

St Andrew's on the Terrace Pentecost 16 Creation 2 Planet Earth Sunday

Readings for the Gathering

Hebrew Bible

Genesis 1: 1-25

Ancient writers pieced together the beginning of the world as it seemed to them it might have happened

In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth. The earth was formless and empty, with darkness over the surface of the deep ***and the Spirit of God was hovering over the waters.*** And God said, "Let there be light," ***and there was light.*** God saw that the light was good, and separated the light from the darkness. God called the light "day," and the darkness "night." ***And there was evening, and there was morning—the first day.*** And God said, "Let there be a vault between the waters to separate water from water." So God made the vault and separated the water under the vault from the water above it. ***And it was so.*** God called the vault "sky." ***And there was evening, and there was morning—the second day.***

And God said, "Let the water under the sky be gathered to one place, and let dry ground appear." ***And it was so.*** God called the dry ground "land," and named the gathered waters "seas." ***And God saw that it was good.*** Then God said, "Let the land produce vegetation: seed-bearing plants and trees on the land that bear fruit with seed in it, according to their various kinds." ***And it was so.*** The land produced vegetation: plants bearing seed according to their kinds and trees bearing fruit with seed in it according to their kinds. ***And God saw that it was good. And there was evening, and there was morning—the third day.*** And God said, "Let there be lights in the vault of the sky to separate the day from the night, and let them serve as signs to mark sacred times, and days and years ... ***And it was so.***

God made two great lights—the greater light to govern the day and the lesser light to govern the night and also the stars. God set them in the vault of the sky to give light on the earth, to govern the day and the night, and to separate light from darkness. ***And God saw that it was good. And there was evening, and there was morning—the fourth day.*** And God said, "Let the water teem with living creatures, and let birds fly above the earth across the vault of the sky." So God created the great creatures of the sea and every living thing with which the water teems ... and every winged bird....

And God saw that it was good. God blessed them and said, "Be fruitful and increase in number..."

And there was evening, and there was morning—the fifth day. And God said, "Let the land produce living creatures according to their kinds: the livestock... and the wild animals..." ***And it was so.*** God made the wild animals according to their kinds... ***And God saw that it was good.***

Contemporary reading

Interview with Prince Philip

<http://www.arcworld.org/news.asp?pageID=1>

HRH The Prince Philip was the inspiration behind the original World Wildlife Fund network of religions and conservation in 1986. In 1995 he founded the Alliance of Religions and Conservation (ARC) and he has continued to support the charity ever since. ARC writer Victoria Finlay interviewed him... **"Can you talk about the origins of ARC?**

WWF was founded in 1961, so 1986 was its 25th anniversary. There was much discussion about where to have the anniversary international conference, and in the end Assisi was chosen, for fairly obvious reasons. The plan was for the "secular" conference to take place in the town, but I thought that it would be a good idea to take advantage of Assisi to try to get the major religions to take an interest in the conservation of nature.

What first gave you the idea of bringing conservationists and religious leaders together?

In the 1980s WWF International was trying to do three things around the world: raise money, develop conservation projects and educate the public. The first two things were fine, but the last one had real difficulties. I argued that the kind of education we were doing through articles and lectures and books and films and things of that sort only reached the educated and probably only the middle classes in the various countries.

The people that we needed to get to were the ones who lived in the areas of greatest risk, and the areas where the potential for biological diversity was highest. It occurred to me that the people who could most easily communicate with them were their religious leaders. They are in touch with their local population more than anyone else. And if we could get the local leaders to appreciate their responsibility for the environment then they would be able to explain that responsibility to the people of their faith. // It didn't seem a particularly bright idea at the time - it was pretty obvious. If your religion tells you (as it does in Christianity anyway) that the Creation of the world was an act of God, then it follows naturally that if you belong to the church of God then you ought to look after His Creation. It may not be sacred itself but the One who created it is sacred - so it seems logical that humans ought to have a certain responsibility for it. // I was not quite sure what the other religions believed about the creation of the world but I guessed that they had similar traditions. I therefore suggested that WWF should invite leaders from the major religions to meet together to discuss what - if any - responsibility they felt they had for the natural environment as a "sacred" entity.

