

Christ in all Creation

Sermon by the Rev Derek Lightbourne St James Lower Hutt, November 26th, 2023

Keynote Bible readings: Mark 16.14 – 20, Genesis 1.1 – 19, Colossians 1.9 - 20

Today's theme is about beginnings and endings, encompassing 'Christ in all creation.'

Beginnings - as a teenager I had a love of creation, and school was a focus place on geography, history along with music. When it came to university, in preparing for secondary teaching these continued to be my focus.

Until I believed being called to offer for ordination. When this was accepted my advisers said to continue on those subjects. So these have over the years continued as a first love – as exemplified in the stole I designed incorporating a cross on the Eastern and Western hemispheres. This interest came to fruition on retirement - enabling travel and photography.

Thus when Vicar Annette invited me to preach on the theme of Christ in all creation on my final sermon in the parish, it was an 'aha moment.' This also ends my time of involvement in the ministry team in the Parish of Lower Hutt.

The sermon is in three sections – in the beginning; creation in Planet Earth, and thirdly the destiny of humanity.

- 1) First, *in the beginning*. Scientists suggest to us it all started with the 'big bang' but they do acknowledge it is a theory - certainly no human was there to witness it. With the recent use of the James Webb Space Telescope set far out in space, there's remarkable discoveries of galaxies that existed before the 'big bang' of 13 billion years ago. Indeed recent scientific thinking now speculates that the universe may have always existed.

The people of God also have pondered – and it's recorded in the Holy Scriptures. First, in the book of Genesis – '*In the beginning God....*' And more so - In the beginning God created.....' There's another also – from the Gospel of John – 'In the beginning was the Word.....and the Word with God, and the word was God....' continuing – 'All things came into being through him , and without him not one thing came into being....then the wondrous miracle, 'What has come into being in him was *life*.....' There's a further ascription of creation's beginning in the epistle to the Colossians: 'Christ is the image of the invisible God, the first-born of all creation, for in him all things in heaven and on earth were created, things visible and invisible.....' (Col. 1 15 – 16). And please bear with me, one more: 'Paul's testimony to the people of Athens: 'The God who made the world and everything in it, who is Lord of heaven and earth.....(Acts 17. 24).

I also offer a *personal reflection* – of 'in the beginning.' – the universe is so awesome - suggesting it's beyond human comprehension. I love the phrase of a song, of creator God – 'hands that flung stars into space.'

And from a hymn 'The spacious firmament on high...and spangled heavens, a shining frame, their great Original proclaim. The unwearied sun from day to day does his creator's power display.....' Verses from Psalm 8 also come to mind: 'When I look at your heavens,

the work of your fingers, the moon and the stars that you have established; what are human beings that you are mindful of them, mortals that you care for them?

Affirming then, this profound awareness – today's theme: Christ in all creation.

2) *Christ in all creation – on Planet Earth* – The concluding words of Mark's Gospel include a commission to the disciples to '*Go into all the world and proclaim the good news to all creation.*' 'Creation' being the rendering of the Greek word *cosmos*. That implies the universe, including the planet Earth, and humanity. St Francis is one most remembered, with his love of animals and birds. And furthermore in relationship – 'Brother Sun, Sister Moon.....' The early Hebrew hymn writers of the Psalms exhorted the people to 'praise God, sun and moon, all you shining stars, you highest heavens.. you sea monsters and all deeps, fire and hail, snow and frost...let them all praise the Lord'.

And our own relationship with nature in worship we praise God...'for the beauty of these islands, for the wild places and the bush, the mountains, the coast and the sea.....for our life together, for Aotearoa, New Zealand.' (NZPB)

Let me further share a personal observation – this happened especially in the Covid 19 pandemic lock-down – birds came back, round our neighbourhood. Thus tui, kereru, pukeko, plover, paradise ducks, and colourful rosellas amongst others.

When on a recent visit to Arthurs Pass I was sitting on a log in the beech forest and, in the stillness a native robin became quite curious, and was hopping round like those birds of paradise in New Guinea. It seemed we were making friends!

