

## Sermon: 8<sup>th</sup> September 2024

### Season of Creation Two: Humanity

“All people that on earth do dwell, sing to the Lord with cheerful voice.”

This wonderful hymn opened our worship this day of our Patronal Festival. “All people sing... to the Lord.” The invitation is to all of us, whatever our faith background. It seems particularly apposite when you think of how much Father James emphasised that our Peace Chapel welcomes people of all faiths and none; that at almost any hour of every day there are people visiting, sitting quietly or praying in here, and that this church, the Mother Church of the area, standing high on this hill above London, has reminded people of God and of faith for over 900 years. We have a truly wonderful inheritance to celebrate.

But there is another reason why this hymn and this festival is so suitable today. It is because our topic on this Sunday, the second day of the Season of Creation is “Humanity.” It is all about our human place in the scheme of things.

You may be asking, why did we have two first readings this morning before the Gospel? Why did Keith say at the end of Judith’s reading, “No Judith, that’s all wrong. Listen to what Genesis 2 verses 5 to 15 says?” What is the difference between Genesis 1 and Genesis 2?

In Genesis 1:28 God says to Adam and Eve, “Be fruitful and multiply and replenish the earth and **subdue** it: and have **dominion** over the fish of the sea and over the fowls of the air and over every living thing that moves upon the earth.” **Subdue and dominate.** As it stands, Genesis 1.26-28 reflects the language of royalty, of ruling and subjugation. But should we be satisfied with that text as the basis for our relationship with Earth and the creatures of Earth?

In Genesis 2:15 our Bible seems to say the opposite, “The Lord God took the man and put him in the Garden of Eden to **till it** and **keep it.**”

Is humankind called upon by God to dominate or to serve (Gen. 1.26-28; Gen. 2.15)? That is the fundamental question which comes out of Genesis 1 and 2.

Before we can answer the fundamental question we have to ask three others:

1. Why does God appear to give two different directions to human beings as to how they are to behave in relation to the earth in the first two chapters of Genesis?
2. How should we respond?
3. How does humanity come into it?

The first two chapters of the book of Genesis appear to be two different stories about creation. Scholars have differed as to why it is so and come up with various answers. The first is that what we read in Genesis 2 is a very ancient oral tradition of storytelling which was passed down from generation to generation until at some point, probably around the 6<sup>th</sup> or 7<sup>th</sup> century BC it was written down and combined with the more formal and poetic language of the first chapter, when the Pentateuch, the first five books of the Old Testament were created. Genesis 1 is very typical of Ancient Middle Eastern creation myths of the time. Genesis 2 is typical of what is called historical storytelling. The authors of the Hebrew narrative borrowed themes from Mesopotamian mythology and near-eastern mythology but adapted them to their own unique belief in One God.

So, we have one creation story looked at in two different ways. In chapter 1, God is pictured as more transcendent, speaking creation into being by his word. The text follows an organisational, chronological tone. In the second chapter God is imminent. The text is more lyrical and the focus has changed from general, all-encompassing and powerful creativity to something more personal and intimate.

So, to question two: How should we respond to God's instructions? Should we subdue and dominate or should we till and care for the earth?

Well, we have tried dominating: using and abusing nature for our own ends and without thought for the consequences, and look at the mess it has got us in? Some nations, some corporations, some individuals are still continuing in this way, ignoring the evidence, not caring about other creatures' right to live; not caring about the fragility of our eco-systems, not caring about our children's and grandchildren's future.

In Genesis 2:15 we are told that God put the first human into the Garden to till it, to be a gardener – and to keep it, to take care of it. By looking after the

Garden, Adam will thereby, also care for the animals and insects that use it. He will, if you like, serve them. This is the way taught by Jesus as shown by our gospel today. We are called to serve and not to *be* served.

So, to our third question and the theme of this Sunday. Humanity. How does humanity come into it?

It was believed in the past that Genesis 1:28 gave human beings the right to dominate and subdue creation. Well, certainly in the West, in the age of the Enlightenment and Industrial Revolution, we have thought it did. We chose to follow the instruction in Genesis 1:28 rather than 2:15.

This right to dominate and subdue has even been used as justification for suppressing indigenous peoples as mere animals! Africans shipped to the West Indies and Americas as slaves, often by the British. Indigenous people throughout the world forced to leave their land, cutting them off from resources and traditions that are important to their identity, survival and wellbeing. Just within the last two weeks, the Maasai people have protested the forced evictions from their traditional homeland of Ngorongoro by the Tanzanian government, and the loss of their right to be on the voters registers thus denying them the right to vote. Why is this going on? So the land can be used for tourism. In so called civilised countries like Canada and Australia, indigenous people have been denied their rights and are not even mentioned in those nation's constitutions. Do we have a right to do this? No! Genesis 1:28 does not give us the right to dominate and subdue creation including other human beings, because the very next chapter (2:15) reinterprets this relationship! Rather than being hailed as a ruler of Earth, Adam, our ancestor, is given the responsibility of 'serving and preserving Earth'.

It is time to confess that we, especially in Western Christianity, have often abused our role as human beings by assuming we have the right to dominate the rest of creation without considering the word of God that calls us to serve and preserve what God has given us as our home. And there is one more thing. A confession of the fact that human beings over the centuries, even in the name of Christianity, have exploited creation and abused the Indigenous people of Earth, invites us to consider one of the messages of our faith we have missed. A very, very important message. In Genesis 2 it is clear that all human beings are made of Earth and the breath of God, the Spirit. We all have a kinship with nature, both physical and spiritual. One of the great forces in recent years, has been the arrogance of the Western world in thinking

indigenous peoples are savages, bereft of religion or mature spiritual insight. We now realise that more often they are the ones that have a spirituality that celebrates humankind's kinship with all of creation. They have a spiritual bond with Earth and the creatures of Earth that Westerners have lost because they have made domination over creation their 'God-given' right. We have a lot to learn from the indigenous peoples of the world. Let us pray God that we have the humility to learn from them.