

What Next?

The Five Marks of Mission

5th Mark - Treasure

Given on the 11th October by Jenny Foakes

To give me some ideas for what to say in this sermon, I looked at what was in the news for the day. The first thing to take my eye was a story about cacti. There are 1480 species of cacti in the world, the vast majority native to the Americas of which 30% are near extinction due to over harvesting and illegal trading. Cacti are vital to the eco systems of which they are part, providing food, shelter, water for deer, coyote, lizards, tortoises. But they are slow growing, often living over 100 years, which makes them vulnerable to changes in land use.

The next story, of which I'm sure we are all aware, is VW, with 11m vehicles world-wide with devices installed to cheat EU & US emissions standards. Unsurprisingly, the value of their shares has dropped by 40% knocking 30 bn Euros from the value of the company.

Finally, EU governments attempting to come up with a swathe of policies, including stepping up the speed and volume of deportations, aimed at sealing off "Fortress Europe" against the huge numbers of refugees we are currently seeing.

Three different stories, picked at random from the BBC news website, with seemingly no connection, but all entirely representative of our interaction with our fellow human beings and the environment in which we live. There were many more I could have chosen.

They are a small reminder of how interconnected we are with the rest of the world and how small the world has become. Coming back from holiday last weekend, I ate my breakfast in Naples and my lunch in Reading. And they are a reminder of the importance of the 5th Mark of Mission that forms the basis of my sermon and our worship today, particularly today as we celebrate God's generous harvest and seek to provide help to citizens of Reading without our advantages.

To strive to safeguard the integrity of creation and sustain and renew the life of the earth. This is a huge task particularly at a time when man has already done so much to damage and destroy the life of the earth.

In Psalm 65 we heard about God's relationship to his creation. God is our saviour, the hope of all the ends of the earth. God in creation has brought order out of chaos, by stilling the roaring of the seas and the turmoil of nations. The whole earth is filled with awe at his wonders. God cares for the land and waters it, enriching abundantly, providing people with grain, carts overflowing with abundance.

In the Psalm, even the inanimate parts of creation join in praise and have hope in God – the valleys shout for joy and sing. Here we have a picture of a generous God, intimately involved with his creation, not sitting back and watching what's happening in an intellectual or disinterested way. God is there in his creation - in the passing hours and the turning of the seasons.

Genesis tells us that God first created heaven and earth, day and night, sun, moon, stars, plants, sea creatures, birds and animals – all of which God saw were good. But the pinnacle of his creation was humankind.

God says, let us make mankind in our image, in our likeness. We know this is more significant – the language has changed. When God creates plants he says, “let the land produce vegetation”; sea creatures, “let the sea teem with living creatures”; animals, “let the land produce living creatures”. The world God creates produces from itself. But in creating humans, he says “let us make” – God makes a deliberate decision to create humans in his own image and the change in language underlines that.

We are made in God's image. In ancient times, kings that ruled over large areas would have statues of their image erected in far-flung parts of their domain, to remind their citizens that they were still subject to the king's rule. These images represented the king's power and wishes, represented the king to his subjects.

We are made in God's image to rule over creation, says Genesis. Made in God's image – so we occupy a unique place in creation and are here to carry out a unique role. We are God's representatives in creation. We are the images that reflect God's rule over creation; not merely stewards but God's appointed representatives, to exercise the same care over creation as God would. That's an awesome thought and an awesome responsibility. And God saw that it was very good – note the change in language again – very good – complete, fulfilled.

At work when we delegate a task, we choose someone with the appropriate skills and abilities. God has delegated the management of his creation to us and has given us the skills and abilities to do that task.

But as a species, have we exercised that delegated responsibility well and used our skills and abilities to do God's will in the sustenance of creation? For that involves not just the natural environment but our fellow human beings as well. Do we treat them as God would? In our daily interactions as individuals, do we see others as Jesus would? Do the communities of which we are part look after one another as God's representatives? What do we think is God's reaction to the loss of one third of his created world? Or to the death of a refugee child on a beach in Greece? To the deception perpetrated by one of the world's largest companies, presumably in an effort to improve their bottom line?

Jesus said “love your neighbour as yourself, for this is the fulfilling of the law”.

What would the world look like if we, as God's representatives in his world took that awesome responsibility for creation seriously and seriously tried to love our neighbours as ourselves? Would there be wars, refugees, climate change, deforestation, pollution of our seas and rivers, species extinction?

At the start of John's gospel we read "In the beginning was the Word, and the word was with God and the word was God. He was in the beginning with God and through him all things were made...". The word made flesh is Jesus. Through the sacrament the life of Christ courses through our veins, so we are as bound into creation as Jesus is. We cannot opt out of our responsibilities. Safeguarding the integrity of creation and sustain and renewing the life of the earth are not optional extras for Christians. While we consider what's next for St Michaels, it's an opportunity to reassess what we are doing both as individuals and as a church community to fulfil the task God has set us to.

Preparing this sermon has given me pause for thought about my place in God's creation – as a human being created in God's image.

Let's all think and pray about what we can do and bring our ideas to the Parish day on 28 November.