

1st Sunday of Creationtide

May only the Word of the Lord be spoken and only the Word of the Lord be heard, in the Name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

This year's readings and themes for the "Season of Creation" are very different to what we've had before. The Ministry Team and I weren't really sure about how these would work and what we might make of them. But given the situation we find ourselves in around the world, I rather thought we might find something that speaks to us where we are now. With hindsight I have to wonder what the committee responsible was thinking when they chose our readings for the next five weeks. But, as a former Bishop of Leicester once said when asked about how to write a sermon, "make it about God and about ten minutes!" So here goes!

The theme today is love thy neighbour. So let's start with "neighbour" a much misunderstood and ill-defined word if ever there was one. Neighbour has never just meant, in this context, the people who live next door and shop at Waitrose and send their children to Malden Parochial. "Neighbour" is everyone and anyone of humankind. From very earliest times the greatest commandment that God gave was to love God above all and to love our fellow human beings as we love ourselves. This "Golden Rule" is found in almost every world religion today, an insight into what is truly right and, sadly, all too often unrealised. So where does it come from? Why is it foundational to Jews and now to Christians?

Genesis tells us the story of how God called Abraham away from the relative security of urban life to a nomadic existence raising sheep. He was promised descendants who would fill the earth and the land of Palestine would belong to them. In the meantime he would wander up and down the country looking for water and pasture, while avoiding conflict with the city dwellers and other nomads. Cultural differences, language, lifestyle all made them outsiders clinging to the edge. Abraham's grandson, Jacob, would take his family to Egypt in order to survive famine. There they were outsiders too, primitive tribesmen against the backdrop of the glories of Egyptian power and civilisation. Eventually they would endure slavery at the hands of the Egyptians, having all but lost hope of an independent existence in their ancestral home. This experience of being outsiders and struggling to merely survive became a dominant theme throughout Jewish history. We see it throughout the rest of the Old Testament, and this is redeemed by the hand of God himself at the first Passover and the subsequent exodus from Egypt, as God acts decisively on their behalf and brings them to freedom and the Promised Land.

God's command at the Passover for all the Hebrews to take part in the

hurried feast of unleavened bread, bitter herbs, and lamb, lays down that the "haves" must share with the "have nots". Only by taking part and marking their door lintels with lamb's blood will spare them the visitation of death upon the Egyptians that will convince Pharaoh to set them free. As far as God is concerned no one is to be left out, his salvation is for the whole people of Israel. The responsibility is on those who have the means to provide all that is necessary to make this freedom possible. This will become an annual celebration to remind the people what God has done for them and how far they have come. Centuries later when they are settled in cities and villages of their own, God tells them to bring the best of their crops and herds to the Temple and offer them saying, "A wandering Aramaean was my father". In other words, to remember they once were homeless, stateless, dependant on the charity and goodwill of foreigners, now to be given freely in turn to those in need whether Jew or gentile.

Jesus will famously reiterate this Golden Rule and underline how important it is to see beyond culture and religion when defining "neighbour". Even Samaritans are neighbours, an idea repugnant to observant Jews at that time because the Samaritans followed a rival version of Judaism. Jesus wants his Kingdom to be a place where everyone's needs are met, where there isn't this great divide between those with more than enough and those who go hungry. A kingdom where exploitation has no place. And that kingdom is so far removed from our daily experience, even in our well-established welfare state that is supposed to see us comfortably from the cradle to the grave.

The truth is we live in a world with economic systems designed to fulfil our every desire, whilst drawing the world's poor into bondage simply in order to eat. Whatever we want, we can have, and get it delivered to our door. Amazon and other online retailers have been a lifeline during lockdown. They have seen their market shares increase and now we can click and our order will arrive tomorrow. Click and you shall receive! More deliveries, more vans, more petrol, more carbon. Lockdown has given the earth a bit of breathing space, but as things move towards normality the level of buying and transporting looks set to remain an ever growing source of air pollution and climate change.

Our dinner tables heave under fruit and veg flown here from around the globe, CO2 increasing with every flight. Developing countries are moving away from growing their own food to raising crops and fresh flowers for us, gambling that a cash economy will allow them to buy what food they need. Lockdown did pause this, but now supply chains are back up and running. The cobalt and other precious metals in our mobile phones and laptops that keep us connected to "share" and "like" to our hearts' content; largely come from places like the Democratic Republic of the

Congo. The government there has largely failed in the face of poverty and civil war, but foreign companies play rebels and the army allowing continuous access to the strip mines that devastate the rainforests, and the legions of women and children picking through the waste for pebbles so they can buy their daily bread. Violence is part of daily life, but at least we'll have a choice of new I phone this Christmas.

The population of the world keeps growing, pushing into habitats and depriving nature of the room it needs. These mouths need to be fed. Their futures increasingly depend on the growth of our consumer culture. The more we buy, the more we throw away, the more we want means survival for the poor. They may be out of sight and out of mind to us, but their reality and their struggle remain. We have the technology and the material wealth needed to help us cope with the changing climate in the short term. We live insulated lives in that regard, but they live at the forefront of global warming as weather patterns change and farmland becomes desert . The boats of migrants landing on the Kent coast are nothing now compared to what will come if Africa and the Middle East starve. Extreme weather events are becoming normalised, sweeping away those clinging to the margins, while the Emperor with no clothes parades about starkers claiming that nothing is changing. Governments have their reasons to prevaricate, because it's all about the economy and growth. The automobile industry depends on that seed of doubt, it mollifies our consciences as we look around the showroom at the shiny new offerings on sale.

All of what could be, ought to be, depends on the choices we make and the pressure we put on our politicians and the companies who make a living off of us. There is, and will continue to be, window dressing in abundance as if we are too stupid or greedy to see the truth. These will not suffice if future generations will be able to enjoy creation as we have done. All of what WILL be is down to the choices we made and the choices are recent ancestors made. God is not going to wave his magic wand and appear just in the nick of time to make everything Garden of Eden perfect and pristine. He has told us time and time again what we need to do to live in harmony with one another and with the creation he committed to our care. He handed us responsibility for his creation and we have made a mess of it. We are running out of time.

All the nations of the world need to work together to mitigate the changes already happening, as well as those to come. We need to share the technology and expertise that can minimise our impact on the planet, so that other countries can establish green economies, not just the rich nations. Companies need to accept that it isn't just about making money without limit, but embrace responsibility for the impact they make. Our choices need to be wiser, more strategic, not just cheap and easy

ones. And the time has come for the wealthy nations to stop turning a blind eye to the personal and environmental costs incurred, in order to satisfy our never-ending hunger for the new. This generation has some hard decisions to make. The future of the human race depends on it. Creation is holding its breath, and God is waiting. Will we let him down yet again? Or will we rise to the challenge?