in the way the church was set up. We are called to live in community, in ways that push us out of our comfort zones, ways that invite us to listen and learn from others who see things through different perspectives. Last week Susan Adams shared the image of the earth as 'the Body of God'. Feminist Theologian Sally McFague uses the image to challenge us to reframe our theology and bring God closer - to the very substance of who we are - humans for the humus - from the very body of God.

Our theology needs to be "ensoiled" once more. The soil and the earth need to be cherished and celebrated again and so bring about metanoia - a total change to the way we live. Last Thursday a load of topsoil was delivered to go on the top of the compost that had been dug in as Janet and many others restore the garden destroyed by recent digging to repair the drains.

As we think about forgiveness, and the need to forgive with abundance, the imagery often harks back to the times when we were told we were unworthy, miserable worms, or even worse.

And yet we now know and celebrate the way worms bring life to the earth, they break down the humus, so that the enriched organisms can in turn bring life. We need the biodiversity of the soil in our

¹ <https://www.episcopalchurch.org/sermon/forgiveness-pentecost-16-a-september-17-2023/>

garden. Today we have a pot of that soil in front of the altar, as well as a pot with a hyacinth, a symbol of spring and growth from the soil.

The Dean of Spiritual Life at Winchester University, Terry Biddington writes that “we need to *think soil* so that we can break through the moribund, shrivelled and earth-impooverished layers of our dominant and sterile philosophies and theologies in order to find practical, meaningful, flexible and nourishing modes of thinking that – informed by awareness of our kinship with the rest of the living world *and* its soils – will lead us towards the more healthy, integrated and sustainable future we all need.”²

Our strength as church, as people of faith, lies in understanding that the integrity with which we live our lives is tied directly to how our beliefs guide our actions. In our coming together in worship we celebrate our differences. Not all of us are called to be activists, to break the law to bring about change, yet all of us are called to change. Both ourselves and the way our actions impact others and the world we live in.

Living in right relationship with God must equate to living in right relationship with creation. We as Christians are urged to recognise the theological centrality of God the Creator, Creation itself, the human vocation of caring for Creation, and doing justice on behalf of the Earth and all of her inhabitants. Many Christian traditions, practices and theologies have perpetuated hierarchy, colonisation and domination of peoples and the earth on which we live.

The Season of Creation is marked by repentance for that past. It is a call to deepen our theological reflection on, and spiritual awareness of Creation, and how we engage in justice on behalf of nature and our neighbours. This season of Creation, which began on 1st September is not a time to say - well we have done our three or four Sundays, now we can return to normal. It is an invitation to experience faith differently, to centre Creation and the Creator, and

² <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/full/10.1177/09667350211000611>

to read our sacred texts and do theology in a new way. This season of Creation invites metanoia — a profound change of heart and life.

In the Parable of the Unforgiving Servant Jesus reframes the whole question about forgiveness. We cannot address our wrongdoing through our character strengths or our virtues or our willingness to forgive as many as seven times. We will never be able to do an economic equation of payment in response to the unconditional love of God.

The small things we can do to be kinder on our earth are not going to heal all the damage that has already been done. However the good news is that despite our inability to ever give back to the Creator everything we ought, God forgives us anyway, completely.

The forgiveness that we are to pass on to others is the forgiveness we have in relationship with Christ. Not because we are moral or climate heroes or because we seek our own wellbeing, but because individually and collectively we are loved by God our Creator and we want to respond in our best way towards God and Creation. A genuine conversion toward a Creation-based vision of God, nature, and neighbour.

The season of Creation falls in our Springtime.

Kōanga is the Māori word for spring. It includes the word 'kō', a digging implement: spring being the time to dig the soil.

It is a time when all around there are signs of new life and hope. May we learn from compost and humus and take from them humility and move towards a more healthy, integrated and sustainable future.

Amen.