On planet Earth we can be none too complacent. Despite protestations our country is still producing and using the fossil fuel being coal and gas. I have noted appeals from Forest and Bird to help fund opposition to the granting of mining permits, especially on conservation land. Despite the protests of some farmers I believe there needs to be change in farming practices so there are fewer herd animals belching toxic methane gas into the atmosphere. Then there's water – conservation. We know climate change is bringing more extremes – floods in some areas, and droughts in others. So there's going to be issues with our lakes and rivers, and reservoirs nationwide. How can we be short of water locally when there's litres of water flowing down Te Awa Kairangi - Hutt River?) Thankfully, we haven't experienced many wildfires – and the water it takes to extinguish them.

3rd) *Humanities destiny:*

The believers of the early church were commissioned, to be 'witnesses. in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the *'ends of the earth.'*' Travel opportunity has given personal special relevance to that commission.

Our own country saw the preaching of the gospel by the Rev Samuel Marsden in 1814. In 2020 I first visited the site – 'the Māori people heard the great and glorious word' (..... from the carol Te Harinui.)

When I journeyed across the Roaring Forties south to Auckland Islands there was a further reminder of how in the 19th century the imperative of preaching the gospel, from a ship which travelled to the fledgling village of Hardwicke. The British ship the Calliope had a chaplain on board and in 1852 when they got to the settlement he baptised the

children living there. Travelling on our cruise was a person whose great great grandmother have given birth to one of the children. Who knows that Bishop Selwyn tried to visit the Auckland Islands but was thwarted by bad weather.

Others also have sought to bring good news 'to the ends of the earth.' Chatham Islands where I have preached saw the visit of Moravian German missionaries. They were scholars and tradesmen. They weren't very successful in converting local Māori, but farming, shipbuilding and grazing sheep provided fresh meat and vegetables to visiting whalers. Relics of their mission station are still present.

There is a place for hope – divine hope. I'd like to quote a less well known yet epic description." Sir Ernest Shackleton was a person of faith and wrote after the epic voyage in Antarctica in 1914 - 16, 'When I look back on those days I have no doubt that Providence (their name for God) guided us , not only across those snowfields, but across stormy white sea that separated Elephant Island from our landing place on South Georgia, I know that through the long and racking march of 36 hours over unnamed mountains and glaciers of South Georgia it seemed to me often that we were four not three. I said nothing to my companions on that point, but afterwards Worsley said to me, 'Boss, I had the curious feeling on the march that there was another person with us.' Crean confessed to the same idea. One feels 'the dearth of human words, the roughness of mortal speech' in trying to describe things intangible, but a record of our journey would be incomplete without a reference to a subject very near our hearts.'

In our day scientists including Sir David Attenborough and young people like Greta Thunburg are urging action towards conservation for the future of our planet. The most telling saying '*There is no Planet B.*' Indeed there's truth in that as toxic rays of radiation frequent the universe – and indeed I believe it is divine miracle that conditions render it possible for humans to even exist. A recent New Scientist article posed the question 'Why haven't we heard from aliens – in outer space? The James Webb telescope has so far found no evidence of intelligent life in the billions of stars and galaxies that are the universe.

In concluding I'm mindful of the prophetic words of Bishop Justin 'that 'climate change is a spiritual issue'. Which means we Christians have to take notice and to act in ways to help restore the Planet.

What more can we do in becoming an eco-church? What can you do in reducing, making less waste? How much recycling is possible? I quote from Irish writer Sr Deidre Mullan: 'We can't be expected to fix the whole world at once; but we can stretch out our hands to mend that part of the world within our reach. We must work locally, but always with an eye to the global.'

The truth of Christ in all creation reminds us of our responsibility. Our prayer to the God of creation, 'to awaken in us a new reverence for life, and the resolve to achieve sustainability. Revive in us a thirst for justice that all might be nurtured by creation. May we actively embrace our role as servants, stewards, protectors, that we may safeguard the integrity of creation and sustain and celebrate the life of the earth.' Amen.