

And God saw that it was good!
The Scriptures and the Care of Creation.

Rev. Elaine Murray

CORK SCRIPTURE GROUP – SPRING MODULE 2024

8TH APRIL 2024

We all know so well the opening of John's gospel:

'In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God and the Word was God.'

tying in with long held tradition of Wisdom/Word being with God always, before time, before space, before light.... The wonder of God's creation is there for all of us and that is why it can seem so horrible to see it being wantonly destroyed, usually by our carelessness and thoughtlessness.

A huge stumbling block for Christians is to view the Earth as just something that we are passing through... on our way to our real home in Heaven.... Sallie McFague, a famous American Theologian, who died in 2019, used the idea of '*a Hotel vs a Home*' in trying to get us to understand what humankind are currently doing to our planet Earth.

As she pointed out, when you stay in a hotel, you use all the towels and throw them on the ground to be washed by someone else. You use more shampoo than you need... sure isn't it free! But if you are at home, you'd be careful to hang up your towel to dry so that you'd get at least a couple of showers out of it.... You only use the amount of shampoo that you need and you put the cap back on the bottle carefully so that it doesn't spill all over the floor of the shower and get wasted.

This is the difference in how we must view the Earth, our home.

As a great poster puts it; **'There is no Planet B!'**

Earth is all we have and we are risking everything when we treat it as some kind of Radisson type Hotel we can just move on from down the road to the next Hotel chain.

We have to work to recover our sense of wonder for what is around us. We have to sit up and notice the miracle of the moon above us. We have to listen to AND value the birds and the bees – while we still have them!

And what about worms and mosquitos! Everything has a value, the earth and everything in it has value because God made it so. As we become aware of the order of Creation, we will see God's valuing of all God's work. We just need to learn to appreciate ... this grows from awareness at a minimum. It's a habit we can cultivate you know... When I was a child I don't ever remember seeing blue tits or blackbirds..... I know logically they must have been around but I don't actually remember as a child looking and really seeing the beautiful colours of a Goldfinch or a Blue tit.. All birds I can remember were either crows, or seagulls or sparrows.... Is there more birds around now?.... No....it's only that now I take time to appreciate all that is around....

We need to relook at our scriptures to appreciate all that it has to say about Ecology and Creation...the Bible is hardly a minor contributor on writings about caring for creation, in fact, the Bible is a powerful ecological handbook on how to live rightly on this earth.

Since God creates and sustains ALL of creation, we find, naturally enough, that the Bible calls us to honour all that is God's... and God saw that it was Good..... God repeatedly calls his creation GOOD. And Jesus Christ is the one through whom ALL THINGS are reconciled to God.

We are called, as part of Creation, to take care of the Creation that God has given us. We need to make a renewed effort to recapture the wonder of the glory of God – his creation..... and then when we really see the wonder of creation, we will remember to treat creation as holy.... as sacred.

In my studies, I came across a very useful way of looking at the Bible for principles for Creation Care, the Integrity of Creation and I'd like to share them with you tonight.

They are the idea of a man called **Calvin DeWitt**, a US Professor and lifelong environmentalist.

He wrote a book called ***Earth-Wise: A Biblical Response to Environmental Issues***, which, I suppose, is exactly what I am talking about tonight!

He talks about there being *8 principles for Creation Care to safeguard the integrity of God's Creation*.

Suggesting that we really need to read our Scriptures anew, we need to look carefully for scripture's own ecological insights on how to live and value our home anew.

The first of these is the '**Earth Keeping' Principle**.

From Genesis 2:15 The Lord God took the man and put him in the garden of Eden to till and keep it. As the Lord keeps and sustains us, so must we keep and sustain our Lord's creation.

The Hebrew word for 'keep' is 'Shamar' which indicates a loving, caring, sustaining kind of keeping ... we all know the Aaronic blessing well 'The Lord bless you and keep you': well the verb 'keep' is 'Shamar'... Our relationship to creation must be a loving, caring, keeping relationship. As God KEEPS people, so should God's people KEEP God's creation.

The 2nd principle is called the '**Fruitfulness Principle**'

In Ps104:

10 You make springs gush forth in the valleys; they flow between the hills,

11 giving drink to every wild animal; the wild asses quench their thirst.

12 By the streams the birds of the air have their habitation; they sing among the branches.

13 From your lofty abode you water the mountains;

the earth is satisfied with the fruit of your work. '

We should enjoy but not destroy Creation's fruitfulness...

