

Sermon preached by Professor John Vickerman on February 20, 2022 - Second Sunday before Lent, 10.30 Eucharist.

Readings: Gen. 2 4b-9; Ps 65; Rev 4; Luke 8. 22-25

- It is becoming a habit for me to preach on creation on the second Sunday before Lent, or is it the first Sunday in half-term? In 2009 I provided some reflections on the 200<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Darwin's birth that had occurred during the week before. Since then I have preached on this Sunday, close to Darwin Day on February 12 in 2017, 2019 and 2020.
- We have two accounts of Creation in Chapters 1 and 2 of Genesis.
- The Collect summarises it all:
- 'Almighty God, you have created the heavens and the earth and made us in your own image: teach us to discern your hand in all your works and your likeness in all your children; through Jesus Christ your Son our Lord.'
- God poured his whole being into his creation, no wonder he rejoiced in it and saw that it is **very good**.
- It is not too much to say that the natural world, all of the cosmos is the first incarnation of God.
- I certainly feel close to God in the woods near our home, or on the shores of the Western Isles where we love to holiday!
- And yet some of the most moving and effective exponents of the wonder of our earth and universe express uncertainty about God - Brian Cox, David Attenborough and Chris Packham.
- Nevertheless, their awe and wonder as they introduce and talk about plants and animals is moving. Their commitment to their protection and preservation is absolute, and far beyond many who express a formal belief in God. They love and are in awe of what we believe God has made! They would I suggest, concur that it is Very Good, but what about human beings?
- The Genesis stories tell us that God created man and woman in his own image and placed them in the perfect environment of the new creation, but told them that they must not eat of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. We know what happened. They messed it up.
- Science fleshes out the awesome details.
- In his TV series Universe, Brian Cox celebrates the wonder of the evolution of the cosmos over billions of years.
- His account of how astronomers now think planet earth was born is mind blowing.
- It seems likely that even before there was any material in the Universe, the evolution of earth was set on its course by the particular wave form of the ripples of energy that initiated the big bang 13.8 billion years ago.
- Later, collisions of galaxies resulted in our sun in one arm of the Milky Way with earth just the right distance away to capture water and retain it and not be too hot or too cold for life to begin to evolve – the so-called Goldilocks position.
- Brian thinks that the fact that complex life has evolved on planet earth is unique, and this life is what gives meaning to the Universe.
- He says '*you and I are here as a consequence of grand events.*' Different from Genesis but almost biblical!
- The more science tells us about the evolution of life on earth the more wonderful it all becomes. Earth's Goldilocks position was stable over 4 billions of years which enabled all the life forms to

evolve from a simple single cell through plants, water life, animal life, humanoids (2 million years ago) to homo sapiens (only 200 thousand years ago).

- And yet our wonderful planet that took so long to evolve, is in danger because of the actions of this species that arrived very recently, and the Bible claims was created in the image of God.
- How then is it that humans are behaving in such a way that they are in danger of destroying all that God has created?
- We know that in common with all other life, the evolution of hominids occurred by adaptation and natural selection to optimise the prospect of survival.
- Essentially the evolving species was self-focussed, involving defence of living space and competing for food to ensure that life flourished.
- Perhaps this where 'the me-first tendency' originated, described in the Genesis 3 story as the fall of man?
- Yet this complex animal early on, reflected on its environment, drew pictures, began to live in communities, developed ways of living together that pooled self-interest and showed a level of self-consciousness and awareness of the transcendent not evident in other animals.
- Humans have remarkable abilities. In the areas of art, literature, music, science and technology the achievements are mind-boggling.
- In space exploration, the design and launching into positions millions of miles from earth of the Hubble, Gaia and James Webb telescopes is utterly remarkable.
- The James Webb telescope launched some weeks ago will be able to monitor radiation emitted close to the big-bang 13.8 billion years ago – the dawn of time.
- Humans certainly reflect God's image in their creative and inventive capabilities.
- But they also have enormous negative tendencies born of their evolutionary urges to survive, to be top dog, to mess things up and at times to be really quite nasty.
- The climate crisis is our present way of messing things up.
- The greenhouse gases, carbon dioxide, methane and nitrous oxide that we generate as a consequence of our consumer-oriented lifestyles, get stuck in the upper atmosphere and inhibit heat leaving the planet.
- Because of individual and corporate greed. We emit more and more.
- In the 1800s the CO<sub>2</sub> level was 280 parts per million. It had been constant for 10000 years. Last year it topped 410 ppm and still rising this year it is up to 421 ppm.
- In consequence the average global temperature has risen by about 1.2 C. It doesn't seem much, but it greatly affects the climate. The greater frequency of the violent storms, like Arwen, Dudley and Eunice is a likely consequence.
- Elsewhere there are rising sea levels and flooding, more severe droughts and forest fires and a great loss of biodiversity - plants, birds, insects and animals.
- As the global temperatures rise further above 2 C things could begin to make life almost impossible in many parts of the planet.
- The UN COP conferences aim to limit the global temperature rise to 1.5 C, but progress is depressing. A 45% reduction in emissions is required by 2030 to limit the rise to 2 C. Last year a UN report showed that 30% of the major emitters are projected to only attain a 0.5% reduction by 2030.

