

CREATION CARE IN WORSHIP AND TEACHING

My intention is to tackle the question that a number of us face: how to incorporate the theme of Creation Care into our Worship and Teaching. I will talk from my own experience as a Christian minister. Because I am retired from responsibility for a particular congregation, instead I now go round taking services in a variety of churches which for one reason or another do not have a designated leader. My challenges, mistakes and occasional successes may be different from yours but I hope that we have enough in common for some of what I say to be of use.

Most Christian churches are accustomed to think about the natural world at particular times of year. In my lifetime that has been at Harvest (in the northern hemisphere in September or October) when we give thanks for what has been safely gathered in. Interestingly this is not a very old festival; it was started in the mid nineteenth century and then became popular and spread. Harvest has in the last decade been incorporated into the season of Creationtide which runs from Sept 1st (St Giles Day) to October 4th (St Francis Day) and resources are being made available on the internet to help people leading worship during this period. The story of St Francis of Assisi is well known – the man of God who chose to live among the poor and loved all living things. I am also fond of St Giles and was proud to be Vicar of a church dedicated to him. He is featured with a deer and an arrow. He was protecting a deer from the King's huntsman. One story has it that he gave sanctuary to the wounded animal and removed

the arrow from its wound; another is that he stood in front of the deer and took the arrow shot himself. Anyway, Creationtide is quite a popular time. Some churches have services for the blessing of pet animals. Schools have harvest services; tins and packets of food are collected and passed on to food banks. But the temptation can be at the end of the season for the worship leader to heave a sigh of relief and tick off creation care as done and dusted until the following year. However, I believe that Care for Creation is a central theme in my faith (as it may be in yours) and should feature directly or indirectly in worship and teaching at other times as well and I want to give some examples of themes which can be used at any place and time.

First of all there is **Thanksgiving** which should be part of every act of worship. In the Church of England we use an old prayer called the General Thanksgiving in which we give thanks for our creation, preservation and all the blessings of this life. These include all aspects of the natural world of which we are part, and its whole evolutionary history which has brought us to be where we are. It's a wonderful world and, after eighty-one years life, I still want to be part of it for as long as I am able. Yesterday I heard that the wife of a friend of mine had died. Poignantly today I got a Christmas card from her with a letter saying it might be her last. But none the less, she said, she was not downcast. She had so many happy memories of people and places – a wonderful life.

Then I would point to **Responsibility**. Christian teaching is that life is not purposeless but that God has given human beings responsibility to appreciate the natural world and to share in the care of it. This teaching was inherited from Judaism and passed on to Islam and is, I daresay, to be found also in other faiths. This responsibility is awesome and vital; it requires fairness and justice. Those like farmers, planners, environmentalists, civil servants and politicians who exercise it deserve our respect and prayers and, on occasions firm and constructive criticism.

Let me now introduce a jarring note, the idea of **Sin**. The word may be misleading, often taken to refer to sexual temptations or to the words of the song: “it’s illegal it’s immoral or it makes you fat”. But it’s quite a precise theological word. It means missing what we are intended to be, not reaching out to others and to God but being turned in upon ourselves, whether we are out for our own pleasure or obsessed with always being right. To appreciate sin we need to put ourselves into the minds of its victims. Imagine we were slaves being shipped to the Americas. We would certainly be aware of the evil that was being done. But those responsible, the jailers, sailors and investors might have varying degrees of involvement. They might have been deliberately brutal, or just too weak or lazy to protest. They might have been ignorant of what the money they were investing or profits they were receiving were doing to others,

as many today have not appreciated the damage we have been doing to the planet. The challenge of course to them then and to us now is: once we do know, what are we going to do about it? How are we going to give other people – and other creatures – a fair deal?

Sin requires **Repentance**. This doesn't necessarily mean lots of emotion or apologies – though these can be appropriate. Repentance basically means: changing direction, taking a first step on a new path – an individual, community or nation starting to do something differently, for example to care for the natural world or improve its energy use. It's great that the Al Mahdi Institute has been able to reduce its energy consumption, for example, and that the Nishkam Centre has a whole lot of solar panels on its roof. In many parts of the country parish churchyards are being turned into wild-life havens. Footsteps has been preparing a series of flashcards with simple tips for how we can reduce our energy use in our homes and at the same time save on our bills. Some of these necessary changes may be attractive and easy, some much more daunting. That's where for me the specific spiritual support of my own faith is such a help. Like many Christians I would say that Jesus Christ is my Lord (the one guiding my life) and my Saviour (the one who strengthens me to be less selfish). You may wish to point to other forms of support in your own faith.

Another theme is **Community**, people being together and sharing with one another. A focus of that in my faith is holy communion where many Christians share together in a meal. That is meant to be expressive of a much wider sharing required of us, within a family, a faith community, local area, city, the world and so on. On the one hand it does demand something of us. We are not to do just what we like, try to secure our own position and let the rest of the world take its chances. But, at the same time we gain from the gifts of others. On a visit to the Buddhist pagoda by Edgbaston reservoir I was told by a monk that we must not just be sending out good thoughts to other people but also be making ourselves ready to receive the good thoughts coming from them. Rabbi Jonathan Sachs has reminded me that it's a good thing that each of us doesn't have all the gifts because then we have the opportunity of receiving from one another. The Birmingham Council of Faiths is a great fellowship and Footsteps is glad to be a project of it. We can give so much love and encouragement to one another, and to our City Council and MPs because they know that we are being cooperative and not competing with one another or with them.

A final theme is **Hope**. Hope is not the same as optimism, which is the belief that things are going to get better whether or not we do anything about them. Hope is rather the belief that change is possible. Hope involves a commitment to work with other people to achieve it. I would add from my faith

that God wants things to be better and that there are spiritual resources available to help those who are making this commitment. Also, that what goes on in this life and in this world needs to be seen in a wider context, that of the divine.

Thanksgiving, Responsibility, Sin, Repentance, Community and Hope: here are themes relevant to worship and teaching throughout the year and Care for the Earth is tied up in all of them.

Where then are we now? After Interfaith Week is finished Birmingham will be gearing up to Christmas. Many schools will put on nativity plays involving children, animals, babies and mothers. I daresay most of us have got involved in them in some ways whether we are Christian or not. Yes, such plays are often unrealistic and overly sentimental. But the basic attitude is so right. They are about the wonderful gift of life and the mothers who give birth to the next generation. Preparing this talk has made me amazed that in some religious traditions, my own included, women have sometimes been regarded as unqualified for responsibility. I would offer the opposite thought. Might there be some decisions about the future life of people and planet so important that maybe they should **not** be made by any one who had not faced the experience of giving birth! Here's a challenging thought to share more widely this year!

John Nightingale

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