

Earth Alert!

Sermon by the Rev Derek Lightbourne, St James Church, World Environment Day June 2018

Keynote Bible passages Genesis 1.26 – 2.3, Ezekiel 17.22 -24, Mark 4.26 - 34

'In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth....and God saw everything he had made, and indeed it was very good.' Today we observe World Environment Day – I would like to have said, 'celebrate' but I'm not sure we can do that, given the present state of the Planet. Hence the Sermon title, 'Earth Alert.'

The sermon is in three sections: Part 1 asks three questions. Part 2 looks to possible directions – Plotting a future - and this is in our hands. Part 3 is a Slideshow reflection.

1) Part 1 - Where to begin? My reckoning charts it back some 60 years and the book 'Silent Spring' by Rachel Carson. In this she alerted the world to diminishing bird-sounds, as a result of less birdlife, they having been poisoned by pesticides especially DDT leaching in the soil, and plants taking them up. Hence less reproduction. The book exposed nature's vulnerability and humankind's effect on nature.

My own interest had been a long one also, with university study majoring in geography, and a love of God's creation. Hence travel and opportunity to visit some remote places.

First question: What's the issue? Put most simply, the weather patterns we've been used to seem to be changing. It's been described as global warming, or more commonly now, '*climate change*.' And there's many parts of the world where there is less rain, more droughts, and for other places, more rain, and more flooding and loss of habitat and people. We are reading of significant ice melting in the Arctic, warming four times faster than the rest of the planet, and of rising sea levels affecting low-lying atolls of the Pacific just north of New Zealand. I recently read of a significant drought in South Africa, and indeed these extremes are becoming so common they scarcely make the media news. With the warmer climate it is predicted many animal species in wild-life rich areas won't be able to adapt to the changing habitat.

Take for example, coral. In its life they are teeming with fish and sponges, brightly coloured, as any diver or snorkeller will know. Coral comprises tiny creatures, polyps and they are very sensitive to ocean temperature. And also to ocean acidification – that is declining water quality. I remember swimming in Vanuatu and there were many reefs a dull grey-whitish colour from bleaching. A two-degree increase in water temperature means corals are unable to adapt and hence many reefs are dying. The Great Barrier Reef in Australia is seriously affected, with bleaching of at least one-third of the 3000+ reefs. It's been suggested we are at a crossroads, a 2014 report concluded 'the outlook is poor'. If present trends continue virtually all corals could be dead by 2050. Fortunately scientists are engaged in trying to selectively breed corals that are more resilient to stress. In another latitude it is polar bears who are suffering from less sea ice, their popular hunting ground. On the positive it is known some fish, birds and plants are able to adapt by moving from their traditional habitat – for some this is good, for ones who cannot adapt it spells extinction.

In our own country we are mindful of changes trending, with the last three years being the warmest on record. There seems a lot more 'severe weather' warnings, and damage from 'weather bombs' and storm surges are very close to home. Scientists are increasingly aware of changes, and these are being documented, as affecting humans and plant and animal life.

Thus the second question – *why is this occurring?* Put much of it down to human activity, and in particular burning of fossil fuels warming the atmosphere. Warmer temperatures - more severe weather: cyclones, storms, tornadoes, and droughts. There's been noticeable warming since the Industrial Revolution. We are mindful too of the effects of pollution. Even when down in the Southern Ocean I saw plastic bags and other items washed up on the beaches. Then there's the 'Great Pacific Garbage Patch', an accumulation of an estimated 79,000 tonnes of plastic debris floating in the area between Hawaii and California.

To the third question – *where's God in this?* In my lifetime I've earlier heard weather catastrophes described as 'an act of God.' Thankfully now we don't hear that so much. To be more accurate it is 'act of humans' – we are reaping what we have sowed. God is in this for sure – as we read in Genesis Chapter 1 in creation and creating. There's a wonderful ascription in the Acts of the Apostles by St Paul in Athens. He proclaims, 'The God who made the world and everything in it, he who is Lord of heaven and earth, does not live in shrines made by human hands, as though he needed anything, since he himself gives to all mortals life and breath and all things.... In him we 'live and move and have our being'.

