

Christ Church, Bath

Trinity 10

Sunday 8 August 2021

Creation

I Kings 19.4-8

[Ephesians 4.25 – 5.2]

St John 6.35,41–51

Consider a communion wafer, such as we will be receiving later in the service. How many stages do its constituent parts go through before it's placed in your hand? The grain of wheat; its germination and growth are dependent on sunshine and the 'cool refreshing rain'. Then there's harvest, transport to market, manufacture... I could go on; but what I want you now to consider is the network of people and circumstances that make all this possible, and what happens if any one of them fails. Say the rain fails the farmer?

He might be able to irrigate artificially. But what if the water supply fails entirely? What if there's war, and the manufacturer cannot function?

It's not difficult to imagine a scenario where the breakdown of all these relationships is so bad that there are no communion wafers, as was the case in a Japanese prisoner of war camp when the Bishop of Singapore celebrated Holy Communion with a grain of rice and a scoop of water from the lavatory pan. He persisted, because for him (as for us) the wafer represents not only one of the fruits of creation, but the Bread that comes down from heaven.

Bishop Wilson was sustained in prison by his vision of a loving God. When things went bad for Elijah and he was fleeing King Ahab, he ran, not just to the first place of safety but to Mount Horeb (or Sinai), there to renew the vision that sustained him and his mission. Like the wise teachers of ancient Israel Elijah knew the importance of vision. One of his forebears had written "Where there is no vision, the people perish" - though a more literal translation might put it, "the people unravel".

Isn't that what we are seeing today? A lack of vision. The unravelling of that great network of relationships that is God's creation, that network which has sustained humanity for all of history? Little by little humans have been picking away at Creation's threads. Poisoning the air, polluting the waters, degrading the soil. We're told that insect numbers are plummeting. Insects are at the foot of the human food chain. Temperatures are rising. We're not far off an irreversible tipping point. In fact, there are some scientists who fear we've already passed it.

The wise men of ancient Israel called this interdependent network The Covenant of Creation. Their temple rituals were designed to beseech God to repair it and mend it when damaged and broken by sin. They were also quite clear about what happens when the Covenant, the network, is damaged or destroyed. Listen to Isaiah:

The earth lies polluted
under its inhabitants;
for they have transgressed laws,
violated the statutes,
broken the everlasting covenant.
Therefore a curse devours the earth,

and its inhabitants suffer for their guilt; Isaiah could be writing about planet Earth in the year 2021, couldn't he?

And as I said, the prophets were also quite clear about why this happens. Lack of vision. "Where there is no vision, the people unravel."

We may no longer believe that the sacrifice of a bull or a goat effects the restoration of The Covenant; but we do meet here to celebrate the sacrifice of Christ on the Cross and his establishment of the New Covenant. Its sign for us is the Holy Communion, and one of the reasons we are preaching about Creation this month is because our Gospel readings from St John are focusing on Christ's teaching about the Bread of Heaven. But as Christ taught the crowds following his feeding the Five Thousand, we hear this morning that "the Jews began to complain about Jesus because he said, 'I am the bread that came down from heaven.'" Why were they complaining? What's going wrong?

The conventional answer is that the powers-that-be in Jerusalem were trying to guard their position. Whether they were frightened of upsetting

the Romans or whether they were jealous of their own privilege doesn't really matter. Their rule was one of gross injustice. If you visit Old Jerusalem the tour guides might take you to the excavated site of one of the first century temple priest's homes. Compared to the average household, this elite lived in luxury, much of it funded by the exploitation of the poor. Listen to what Ezekiel had to say about a similar situation in Jerusalem five hundred years before:

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?

Ezekiel's other complaint about the priesthood of his day (one which he shared with Isaiah) was that they had lost sight of the vision of God's love. They could no longer see that great network of relationships that is the Covenant of Creation. That's how in their greed to take the 'clear water' for themselves they didn't mind if they mudded the rest with their feet – leaving the poor to manage (or not) as best they can. Does it sound familiar?

If you look at the various environmental disasters that are besetting us, how many of them can be put down to the actions of people who can see no further than short-term advantage? The farmer who maximises this year's harvest with no thought for the soil he's going to bequeath his children; the coal mine which leaves its spoil tip on the edge of his Welsh village, with no thought to its safety two generations hence; the politician who advocates a quick fix but stores up more problems for the future.

Now consider those human achievements of which we are all proud, and which stand the test of time. St John's Hospital here in Bath, founded and endowed by Bishop FitzJocelyn in 1174 and still providing relief and succour to the aged and needy of our city. Many an ancient grammar school, still providing free and quality education. The National Health Service, whose founders then and whose staff now have the vision to provide the best health care possible, free at the point of need.

We Christians, we who are the priesthood of all believers, the successors of Elijah and the prophets, we come to church on Sundays to renew our

vision, and in receiving the Bread of Heaven we commit ourselves afresh to the New Covenant of God's Creation in Jesus Christ. We come that our eyes may be opened by Christ so we may behold and be inspired by this vision.

For the implications of Christ's vision reach out far beyond the walls of this building into all that we do and all that needs to be done. It is the yardstick against which we measure private morality and public ethics. And don't for a moment believe anyone who tries to tell you that religion and politics don't have anything to do with each other. That's the siren heresy of those whose vision is too small, of those who, like the leaders complaining about Jesus, don't want to have their privileges challenged or to share their bounty with those left out. Jesus called people like that 'blind' or 'dead' (as in his contemptuous phrase, "Let the dead bury their dead"). Jesus came to open the eyes of the blind, he came that we might have life, and have it in all its abundance.

I am going to close with words written just over ten years ago by Bartholomew, Ecumenical Patriarch of Constantinople. He writes:

The crisis that we face is – as we all know and as we all readily admit – not primarily ecological but religious; it has less to do with the environment and more to do with spiritual consciousness. It is a crisis concerning the way we imagine the world; it is a crisis, ultimately, over the image we have of our planet... Unless we radically change the way that we perceive the world, we will simply be dealing with symptoms, not their causes. We require a new image of the world if we hope for “a new heaven and a new earth.”