

Dear God! What on earth are we doing to the Earth?

The search for wisdom

Christ at the centre of the cosmos

An address given by Professor Paul Ballard, 21st August 2019

It is a privilege and a pleasure to be invited to open this series of meditations and reflections on the GAIA installation.

The Peterborough Eco-faith Network, of which I am the Co-ordinator, seeks to support Christians who are concerned for the health of the planet, to arouse interest in these issues among Christians and the churches, and to collaborate with others in the wider community. If you wish to know more or to be involved, pop in to see our stand, along with others, in the Education Building, across the green. That exhibition is worth a visit.

As you face the high altar from the nave, in the crossing hangs a globe, an image of our planet. Looking at it must be a little like the experience of those astronauts who saw our world from space for the first time. There it is; wonderful and beautiful, yet just a speck in the vastness of space. This is our home, our only home. On this 'terrestrial ball', to quote Isaac Watts, we have emerged to create all that human civilization means, sustained by earth's resources. For this we can give thanks, not least as we approach the season of 'creation-tide', when we celebrate harvest and 'all good gifts around us'.

However, 'creation-tide' is also a time to recollect our responsibility for the earth, the imperative of creation-care. You do not need to be reminded of the ways by which we exploit, over use and abuse the earth. You watch the telly and read the papers. You are familiar with the dangers we face as a human race: climate change, deforestation, habitat and species loss, desertification, the pollution of sea, land and air.

It is good that Peterborough City Council, prompted by strong public concern, along with many other councils, has declared a 'climate emergency'. This should strengthen our city's aspiration to be an Environment Capital, alongside many other groups and organisations, including the cathedral. Such actions are, of course, part of the slow but discernable shift towards building a sustainable world: fossil fuels are being phased out, greener technologies emerge daily, and cultural patterns are changing, through re-cycling, healthy

living, the reduced use of earth's resources and a greater concern for the natural environment.

But these changes may merely be attempts to stave off facing the real issues of working towards a fundamentally new approach to life. Simply tinkering across the surface or around the edges, making a few adjustments, will not be enough, all the while hoping that, really, it will be 'business as usual'. The problem is deeper than that. We are being challenged to reassess the fundamental understanding of our relation to the created order, of which we are a part and on which we totally depend. It is about the underlying attitude that, across the globe, informs our actions, our communal assumptions and our economic life. Unless that changes, the rest, in the end, is but plastering over the wounds.

Look again at that globe. Our age is an age of exploration and radical new knowledge. That image itself comes from the perspective of space. We inherit and build on the triumphs of the Renaissance and Enlightenment. We live in time that has delved into the very core of matter, discovered the elements that govern life, even explored the origins of existence and the vastness of the universe. From it has come the modern world, from which we all greatly benefit. But it was Sir Francis Bacon, Elizabethan politician, polymath and a father of modern science, who put his finger on the hidden challenge. He said: 'Knowledge, itself, is not wrong but it gives power'. And it depends what is done with that power, to what ends it is directed. This power has, in fact, been seen, primarily, as an opportunity to serve our immediate human ends. What, it is asked, can we get out of it, personally or communally? But this narrows our vision and tends to blind us to the wider context and its needs and flourishing. Everything, we assume, revolves round human needs, wants and greed. To recall Genesis, the dominion of responsible care that God has entrusted to us has become domination, the exercise of force, pushing aside all other claims or needs. So, the natural world has been seen simply as a resource to exploit, or a repository for our refuse, or a stage on which the human drama, the only game in town, can be played. It is this fundamental assumption that, crucially, has to be challenged. A new mind-set is needed, a more peaceful, just and comprehensive picture of what it means to be human, so that we live not just on but with and for the planet that sustains us and which we so happily abuse.

Where, then, are we to turn for this new perspective, for what the Bible calls 'wisdom', the hidden secret of all things? Does our faith offer an insight? Look again at that globe, but this time see in front of it George Pace's Crucifixion, with its motto: 'While the earth turns, the cross stands'.

Two Biblical passages, Proverbs 8:22-31 and Colossians 1:15-20, are key. The creation poem from Proverbs tells how the world is shaped and governed by God's wisdom, purpose and order. It is not random or simply vacuous but carries within it the heart and mind of God. As Genesis put it: 'It was very good', and so it remains.

