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Talk by The Rt Revd David Atkinson, Bishop of Thetford

Taken from www.norwich.anglican.org

The world was made through him, yet the world knew him not

Psalm 8

John 1. 1 – 14



The Milkmaid, Jan Vermeer

Taken from Olga's Gallery, www.abcgallery.com

It was in 1967 that a historian in America, Lynn White, gave a lecture called 'The Historic Roots of our Ecologic Crisis', in which he complained not only that Christianity was the most anthropocentric of all religions, but that we carried a heavy load of responsibility for the environmental crisis which the world faced. What he had in mind was the Genesis text about humanity having dominion over the rest of creation.

There is no doubt much of which we Christians need to repent in our treatment of the created order, but the Christian faith itself is, if I can put it like this, very green.

The prologue to the Fourth Gospel says "the world was made through him" "without him was not anything made that was made". St Paul echoes this with his wonderful text "From him and through him and to him are all things." The whole created order is God's creation. As the psalmist put it "The earth is the Lord's and all that is in it." (Ps 24.1). What higher motivation can there be to 'till and to keep' as our Bibles translate the command to Adam in the Garden - and which I think is better translated as 'to serve and to protect'.

All things are from God's hands; the whole rich emergent creation of Genesis 1 is not there solely for our benefit but for God's - he calls it 'good'; our role is to serve and to protect God's garden.

Thomas Trahere has some wonderful lines about our enjoyment of and engagement with the world:

You never enjoy the world aright, till the Sea itself floweth in your veins, till you are clothed with the heavens and crowned with the stars: and perceive yourself to

be the sole heir of the whole world, and more than so, because men are in it and every one sole heirs as well as you. Till you can sing and rejoice and delight in God, as misers do in gold and kings in scepters, you never enjoy the world.

By an Act of Understanding therefore be present now with all the creatures among which you live... We infinitely wrong ourselves by laziness and confinement... You are never what you ought till you go out of yourself and walk among them.

And this, I think, is how we are to interpret that phrase about 'having dominion'. It comes also in Psalm 8: where the poet reflects on the smallness of human beings in relation to the heavens, the moon and the stars, and yet 'you have made them a little lower than God, and crowned them with glory and honour; you have given them dominion over the works of your hands.' (Notice - the works of God's hands). And this calling to dominion is in the context first of humble worship before the Creator - how majestic is your name in all the earth; and in the context secondly, of being 'crowned' like kings to care for the works of God's hands. And the true and good king, reflecting the kingly rule of God, is supremely concerned with the welfare of creation, and especially the cause of justice for the marginalized and oppressed. (read Ps 72).

So Lynn White is mistaken if he believes the Bible gives us warrant for exploitation.

But, to be fair, there is much of which we need to repent. The world was made through him – through the Word, - and yet the world knew him not. We human beings have shown that we have not known him by our sin and selfishness which has indeed exploited the natural world. Since the industrial revolution in particular, we have been burning up the resources of the planet as if there were no tomorrow, and the resulting accelerating pace of climate change warns us - as the weather warned the people in Isaiah's time - that we have lost touch with the ways of God. "The earth dries up and withers, the world languishes and withers; the earth lies polluted under its inhabitants; for they have transgressed the laws, violated the statutes, broken the everlasting covenant." (Isa. 24. 4f.).

And we in the West, in particular, have shown that we have not known him, to the extent that we have allowed the rich to get richer while the poor of the world are getting poorer. Climate change will not so much affect the UK, and the 8 lane Santa Monica freeway in California, as it will affect sub-Saharan Africa, and Bangladesh. The Millennium Development goals, seeking to eradicate poverty and hunger and to reduce by half the people who are living on less than one dollar a day, become less and less achievable without urgent changes to our global priorities in relation to carbon emission as much as in relation to debt and development. As Christian Aid is making so clear these days, climate has become an issue of justice.

The world was made through him, and yet the world knew him not - and we show that we have not known him to the extent, in particular, that we ignore what we might call the Sabbath principle - that rhythm of engagement with the world and rest and worship which enables the development of shalom - that wellbeing in all our relationships which reflects something of God. Sabbath is about sufficiency - as John Taylor wrote many years ago "enough is enough"; Sabbath is about the rhythms of life which fit in with and support the natural rhythms of the earth and all its creatures; Sabbath is about

holiness - recognizing the sacred within creation - creation is not divine, but it is sacred, infused with God's spirit and held in being by God's breath. And the Sabbath of Sabbaths which we call Jubilee is essentially about the liberation which comes when wealth is not allowed to accumulate in the hands only of a few, but when the rich resources of God's world are equitably shared.

There is no place where the themes of God as creator, repentance for sin, the reminder of holiness, the call to live in the power of the Spirit come together more clearly than in the sacrament of Holy Communion. This Vermeer picture of the milkmaid seems to me to be filled with sacramental imagery - the 'miracle of the ordinary' - not least that the milk, like God's grace, never ceases to flow. The material world becomes a vehicle for divine generosity; nature is God's gift.

The sacramental nature of the universe - that the material world is a vehicle for divine grace and healing - is symbolized and enacted in the Eucharistic sacrament of grace. And at its centre is the death and resurrection of the covenant Lord, through whose cross, St Paul says, all things in earth and heaven are reconciled to God.

Hans Kung writes of the kingdom of God as 'creation healed'.

So every time we come once again with gratitude to receive the tokens of grace in broken bread and poured out wine, we come to the one through whom the world was made - even though the world knew him not; we are invited to know him afresh as those to whom he gives power to be children of God - royal servants of his creation - servants and protectors of his Garden - and as those committed to engage with his world by doing justly, loving kindness and walking humbly with him. We do so with the prayer that his kingdom will come - on earth as it is in heaven.