

## Wellington Cathedral of St Paul

*Sunday, November 6<sup>th</sup>, 2016*

OT: Genesis 9: 12-17    NT: Romans 8: 18-27    Gospel: Luke 12: 22-31

Preacher: Rod Oram

In the name of God, creator, redeemer and giver of life. Amen

Every time I've come to church to worship, whether its my first visit or my umpteenth, I like to sit about six pews back from the front, on the left, on the aisle.

Perhaps I'm just nosey. Well, I am a journalist.

But not too close. I need to take my cue from people in front. So I don't stand embarrassed when everyone else kneels.

Clearly I'm a creature of habit – of very deeply ingrained habit. One of my earliest memories of church is sitting right there. Because that's where my father always led the family to.

Our church was St George's, a Victorian pile in Edgbaston, an inner city suburb of Birmingham. This was Britain in the 1950s when the city was still in its great, coal-powered industrial heyday.

Sometimes in winter, the smog was so bad, we'd sink into preternatural darkness by early afternoon. Visibility was near zero. My bus home from school could take an hour and a half to creep 7 miles.

It was worse in the capital. During the Great Smog of London in September 1952, 6,000 people died. The cause? The levels in the air of microscopic health-damaging particles from coal burning were two to three times greater than the worst "smog-ocalypse" days Beijing suffers now.

Back then in Britain, such smogs were not understood to be ecological disasters. They were simply local, adverse, side effects of industry, progress and prosperity. We cleaned them up in about 15 years by better technology and air quality legislation.

In so far as I thought much about nature while I was growing up, it came in three basic forms: manicured -- such as our suburban garden and city parks; tame as in "we plough the fields and scatter the good seed on the ground," as we sang every harvest festival; or wild...in the mountains and beaches we visited often as a family.

Oh, how much simpler life was back then. In 1950, the year I was born, there were only 2.5bn people in the world. That's the same population as China and

India today. So it was as if all humans in 1950 lived in just those two countries, and nobody lived anywhere else in the world.

Today we are 7.5bn, and heading, we hope, for stabilising at about 10bn by 2050. If I fulfil one of my great ambitions – to live to be 100 – my fellow living humans will have quadrupled in my lifetime. And each of us will be demanding far more from nature than when I was a child.

God's creation on earth is ancient - 4.5bn years or so old. We humans are a very, very new problem for it. Our human forebears came out of Africa only 200,000 years ago. In our current form, we humans have only looked and behaved like this for 50,000 years.

If we express that on a 24-hour clock, the world's evolution began this time yesterday; and the industrial revolution, the moment 200 years ago we started to change the planet, began 1/200<sup>th</sup> of a second ago.

We have triggered the ecological equivalent of a nuclear explosion.

We are massively destructive of all forms of life in our ecosystem, and increasingly so as our population, appetites and technology soar. We have created many interdependent, truly global ecological disasters.

Thus, this is the Anthropocene, the first geological epoch in which the dominant force changing the life systems of the planet is humankind itself.

Such is the havoc we wreak, the rate of species extinction is more than 100 times the natural rate, and accelerating fast. Some 50% of the species alive today will be extinct by 2100, scientists estimate. That seems far away. Yet the youngest members of our congregation today will still be alive then.

With each species we kill, even those we drastically diminish, we snip more threads in the web of life, weakening the ecosystem...and its ability to support us.

As Paul wrote in this morning's epistle: "We know that the whole creation has been groaning" ...waiting for the coming of our redemption, our right relationship with God and his creation.

What should we do?

Well, yes, we must act on science, technology, economics, politics and all the other human constructs involving the ecosystem and sustainability. We need to know what's happening and what we can do about it.

But all that won't work, if we don't change our values. Above all we have to have a spiritual relationship with creation, a deep belief in our intimate, intrinsic connection with all living things. We have to be dependent, caring --

inconsequential -- parts of creation; not agents in charge of, or having stewardship over God's creation.

We humans have been abusing nature for a long, long time, in many ways.

"The world has been created for everyone's use, but you few rich are trying to keep it for yourselves. For not merely the possession of the earth, but the very sky, the air, and the sea are claimed for the use of the rich few. ...The earth belongs to all, not just to the rich." So wrote St Ambrose of Milan...in the 4<sup>th</sup> century.

To set right what we have done wrong to God's creation, we must do a fearsomely large number of things – above all we must stop abusing nature so we give nature a chance to heal itself.

But in essence, we only have to do one thing. Find our right relationship with nature. We can learn, for example, from the Maori understanding of *kaitiakitanga*.

We translate the concept inadequately into English. We use words like guardianship or custody. But those get us no further than the traditional Christian view of stewardship...the one I held as a child six decades ago and only in recent years have begun to shed.

Yet Maori understand that when we use resources, we influence the rest of the ecosystem, the web of life. Thus we humans are inherently *part* of the system, part of nature. We are ourselves *kaitiaki*.

Which is exactly what our reading from Genesis is telling us this morning. God says: "Whenever the rainbow appears in the clouds, I will see it and remember the everlasting covenant between God and all living creatures of every kind on the earth."

And as Luke's Gospel assures us this morning, God understands our needs. His creation will provide abundantly for us.

So, how might we save ourselves? By giving *to* nature rather than taking *from* nature.

We cannot even conceive yet of what many of those remedies will be. If we find Christ in all creation, we will find inspiration to imagine those remedies and enthusiasm to act on them.

After all, inspiration is from the Latin for spirit, breath; and enthusiasm is from the Greek for "in God".

With such inspiration and enthusiasm we can stir up our friends and neighbours, we can encourage them to join us on the road to a right relationship with creation.

For me, the greatest moment in the Diocesan Hui in this great cathedral yesterday, was the naming of the new Diocesan e-bike. Summer, a member of the Island Bay parish, won the competition with her suggestion of Tallulah.

Why Tallulah? Because that was the name the Jamaican team called their bobsled in the 1988 Winter Olympics.

*Cool Runnings* is the name of the film about their exploits...a perfect name, Summer suggested for an e-bike powered by renewable electricity.

What's even cooler is Summer is the climate change coordinator for her parish. She knows far more about care of creation, as a 10 year old, than I ever dreamed of at her age at St George's back in Birmingham more than half a century ago.

We can barely imagine how smart 10 year olds will be when Summer's 66...how smart they will have to be...and how much they will know then that we have no idea of now.

As Summer is now, they will be breaking habits deeply ingrained for generations.

This excitement -- this sheer, wholesome joy -- of helping humankind develop its right relationship with creation is, I truly believe, one of our greatest opportunities for mission.

Imagine a field, long after harvest. All that's left above ground is dry, short stubble. The field looks dead, yet life teems below its surface. But when a few sparks start a fire, the dead and decayed stubble burns off, allowing new life to spring forth.

Here's how Katharine Jefferts Schori, then the Presiding Bishop of the Episcopal Church in the US, spoke of the sparks -- the saints of every age -- in her sermon in Washington National Cathedral on All Saints Day 2006.

"Let the pain of the world seize us by the throat.  
Listen for Jesus calling us all out of  
our tombs of despair and apathy.  
May the shock of baptismal dying once more set us afire.  
This place we call home is meant to be  
a new heaven, a new earth, a holy city, a new Jerusalem.  
It is the sparks in the stubble that will make it so."

Amen