- The COVID pandemic resulted in almost unimaginable lifestyle changes. Travel stopped almost overnight, consumer sales plummeted, but emissions fell by only 6.3% and they are on the way back up again. Can we imagine governments imposing such changes to control climate?
- The prevarication of our own government over policies to fulfil their own promises at COP26 discourages hope. Part of the Tory party are pressing for licences to open up new oil and gas fields and approve new coal mines.
- Yet millions of concerned people are trying to do their bit to reduce their own carbon emissions based on the belief that small changes can make a big difference. A 1 degree change of course can take a ship to a very different destination!
- Our Church has committed to move to a net zero Carbon Footprint by 2030! The Cathedral is signed up to this too. If it was mirrored nationally and globally it would probably limit the global temperature rises to 1.5 C, which although still challenging, would make life on earth tolerable.
- Attaining this wonderful aim would show to the rest of society that Christians really do care for the God's planet and its people.
- But big commercial interests, aided by banks, hedge funds and pension funds in many nations are pushing in the wrong direction. A UN report on Thursday shows that 2% of global GDP (£1.3tn) is provided by governments in subsidies and tax breaks to companies carrying out activities that are destructive of nature.
- And we are seeing evidence of the catastrophic results we can increasingly expect.
- Are our efforts too small Things do not seem to be improving. Do we give up?
- If we say we follow Christ, we MUST surely continue to do all in our power to urgently contribute to reversing the effects of this climate crisis.
- There are three reasons why:
- First, because it destroys the environment for all the other living creatures and plants on earth. The Earth is the Lord's, for God's sake it must stop!
- Second, because it will make life intolerable for our grandchildren. The floods and violent storms here in the UK are foretastes of much wider problems over the world. The fires and floods in Australia, the desertification of southern Europe. As glaciers and ice caps melt, sea level rises will inundate towns like Hull and parts of London. No wonder Greta and her friends are starting to scream in panic.
- Third, and perhaps even more important for followers of Christ, we must act because the climate crisis hits the impoverished peoples of the world first and makes eco-justice impossible. Africa suffers frequent droughts and plagues of locusts, in Bangladesh it is estimated there will be 19 million climate refugees as a result of sea level rise and river flooding.
- Over 800 million people go to bed every night hungry, and it is getting worse. Yet in less than one day we in the UK use more carbon emitting energy than someone in sub-Saharan Africa uses in one year.
- Jesus' had great love for the poor and vulnerable. 'In as much as you have done it to these, the least of my brethren you have done it to me'. As Desmond Tutu has said by our actions we are spitting in the face of God.
- Is there hope?
- As a species we do have all the intellectual and technical skills and capability to turn this situation round.

- There is even evidence that the earth itself is fighting back. Bacteria are evolving with enzymes that eat plastic!
- Are we going to be like the disciples in the boat on the stormy sea? Does God seem to be asleep while our planet home is being destroyed. Do we cry out 'Master, master, we are perishing! I suspect his response might be the same, where is your faith, I am still in the boat with you.
- Our planet will survive, but despite the efforts of good people, it may be very different from what we know or hoped for.
- Alastair McIntosh, a Celtic Christian who has written and spoken extensively to help Christians face the impact of Climate change, writes\*: 'Our drift must be towards becoming whole people in a whole world .. *For God so Loved the world* .. Even if we find ourselves forced to view the little steps we take today as patterns and examples for reconstruction after the grand melt-down in some post-apocalyptic scenario, what matters is that we never give up.
- Love does not succumb to compassion fatigue. Love cherishes the flesh and blood body of the world ... infuses it ...forgives it and resets the seeds of Eden as Heaven on Earth. That is our calling in these troubled times.
- And so, hope is not sitting back on tenterhooks and waiting for a miracle to happen. Hope is being receptive to a new mind and new heart. Hope is about setting in place the preconditions that might reconstitute life and **then courageously getting on with it.**'
- We do not know fully what that will mean, but as we come around the Communion Table, we do know that the central message of the Christian faith is of resurrection from death. We believe that even if the worst we can imagine happens, God is still with us in the boat and can yet bring life.
- Amen

Alastair McIntosh, *Hell and High Water - Climate Change, Hope and the Human Condition*, p 249 - 250 (2011)

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