

Sermon/homily notes

Education Sunday 2009

'THE EARTH IS THE LORD'S.' HOW THEN SHALL WE PREACH?

Readings: Isaiah 40:21-31; Psalm 147:1-11, 20c; 1 Corinthians 9:16-23; Mark 1:29-39

Psalm 147 is a psalm of praise, celebrating the kind of God we worship. Many years ago Archbishop Desmond Tutu stepped off an aeroplane to be greeted by a flurry of reporters seeking a quote. He duly obliged. "I woke up this morning and thought, 'Thank God I am not God'. But then I thought, 'Thank God you are God'."

In surveying and giving thanks for God's graciousness the psalm moves from the particular to the universal and then reflects on what is asked of us in return. So verse 2 speaks of building up Jerusalem and gathering Israel's outcasts. Verse 3 moves to the healing of all the broken-hearted and the binding up of wounds. Verse 4 reaches to numbering and naming the stars in the sky. When we think of moving from the particular to the universal, it is worth pondering how what we see in the ministry, teaching, death and resurrection of Jesus is God's gift of God's own self incarnate (made flesh) in one life, so that we might grasp something of how God is and how life is all the time.

Verse 5 rejoices that across all this sweep from Jerusalem to the stars, God is great, powerful, immeasurably vast in understanding, committed to lifting up the downtrodden and possessing a fine sense of justice. (Preachers may want to insert their own illustrations here.) It is in that context, as the Psalmist sings his melody, that God's provision of the necessities for life – clouds, rain, pasture for animals and food for birds – is celebrated. The opening words of the Bible tell us that on the third day, as dry land appears, the very first things God puts on earth are plants bearing seeds and trees bearing fruit. The biblical account of creation shows God committed from the outset to fruitfulness and growth. Can we see that God has provided what is needful for life and growth and fruitfulness in our own lives? What should our attitude be?

For the Psalmist, God is not interested in strength or speed or prowess, but in those who take a proper attitude of awe and respect ('fear' in the Hebrew scriptures' sense of the word) and who continue to place their hope in God's constant love. We have to acknowledge all that God is and has done, and believe that God's loving care surrounds us, even if Jesus discloses that sometimes God opens up new creative possibilities out of seeming dead ends which have to be lived through first.

2009 will be the 40th anniversary of the first Moon landing. You may like to ponder how, in the 40 years since, scientific development has not been outwards to the stars but in miniaturisation, computers, mobile phones, iPods, etc, and how God is everywhere from the universal to the most minutely focused, as in paragraph one above. You may like to think about the use of images of the Earth from space to illustrate God's provision of life, fruitfulness and growth, as in paragraph three above. You may like to ponder how the Moon has no light of itself but reflects light from another source for our illumination and guidance by night, and make the link to a proper attitude towards God, the source of life and light and love in paragraph four above.

What is education for? Is it simply about wealth-creation, or is it also about wellbeing? Does it train pupils only to compete effectively as individuals, or can education prepare us to live in more sustainable relationships with our fellow human beings, and with the ecosystems on which we depend so completely? The Bible proclaims that our environment – the earth and all that is in it – is not simply there for us to explore and exploit, but that it belongs to God (Psalm 24:1). We as human beings are part of creation, ‘made from the dust of the earth’ (Genesis 2:7), and intimately related to our fellow creatures. Yet we are also called apart within creation to reflect God’s image in looking after it on his behalf (Genesis 1:26-28). This should affect how we educate young people in profound ways. Perhaps we can reflect on how education can prepare pupils for responsible stewardship of God’s world, or how education can recover a vision of connecting people with a sense of place and belonging – experiencing the joy of planting, growing and eating food, and reflecting on our dependence. Rather than encouraging us to see the world as our oyster – something to admire, consume or exploit and then discard – perhaps education needs to see the world as a gift on trust, a family heirloom to treasure, enjoy and pass on intact.

In Psalm 147 we read of God’s intimate relationship with creation – he knows the stars by name – and of his provision in rain, grass and wheat. In our search for sustainability he is the Sustainer, not only of people, but of all creatures, of the weather systems and of Earth itself. In an age when the fear of climate change and other environmental disasters looms large in pupils’ minds, God’s commitment to creation gives us hope. Through Christ – the Creator, Sustainer and Saviour of all things (Colossians 1:15-20) – there is hope, both that people can be transformed from selfish consumers into loving caretakers of creation, and also that creation itself can be set free from its bondage to decay (Romans 8:19-22).

Material provided by A Rocha UK and members of the Education Sunday Steering Group.



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