

‘Sharing the Creative Passion of God’ – A Homily for Harvest

As Christians we can have a dangerous tendency to unnaturally split our world into the spiritual and the material, but more than this to elevate one and diminish the other. We see the spiritual as important - and denigrate the material as unimportant. Interestingly in a world that seems dangerously materialistic in its desire to consume more and more at any cost, we have actually failed to be truly materialistic: we have failed to understand that God is intimately concerned with our world in all its earthy, materialistic reality, and have therefore failed to understand our own deep connection with our planet.

I believe that our primary task is to move away from an individualistic concern for our own spirituality and salvation, and come to realise alongside the early Church Fathers and Mothers – that there can be no salvation for us that is not at the same time the redemption of the whole world. Now I’m sure that we have all had to endure doom-laden sermons about the state of our world, and when statistics are thrown at us from the pulpit, statistics like: 20% of the world consumes 80% of the world’s resources, or one third of the world’s population is already experiencing water shortages, or again, that two-thirds of the world will be experiencing water shortages by 2025 – then often we feel a paralysing mix of guilt and powerlessness. Such paralysis does not galvanise us into action.

So today I’m not going to beat you over the head with painful and condemning statistics, but instead to provide some theological ammunition as to why we have to be serious about our planet in the first place. After all if we are able to become passionate for our planet, then I believe we are actually sharing the passion of God himself.

Both Scripture and Christian Tradition attest to the divine passion for our planet, and both are pretty explosive in what they have to say to us. First to Scripture: it is Genesis that reminds us that it is God himself who creates our world out of nothing, entrusting his beautiful creation to humanity. The delicate harmony and balance of creation is celebrated in the divine speech that declares creation to be “very good.” Throughout the Scriptures we are

reminded that creation is a living sign of God's glory, participating in the splendour and majesty of his being. We are told this again and again; clearly the writers were justly worried we might forget. Here's the Psalmist, praising God for the majesty revealed in creation:

O LORD, how manifold are your works!

In wisdom you have made them all;

The earth is full of your creatures. [Psalm 104]

Or here's the book of Job:

Then the Lord answered Job out of the whirlwind:...

Where were you when I laid the foundations of the earth?

Tell me, if you have understanding.

Who shut in the sea with doors when it burst out from the womb?

Have you comprehended the expanse of the earth?

Declare if you know all this...

It goes on and on: God's delight, joy, interest, excitement, laughter – his passion - is all too fearfully clear. Our Scriptures demand that we must have a passion for the planet because the planet is God's passion.

In the Christian Tradition it is Irenaeus who speaks most clearly about this most earthy of divine passions. Here's Irenaeus commenting on the Gospel of John:

“As John declares regarding Him (that is Jesus): ‘All things were made by Him, and without Him was nothing made.’ Now, among the “all things” our world must be embraced.”

Irenaeus sees Jesus' act of salvation, not as a human-centred activity, but as a divine embrace of the whole world. Closer to our own time we find Pope Paul IV and C. H. Spurgeon – both from rather different poles of the Christian tradition – moving us in similar directions:

“One cannot dissociate the plan of creation from the plan of redemption. The latter plan touches the very concrete situations of injustice to be combated and of justice to be restored.”

Or again,

“God will one day change our bodies and then he will change this world itself. We expect to see this world that is now full of sin turned into a paradise, a garden of God.”

To be authentically Christian in our world is to share the passion of God for our world. For too long the Western Church has swept its concern about the environment out the back door, but as the Indian proverb reminds us:

“you can sweep nature out through the back door, but it will come tearing back like a hurricane through the front window.”

In both Scripture and Tradition it is of course Jesus who has reconnected us to creation. He has enacted redemption through his death and resurrection. It is through him that the alienation, hopelessness, unreality and guilt we often feel when faced with these issues - feelings that can tempt us into inaction and paralysis – can be transformed into redemption and the hope of global peace.

Jesus has set us free to bring in his kingdom and share his passion. Today as we celebrate the liturgy of creation, let us come to God, pledging to make our response: either to learn more before we can act, or to take small steps to restore the balance of creation through developing sustainable patterns of living. But in all of this, let us remember that in our thinking and doing we are connecting into a passion for the planet, a passion that shares in the passion of God himself. AMEN.