The Reflection

On the ARC website is this question and answer: "Who were the first environmental campaigners?" Answer: "The world's religions. Why? Because in all their sacred books, through their traditional practices and running as a thread through the protection of sacred sites runs care and compassion for the natural world."

On a visit to Iona in 2013 Roger and I were privileged to hear Martin Palmer, the CEO of ARC – the Alliance of Religion and Conservation. It was my first inkling that the Duke of Edinburgh had played a key role in not only the World Wildlife Fund but also this Alliance between the world of conservation and world religions (as the interview we read this morning tells us.) In fact, Martin prevented the organisation being about Religion Conservation and Education which would have made their acronym ARCE. Prince Philip overheard this comment by Martin and said “Did that man say arse?” ARC describes itself as “a secular body that helps the major religions of the world to develop their own environmental programmes, based on their own core teachings, beliefs and practices.” The ARC website is a mine of information. Did you know that “the 11 faiths in ARC own seven percent of the habitable surface of the planet, and if they invested together, would be the world’s third largest identifiable block of holders of stocks and shares?” Did you know that ARC has a programme of Sacred Gifts – events and activities recognised around the world as a religion’s “sacred gift for a living planet.” These range from converting a rubbish dump to a park in Cairo to pledges to clean up a sacred river in Nepal. Forty of these sacred gifts are listed on the website.

One initiative of ARC is Faith Invest: This was begun to recognise the investment potential of the faiths. “*Key faith and investment guidelines outlining what different faith traditions would be interested in investing in, and why*” drawn up in 2017 attracted others beside the faiths; like philanthropies and NGOs. So in response, ARC has helped charity and aid funded projects to develop business plans in which ethical investors can invest. “*This “pipeline” will supply the demand this new movement has unleashed.*” While faiths have done negative screening of investment opportunities like avoiding arms, tobacco, or alcohol producers for example, this is a more positive project so faith investors can concentrate on positive investments in areas consistent with their faith stance, for example “*sustainable energy, profitable waste recycling initiatives, organic (or similar) food, fair trade comestibles, and which also prioritises companies with clear, transparent, ethical policies in terms of staff, gender balance, waste disposal, transport policies etc. This is why FaithInvest is being created*

The secular nature of ARC has broken through the theological barrier. Often, religions, especially those with a strong belief in the after-life, have practised ‘evacuation theology.’ “This earth is not our home” the church has sung in the past, for example, “we’re just a-passing through.” If our time on earth is viewed as only a way station, a temporary stopping place on the way to somewhere much, much better, people reason, why bother about what happens to this temporary shelter?

I’ve said before that it is only recently I plumbed the depths of the influence of the theologies around me as a child. If God was great and eternal and in control, then I realised I had learned as a child, through a kind of osmosis that my agency in the world was not very significant nor effective. God had the upper-hand and held all the cards. Throughout Christendom people have been taught explicitly and implicitly that heaven was more important than earth, the sacred more important than the secular, supernatural more significant than the natural, the divine was bigger, brighter and better than the human. So, all the aspects of this material world which needed work from me as a human being, lost out in the hierarchy I was unconsciously absorbing. Not only was this natural, material and physical world not deemed very important, it was sometimes seen as a positively dangerous distraction from being super-spiritual. “The World” was often used as a metaphor for the “lusts of the flesh” which sounded vastly intriguing but extremely risky. So it was not surprising the physical world was seen as serving the spiritual progression of the human race towards sainthood, rather than a beautiful fragile mystery which deserved respect and dignity and care in its own right.

