

“Love God, love His world”

The other day as I was scrolling Facebook I came across an article titled “Revising Amazing Grace to Solve the Wretch Problem.” While the author was satisfied that slave-trader John Newton who penned the hymn might rightly refer to himself as a “wretch,” she resisted self-identifying as a “wretch” herself, and advocated for changing that line of the hymn to “saved and set me free” or “saved a soul like me.”

It’s interesting to ponder her ideas off the back of our reading of Psalm 14 this morning. Did you get how we’re described there? Verses 2 and 3 read:

The Lord looks down from
heaven on humankind
to see if there are any
who are wise,
who seek after God.

They have all gone astray, they
are all alike perverse;
there is no one who does good,
no not one.

Sounds pretty wretched to me! Now don’t get me wrong, it’s not my goal to browbeat you with your badness this morning but I do think we need to take some care in this arena.

I’ve long loved something Rabbi Simcha Bunam said, I came across him the first time quoted in a Philip Yancey book. Rabbi Bunam says, “Everyone must have two pockets, so that he can reach into the one or the other, according to his needs. In his right pocket are to be the words: ‘For my sake was the world created,’ and in his left: ‘I am but dust and ashes.’” The thing is we need both pockets, and if we fail to tell the truth of either one we’re in trouble.

David Benner has this to say, “Some Christians base their identity on being a sinner. I think they have it wrong—or only half right. You are not simply a sinner; you are a deeply loved sinner. And there is all the difference in the world between the two.”

One hand... “I am but dust and ashes” ...the other hand, “For my sake was the world created.”

One hand..." I am a sinner" ...on the other hand, "I am a deeply loved sinner."

Scripture's testimony, the realities of our world, and an intimate knowledge of my own heart persuade me that "wretch" isn't at all an inappropriate label for us as humans, it's certainly a fitting descriptor for me. It's a pretty confronting and uncomfortable exercise to contemplate the darkness of our own hearts. This is where we consider not only the bad that we've done, but what we'd like to have done; it's how we consistently fail at the good we wish to do, but we don't; it's about the attitude of our hearts when we do do good; it's honesty about our propensity for the same dreadful sins *others* commit if our life circumstances had been the same as theirs; it's systems we participate in and perpetuate without a thought for the impact on the poor and vulnerable, and on Creation. And it's our existence independent of the God who created and loves us. I could go on, but I hope you get the idea.

Part of this whole being broken business is our tendency to either go hard on the sinner and wretch identity and wallow in the misery which is ourselves; or we recognise the problems with such a gloomy perspective and push back with the notion that actually we're really not so bad, in fact we're really rather good!

I believe Scripture teaches that we were indeed created good, and the image of God is present in us still, as is the capacity to do good as an expression of that image. But the corruption of sin is real and deep and taints everything we do. David Benner describes it, "Sin is more basic than what we do. Sin is who we are. In this regard we could say that sin is fundamentally a matter of ontology (being), not simply morality. To be a human is to be a sinner. It is to be broken, damaged goods that carry within our deepest self a fundamental, fatal flaw—a flaw that masks our original creation goodness and infects our very being."

One outcome of our sinful lifestyle is agony for the earth. Hosea 4:1-3 says:

Hear the word of the Lord,

O people of Israel;

for the Lord has an

indictment against the

inhabitants of the land.

There is no faithfulness or loyalty,

and no knowledge of God

in the land...*to verse 3*

Therefore the land mourns,
and all who live in it languish;
together with the wild animals
and the birds of the air,
even the fish are perishing.

Our ecological crisis is essentially one of sin. The guardianship or rule of Creation that we were trusted with was on the basis that we are made in the image of God. God's rule of the earth isn't extractive, consumptive, destruction-driven, but loving, caring, providing, and nourishing, and we were supposed to exercise dominion in like fashion.

A beautiful example of God's way was the manner in which He built in a statute of limit of exploitation and called it the Sabbath. Stephen Pattemore of A Rocha says, "Sabbath wasn't primarily a religious day, it was for rest, and a statute of limitation on exploitation. Sabbath was also for the animals and the fields. Weekly, 7-yearly, and 50-yearly Sabbaths ensured rest, equity, and justice. We as humans have been given a duty of care for the world and we've blown it. We've failed to provide the necessities of life for those in our care."

In another Psalm, Psalm 104 we encounter a glorious hymn of praise, a celebration of God's creative and sustaining power. The only note of disharmony in the entire 35 verses is when sinners and the wicked are mentioned near the end.

When we turned away from God to go our own way, sin entered the world. Sin is personified by the enemy who exists only to steal and destroy, and it pollutes everything, including the breadth of creation and our relationship with it. We are literally desecrators. The dictionary says that to desecrate is to "treat (a sacred place or thing) with violent disrespect; or to damage or show a lack of respect for something holy."

This is the complexity of climate change: We live in a wonderful world that is infected with sin. We have unique and incredible potential, which is sometimes used for good, sometimes for wrong, and usually for both.

An interesting – and important – interpretive note from our Psalm this morning is that verse one, where it says, "Fools say in their hearts, "There is no God." is not actually written to the atheists of the day – there weren't any, that is to say there were very few, if any, of the people we know

today as atheists who deny the existence of God on philosophical grounds. What did exist though, was a practical atheism, where people might profess a belief in God, but they live as if He doesn't exist.

There's a challenge there for us. When we rock up to church on Sunday I hope I'm right in imagining that for most that will mean faith in a living God. Sadly, for a long time in the history of the Western church that faith hasn't translated into goodness for the created world. We've not understood loving God as of necessity meaning that we love and care for creation. Nor have we understood that our relationship with Creation is inseparable from our love of neighbour. When it's the poor and vulnerable of the world who suffer first and most from the impact of our careless and callous engagement with Creation, we fail to love them as ourselves which we are explicitly commanded to do. Our faith in God must take shape as concern for the things that are on **God's** heart, or we risk falling into the pattern of those the Psalmist labelled "fools," because for all their profession, they lived like none of it was real.

Care of Creation is nothing other than obedient, God-honouring discipleship, it's working out our salvation. It's the normal Christian life. What's more, we can't really say we love someone and then trash their stuff, can we? Caring for creation is honouring and loving the God who made it and cares for it. We must treat everything we have as His, because it is.

How then should we live?

We worship God for the wonder of creation. We celebrate the hope we have that Jesus is in fact "...making all things new." We *are* a people of hope, but this hope is not a licence for neglect, but impetus for our cooperation with the purposes of God to restore all things.

Included in your bulletin are seven suggestions from Tear Fund Australia for how to begin, or continue on our Creation Care journey. But don't be limited by those, there are many more possibilities. Our recent commitment to Eco Church means that this is a community activity and conversation for us here at St. Paul's too, so let's be actively thinking about what caring for our environment looks like in this space.

And to close, in the words of Stephen Pattimore:

"Let's start now,

Choose something,

Just do it – for the love of God!"