In Genesis (1:20,22,24):

²⁰ And God said, 'Let the waters bring forth swarms of living creatures, and let birds fly above the earth across the dome of the sky.' ²² God blessed them, saying, 'Be fruitful and multiply and fill the waters in the seas, and let birds multiply on the earth.'²⁴ And God said, 'Let the earth bring forth living creatures of every kind: cattle and creeping things and wild animals of the earth of every kind.' And it was so.

We see how God's creation reflects God's fruitful work, giving to land and life what it needs to satisfy and sustain it. As God's fruitful work brings fruit to Creation, so should ours! As God provides for all God's creatures, so should we! We who are created to reflect God's image! So though we are expected to enjoy Creation and it's many fruits, we may NOT destroy that fruitfulness. We must preserve and care for God's many species whose interactions and

relationships with each other and the land and water make up the very fabric of our biosphere...
Listen to Ezekiel 34:18:

'Is it not enough for you to feed on the good pasture, but you must tread down with your feet the rest of your pasture? When you drink of clear water, must you foul the rest with your feet?'

The next principle de Witt speaks about, the third principle, is the '**Sabbath Principle**'

Exodus 20:8: *'Remember the Sabbath day and keep it holy'* and

Deuteronomy 5:12 *'Observe the Sabbath day and keep it holy'* no ambiguity there. We must provide for Creation's sabbath rests. The biblical texts are clear about the land also needing its time of sabbath. Nothing in Creation must be relentlessly pressed.

Exodus 23:10-11: *The Lord will provide...*

Leviticus 25:20-2: *Should you ask, 'What shall we eat in the seventh year, if we may not sow or gather in our crop?' I will order my blessing for you in the sixth year, so that it will yield a crop for three years.*

Jesus furthered explained the Sabbath in Mark's gospel (2:27). Then he said to them:

'The sabbath was made for humankind, and not humankind for the sabbath;

clarifying that the Sabbath is made for those who are served by it... not the other way around. The Sabbath is made for people and, through them, for ALL the rest of God's creation. The Sabbath protects the land from relentless exploitation, it helps it rejuvenate, helps give it time for rest and restoration. It's not merely a legalistic requirement but a profound principle. The Sabbath law is not restricted to agriculture where the farmers allow their land to rest – it applies to ALL creation. It affects our use of water and air when we discharge our exhausts, smoke, sewage and all that we 'throw away' (just look at the effect of Fast Fashion at the moment!). God does warn us what will happen if we disobey....

Leviticus 26:14-15,33-35

But if you will not obey me, and do not observe all these commandments, if you spurn my statutes, and abhor my ordinances, so that you will not observe all my commandments, and you break my covenant, And you I will scatter among the nations, and I will unsheathe the sword against you; your land shall be a desolation, and your cities a waste.

Then the land shall enjoy its sabbath years as long as it lies desolate, while you are in the land of your enemies; then the land shall rest, and enjoy its sabbath years. As long as it lies desolate, it shall have the rest it did not have on your sabbaths when you were living on it.

Harsh words as it often the case in Leviticus but who here remembers how quickly the land recovered during our enforced pause in the Pandemic! It was frightening... yes, harsh words but God's promises of blessing are equally powerful!

Isaiah 58:13-14

If you refrain from trampling the sabbath, from pursuing your own interests on my holy day; if you call the sabbath a delight and the holy day of the LORD honourable; if you honour it, not going your own ways, serving your own interests, or pursuing your own affairs; then you shall take delight in the LORD, and I will make you ride upon the heights of the earth; I will feed you with the heritage of your ancestor Jacob, for the mouth of the LORD has spoken.

The fourth principle is the '**Discipleship Principle**'

1 Corinthians 15:45:

Thus it is written, '*The first man, Adam, became a living being*'; the last Adam became a life-giving spirit.

And also in 1 Corinthians 15, verse 22: *for as all die in Adam, so all will be made alive in Christ.*

We are all called to be Disciples/Followers but not of the first Adam who neglected to serve (Abad) and keep (Shamar) Creation. We are to be followers of the last Adam, Jesus Christ, in John 3:16 we hear: *that God loved the world so much that he gave his only son to bring*

true life, to make things right. Christ is the one IN whom and FOR whom all things were created

Colossians 1:16 *for in him all things in heaven and on earth were created, things visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or powers—all things have been created through him and for him.*

God redeems us through Christ, he is the one through whom God made the universe

John 1:3 *All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being*

Col 1:20 *and through him God was pleased to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, by making peace through the blood of his cross.*

Hebrews 1:3 *He is the reflection of God's glory and the exact imprint of God's very being, and he sustains all things by his powerful word. When he had made purification for sins, he sat down at the right hand of the Majesty on high.*

God reaches out sacrificially to make things right again. Jesus Christ, the final Adam, undoes the damage the first Adam and his followers did. The first Adam brought death and degradation whereas the second Adam brought life and restoration.