What have humans done? Over many many years they have taken the God-given gift of 'dominion' over all living creatures as they go ahead to exploit, subdue, and effectively upset the delicate ecological balance that is earth in creation. We are paying the price now.

Thus *Jesus* when asked about signs of the end of the age, he sounded a message that surely calls our attention – wars, rumours of wars, famines and earthquakes, the increase of lawlessness, unjust imprisonment and ill treatment human to human. He could surely be prophesying about our own age. In spite of this he spoke of 'good news' of the kingdom to be proclaimed. How then might this good news be proclaimed in the context of 'Earth Alert'?

[Part 2] *Plotting a future.* While it is God's earth, the future very much lies in our hands. How are we going to 'save the Planet'? I would venture to suggest at least 4 ways we can positively act towards the future, and in the 'now'.

First is '*mindfulness*' – it's a relatively new word in our vocabulary. My understanding is for us to keep such in our mind – pondering and with action. Hence *care of creation* is paramount. What is important is to bring such to mind. Mindfulness may be a new way of expressing what prayer is for the Christian. It has to do with our relationship with God – including the stewardship of the Planet, how we care and being accountable to God. As we have this in our mind, it leads to actions.

Second, acting on the *'Three RE's'*. From this will come attention to the need to *recycle*, what can we *re-use*? How can we *reduce*? Less waste. It has very practical implications, like the number of plastic bags provided in supermarkets, plastic wrapping, to re-use or recycle where we can. That's where we can be effective – it is not to just one or two, but a whole congregation, and other congregations, the wider community. I was pleased to note supermarkets in the USA have phased out plastic bags in favour of strengthened paper. There's the intent now in our country, with our two major supermarket chains. The intent of Arbour Day was more trees be planted, or replace ones that have been cut down thus sucking up the excess Co2 in the atmosphere. I enjoy watching seeds germinate and grow. Jesus was also admiring of the miracle of growth as in the tiny mustard seed of today's gospel reading. For us it is at all this is at the 'micro' level, what we can do. Then there's the 'macro' – of councils and governments having a commitment to conservation.

Third there's an aspect of *'sacred and secular'* as Pope Francis issued his proclamation of planet earth being 'Care of the Common Home'. For many years church and science were at odds. So it is encouraging now to see church and science in common accord. I remember being struck several years ago by a book by Agnes Sanford, a very spiritual lady. Like Rachel Carson she was way ahead of her times, with the title 'Creation waits.' She was quoting from St Paul's writing to the Christians in Rome. Paraphrased Paul was saying that creation is waiting for humans to come to their senses to arrest the decay of creation. He described it as 'groaning in labour pains'. Our calling under God is to help restore creation. Hence the 5th Mark of Mission - 'to strive to safeguard the integrity of creation, to sustain and renew the life of the Earth.'

Fourth, one more in plotting future direction – being mindful of *neighbourliness*. As we consider the effect on nations one can note that it is the less well off nations suffering more from the effects of climate change. Keep in mind the small island nations of the Pacific, like Kiribati or Tonga. Keep in mind the 3rd world countries of Africa struggling whenever there's a drought. We might ask 'who is my neighbour', in this context? Someone has written '*Climate change is as much a matter of faith as it is about the future of God's creation.*'

[Part 3 Slideshow World Environment]

In *summary* then, there is increasing evidence scientifically verifying climate change and its implications for all life. However let's not so much dwell on the situation, and feel powerless but rather be aware of it and how it affects communities both human, plant and animal. As we come to *mindfulness* to ask yourself how can I be more active towards the preservation of life? How can I act in *partnership with God* to restore this unique planet?

I began with the opening words of the Book of Genesis. Now to close with the affirmation from the beginning of the gospel of John: 'All things came into being with God. What has come into being was life, and the life was the light of all people.'