



Sermon preached by Revd Nigel Uden on 16th May 2021

Readings: Genesis 2.4a-9, 15-17, Mark 10.42-45

This service's climate change theme is very much the same as the theme of last year's Christian Aid Week. Again, *Christian Aid* calls for 'humanity to be in communion with nature, rather than exploitative consumers of it'. It is, of course, worth repeating, all the time we remain in a climate emergency that seems to receive so much less urgent attention than the coronavirus pandemic.

I am reminded of the service a fortnight ago, when I referred to Juan Carlos Ortiz telling of the preacher who was chastised by the church Deacons because for three consecutive weeks his sermon comprised neither more nor less than 'love one another'. His rejoinder to their complaint was, 'well, I've yet to see it make a difference.' Repeating the ecological message is perhaps essential, until it makes a difference.

A particularly arresting element of David Attenborough's recent book, *A Life On Our Planet*,¹ is the way he charts three statistics over the eight decades from 1937-2020. He notes how the world population, has increased from 2.3 billion to 7.8 billion, how the carbon dioxide in the atmosphere, linked to the burning of fossil fuels and leading to global warming, has risen from 28 part per million to 415 parts per million – a fifteen-fold rise, and how the remaining wilderness – that which we are not taming and controlling – has declined from 66% to 35%. With these stats, and his extrapolations from them, 94 years old Sir David writes of having 'to remind myself of the dreadful things that humanity has done to the planet in my lifetime.' 'Are we', he asks, '... sleepwalking into catastrophe?'²

With such stark statements of our reality, you and I will hear the nation's best known natural history filmmaker repeating himself frequently – as if with the preacher who said, 'well, I've yet to see it make a difference.' It's data that's in the public domain, we can read it everywhere we're willing to look, we can hear it time and again on TV and radio, and we feel its direct impact upon our lives as we bear the different degrees of heat and cold, levels of flood and drought, that are so different from a generation or two ago. I don't intend to reiterate them here, so much as to urge upon us a serious attention to them.

The two Bible readings in this service have been selected because they offer suggestions of why people of faith might join with all people of goodwill, whatever their convictions about religion, to play an active part in responding to the climate emergency.

The book Genesis has two accounts of creation. If we are looking for science or history, they are incompatible. If we are looking for a word of wisdom about how we are to relate to creation, they are both equally worthy of consideration. The account in chapter one has humanity made on the sixth day, just before we read of God resting from such creative adventures over the previous week. The account of creation in Genesis 2 has humanity made before the plants and birds and animals. In the first account, the people have dominion over creation. In the second, that dominion is refined into tilling and keeping the garden, maybe 'to watch it'.³ As we inhabit planet earth in our own era, it is clear that an understanding of dominion which leads us to exploit, control, even neglect creation, is potentially disastrous. One might argue it has got us to where we are today. Conversely, if we allow the alternative Genesis creation story to lead us into such a *biophilia* – such a love of nature – that we will till and keep and watch, then our passion for creation might just stir us to the change of attitude that is so urgently required today. It is both a head and heart thing. All the knowledge and expertise in the world will not resolve the climate emergency if we do not have a change of heart. Nor, it must be said, will all the unbridled passion in the world if it is not partnered

with good science, rigorous policy, and sheer determination. ‘The LORD God took the man and put him in the garden of Eden to till it and keep it.’

In the tenth chapter of Mark, the narrative is about to develop into a long account of Jesus’ last week. The verses we heard are from what we might regard as a summing up of Jesus teaching ministry in Galilee, before he travels to Jerusalem for the denouement of it all. Part of that summing up is the emphasis upon followers of Jesus being servants, just as even he came not to be served but to serve. This is such old Christian hat, that it is easy to take it as read. Though perhaps Juan Carlos Ortiz would want frequently to repeat our vocation to serve just as he did our vocation to love: ‘I’ve yet to see it make a difference.’

Moreover, even if we are persuaded of the call to serve, we might more normally regard it as referring to our serving one another, our fellow people. This is *Mental Health Awareness Week*. The 2021 theme is an emphasis upon how spending time in nature improves our mental health and lowers our anxiety. So we who sense Jesus beckoning us to be servants, might feel ourselves urged to help people affected by mental health issues to get out into the natural world – pushing a wheelchair user around the park, or doing some gardening for the person who is no longer able to till the Garden of Eden upon which they love to look out when confined to their armchair. But it seems important to me that in this era of climate emergency, we must reimagine our relationship to creation so that our *biophilia* is also lived out in servanthood - by serving the planet rather than abusing it. Christian Aid Week again presses upon us the urgency of this aspect of Christian mission – until it makes a difference. It happens also to be the week we are moving back into the premises of Downing Place Church, after eighteen months redevelopment of them. In that project, serious effort and expense has gone into ensuring that our footprint is as green as it can be. It’s a modest and inadequate but genuine attempt to serve creation, for its good, for the good of those whose poverty makes them more susceptible to the price of the climate emergency, and for the glory of the creator.

Surely that is the change of attitude required if we are to do what David Attenborough urges at the end of *A Life On Our Planet*, when he writes: ‘We can yet make amends, manage our impact, change the direction of our development, and once again become a species in harmony with nature. All we require is the will. The next few decades represent a final opportunity to build a stable home for ourselves and restore the rich, healthy and wonderful world that we inherited from our distant ancestors.’⁴

May it be so, that all creation might laugh rather than lament.

¹ Attenborough, David 2020 *A Life on our Planet: my witness statement and a vision for the future* London: Witness Books

² *ibid* page 101

³ Alter, Robert 1996 *Genesis* New York & London: W. Norton and Co page 9

⁴ Attenborough pages 220f