All Saint’s Harnham

Lent address

28 March 2017

**SOCIAL JUSTICE AND THE ENVIRONMENT**

We live in a beautiful fragile world. This planet which is our island home, this earth seems so vast, it makes us feel tiny. It seems so stable, so permanent – this solid earth - and yet we are discovering it is far more fragile than we realised.

“Holy, holy, holy Lord, God of power and might,

Heaven and earth are full of your glory.”

As you walk around Harnham, perhaps go down to the Recreation Ground and look across the water meadows, do you often think “This is full of God’s glory” ?

I ask that because our theme this evening is “Social Justice and the Environment” seen from a Christian perspective, and a key part of the Christian perspective is that the earth around us is full of God’s glory, if only our eyes are open to it.

**Environmental issues we are facing**

Let me start by setting out some of the issues that we are facing in relation to the environment – and when I say “we”, I mean we human beings, we the human race living on this beautiful fragile planet – because these are global issues, and we are all involved in them in different ways.

Let us start with polluted water – a serious problem in much of Africa, but also in parts of Asia. In many places this is the result of natural causes. It has always been like this. The systems needed to deliver clean drinking water suitable for people to drink have never been constructed. But the existing problems are often made worse, for example, by oil companies drilling for oil, because oil spills soak through into streams and rivers and contaminate the water there. Sometimes the chemicals used in mining for some kinds of minerals can leach into water systems and pollute them. All this may seems a long, long way away from us, but we need to remember that we drive cars on the petrol or diesel that comes from this oil, and we have 101 things we use every day that are made from minerals mined all over the world.

This leads into air pollution. How many of us are old enough to remember the smogs that larger towns and cities in this country used to suffer before the Clean Air Acts ? Many people who suffered from chest problems died a premature death as a result of smog. We have come a long way from there, but most of us have probably seen photographs of Chinese people walking around one of their major cities wearing masks to protect themselves from the pollution in the air they are breathing. And we are not innocent as a country. A few years ago there were complaints from the Scandinavian countries that their snow was being polluted by emissions from British factories and power stations blown across the North Sea by unusually strong south-west winds.

But the major issue is of course climate change. I think you know the story, but it may be worth reminding ourselves of it. Over the past 250 years we have burnt huge quantities of fossil fuels, coal, oil and gas. Our comfortable standard of living, our warm houses, our oh! so useful cars, these have been based on this burning of fossil fuels. In burning these fuels we have pumped out into the atmosphere millions of tons of “greenhouse gases”, particularly carbon dioxide, far, far more than the atmosphere can absorb by natural processes. As a result our climate is changing. The earth is heating up – global warming – and we are beginning to experience the effects of this.

Rising temperatures are leading to the melting of the Arctic ice-pack, and this leads to rising sea-levels which threaten coastal cities and low-lying islands. Bishop Nicholas has spoken about his conversations with a Bishop in one of the island nations of the Pacific. There is a serious danger that if this process continues his country’s islands will become uninhabitable.

Many of the low-lying areas that are most threatened by rising sea levels are among the poorest in the world. Bangladesh, for example, one of the world’s largest and most densely populated countries, has large areas of low-lying fertile fields where millions of people grow the food on which they survive. If rising sea-levels combine with high tides and strong winds to flood some of these fertile low-lying areas, the salt in the sea-water will rob these fields of their fertility and leave tens of thousands of people who depend on them liable to starvation.

Rising temperatures are also likely to lead to more frequent extreme weather conditions, to more droughts. East Africa is now suffering the consequences of drought and millions of people are threatened with hunger.

There is a differential effect at work. Many of the countries most likely to suffer damaging effects from climate change are poorer countries. They have fewer resources to protect themselves. Richer countries are better placed to afford to build more effective sea defences.

There are issues of justice here. We, the more developed countries, are the main beneficiaries of the burning of fossil fuels, but the costs that derive from this are mainly borne by people from poorer countries. What is the justice in that ?

Similarly those who are better off are better able to protect themselves than poorer people. One of the most vulnerable cities in the world is Miami in Florida, the home to many poor people as well as to many affluent people. For many of the more affluent residents Miami is their winter home. If their seaside home is flooded and becomes uninhabitable, they can at least go back to their other home in New England or the mid-West. But those for whom their Miami flat is their only home, if it is flooded, they become homeless.

**From the perspective of our Christian faith**

So can I invite you to reflect on these issues in the light of our Christian faith? May we look at the situation as Christians from three different perspectives?

**The first perspective** is that **the world is God’s gift to us**. It is not ours by right. We did not make it. It is God’s gift to us. I am reminded of the Psalmist’s words:

“The heavens are the Lord’s heavens,

but the earth he has given to human beings.” (Psalm 115.16)

What do you do when you receive a gift ? It is usual to thank the person who gave it to you, to appreciate it, and if there is something special about it, to cherish it. Have we, we human beings, cherished the earth that the Lord has given us ?

