

Stott week 4 -caring for creation

Last week on our break in Durham I think I caught a glimpse of the northern lights – that strange phenomena of dancing colours of green, red, orange, blue in the night sky. A few years ago in a dark place, I was overwhelmed by the millions and millions of stars. The creation all around us is really amazing – I wonder what's your favourite part of it?

In this fourth week looking at John Stott's book radical discipleship, we delve into a crucial aspect of our discipleship—Creation care. As Christians we have duties towards God and neighbour, as Jesus sums up the whole of the law, and that duty extends to our care and concern for the created environment. The Bible tells us that in creation God brought into being three essential relationships – first to himself, we are made in his image; second to each other, we are called into relationship; third to be stewards of the earth as God commanded.

All these relationships were altered as sin entered the world; and so (2 Cor 5:19) as in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, that reconciliation must include to God, to each other, and to the whole of creation. Yes, one day there will be a new heaven and a new earth, but in the meantime the whole creation is groaning as in the pains of childbirth (Rom 8:18-23) – just how much of what is to be can be brought about now is a matter for debate, but just as we believe Christ heals now and that is a sign of the kingdom of God which one day will come in all its fulness, with no crying, or pain, so we work towards a better environment knowing that when Jesus returns at the end of time the new creation will be perfect.

The psalmist points us to two truths – Ps 24:1 The earth is the Lord's and Ps 115:16 God has given the earth to the human race. These two truths complement rather than contradict each other. There is a growing concern amongst Christians in many parts of the world that creation care matters! The earth belongs to God by creation and to us by delegation – proper delegation, not abdication – we have a God-given responsibility to preserve and develop (and not to exploit) the earth on God's behalf.

Keeping this truth in mind will lead us away from two errors.

- 1) Firstly, The deification of the earth – not so long ago, in Rochester cathedral suspended from the roof and filling the space was a blown up globe of the earth- it was amazing walking around and underneath it – seeing, for instance, on one side that it was almost entirely water, and realising just how small the united kingdom is – and how far north too. So far so good, but the people who had placed it there called it 'gaia- that new age term which suggests some god-like character for creation. Christians are called to recognise that nature is created not creator. We respect nature because God made it, and saw it was good, we do not reverence nature as if it were God!
- 2) Secondly, we must avoid the opposite extreme, which is the exploitation of nature. What does Genesis 1:26-28 mean though, when it talks about ruling over and subduing the earth - surely this means we can use it as we like? But the God who created the earth did not hand it over for it to be destroyed. No, God calls us to responsible stewardship
- 3) So, the right and proper middle ground, the proper relationship we are called to have between ourselves and nature is that of cooperation with God. This reflects that we are part of creation, just as dependent on God as everything else, and that's something we easily forget. Yet we are not equal to the rest, God became human, he humbled himself to be like us in Jesus and at the beginning formed a relationship with the first human beings – God planted the garden and then called Adam to work on it and take care of it (gen 2:15). What an amazing calling – to cooperate with God for the fulfilment of his purposes, to transform the created order for the good of all – in this we express our love for our creator and is a means of making our worship real. When in Genesis did creation end – on the 6th day, no, on the 7th – the 6 days of toil find its fulfilment in the sabbath – the day to enjoy it and to give praise to our creator –

that's why neglecting worship is not good for us. We find our humanness not simply in relation to the earth, but in relation to the creator of heaven and earth expressed in our worship. God intends our work to be an expression of our worship, and our care of the creation to reflect our love for our creator.

All this is more important now than ever. Against this biblical teaching is the current ecological crisis – expressed in 4 ways –

- 1) the accelerating world population growth – just 250 years ago the estimate is that there were a billion people on earth. Now it stands at 7 billion, and by 2050, just 27 years away it may well be 9 billion. How will it be possible to feed so many, given that so many lack the basics to survive?
- 2) The depletion of the earth's resources. Some of you might have read Schumacher's book *Small is beautiful* – the difference between capital and income. Fossil fuels cannot be replaced, the appalling levels of deforestation and desertification are there for all to see. There is the plasticisation of the oceans, and the loss of many sea based creatures.
- 3) Waste disposal and the many by-products of a consumer society. The average person in the UK throws away the equivalent of their body weight in rubbish every.... (guess) three months.
- 4) Climate change – this is real and the most serious. The hole in the ozone layer is affecting the Antarctic, and global warming brought about by industrialisation is a serious threat, affecting weather patterns and geography – all brought about by human actions over the last 250 years or so.

Reflecting on all this, the word 'crisis' is an understatement – but what is the appropriate response for us as Christians? For this we can look toward organisations with an excellent track record and a solid biblical foundation - two worthy of further study are Tearfund and a Rocha. Tearfund is committed to working with partners in the majority world. A Rocha is different, being much smaller, commits itself to caring for God's earth and suggesting to you and me easily achievable gains – its website is well worth a look, and something that should appear on our PCC agendas.

Which brings us to the question – what can the radical disciple do to care for the creation? Evangelical writer and environmentalist Chris Wright suggests the following...

- Using sustainable energy where possible
- Switch off unnecessary appliances.
- Buy food, goods and services from companies with ethically sound environmental policies
- Join conservation societies
- Avoid overconsumption and unnecessary waste
- Recycle/reuse as much as possible.

Many churches are now working toward eco-church awards, and this is something I think is worth further investigation.

Chris Wright concludes

'in the past, rightly Christians have been concerned about great and urgent issues in every generation...the evils of disease, ignorance, slavery, and many other forms of brutality and exploitation. Christians have taken up the cause of widows, orphans, refugees, prisoners, the insane, the hungry, and most recently have swelled the numbers of those committed to make poverty history.

He continues 'it seems quite inexplicable to me that there are some Christians who claim to love and worship God, to be disciples of Jesus, and yet have no concern for the earth that bears his stamp of ownership. They do not care about the abuse of the earth and indeed, by their wasteful and over-consumptive lifestyles, they collude in it.'

Strong words, but words worth reflecting on? God intends... our care of the creation to reflect our love for the creator.

In Deuteronomy 10:14 we read 'to the Lord your God belong the heavens, even the highest heavens, the earth and everything in it.'

The world can be a beautiful place, and we are called to make it even more so. Amen.

Bible study questions...

Biblical Foundation:

1 What biblical passages support the idea of humans being stewards of creation?
How does the concept of creation care align with the biblical mandate to care for the Earth?

Stewardship and Responsibility:

2 In what ways does the Bible teach about humanity's responsibility for the environment?
How does the idea of stewardship impact our daily decisions and actions towards the environment?

Creation and God's Glory:

3 How does the care of creation contribute to reflecting God's glory?
In what ways does the created world reveal God's attributes and character?

Redemption and Restoration:

4 How does the Bible speak about the redemption and restoration of creation?
In what ways does our care for the environment participate in God's plan for restoration?

Consumerism and Lifestyle:

5 How does consumerism impact the environment, and what does the Bible say about our lifestyle choices? In what ways can we align our daily habits with biblical principles of stewardship?

Community and Global Perspective:

6 How can the church and communities collectively engage in creation care? What global implications does the Bible suggest for caring for the environment?

Practical Application:

7 What specific actions or changes in behaviour does the Bible encourage regarding creation care? How can we practically implement these principles in our individual lives and as a community?

Theological Reflection:

8 How does creation care relate to broader theological themes such as God's sovereignty, providence, and love for His creation?

9 How can a robust understanding of creation care enhance our overall understanding of God's plan for the world?

Remember to encourage open and thoughtful discussion, allowing participants to share their perspectives and insights based on their understanding of both the Bible and the content presented in John Stott's work.