St. Paul, in the snippet from his letter, echoing Proverbs, kind of inverts the process. At the centre he put Jesus Christ, on the cross, who is visible. For Christians, Jesus is the open, public expression of the heart of God, God's wisdom. Paul asserts, however, that this reality is not only found in history, in the cross and in the fellowship of faith, but is the truth of the cosmos, the secret of God's creative purposes. *In him, all things in heaven and 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. He himself is before all things and in him all things hold together.* Or as John puts it: *All things came into being through him.* There it is again: *all things*, that is the universe, with all its millions of galaxies and the smallest particle of energy. If we want to know what it all means we have to turn to Christ, *the Word made flesh, the image of the invisible God.*

If, then, the crucified is at the heart of creation a number of things have to be said about how we see our world.

First, to borrow a phrase from Gilbert and Sullivan, *'Tis love that makes the world go round.* In Christ crucified God shows his commitment and care for the creation. There is indeed danger, tempest and earthquake but at the heart of the world there is love, love that gives meaning to existence and can weave its meaning into the drama of life. The world is most really the world when it is seen as interlocking harmony, where each element, each plant, each creature finds itself and serves the whole.

Studdert Kennedy, Woodbine Willy, contemplates a rose.

*In this one flower meet
And intertwine,
The universe is concrete*

*The human and divine
In one unique and perfect thing, are fused
Into a unit of love,
This rose as I behold it.*

Secondly and closely, the cross is the agony of God in Christ, his longing of love for the restoration and re-flourishing of the damaged earth. God suffers pain and distress and shares our longing and striving for a new heaven and a new earth.

God weeps. Christ still says: *Father forgive they know not what they do*. From Nicaragua:

*On the last day man destroyed the world called Earth.
Earth had been beautiful
Until the spirit of man moved across her face, destroying all; things,
And the lord saw what man had done,
And in the silence
That had engulfed the smoking ruins
God wept.*

Thirdly, the cross is the place of healing. St Paul again: *Through him God was pleased to reconcile all things*, to bring things back together again. The Spirit of God eternally sustains and restores creation. Lines from *God's Grandeur*, by Gerard Manley Hopkins:

*Generations have trod, have trod, have trod,
All is scared by trade
Bleared and smeared with toil; the soil
Is bare now, nor can foot feel, being shod.
And for all this, nature is never spent;
There lives the clearest freshness deep down things
Because the Holy Ghost over the bent world broods with warm breast,*

And with, Ah!, bright wings.

Fourthly, the cross is the mark of the Kingdom. As Jesus insisted, authority and power in the Kingdom are found not in exercising lordship but in sacrifice and service, in seeking the welfare of others, sharing understanding and sensitivity. If that is true in human relations it is true for *the flowers of the field and the birds of the air*. All things, in their own way, are part of an inter-related whole, dependent on each other. We who have been given power to understand this will find fulfilment in living as part of this harmony with all things. There is a marvellous image in Micah of *shalom*, the peace of the Kingdom, after the end of strife and battle, when humanity and nature come together in a symbiosis that is mutual well-being.

Nation shall not lift up sword against nation

Neither shall they learn war any more;

But they shall sit under their vines

And under their own fig tree,

And none shall make them afraid.

Fifthly, the world is gift. *God so loved the world* (that is the cosmos) *that he gave his only begotten Son*. God's giving encompasses *all things*. Therefore, we should receive all things as gift from God – including our world. Gifts to be received gracefully and with thanksgiving, especially the gift of life and sustenance. Thomas Treherne:

Your enjoyment of the world is never right, till every morning you are aware of heaven; see yourself in your Father's place; and look upon the skies and the earth as celestial joys.

Here then, before the cross, is the beginning of wisdom, of understanding God's creation. There is much to tease out, questions to ask and greater wonders to behold; but, as Paul asserts, Christ is at the centre of creation. If, therefore, *God so loved the world* then those who love God should be caught up in the wonder, joy and caring for it. Indeed, there is gospel, good news for our day. For Anglicans, the fifth mark of mission is creation care; to make the environment central to our concerns as Christians. This is a part of our calling as human beings alongside all those who are committed to the quest for justice and peace and the integrity of creation. This is what makes us human.

As Christians we can offer a vision and a strategy that can undergird that can inform that imperative.

It will not be easy to take the *road less travelled*; to join with those who go against the stream. For humanity to row back from the potential disaster of the sixth extinction will take all our energy and self-control. There are no simplistic solutions. It will mean consuming less, treating nature with respect, using our ingenuity wisely and finding fulfilment in ways different from the patterns of life that we presently assume. But if we do tip over that precipice there is no way back. Therefore, it behoves us to note well this Yoruba wisdom:

Enjoy the world gently.

Enjoy the world gently.

It cannot be repaired.

Enjoy the world gently.

This address was part of a series of 'Wednesday at One' talks, by various speakers, during the exhibition of Luke Jerram's Gaia earth artwork at Peterborough Cathedral, 19 August to 15 September 2019.