

Why should we care for God's creation?

It's tempting to begin this morning by citing a litany of scientific research pointing to the damage we humans are doing to our planet. I will give you just one example.

WWF, the Worldwide Fund for Nature publishes the Living Planet Index. It measures more than 10,000 representative populations of mammals, birds, reptiles, amphibians and fish. It has declined by 52 per cent since 1970. Put another way, in less than two human generations, population sizes of vertebrate species have halved.

It's easy to turn off when statistics are quoted. Sometimes a story provides a more powerful illustration. Alexander Cordell's book, "The Rape of the Fair Country", is about a small boy's recollection of living through the industrial revolution in Wales:

"I thought of my river, that my father had fished in (his) youth, with rod and line for the leaping salmon under the drooping alders. The alders, he said, that fringed the banks ten deep, planted by the wind of the mountains. But no salmon leap in the river now, for it is black with furnace washings and slag, and the great silver fish have been beaten back to the sea or gasped out of their lives on sands of coal. No alders stand now for thy have been chopped as fuel for the cold blast (furnaces).....Plundered is my country, violated, raped."

Wherever we look, the damage to the environment caused by humans is inescapable. Why should we care?

Well we all enjoy the beauty and the diversity of the natural world and we don't wish it to be spoilt. We also care for the world that our children, or grandchildren will, inherit. But there are 3 particular reasons we, as Christians, should care about the environment.

First it is God's creation. In verses 2 and 3 of Hebrews Chapter 1 we read that Jesus created and sustains the universe. It is His, he made it and he sustains it by His powerful word. It is Jesus, who God has chosen to possess all things at the end of time.

Psalm 24 tells us the earth is the Lord's and everything in it. It doesn't belong to us. Jesus is the heir of all things: this includes the whole environment – the air we breathe, the water we drink, the land we cultivate, the sites we build our homes and workplaces on – everything! If we know it belongs to Him then surely we will want to be careful in the way we use its resources. This is part of our worship: we worship God our creator, and we treat with respect all that he has created.

Secondly we care for God's creation because we are commanded to do so. In Genesis 1 God delegated some of His authority to rule over creation, to men and women. He expected us to take responsibility for the environment, and the other creatures that share our planet: to be stewards. Stewardship implies that we must not be careless or wasteful. John Calvin put it like this:

“The earth was given to man, with this condition, that he should occupy himself in its cultivation... The custody of the garden was given in charge to Adam to show that we possess the things that God has committed to our hands, on the condition, that being content with a frugal and moderate use of them, we should take care of what shall remain... Let everyone regard himself as the **steward** of God in all he possesses”.

Thirdly we care for God's creation because He will hold us accountable. The passage from the Sermon on the Plain, in Luke's Gospel Chapter 6, reminds us that, while we are saved by grace alone not by works, we are not free to indulge our sinful nature. Jesus provides a very stark contrast between two types of men. Happy, or blessed, are the poor in verse 20. But He says how terrible it will be for the rich in verse 24.

How are we to understand this? Literally or spiritually? Traditional evangelicals tend to read only ‘the poor in spirit’ as Matthew describes them in his version of the Beatitudes. Social activists tend to read only ‘you poor’. Gordon Fee and Douglas Stuart in their book ‘How to read the Bible for all its worth’ insist that both are authentic:

“In a truly profound sense”, they say, “the real poor are those who recognize themselves as impoverished before God. But the God of the Bible, who became incarnate in Jesus of Nazareth, is a God who pleads the cause of the oppressed and disenfranchised”.

We need to remember that Jesus looks at the heart, not at our bank balance. Darrell Bock, in his commentary on Luke says: “The beatitudes indicate the kind of person God desires as his child.....(they) represent an invitation to let God mould his children into who they ought to be”. He goes on: “Jesus addresses the judgment of God, to the callous rich, and others who are comfortable with their state in life, while being unconcerned about the needs of others”.

How does this passage in Luke relate to us seeking to care for God’s creation? Most scientists agree, the blame for the increasing number of species faced with extinction lies with unsustainable human consumption. It is our consumption in the developing world that is damaging ecosystems, creating climate change and destroying habitats at a faster rate than previously thought.

Jesus was addressing his disciples who believed they were following Him. Are his words equally applicable to us? We may not think of ourselves as being rich, indeed we may not be very rich by current standards, but in comparison to the 1 billion people in this world, living on less than £1 a day, we are extremely rich.

It’s not a question of money alone. Wealth can be measured in even more fundamental ways: access to pure air, clean water, good sanitation, affordable education, free health services, good governance, the rule of law and a welfare net to catch us if we are unable to provide for ourselves.

These are benefits that the 1 billion living on less than £1 a day are unlikely to have access to. It is these people whose livelihood, is most threatened by climate change.

How can we respond to such need when it is on the other side of the world? When it is made much worse by armed conflict, bad governance, inequitable distribution of natural resources, as well as climate change? Later in Luke’s Gospel Jesus teaches us to love our neighbor as ourselves. The parable of the Good Samaritan, a despised foreigner, shows that our neighbor is anyone of any race, creed or social background.

But God does not want to burden us with guilt. The Apostle Paul in his second letter to the Corinthians, Chapter 8 v12, lays down this principle for giving: “if the willingness is there, the gift is acceptable according to what one has, not according to what he

does not have". While we may be unable to affect bad governance or armed conflict, we can surely consider how the decisions we make about what we consume affect others.

Social Trends, published by the Office for National Statistics, draws together social and economic data from a wide range of government departments and other organisations. It paints a broad picture of UK society today, and how it has been changing. Even though we are going through the worst economic downturn most of us can remember, it reveals that: "household net wealth more than doubled in real terms in the two decades between 1987 and 2009".

In my own lifetime - I was born in 1948 - real disposable household income per head, that's total income from wages, salaries and state benefits, after the deduction of taxes, has more than quadrupled.

Is our increasing consumption in the West sustainable? Ecological foot printing shows that if everyone in the world consumed as many natural resources as the average person in Western Europe, we'd need three planets to support us.

The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change reported recently: "Human influence on the climate system is clear. Continued emission of greenhouse gases will cause further warming and long-lasting changes in all components of the climate system, increasing the likelihood of severe, pervasive and irreversible impacts for people and ecosystems. Limiting climate change would require substantial and sustained reductions in greenhouse gas emissions".

But what can we do? How will being more careful in what we consume help? The problem is so big it's tempting to say that whatever we do will make little difference. But Jesus calls us to follow Him, and to obey his commandments. The law of Christ is to love our neighbor as ourselves. Caring for creation by adopting a radical lifestyle in a materialistic world is part of our Christian witness.

John Poulton wrote in "A today sort of evangelism":

"The most effective preaching comes from those who embody the things they are saying. They are their message. Christians need to

look like what they are talking about. It is people who communicate primarily, not words or ideas. Authenticity gets across. Deep down inside people, what communicates now is basically personal authenticity.”

This is not new. Bishop J.C. Ryle in his book ‘Holiness’ written at the end of the 19thC put it this way:

“You may talk to persons about the doctrines of the Gospels, and few will listen, and still fewer understand. But your life is an argument that none can escape”.

May the way we care for God’s creation be one part of an authentic Christian lifestyle, which draws men and women to Christ.