



For the Sake of the Planet

Rev Susan Adams

Year A, Creation 2

Deut: 8

The Grandeur of God,

Gerald Manley Hopkins

Matt 6:25-34

10 September 2023

We are now celebrating the '*season of creation*'.

And therein lies our problem!

How we think about God, planet earth, and being human, can be for us a potent mix of problems and possibilities as we face the issues Cate raised last week, in relation to ourselves and the climate crisis. Our liturgical calendar sets these Sundays as the Season of Creation and so focuses our thoughts.

It's good to turn our focus to the earth and all the flora and fauna that inhabit it, to give due consideration to the oceans and air, the mountains and the climate. Its especially good for us urban dwellers to remind ourselves of the fragility of what supports our life.

And I'm grateful, as I'm sure you are, to Alan Broome and the Climate Action group for holding us to account for our lack of attention to climate issues and the wider environmental issues.

But how is it we Christians have been 'late to the party' so to speak when it comes to the well-being of our planet? How is it we seem to have taken 'creation' for granted? It is true there have been scholars trying to shock us to attention for a 3< 4 decades. Yet just last week, when I mentioned climate change to a person and our need to both mitigate the impact of our lifestyle on the climate, and adapt to the impact of the way we have lived, I was told very earnestly that if God had not wanted us to develop our ability to use fossil fuels and other resources and live the way we do, He would not have provided us with the means and abilities for us to do so.

It seems it is only relatively lately climate concerns have become mainstream concern for some Christians!

What I am saying this morning is a standalone introduction to the after church discussion for those of you who can stay and engage.

I'm trying to touch on some of the ideas we might explore. As many of us have moved beyond a literal understanding of the Bible, and been prepared to embrace contemporary science along with our theologising, the notion of 'creation' - (someone assembling elements in ways not previously conceived of to create a new thing) - has become for us a stumbling block.

And our very idea of 'creation' - ex nihilo; out of nothing - and the theology we have developed around it emerging from the Genesis stories, has become increasingly difficult for us to take seriously. It is increasingly problematic for Christians - especially since the period of time we call 'the enlightenment' and the emergence of 'science' as a separate discipline from theology, to conceive of planet earth and human life along with all it contains coming into being by the artistic imagination and will of some great mind as our creation story narrates.

Similarly, progressive theologians and biblical scholars no longer work with the assumption that Jesus will return shortly and then our problem will be sorted - despite over 50% of US Christian's believing it could happen about 2050! (2010 pewresearch.org)

As Christianity developed in the centuries after Jesus, a 'Theology of Creation' evolved. The Genesis story ceased to be a metaphor pointing toward wonder and amazement, and for a proportion of Christians, became instead fact. Over time that theology has become a bit of a conundrum: on the one hand God created the world and all that is in it and gave it to humans to have dominion over and use for their advantage; and on the other God created the world and we poor humans are 'helpless' to do anything much in the face of God's continuing power - unless, that is, we can persuade God to help. We vacillate between these two theological frameworks: in the one we humans have all the power and in the other God has all the power and we are helpless. We've live both perspectives and re-enforced them in our hymns and liturgies - even here at St Matthews!

But this was not always the way 'creation was thought about'. For the farmers and fishermen, the peasant population of Jesus day who were his primary audience, those same creation stories, which in our reading give humans preeminence over the land its resources and its creatures, gave to those ancient people a sacred trust to be honoured. It gave them responsibility to care for the earth so it would continue to sustain life: the rain would fall on sacred mountains and water the land, the seasons would turn and crops would grow, animals

and birds and insects would flourish and support life. God had indeed blessed the people and this blessing must be honoured. They knew this first hand. First testament prophets warned what would happen, if the land and covenant were not honoured. They knew this too

Now, in our time once again, for the sake of our planet, we must get on with the task of finding how we can live in ways that will respect all the life planet earth sustains. We need a way to live that will take us forward into a future as yet unknown.

So we ask ourselves "What can Christianity contribute to the current crisis that will help?"

It seems to me we Christians could still have the power of persuasion if only we can find the key that will unlock and release the residue of the damaging theologies that are deeply embedded in western brains whether we are Christian or not. That's what we stand for here at St Matthews
We need to harness the power of our collective imagination - for that is what religion is all about - that is where it's power lies! Religions, including Christianity weave stories about who we humans are, how we relate to the power of Earth, to God, to each other. They weave stories about what human life means and offer prophets and heroes and holy people to support the stories and encourage the people. Christianity offers hope when all seems hopeless; it offers second and third and more, opportunities to change and do things differently.

It offers us the opportunity to understand the earth and all it contains as a sacred trust held on behalf of the future.

It is to be cared for and nurtured for the sake of each other, in this way we will be able to gift our miracle of life and the wherewithal to sustain it, to future generations.

The story of the miracle of creation can be for us a powerful metaphor to support our attitude of wonder, as can stories of the covenant between God and humans that set out God's generous blessing.

So too can the *image of the earth as "the Body of God"* that is offered by contemporary theologian Sally McFague as she attempts us to persuade us to reframe our theology and bring God closer - to the very substance of who we are - humans from the humus, from the very body of God.

New Testament writers had moved a long way from the rural peasant audience of Jesus. They were faced with increasing population

pressure in urban centers along with all the tension and differences that brought. Like us they attended closely to the stories of Jesus engagement with people, the parables he told ... his actions, to understand what his ministry had been all about. They seem to have been sure, judging from the records we have, that the well-being of the people was intrinsically related to the well-being of the land even though they may be separated from daily contact. The manner in which the people lived out the fullness of the covenant, reminding them of God's care and concern even for the least: the lilies of the field, the birds of the air, 'the blessed poor' was key to ensuring God's ongoing care and blessing. Urban centers were dependent on the fertility of the agricultural land and abundance clean water supplies and a mutuality of concern for the wellbeing of the poor. Jesus seems concerned with the displacement of peasant farmers in northern Galilee. He was aware of their loss of economic and food security under the colonial governorship of Herod then Pontius Pilot and Antipas the tetrarch of Galilee (Tiberius the Roman emperor) as they built cities and gathered wealth and power.

In these respects not much has changed.

So what can we as 'church' contribute to the situation we find our world in?

There are scientists, and economists, and town planners, and ecologists and others amongst us who will work with their specialised knowledge and skill to mitigate the damage we are doing and encourage us to change our lifestyles. We need to listen carefully to them.

As 'church' today, reminding ourselves of the fragility of the blessings we take for granted as well as the harshness of the impact if we do not, even as the First Testament prophets warned those ancient peoples - is a good place to start.

Vision, hope, our capacity to change, collective action and the presence of the energy and spirit of God are all aspects of a contemporary theology we can contribute.

As Christians we know we *do not need to be afraid* of the changes that face us, that must be made, for God is with us and amongst us as close to us as the breath we breathe.