

TALK 6.9.26, GENESIS 2:8-18, ECC. 3:9-15 & 22

CARING FOR EDEN – THE POTENTIAL FOR LIFE

This week, I came across this story on social media. This is what somebody wrote about one experience, which had amazing & far-reaching consequences: 'One day, I was out taking my dog for a walk. I stopped to give my dog a treat, and I was aware I was being watched by a crow, from the branch of a tree. The crow jumped down in front of me & cawed at me to be given a treat too. I was so surprised I said "Good morning, Mr Crow" and gave him a treat...! As I walk that route every day, Mr Crow kept coming back for more... Now, years later, I regularly meet his descendants, politely asking for a treat all over town. There is a breeding pair opposite my home. One of them always asks for food - and this year, for the first time, I was introduced to a crow chick...'

It's not only elephants who have good memories & a collective consciousness. We know that crows are smart birds. But this does seem quite extraordinary. Not only does this remind us, in the words of Ecclesiastes that, 'God has made everything beautiful in its time'. It also teaches us an important lesson, in light of the creation account in Genesis 1 & 2: If we set our hearts on blessing God's creation, we will receive blessings in return. In the words of another verse of scripture from Ecclesiastes: 'Cast your bread upon the waters and it will return to you'. (Or, in our Bible translation: 'Ship your grain across the seas; after many days you will receive a return').

However, ever since our original ancestors disobeyed God, the relationship between humanity & the rest of God's creation has become more complicated & difficult. In the words of Paul in Romans 8, God's creation has been 'subjected to frustration'. And we know, from our own experience. This hottest summer yet, shows that we are clearly in danger of 'reaping the whirlwind'. We run an increasing risk of our bad choices & unsustainable lifestyles coming home to roost, in dramatic ways. The destructive flood in Tibet & Nepal is just one of many recent examples. Just another example of the poorest peoples suffering first & worst. Our seeming inability to care for God's creation in the way God intended, means that together we may not receive the blessings of God's creation, in the way that we would hope & expect.

The second command God gave Adam & Eve is here in Genesis 2:15. They were placed in the Garden of Eden – 'to work it & to take care of it'. God gave them

the freedom of this rich & fertile land. God's law of freedom was written into creation. Adam & Eve were free to eat from any tree in the garden. They could have chosen to eat from the Tree of Life. But instead, together they were deceived by the serpent and ate from the tree they were commanded not to eat from: the Tree of the Knowledge of good & evil. Both these two trees God placed in the very middle of the 'very good' Garden of Eden.

We know the story of the fall of A&E. I won't rehearse it here, although it does require closer reading. Because we often think we know the story. There is always more to this than we often see at first – or second - glance. But I deliberately chose Genesis 2 as our reading today, not Genesis 3. I would like us to consider humanity's 'original blessing', rather than what we tend to focus on: humanity's 'original sin'... We know all about human sinfulness. This is very familiar to us, both from what we see around us, and from what we see within ourselves. We can't ignore it, or deny it. But instead, let's remind ourselves of God's original calling to us.

God gave to A&E potential for life in all its fullness. The Garden of Eden wasn't perfect, it wasn't meant to be. It wasn't an end in itself. Humanity was placed in Eden, to grow there & then to go beyond Eden. This place was a school of care & prayer. What God intended for humanity in Eden, was to grow in love with God, with each other & that place. God wanted them to grow in love - so that they would ultimately ignore that other tree. Instead they would see the wonder of the fruit of the Tree of Life & eat from this tree's branches. Eden wasn't a settled state of 'paradise', as it is so often seen. Both purpose & potential were built into it. Equally, God's intention is not for humanity to somehow 'return to Eden'. Both John Milton, as well as the Bible Society Bible course make this common mistake. John Milton's epic poem, 'Paradise Lost' was followed by the much less read poem 'Paradise Regained'. But I believe, from what I was taught at Spurgeons College, this is to misunderstand God's plans & purpose.

I don't believe God wants us to be forever looking over our shoulders, longing for an ideal existence, somewhere in the dim & distant past. God does not call us to re-trace our steps to the Garden of Eden. Instead God calls us to set our hearts, to set our eyes ahead, towards God's new Jerusalem. To the new heaven & earth which God in Christ is preparing for us... But how do we make this journey? How are we able to set our hearts on this impossible pilgrimage?