Romans 5:12-17 *Therefore, just as sin came into the world through one man, and death came through sin, and so death spread to all because all have sinned— sin was indeed in the world before the law, but sin is not reckoned when there is no law. Yet death exercised dominion from Adam to Moses, even over those whose sins were not like the transgression of Adam, who is a type of the one who was to come.*

But the free gift is not like the trespass. For if the many died through the one man's trespass, much more surely have the grace of God and the free gift in the grace of the one man, Jesus Christ, abounded for the many. And the free gift is not like the effect of the one man's sin. For the judgement following one trespass brought condemnation, but the free gift following many trespasses brings justification. If, because of the one man's trespass, death exercised dominion through that one, much more surely will those who receive the abundance of grace and the free gift of righteousness exercise dominion in life through the one man, Jesus Christ.

The disciples/followers of the 2nd Adam are the people for whom the whole earth is eagerly looking for .. Romans 8:19 *For the creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the children of God;*

We walk in the footsteps of the one who reconciles all things. We work to reconcile all things to God in Christ.

The fifth principle, de Witt calls the '**Kingdom Priority Principle**'

Matthew 6:33 *But strive first for the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well.*

We must seek first God's kingdom and in seeking God's kingdom, we will discover happiness and joy are by-products of our stewardship. Fulfilment will come as a result of seeking the kingdom. The inheritance is not for people who arrogantly exploit their neighbours, the land and earth's creatures for all they're worth! Nor is the inheritance for those who knowingly destroy the earth... *'Our Father... your will be done on Earth'* (Matthew 6:9-10) When we say this prayer, we affirm this calling ... to seek God's Kingdom.

The 6th Principle is the '**Contentment Principle**'

We must seek true contentment. People chose to go their own grasping way , taking and grabbing more and more from Creation for selfish advancement. This relentless pressing of land and life is seriously degrading God's Creation. Psalm 119:36 should be our prayer : *'Turn my heart to your decrees, and not to selfish gain.*

Accumulating the goods of Creation is selfish gain. *Godly gain is doing the work God would have us do in the world.* 1 Timothy 6:6

Of course, there is great gain in godliness combined with contentment; Especially when you think about the very next line that we use in our funeral liturgies.....

for we brought nothing into the world, so that we can take nothing out of it;

Contentment means aiming to have the things that will sustain us while not pressing beyond that. Personally, I believe that this is why many of us are so happy on holidays... we only have to mind what fits in our suitcases! There is an Amish saying about 'the desire to be rich is to desire to have more than we need to be content.' If we don't go beyond contentment we can use all our energy to pursue other more important things...

1 Timothy 6:11 *But as for you, man of God, shun all this; pursue righteousness, godliness, faith, love, endurance, gentleness.*

Of course that applies to Women of God too!!

Hebrews 13:5 *Keep your lives free from the love of money, and be content with what you have; for he has said, 'I will never leave you or forsake you.'*

Being content helps Creation's integrity... all the things we use, make, manipulate, accumulate derives from Creation itself. If we are content we will demand less from the land, leave room for God's other creatures. We will be responsible stewards, true care-takers, keepers of Creation. We will allow Creation to heal itself and perpetuate its fruitfulness, to the glory and praise of its maker!

The 7th and penultimate Principle is the '**Praxis Principle**'

We must practice what we preach. In our scriptures we are told what is right. Just knowing, or believing, is not enough.

James 2:19 *You believe that God is one; you do well. Even the demons believe—and shudder.*

Yes, even the demons believe!... we must practice God's requirements or they do no good.... The famous 'the road to Hell is paved with good intentions'! The failure of God's people to act on what they know is right is well documented - and challenged – in scripture.

Ezekiel 33:31-32 *They come to you as people come, and they sit before you as my people, and they hear your words, but they will not obey them. For flattery is on their lips, but their heart is set on their gain. To them you are like a singer of love songs, one who has a beautiful voice and plays well on an instrument; they hear what you say, but they will not do it.*

Or Luke 6:46 *'Why do you call me "Lord, Lord", and do not do what I tell you?*

Studying our scriptures to learn God's requirements for Creation brings us directly to the question 'Now what must we do?' Our challenge is to move forward and to put what we know and believe into practice.

The 8th and final principle mentioned by De Witt is the '**Conservation Principle**'

We must return Creation's service to us with service of our own.... the root meaning of Con-Serve - to serve WITH!

