

GOD'S CARE, AND EARTH CARE, LEITH CHURCH. JUNE 27TH 2021

- 1 A couple of weeks ago Kristel spoke about A Rocha and the Eco-church project. A number of people have spoken to me since about how inspiring they found that interview, and I would like to follow up on that this morning.

However, when I told a friend during the week of this plan he paused a bit, then tentatively said, "well, given everything, make sure you keep it real." Everything, probably means Natalie's ongoing hospitalisation and health threats. What helpful connection is there between my concern for care of God's Earth, and the fact that my wife Natalie continues to be seriously ill in hospital? Am I dreaming...living disconnected from the realities of life?

A story about Natalie: years ago one of her younger brothers was terrified of water. For a family whose summer holidays, and many Auckland evenings, consisted of endless swimming this was a problem. One day Nat began a game with her brother, dragging a stick around in the sand, making patterns that he would follow. Slowly she got closer to the water's edge, and so did he. Then occasionally she ran the stick through the shallows. So did he. Finally he was in. Eventually he became a multi-sporter and the most accomplished swimmer in the whole family of fish!

We will all have stories like that. Stories of things that terrified us...that we didn't want to do...that eventually turned out to be liberating and life-enriching. The call to care for God's Earth is like that I think. When we first hear talk about it we fear that it's just another burden being piled onto already overstressed lives; Or another thing to make us feel guilty. But as we begin to dip our toes into the water, and finally our whole selves, we discover this to be not another oppressive demand but a liberating gift. Loving engagement with the Earth becomes an opportunity to discover the immensity of God's grace and generosity; an opportunity to integrate our fragmented lives; and an opportunity to participate in the fullness of Christ's purposes for creation.

- 2 Genesis 1 is the story of a building project. God is building a temple in which to dwell, and the temple is the whole creation. The final task is to install an image to show whose temple it is, and who this domain belongs to. Human beings are installed as God's image. Our task in the world is simply to represent its owner and to encourage true worship.
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But this image is a living and responsive image. This image is given the power of dominion (or "being in charge" GNB). When we're put "in charge" of something, or when we leave one of the kids "in charge," this is always a responsibility of care. It is nothing at all about throwing your weight around, being a bully, or using things for your own advantage over others. And our human dominion is nothing about domination, or consuming the world for our own selfish purposes. It is entirely about representing and practicing God's care and love for creation. Many early Christian leaders described it as being "good governance for the well-being of all God's creatures." This is the primary task of human beings. It is our first commission.

But then this dominion is described as spreading over the Earth and bringing it under control. Doesn't that open up all manner of possibilities for abuse? Yes, but not if it's being done in relationship with the one we represent here. Rather, this is the calling of coming to understand the world, coming to appreciate it more and more, extending the creator's care, and ensuring that all creatures have their own opportunity to thrive before God.

It's also a recognition that although the temple of the creation is complete it's not frozen in time, it's good but not perfect, God is still at work in it and we're invited to be part of that work too.

4 Perhaps this unfinished aspect is part of what Paul had in mind when writing Romans 8 – one of the great New Testament creation passages we haven't read this morning. In Romans 8 Paul writes of creation being subject to decay because God willed it to be so. He reminds us that “all of creation groans with pain, like the pain of childbirth, and we groan too, as we wait for the children of God to come into their freedom.”

I don't believe this means that God causes disease or other distress. Rather, God has created the universe open to a range of possibilities, many are creative and fruitful; and some are painful – even terrible. And the effect of that is that we will not end up worshipping the creation. It's challenges will always force us back to the creator, that we might find our identity, peace and love in the Lord himself and in nothing else. In the giver, not in the gift.

So, to keep this real for my friend. This very good creation is one where we also experience decay and pain. But that experience of pain and vulnerability is lived within the much bigger reality of a good creation and a caring dominion. Watch a child carrying a butterfly, or an egg in a race; or think of a person in pain sitting on a special air cushion. Whatever our pain, we are invited to surround it with this much bigger embrace of the beauty and generous provision of God in creation. We can even embrace decay, which every tree does when it drops its leaves, and we do happily every time we dig compost into the garden. We can even embrace it in our own bodies, as the great NT scholar Charles Moule put it, “we are to use, and to use up, our bodies in the service of the kingdom of Christ.” Use up your body! I love that.

And, still keeping it real: are you a builder, handyman, artist, musician, or architect? Are you a helper, a cleaner, an advisor, a medical professional, an educator, or researcher of any kind? Are you a gardener or farmer? Are you a parent in the business of forming the lives of other little humans? All the possibilities for fruitful and caring work are present in this commission to extend God's care in the world. Right now Natalie and myself are experiencing the reality of a groaning and unfinished creation; and equally we are experiencing the reality of a dominion that is extending care as a result of supportive prayer, expanding knowledge and warm love.

5 And now let's skip over to Colossians 1. How curious! All the things attributed to human beings in Genesis 1 are here attributed to Christ, and a whole lot more. Christ is the true image of God. Christ is the one who enables our true, loving and joyful worship in the temple of creation. Christ is the Word through whom all things are created and sustained in being. Christ is the one who exercises true dominion – and he does this as the servant king. Christ is the one who enters into the world's pain and redeems it. Christ is the one who works God's reconciliation of all that has gone astray and become abusive. Christ is the one whose purpose is the healing and reconciliation of all things to God. And Christ has invited us to be reconciled through him, to put on his life, that we might learn again our true dominion in the world, and share with him in his healing purposes.

6 To live in this vision of hope, to be sustained by this hope, is one thing that makes Christian environmentalism unique among all environmental movements. And the other thing is the centrality of worship. This is why the eco-church vision is so enabling for us. Look at these five elements. . . . Every aspect of Christ's ministry and our discipleship is included here.

7 Let me be challenging: to become eco-christian is to be captivated by the cosmic vision of God's love in Christ; it is to enter into the inter-relatedness of all things in Christ; it's to move from a puddle into the ocean; it's to discover what it means to be fully human in Christ. It's to become real – at last!