

Caring for the environment: a fuller theological consideration of why Christians care for the environment

"The Earth is the Lord's" (Psalm 24)

Christian care for the environment rests on three pillars.

The first is the conviction that this world is God's creation. He made it and "saw ... it was very good." (Gen 1.31) Human rebellion has affected the relationship between humanity and creation (Gen 3), but God cares about his creation, makes promises to every living creature (not just human beings) that he will not destroy it (Gen 9), and gives his people instructions about how they should treat it (e.g. Lev 25.1-12) and gives his prophet a vision of what it will one day be (Isaiah 11.6-9). In the New Testament Paul expresses the conviction that God has continuing purposes for creation (Romans 8.19-21) and tells us, concerning Jesus Christ, that 'all things were created ... for him' (Col 1.16). It seems appropriate then that when we get to the final chapter of Revelation the picture is not of souls floating around on clouds, but of a renewed creation.

The second pillar is the conviction that God has given human beings a responsibility for his creation. While the command to 'rule' (Gen 1.28) can be (and has been) misunderstood, it must be interpreted in terms of the servant kingship God himself models for us. Thus understood, it fits with the command to 'work (equally well translated 'serve') and take care of' the earth' (Gen 2.15). We are called to be 'care-takers'.

The third pillar is that God is a God of justice and mercy and that he calls us to be people of justice and mercy too (Micah 6.8). Almost everything bad about climate change and environmental degradation affects the poor and future generations worse than the rich and comfortable.

These basic truths can be built on in various ways. The theological concepts of covenant and of justice are fruitful ones to explore. The conclusion has to be that the earth is not just a backdrop for human existence but that God has a care for all that he made. So Christians are to care for the world in which God has put us. To call God creator and at the same time to spoil and destroy his creation is a contradiction of our faith.

These truths are recognised by the Anglican Communion's 5th Mark of Mission which says that as part of our mission we are to "Strive to safeguard the integrity of creation and sustain and renew the life of the earth".

When we turn to consider the state of our world we find a plethora of environmental problems. Climate change is at the heart of many of them. Since the industrial revolution human activity has pumped increased quantities of carbon dioxide into the atmosphere, raising the temperature of the planet, changing weather patterns, creating new areas of desert, melting ice caps, raising ocean levels, damaging habitats and thus biodiversity, increasing the frequency of violent weather events. In addition human beings have been polluting earth, air and water, destroying vital tropical forests, exhausting fossil fuels, over-using water supplies, over-fishing the oceans, causing or hastening the extinction of species. Most often it is the consumer demands of the more developed nations which have been the moving causes, yet it is largely the poorer nations which are suffering first and most from the effects.

As Christians we cannot ignore this destruction. Our calling to care for God's earth and our commitment to justice and love and mercy demand that we pay attention both to the causes and the possible remedies. This is not an optional interest but a central consequence of our faith.

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