Under this kind of theology, the world was our farm, producing only for **our** health and well-being. It was to serve us as the harvest field for our sustenance and survival. That **it** needed help to survive was unimaginable – and anyway wasn’t that Almighty God’s responsibility, not ours, poor weak humans as we were? So, it was disappointing, but not surprising, when I investigated the curriculum at Knox Theological Hall, training ground for Presbyterian ministers, in the 1990s to find of all the five faces of mission the one which was least represented was ‘care of creation’. More than one generation of Presbyterian ministers has been ordained without any substantial training in the theology and care of creation. How then might they lead the church to be conservational and environmentally conscious? Have curricula changed since then?

As a symbol of this, when the Season of Creation designed by the Uniting Church in Australia first hit lectionary-consciousness, I turned for supporting music to the Creation section of the conventional hymnbook we were using in the parish I was in at the time. It was a shock to find in that Creation section only hymns which praised the Creator or gave thanks for harvest:

"All creatures of our God and King" were urged to "Praise Him". We ploughed "the fields and scattered the good seed on the land" and sang confidently that it would be "fed and watered by God's almighty hand". "All good gifts came from heaven above." I never did find out where the bad gifts came from! We thanked the Lord that he had "made the earth so bright, so full of splendour and of joy, beauty and light," ... "that in the darkest spot on earth some love is found." But we did find, as usual with hymns like that, only one verse relating directly to the earth was supplied, after that the earth was quickly spiritualised into a metaphor for a sacred relationship. "For the beauty of the earth" we also sang in thanks. This hymn manages four verses of real appreciation for real physical attributes of our life before turning idealistic and 'pure', looking above to that heavenly resolution for everything. God's justice was "like mountains high soaring above", we sang, and the clouds were "fountains of goodness and love" – while we blossomed and flourished "as leaves on a tree," but then withered and perished while God remain unchangeable. Looking further through a conventional hymnbook, to lesser known hymns, Creation is explicitly named as God's farm by John Arlott, a relatively contemporary hymn writer. Our crops and our work in producing those crops are seen by him as our prayer to God. For James McAuley, different aspects of creation reflect the bounty, wonder, beauty and wisdom and glory of Christ – so this world is pictured as a mirror. Like mirror-faced skyscrapers, the actual creation doing the reflecting fades into insignificance against the sacred holiness it reflects to us. Albert Bayly, born in 1901, includes "shining constellations" and the "atom's hidden forces," but still has us following "ageless plan" which will lead us to "immortality." David McCarthy, born 1917, strikes an unusual note of lamentation and confession when he writes: *Forgive our careless use of water, ore and soil, the plenty we abuse, supplied by others' toil. Save us from making self our creed, turn us towards our neighbours' need.* and *Give us when we release creation's secret powers to harness them for peace, our children's peace and ours. Teach us the art of mastering which makes life rich and draws death's sting* But then, it seems we are all, creation included, still just labouring our poor way to that better place.... *Creation groans, travails, bound in its futile plight until the hour it hails the new found of the light who enter on their true estate. Come Lord, new heavens and earth create.* God, it seems, will bail us out in the end!

Catherine Arnott manages to celebrate the technological inventiveness of humankind, seeing us as 'children of creative purpose" and praying that we will eventually align our creativity with that of the Great Creator. If we remember most what we sing, then this mindset, this kind of social psychology is deeply ingrained in those who have faithfully attended church over the last 8 to 10 decades. It is noticeable that the sacred relationship in these hymns, ancient and somewhat modern, is usually vertical, between earth and heaven, between humans and God. It is vertical; and external to us.