In Genesis 2:15 *The LORD God took the man and put him in the garden of Eden to till it and keep it.*

The Hebrew Word 'Abad' translates here as 'till' but also is translated as 'Serve' (or 'dress' or 'work').. This word 'Abad' occurs 290 times in the Hebrew Scriptures.

Joshua 24:15 *Now if you are unwilling to serve the LORD, choose this day whom you will serve,.... but as for me and my household, we will serve the LORD.'*

God calls us all to give the garden of Creation our caring service. We know that this garden serves us.... Good food, beauty, herbs, fibre, medicine, pleasant microclimates, continual soil making, nutrient processing, seed production.... Ecologists call what the garden provides 'ecosystem services', water purification by evaporation and percolation, moderation of flood peaks and drought flows by river system wetlands etc.

Yet Genesis addresses OUR service to the Garden. What is given is implicit, our service to the garden is explicit. We are expected to return the service of the garden with service of our own.

Reciprocal service, defining an engaging relationship between garden and gardener, between the biosphere and its safeguarding stewards. Our love of our Creator God, God's love of creation and our imaging of this love of God, all join together to commission us as Con-Servers of Creation, following in the footsteps of the second Adam. Again, looking at 1 Corinthians 15:22 *for as all die in Adam, so all will be made alive in Christ* and 1 Corinthians 15:45 *Thus it is written, 'The first man, Adam, became a living being'; the last Adam became a life-giving spirit.*

These were the 8 principles for Creation Care as outlined by Calvin de Witt which I feel can be really useful in helping us to find in our scriptures areas and thinking that point to the value of all Creation. The **Principles of Creation Care** again were:

- 1. Earth Keeping**
- 2. Fruitfulness**
- 3. Sabbath**
- 4. Discipleship**
- 5. Kingdom Priority**
- 6. Contentment**
- 7. Praxis**
- 8. Conservation.**

By re-examining our scriptures, by 'mining' our scriptures, much like the Liberation Theologians did back in the 70s, we can use our Christian Theology to engage with the ecological concerns in our society. We need to do this... because our traditions impact on our responses. We have come a long way from the understanding of humankind being the dominating force over nature.

In 1966, Professor Lynn White, in an address to the American Association for the advancement of science, stated that:

We are superior to nature, contemptuous of it, willing to use it for our slightest whim ... we shall continue to have a worsening ecological crisis until we reject the Christian axiom that nature has not reason for existence but to serve Man'.

He was being so radical back then but so right! Back in the mid 70s, **the Justice, Peace and Integrity of Creation (JPIC)** initiative caused a paradigm shift in Christian thinking towards an understanding that the whole of creation had an intrinsic value. The ethical perspective that evolved from this could be termed 'Theocentric', rather than anthropocentric or even biocentric.

A God centred view holding human interest and the broader concern for creation together while at the same time recognizing the place of humans as having special responsibilities for all others. A Christian theology of Creation celebrates the interconnectedness and interdependence of all within the cosmic covenant of God.

The integrity of creation as a phrase, theologically affirms that creation is dependent on its creator while also having a worth in it's own right. Humankind is just a part of the totality of all that is created. Sallie McFague, whom I mentioned earlier said this:

'In addition to the many other contexts for interpreting who we are, we must also remember the cosmological one, we must move beyond Democracy to Biocracy, beyond loyalty to our own tribe to a view of ourselves as citizens of Planet Earth'

Creation itself is sacramental. According to Genesis, everything that God created was 'good' and so the view is that God's goodness comes to us through creation.

Nature is thus seen as revelatory of the divine, the cosmos is seen as a place of mystery, holy ground. God is close, immanent; this implies a renewed, a sacramental approach which calls people to embrace the mission to heal and restore creation by adopting environmentally sustainable lifestyles as daily spiritual practice so as to act as models for others.

The biblical theme of the Love of God for Creation comes across most vividly in the Wisdom Literature and in the piece of Scripture I have chosen for study tonight - **Psalms 104**.

As Christians, we must apply the hermeneutic of suspicion and retrieve the correct understanding in our creation scriptures to counteract the old understanding of dominion as allowing humankind's domination as Professor Lynn White identified way back in the mid 60s.

When we look carefully, as we did tonight, we find that our scriptures speaks loudly of the Joy of God who loves all God's creation for itself in a way which is not dependent on whether or not it is useful for humans.

For '*God saw that it was good*'

Thank you.

© Rev Elaine Murray, Carrigaline Union of Parishes.