

Radio 4 Service

Sunday Feb 23rd at St Mary's, Barnes

When the 16th century Venetian artist Tintoretto depicted God creating the birds and animals he painted great flocks of birds springing out of God's hand and the ocean teeming with fish. Alas, as we know, this is no longer the case. A UN report last year warned that one million species of plants and animals were at risk of extinction.

This very much came home to me last summer. One of my greatest pleasures is to go out into the garden in the evening, lie on my back, and watch the swifts darting and diving and weaving in the sky. Last summer I saw hardly any. In their migration from the South they follow the insects, and in recent years insects have been much reduced. "It's only an insect", people might have thought in the past, but now we know that all life depends on them. The decline in insects is so precipitous that there are warnings that the whole eco-system is in danger of collapsing.

I am aware of damage to the environment by what I no longer see. For others, the effects of climate change for example, are much more devastating. Low lying islands and parts of countries like Bangladesh will be flooded as sea levels rise because of melting ice caps. And as always it will be the poor who are worst affected, for it is they who live in the low-lying areas most at risk.

Many people, who do not regard themselves as religious, still feel that there is something deeply spiritual about our concern with the future of our planet. They are right to do so. After all, why do we feel distressed about so many species being lost every year? Behind this distress there is, I believe, a profound theological conviction- that creation is good in itself for itself. This loss of species matters not just because they might be of use to us but because they are of value in themselves, for themselves. This insight reflects those wonderful verses in the book of Genesis we have just heard. God saw what he

had made, and behold it was very good. Birds, butterflies, fish, trees, flowers-even weeds are little miracles.

We sense the goodness of creation in the way nature refreshes us, whether it is a pot of flowers in the room, or the sky as we look out of the window. As the poet Gerard Manly Hopkins put it “There lives the dearest freshness deep down things”. In the same poem he goes on to say that this life-giving power is the work of the Holy Spirit.

Christians, and many others, believe that behind the beauty of nature there is a supreme beauty. Worship is about being taken out of ourselves to acknowledge this surpassing reality as good in itself, for itself. As St Augustine used to pray “O thou beauty most ancient and withall so fresh”. So it is that sometimes when we are taken out of ourselves by beauty in nature, say a magnificent tree, we teeter on the edge of wonder to feel awe before the unimaginable source of all things. One of the great marine biologists of the 20th century, Sir Alastair Hardy, said about his work shortly before he died “Just occasionally I became so overcome by the beauty of the natural world that for a moment or two I fell to my knees in prayer.”

In the light of this awareness creation come to us as a gift. Suppose in a family there has been handed down from our grandparents an ancient clock. It is not hugely valuable, but it is a much-treasured possession. Our parents loved it, we love it, and we want our children and grandchildren to have it when we are gone. If that is how we feel about something like a clock, how much more important is it that our grandchildren and their children are not deprived of what means so much to us. As we have benefited from the labours of generations before us, we have an obligation to those which come after. We are, as the political philosopher Edmund Burke said, “a partnership not only between those who are living, but between those who are living, those who are dead and those who are to be born.” We have been given a beautiful earth not just for our own use but to look after for those who come after us. As the first book in the Bible makes clear, we are stewards of the earth, custodians, caretakers, not the owners of it. On present predictions we will leave it in a worse state than we found it.

Things will get worse anyway. The point is to avoid disaster on a massive scale.

There are small actions that each one of us can take in our immediate environment and there are changes that are needed in the economic and public spheres. To act politically without acting personally is hypocritical. Equally to act personally but not politically is to be ineffectual. Both individual actions and public policies matter and the more we are committed to one the more likely we are to be committed to the other.

Recycling our waste is one obvious small action we can and should take at a personal level to care for the environment. But at the moment recycling rates vary hugely in different parts of the country. The highest is East Riding with an average of 64.8% of its waste recycled. The lowest is a London Borough, which I will resist naming and shaming, with only 14% of its waste recycled.

At a more institutional level in combating climate change we can press that financial institutions no longer invest in fossil fuels. 89% of global CO2 emissions came from them and industry. Through our pension funds very many of us now have a stake in this. I am glad that The Pensions Board of the Church of England from which I draw my pension has invested £600 million in a new stock index linked to the way companies perform in relation to the Paris Agreement on Climate change.

There are in fact a range of ways in which we can respond to the crisis, and many bodies, including the Government and the BBC set out 10 basis steps on their website that include issues like driving, flying and the food we eat.

In the past people tended to think that creation was just a backdrop for the great drama of human salvation. Now we have woken up to the fact that not only are we a part of creation, but that creation matters in itself, and for Christians Christ is at the very heart of it

In a remarkable passage in the letter to the Colossians it is said of Christ that “In him everything in heaven and earth was created..the

whole universe has been created through him and for him...all things are held together in him.” So, for a Christian care for creation is not just an expression of gratitude for a precious gift but part of our response to Christ, the ground of our being and the goal of our longing. He calls us to care for the beautiful earth we have been given. If we want it to be good for our children, grandchildren and future generations everyone agrees that we will need to respond now with a much greater sense of urgency.