Tonbridge morning 17.3.19

It is a pleasure to be here once again. I have been asked to preach about some of the themes of my recent book called ‘Hope Rediscovered: biblical wisdom for an anxious world’. I will try to do that this morning and this evening.

Let me first tell you how the book came about.

First, I am very concerned – as we all are – about the environmental degradation we are causing to the planet, particularly due to climate change.

Do you recall the opening ceremony of the 2012 London Olympics – with England’s green and pleasant land transformed by the smoking chimneys of the industrial revolution? There is so much to thank God for in science and technology. I spent some years as a research chemist, and am grateful for all the benefits science and technology have given us. But one of the things the early industrialists did not know is that by burning fossil fuels, by cutting down rain forests, by some aspects of industrial agriculture, we are putting a blanket around the earth, which is changing the climate, with potentially catastrophic consequences - more frequent severe weather events, growing deserts, warming oceans which affects the plankton and so the food chain, loss of food security and of fresh water; coastal areas flooding leading to huge migrations - and all in the context of a growing human population - growing at the rate of a city the size of Birmingham every five days. My grandfather did not know anything about this, nor did my mother and father. But we do. There is a new and very particular responsibility on our generation.

 More and more people are realizing that ‘climate is not simply an economic or political issue, it is a moral and spiritual one’. Think of some of the questions climate change poses to us: our human relationship to other creatures, the trust we place in technology, our duties to the poorest parts of the world, and to future generations - and how we handle our fears and vulnerabilities about the future; and perhaps most poignantly: what sort of world will my grandchildren find when they are my age? These are all moral and I suggest spiritual questions. They are about global justice, about inter-generational justice, about living in the truth. There are a small but growing number of academics who discuss all this in terms of an almost inevitable near-term social collapse, a probable ecological catastrophe, and a possible extinction of all animal life including human life by the end of this century. That is the motivation behind the growing Extinction Rebellion movement - and the rather marvelous recent strike by school children, who seem to care more about all this than most politicians - or indeed most church members - seem to.

I think we are in need of spiritual wisdom. Where is spiritual wisdom to be found? Are there any grounds for hope?

The second concern behind my book is that we humans are losing any true sense of who we are. In this anxious world, we are becoming more and more divided into the haves and the have-nots; we are becoming more and more commodified and our value seen only in our utility; everything including the environment is given a price-tag. We are losing any sense of the common good, and we are being driven by a model of ‘economic man’ which is individualized and self-interested.

We rightly hear about sustainable development: how does this tie in with ecology, economy and equity? What does it mean to flourish? What counts as authentic humanity? Again: are there any grounds for hope?

Let me digress slightly to ask: How have we got to this point?

I think we have lost the biblical sense that there is a creative triangle of relationships between God, humanity and the earth - that we humans are part of the earth, and dependent on the earth for our well-being, but we also have responsibility as God’s image-bearers to care for God’s creation on God’s behalf. Instead of this rich triangle of relationships, some Christians seem to have concentrated entirely on the ‘God – human’ axis of the triangle and – damagingly - have ignored our human interdependence with the earth. Others have tended to displace God, and think only of our human relationship to the earth. Then we think of ourselves as the Masters and Possessors of Nature (as Francis Bacon once put it). We use the world to provide for all our wants, so we exploit it, and extract it, and damage it without thought of the future.

I think that one Christian moral imperative, if we are to live hopefully, is to recover that triangle: God, humanity and the earth in creative interrelationship bringing ecology, economy and equity together under God.

So to my third motivating factor. I have for a very long time had a particular fascination with the Fourth Gospel – John’s Gospel - and of all the gospels this one seems to draw most on the Wisdom traditions of the Hebrew Bible, and also talks most about human flourishing: ‘*I am come that they might have life in all its fullness.’*

So I wondered what would happen if I tried, as it were, to put my questions about our need for wisdom in our relation to God’s creation, and concerns about human well-being, to the author of John’s Gospel, and try to draw on some of the themes of the Gospel to find some wisdom for today.

In the Hebrew Bible, what we call our Old Testament, Lady Wisdom does two things. First, she gives us a sense of order in the world - Wisdom is at the heart of God’s creation; wisdom holds everything together; wisdom is behind nature’s laws and patterns. Second, Wisdom helps us to cope; gives us stories and patterns and guides to live by; helps us find our way, which is God’s way, in all the uncertainties of this world. Wisdom shows us what life in its fullness is about.

So this gives the structure to my book.

The book is divided into three main sections, each of which draws on themes from John’s Gospel:

(i) Wisdom embedded in creation - this draws mostly on the Prologue in John chapter 1. That is what I want to talk about for the rest of this morning’s sermon.

(ii) Wisdom embodied in Jesus, The Man - this draws on the portrait of Jesus especially in John chapters 1 – 12 - and I will explore this this evening.