This is what the writer of Ecclesiastes means when he says: 'God has set eternity in the human heart' ... He also goes on to say: 'yet no-one can fathom what God has done, from beginning to end'. Our own lives, let alone the whole sweep of human history, are just too much for us to know & understand. But one thing we do know is this: even though we cannot return to Eden, by God's grace, the Tree of Life is still available to us. How truly wonderful is this good news. Even in the midst of our sinful lives, our sinful world - Jesus, the True & Living Vine, is our gateway to new life & to eternal life. Alleluia! Praise God for the good news of Jesus' life, death & resurrection for us.

The only way to get rid of the bitter taste of our own sin, is to taste the sweetness of Jesus, the Tree of Life. What an exchange God offers each of us in Christ! But we cannot know forgiveness, without first confessing & repenting of our sin. To enter the Kingdom of God, we must recognise our own poverty of spirit – That we are just like A&E. We don't listen to God & follow God's ways.

If you don't yet know the wonder of God's love & forgiveness, I invite you to seek God today. You may even want to repeat in your hearts after me, this simple prayer of faith. This is the kind of prayer you would pray in order to commit yourself to follow Jesus. This is about giving your life to God, to help you to make a new start. Let us pray:

HF, thank you for the goodness of creation...; thank you HF for the gift of life you have given me, with all its blessings & potential.

LORD Jesus, I ask you to forgive me for mis-using the life you have given me... I confess my sins to you now in the quiet...

HS, I ask that, like a powerful, flowing river, you would come into my life & make me new... Help me to follow Jesus & to trust in you my HF, from this day on...

If you prayed that prayer in your heart, I encourage you to speak to someone after the service, who you know to be a Christian. (& if you hardly know anyone here yet, I suggest you speak to someone wearing a yellow lanyard, like this).

Listen to words of Jesus in John 15 – Shortly before he died, Jesus said this to his closest friends: 'I am the True Vine & my Father is the Gardener... I am the Vine, you are the branches. If you live in me you will bear much fruit... You did not choose me, but I chose you and appointed you to go & bear fruit, fruit that

will last'... And we know, from Jesus' life & from the closing words in this passage about Jesus the True Vine, that the heart of the mystery of life, is love.

How do we live a fruitful life? How do we bring blessing to all of creation? By loving Jesus & by loving our neighbours as ourselves. We stay part of the Tree of Life (we live in Jesus) by loving God & by loving all of God's good creation...

This year marks 10 years since the launch of the EcoChurch programme. This is a national & international movement which is still growing. Including Carey, there are now over 9,000 EcoChurches in England & Wales. That's over double the original target of 10% of churches by 2026. The plan is, by God's grace, this number will grow to 40% of as EcoChurches by 2030... More & more churches are becoming committed to loving God, through caring for his creation. Alleluia

There are many ways in which we can learn from A&E & Jesus our True Vine. Many ways we can each put into practice what it means to care for God's creation. Here are just some things you might consider, in line with our Bronze EcoChurch status. From these suggestions, you might pick one or two:

- find time to appreciate God's creation: by gardening or by nature walks
- make sure to waste less food; buy less clothes & recycle & re-use them
- buy more local produce, more FT produce in the shops
- change your energy supplier to a greener, more sustainable supplier
- use less polluting, more sustainable transport & don't fly as much
- join other people the Sustainable Streets programme, for a number of workshops across the town over the coming months, tackling issues like: energy, travel, water, resources, food, nature (details in today's newsletter)
- attend a local showing of the People's Emergency Briefing film, to find out more about the challenges of our Climate & Nature Emergency (details in future newsletters)

Lots to consider I realise. Finally, there is another way for us to be fruitful too. Want your life to bear lasting fruit? To bring blessing the all creation? I encourage you all to share the good news of Jesus, the True Vine, with your family, friends & neighbours. You will be richly blessed if you share the multiple blessings of the good news of Jesus with others.

And so, I would like to finish my talk by sharing a video from Bangladesh. A video which shows that in one area of that huge country, 38 people have recently given their lives to Jesus & been baptised. This was a video sent to us

by our new BMS World Mission partner, Barnabas Hembrom. As we watch, I encourage you to keep thinking about the fruitfulness of Jesus, our True Vine, and how we too can play our part in bearing fruit & blessing all of God's creation. (SHOW VIDEO).