

A CHRISTIAN LOOK AT THE ENVIRONMENT

Study 4. He (Jesus) is the image of the invisible God..... (Col 1, 15)

Lead in.

2 years ago, my husband and I were travelling in Italy by coach, a tour arranged by a reputable Travel company. Near the foot of Mount Vesuvius, we stopped and were taken into a very elegant shop with many beautiful pieces of jewellery made from "Mother of pearl" and coral. We were encouraged to buy some, particularly as the coral reef from which the raw materials were taken would be exhausted in two years, and the jewellery would then be a very good investment as it would increase in price when no more could be extracted. We did not buy any, and when we returned home, I wrote to the firm who arranged the trip to complain about the lack of concern for the loss of a coral reef and all its species. What would you have done? Why?

At the recent earth Summit in Johannesburg, certain goals

were laid down. Many people were cynical about the whole exercise, but some progress was made in some area. It was agreed that there should be a target of reducing the number of people in the world without proper sanitation by 50% by 2015. This would be possible if there is sufficient political will. A similar target was agreed about clean drinking water for people. The European Union launched a "Water for life" initiative. The Jubilee Debt campaign has made some impact, but improvement is very slow, and there is still much to be done about trade.

"Mostly we know what to do, but we lack the will to do it."

Sir Crispin Tickell, a British diplomat who was one of the architects of the Earth Summit in Rio in 1992, has commented, about care of the environment, "Mostly we know what to do, but we lack the will to do it." Discuss this. Do you agree?

Bible passages Acts 14, vv15-17; Colossians 1, vv9-23; Romans 8, vv19-21; Revelation 4, v11

Questions for discussion

1. How does Paul describe Jesus, and his relationship with the creation. How should this relate to a Christian's view of the environment
2. Many non-Christians are keen supporters of care of the environment. In what ways can Christians work together with them? Why should they? In what areas might there be difficulties?

Consider what cooperation might be achieved in a) setting up a local nature reserve together, or b) endeavouring to arrange an Interfaith Service on creation care in a Christian Church.

3. "The business of a Christian is to save people's souls. The environment is irrelevant." How would you answer this?

4. How is the Gospel of forgiveness of sins through Christ and new life by the power of God's Holy Spirit relevant to environmental problems?

Prayer

1. Thank God and worship him for his creation and for the salvation brought by Jesus.
2. Pray to go deeper into the Christian faith and knowledge of God.
3. Pray for a deeper obedience to the Gospel, including love and respect for all people, and God's creation while at

the same time not betraying our Christian faith.

Background Notes

1. Human behaviour is badly flawed by sin, which affects our relationship with God, with one another, and also with our environment. (Hosea 4,v3).
2. People of other faiths, associated with New Age beliefs, or no faith are all found within the ranks of those who care about the environment. This has caused some Christians anxiety as to how we can work with others in this field without compromising our own faith. The answer is surely not to withdraw but to make sure we understand what the Bible teaches and apply it to what we do. At the same time we can listen respectfully and carefully to what people with different beliefs think, and take any opportunities we have to share our faith.

Christians believe in one God who created everything that exists, not only for human convenience but because He values the creation for its own sake. Though closely involved in creation, He is different from it. We respect creation and admire it, but do not worship it in any way, or consider it, or us, to be part of the Divine. (Pantheism).

God values it so highly that He became part of it. In Jesus the Word became flesh. Creation took place through Jesus, and He holds it all together. (Col 1vv 15-17)

Human beings, preferring to choose their own way, instead of following God's, have become estranged from God, and His image in them is defaced. Jesus is the perfect image of God, and by His death and resurrection effected forgiveness and reconciliation for us with God, one another and all creation. (Col 1,vv19,20)

We are unable to break the power of sin by our own efforts, but Jesus has

done it for us. (Col 1,vv21-23).

Forgiveness and reconciliation are the free gifts of a loving God to all who will receive them from Him. Fully accepted, this changes attitudes, though not necessarily instantaneously. This is the message of hope which Christians bring to environmental issues. But we must remember that we cannot fit God into our ideas about the environment. We and the environment must fit into his purposes.

All creation was made to worship God through Jesus. That this affects the whole of life is illustrated by the story of the Tangier watermen.¹

The Tangier Island Watermen community.

Tangier Island, Virginia, is.....home to a unique watermen community....It has been largely isolated for 200 years.....they harvest crabs and oysters. The Church is at the centre of their life, and over 80% of the community consider themselves Conservative Evangelical Christians. The Tangier Island population traditionally relied on collecting oysters and blue crabs, but because of damage to the oyster reefs from over fishing and from disease, the economy has become almost entirely dependent on a blue crab fishery. Unfortunately this fishery also is now suffering from over-exploitation, compounded by pollution from farms and urban areas along the edge of the Chesapeake Bay. The decline... has reduced the income of watermen and their families and created worries about their livelihood and way of life. This has prompted environmentalists to recommend stringent controls, which have aggravated underlying fears in the population, and surfaced in bitter conflict between watermen communities and environmental groups.....

Most watermen and women of faith believed that there was a scriptural foundation to steward the environment and its creatures, including their catch species. This provided a bridge to help them understand and accept stewardship ideas promoted by the regional environmental group, which were otherwise regarded as threatening to the community.....A Tangier Watermen's Stewardship Initiative was developed by the community. The biblical principles of the Tangier environmental ethic..... were Caretaking...

Maintaining the fruitfulness of the catch species;

Practising contentment;

Allowing for Sabbath rest for the creation;

Loving one's neighbour and hence not polluting the Bay;

Obeying the law of God, and therefore Obeying the civil laws, particularly those relating to the fishery laws.

Once the environmentalists realised the need to accept the Tangiermen's faith framework...a shared vision began to emerge.....

With full community participation, I.....helped devise an environmental and economic stewardship initiative....The Initiative's leadership was entirely indigenous to Tangier

Island.....endorsed by the Town Council.....

I preached on biblical environmental stewardship and loving one's neighbour. At that service, fifty eight fishermen broke down in tears and asked God to forgive them for breaking the fishery laws. They then committed themselves to a Stewardship Covenant.....many people's behaviour and attitudes changed radically and positively towards the environmentalists on the island,..... Watermen began bringing their rubbish back to the

island rather than dumping everything overboard. Many apologised to fellow-Tangiermen working for the Chesapeake Bay Foundation for their animosity over the years..... There is still opposition to the Initiative.... Some oppose the initiative because it is religious based(although the Initiative has always been open to all people, and 7 non-Christians took the Covenant.)

In addition to the Watermen's Stewardship Covenant, the women have developed their own Covenant, agreeing

1. To be better stewards of resources by consuming less;

2. Not to give in to every desire of their children; and

3. To be less demanding on their husbands who may be losing income due to their commitment to obey all the fishery laws.....

The Tangier Island experience involved healing and a renewed sense of harmony between people and the creation..... This faith-based approach should not be seen as a blue-print for all situations. Its methodology, however, may well be the basis for an organically developed approach by the native populations of other faith based communities.

ⁱ EMMERICH, Susan Drake. 2000. The Declaration in practice: Missionary Earthkeeping in: R.J.Berry (ed) *The care of creation*. Leicester. Inter-Varsity Press, pp147-154. (By kind permission of IVP)