(iii) Walking Wisdom’s Way: living authentically as God’s people in God’s world. This will form the basis for what I want us to discuss in the evening meeting on Tuesday.

Throughout, I think we can discover grounds for hope in the faithfulness of God.

So let me use the rest of my time this morning to invite you to think about

**(i) God’s Wisdom embedded in creation.**

The opening words of the Gospel of John, ‘*In the beginning was the Word*’, take us immediately back to the opening words of the Hebrew Bible: ‘*In the beginning, God*’*.* The Gospel writer assumes that God is Creator, and Nature is God’s Creation in which God’s Wisdom is embedded, holding all things together. The wonderful poem at the start of our Bibles, Genesis chapter 1, is a reflection on Nature as God’s creation. In much of the Hebrew Wisdom literature, Wisdom offers us a way to understand God’s gift of creation, and our human place within it. It gives pointers to how we are to live and care for the rest of God’s creation if we are to flourish, and how to cope when things are hard.

The poet who wrote Psalm 104 speaks of God’s wisdom and joy in all the creatures and ends with a dominant note of joy: ‘*May the Lord rejoice in his works’* (v.31). God’s Wisdom is embedded in creation, and is a source of God’s delight. As John’s Gospel puts it ‘God so loved the world.’

Part of our human responsibility in the care of the world that God loves, in response to God’s gift, is to safeguard the possibilities of delight and joy in God for ourselves and for others and for future generations. When we capture God’s joy in God’s creation, we find one source of hope in the faithfulness of God.

If ‘the earth is the Lord’s’, we as his image-bearers are called first to an **ethic of allegiance**.

However, sometimes Nature fills us rather with anxiety and fear, and seems to be a place of inexplicable suffering. In the Wisdom writings, we also find this other perspective on Nature, darker and more perplexing. There is within God’s creation that which is broken, seemingly cruel, without obvious purpose. Creation is in jeopardy.

One aspect of the brokenness of the world is human sin and selfishness, of which John’s Gospel says a good deal. *‘The world was made through him, and the world knew him not.’*

As long ago as the sixth century bc, the prophet Isaiah referred to environmental damage as a symbol of God’s judgement on human sin:

*The earth dries up and withers, the world languishes and withers; the heavens languish together with the earth. The earth lies polluted under its inhabitants; for they have transgressed laws, violated the statutes, broken the everlasting covenant.* (Isaiah 24:4f.)

It was with that in mind, that in 2012 Operation Noah published its *Ash Wednesday Declaration* on ‘climate change and the purposes of God’. It reflected on God’s joy in creation, and our joy in God’s gift; our need to repent of past stupidities and sins, on the call to love our neighbours and do justice in the world, and on the grounds for hope in God’s faithfulness. Professor Mary Grey commented on this:

‘For Christians, the themes of this statement - joy, repentance, hope, justice and so on – are not optional: they are at the heart of our identity as Church. We will encounter them in the form of a question when we face God’s judgement: “*What did you do to cherish my creation in its hour of danger?”*

Hour of danger? Could it be hour of opportunity? Just suppose we had a world in which we were not all trying to consume as much as we could to keep GDP growing and growing as though there were no boundaries, or in which we could significantly reduce our dependency on coal, oil and gas, and satisfy our energy needs in other ways. We would not be extracting so many resources from the earth, and the earth would be more sustainable; the air would be cleaner and we could breathe more easily; the water would be fresher and there would not be wars fought over clean water; the land would be more fertile and our food security would be stronger; people who live in London or New York or Shanghai – not to mention the Solomon Islands - would not be afraid that their cities will flood. We could build a cleaner and healthier and better-fed world that is more just, with less poverty, and less anxiety about what the future will hold. Is that still within our reach? The time available is diminishing.

To achieve that we need an **ethic of restraint**. Here is one of Archbishop Rowan’s comments on the Pope Francis’ wonderful Encyclical *Laudato Si*:

*‘Measureless acquisition, consumption, or economic growth in a finite environment is a literally nonsensical idea; yet the imperative of growth remains unassailable, as though we did not really inhabit a material world.’*

We need to live within limits: the physical limits of a material world, and the moral limits of God’s ways of Wisdom.

If our natural world is actually the place where the Wisdom of God is embedded: that call’s us to live differently; in allegiance to the Creator, and with restraint in our use of the Creator’s gifts. We pray each day ‘your kingdom come on earth as it is in heaven.’ That holds before us the vision expressed by Hans Kung in the wonderful words: ‘The Kingdom of God is creation healed.’ That is a vision to motivate us in our care for God’s creation now.

I want this evening to move to my second section. God’s Wisdom embedded in creation is actually God’s Wisdom embodied in a person - a person who shows us through his life and death and resurrection what authentic humanity looks like. So I move from thinking about our care for God’s creation, to thinking about what it means to be fully human in God’s world. It is in Jesus that we see what human flourishing means. In Pontius Pilate’s words, as he points to Jesus: here is The Man.