In more recent hymnology, especially in the NZ Hymnbook Trust books, the relationships are more often horizontal; between humans and their world or between humans and the man Jesus and his experience on planet earth. Like Shirley Murray's "Our life has its seasons" or "Sing green to the good sweet earth" and Cecily Sheehy's lament: *Is this the end of the world? What do we do?/ Fighting and war in each land. Fighting for who?/ Silently Planet Earth dies, used and abused/ Where is the Christ who was battered and died, that we might live?/ She ends with the supreme horizontal relationship of human solidarity: Earth will recover if hand stays in hand, heart bound to heart.*

Our first hymn today also asked where the Christ was, and like William Blake in 1808, speculated about whether the Christ ever walked *our* land in some former time. If Jesus *had* walked scree and tussock brown – do we imagine that he would care if those delicate mountain ecosystems were strained beyond what they could bear? Would he care if The Terrace outside these doors was polluted, filled with rubbish and rough sleepers? Would he be hoping it was mist over the harbour and not smog? If we can imagine Jesus caring whether or not we are happy, and at one with our neighbour, remaining fair to the treaties we make, as verse two of that hymn suggests, why would we *not* think that Jesus also cares about the tui and the fantail and the kereru? After all,

wasn't it he who talked about even the smallest sparrow being noticed, and wild flowers of the field being more beautiful than the richest kingly vestments?

If you have ever had "She loves you, yeah! Yeah! Yeah!" ringing through your head, you will know that it is important what we sing. Cecil Frances Alexander knew that when she penned well known children's hymns like "All things bright and beautiful." We need a new generation of singer-songwriters and singer-hymn writers to image planet earth on its own terms, not as a farm for our exclusive use, or as a mirror to reflect something else, but for its own beautiful, fragile sake. The earth doesn't have to show us the glory of God, it simply needs to be. It does not have to produce for our sakes, it just can exist. It may be beautiful if its mountains and lakes fall in pleasant lines, but equally the dark satanic mills might teach us something, just as an ugly shape of a mountain can become dear and familiar. There's a hill just south of Balclutha which is half way between Dunedin and Gore. Recently, as my siblings and I have been driving together to and from Gore, I've discovered we all love the view from that crest. It is the first time on that journey when on a clear day, you can see the Hokonui Hills – home of moonshine, yes - but also if you like 'our' mountain, beneath which runs 'our' river, the Mataura, in the land of Murihiku, literally 'the tail end of the land.' The Hokonuis happen to be a beautiful shape as a result of the formation of the Southland syncline but their significance to me is more than they mean home. The dip and swoop of those green-clad hills is a sign journey is almost done. The hill and the river, the land and the syncline all have their own identity. We can add our identifications to it, but the Hokonui Hills existed before me and will exist after me and the river will run where it will without my intervention. It deserves its own *mana*, its own respect not to merely dwindle into Susan's favourite hills.

Today's final hymn (which has its world premiere today), began with a poetic impulse. I thought, "Let's be particular and actually *name* the top ten endangered birds and animals in New Zealand." Given the mellifluous Maori language I thought I would find flowing beautiful names to use like 'kereru' or 'kiwi' and so on... Imagine my chagrin when I turned up the 'Greater short tailed bat' and the 'southern elephant seal', the 'small black stilt' on the lists. But I had vowed to name them, so in they went stiff, short English names and all, just as they were listed.

It's symbolic, that moment for me. There are times when we need poetry to ease our way through the nastier realities of life but at other moments we need the scales stripped from our eyes; we need to not retreat into spiritualising or metaphors; we need to face the reality of the damage that has been done, done by us continuing to do what seems familiar and right, but which isn't necessarily doing the planet and its creatures any good. Through our progressive lenses, we need to face the fact that no heavenly Calvary are coming, that there is no fairy godmother to wave a magic wand. We need to face the fact that we are those who have been charged to see with the God of the genesis myth, that this world is good. **This world is good enough to save and too good to lose.** If "hand stays in hand" and "hearts are bound to other hearts", Cecily Sheehy says, we can do it. If each of us pick one action, practice it consistently and carefully, who knows what effect that might have on scree and tussock and on harbours, on swooping green hills, on fairy terns and on Bryde's whale and a whole lot of other creatures who are utterly dependant on our actions. What will you do for Planet Earth this Creation month? What will you continue to do for all the months that follow? Let's ponder that in the silence for a moment or two, and make in the inner heart our own promises to the planet and our partner species

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