The answer has to be ‘Not much’. One zoologist described the human race as an animal species which has fouled its own nest. We have polluted the water supplies given to us so freely with our effluent and our waste disposal. We have made the oceans so acid that beautiful coral reefs are dying. And we are burning up the resources of fossil fuels so fast we risk very destructive climate change. Is this the way to treat a generous gift ?

**The second perspective** comes from the hymn of praise in Paul’s letter to the Colossians 1.15-20 – a hymn of praise to our Lord Jesus Christ. It speaks of **Christ** not just in relation to the Church, the community of disciples who seek to follow him and serve him, not just in relation to human beings, but **in relation to the whole creation.**

Let me quote from it. “In him (ie Christ) all things in heaven and on earth were created ..... all things have been created through him and for him. He himself is before all things, and in him all things hold together. ..... so he (has) first place in everything. ..... and through him God was pleased to reconcile all things by making peace through the blood of his cross.”

The phrase “all things” is repeated again and again – it comes six times in just six verses. Christ’s creating and redeeming activity is cosmic in scope. It embraces “all things”, the whole material world as well as the whole human race. Jesus Christ whom we worship, to whom we pray, whom we try to follow, He is the creator and redeemer of the whole cosmos, the universe of boundless space and all the galaxies within it.

That leads us into **the third perspective**. Paul was born and brought up a Jew, as was Jesus himself. He had been educated in one of the leading schools of Judaism. He had spent years studying the Hebrew Scriptures which we know as the Old Testament. He was steeped in its ideas and its way of thinking. He understood its perspective **that it is not only human beings who are alienated from God and need to be reconciled to Him. That is also true of the whole of creation.** The whole creation is out of joint.

That comes across clearly in Paul’s letter to the Christians in Rome, in chapter 8. “The creation is subject to futility” he writes. It longs to “be set free from its bondage to decay and obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God.” (v 21) “The whole creation has been groaning in labour pains” he goes on (v 22). It might be a picture of the polluted over-strained world we live in today.

**The seriousness of the environmental crisis**

But let us recognise how serious the environmental crisis we are facing is. The greatest danger is that the global heating process becomes self-accelerating. For example, one of the things that keeps the earth’s temperature in balance is the way that ice reflects much of the sun’s heat back into space. Known as the “albedo effect” clear ice reflects back 90% of the sun’s heat. This is enormously important in keeping the earth’s temperatures down. By contrast water only reflects back about 10% of the sun’s heat. As temperatures rise and ice melts and turns into water, less of the sun’s heat is reflected back into space and more is absorbed by the earth, so accelerating the process of global warming. The greatest danger is that we get into a spiral of accelerating rising temperatures which race away out of our control.

Another danger is that rising temperatures may lead to the thawing of land masses in, for example, Siberia, which releases large quantities of methane that has been locked in the frozen earth. As a greenhouse gas methane is far more destructive than carbon dioxide. The release of this methane could result in an uncontrollable spiral of accelerating temperatures.

Perhaps the greatest issue of justice here is what has been called **inter-generational justice.** We are enjoying the benefits of a life-style based on burning fossil fuels. But what sort of a world are we leaving to our children and our grandchildren ? – a hot, parched earth where people die of heat-stroke and there is widespread hunger and famine because previously fertile areas are now parched and arid ?

Are we going to treat our island home as God’s gift to us ? and treat it as a gift should be treated, cherishing it and guarding it against everything that spoils or damages it ? Do we have the vision to see the earth as “full of God’s glory” to be protected from damage and desecration ?

**The hope of salvation**

I spoke a few minutes ago of Paul’s picture of the whole creation as in bondage to decay, groaning in labour pains, longing for a new world to be born. Lying behind this picture of creation that Paul gives is the Old Testament vision of salvation. The Old Testament was the Scripture of Jesus and the twelve disciples and of Paul. The vision of salvation that they held was the Old Testament vision of salvation, the vision of a redeemed people in a restored world. Here is one example from the book of Isaiah.

“The wilderness and the dry land shall be glad,

the desert shall rejoice and blossom;

like the crocus it shall blossom abundantly,

and rejoice with joy and thanksgiving.

.........

Then the eyes of the blind shall be opened,

and the ears of the deaf unstopped.

Then the lame shall leap like a deer,

and the tongue of the speechless sing for joy.

Waters shall break forth in the wilderness,

and streams in the desert.

.........

The ransomed of the Lord shall return,

and come to Zion with singing. .....

They shall obtain joy and gladness,

and sorrow and sighing shall flee away.” (Isaiah 35.1-2, 5-6, 10)

A people redeemed and reconciled – physical ailments and disabilities healed – the environment restored, fertile and beautiful again. That is the vision of salvation that the prophet Isaiah holds out. That is the vision that underlies Paul’s thinking about Christ and creation. That is the vision that we need to have as Christians if we are to make our distinctive contribution to the current environmental crisis.