



Climate Change and the Purposes of God

Session four: What do I need to change?

Notes for group leaders

Purpose of this Session

The purpose of this Session is to take us back to one of the primary purposes of Ash Wednesday: self-examination before God. If you are using this as a Lent Course, it is worth reminding ourselves that Lent is often a time of penitence for sin, and for prayer - that we may live more godly lives as Christ's disciples. This session looks at our human responsibilities under God for the care of creation, and at the call to repentance from wrong and to a change of direction. Two sections of Climate Change and the Purposes of God are covered in this session.

Session four: What do I need to change?

Why should we care for God's world? Because God does (*The Lord is good to all, and his compassion is over all that he has made.* Psalm 145:9). God knows about the fall of each sparrow (Matthew 10:29). We are made in God's image to reflect something of God.

1. Read Psalm 8

This psalm shows us a way into understanding our responsibilities for care for God's earth.

- Psalm 8 is a song of praise to God the Creator. The poet contemplates the glory of the starry heavens (v1), and behind that, discerns the glory of God. He offers praise with the same awe and wonder that a young child shows - a fact that should silence God's opponents. The deep spiritual response of even young children to the wonders of God's world are a sort of audible 'bulwark' against those who oppose God's ways (v2).

The group could talk about some examples of how they have seen children appreciating creation.

- In verses 3 - 4: the overwhelming nature of the poet's experience of God's glory in creation helps him to a right understanding of his own place within God's creation. God's revelation of himself within creation illuminates humanity's status and presses the question 'what are human beings?' The first word about human beings is one of humility before the majesty of God.

? What would we include in an answer to the question; "What are human beings?"

- Throughout the psalm it is God who is the subject. In verses 4-6 we read how God has made human beings to be his image. It is God who now gives to humanity a task of royal service. On the one hand we are 'crowned' with the authority of God the king (v 5), and responsible for the care of all 'the works of God's hands' (v6).
- The created order is always 'the work of God's hands', not humanity's to exploit or damage. The task of 'dominion' is that of commission given by God to exercise God's 'rule over' creation on God's behalf and in line with God's will and God's way. This 'royal' task is to reflect the sort of kingly rule which God exercises.

? How does this psalm make you feel about the earth and our place in it?

? Can you think of practical ways of expressing care for God's creation in your locality?

Examples of practical action:

- *Eco-congregations*
- *Transition Towns*
- *Environment projects in Church schools (e.g. creating a wild-flower garden)*
- *The Church of England's 'Shrinking the Footprint' Campaign, which focuses among other things on making church buildings more efficient*
- *Operation Noah's 'Carbon Exodus'*
- *Conservation projects in churchyards - leaving some grass unmown to allow grasses and wildflowers to flower and seed*
- *Local community projects working on energy efficiency or waster recycling*
- *Working to reduce our personal carbon allocation (maybe by 5% or 10% each year)*

2. Take Responsibility

Read Genesis 1:26 to Genesis 2:15

? What does 'responsibility' mean?

? Can it apply to something as big as the earth?

? Can it be used for groups of people as well as individuals?

Climate Change and the Purposes of God says:

Humans, made in God's image, have unique responsibility for the well being of creation (Genesis 1:26, 2:15). We are to care for the earth because it is gift, the product of God's love. No sparrow falls without God knowing. Humanity has always had the capacity to destroy our environment, but today we have this to an unprecedented extent. Whereas previous generations did not know the damage they were causing, we do. We must use our power wisely to promote the flourishing of future generations and the diversity of life on earth. This is the responsibility of every Church and every believer.

? Can you think of ways in which our generation is causing damage to an unprecedented extent? What does that do to our sense of responsibility?

We are exceeding the boundaries of sustainable life on our planet in different ways:

- *Loss of biodiversity*
- *Availability of fresh water*
- *Acidification of the oceans*
- *Nitrogen usage, especially in agriculture*
- *Build up of toxic chemicals in the oceans and rivers.*

Mark Lynas' Book 'The God Species' Fourth Estate 2011, develops the concept of 'planetary boundaries'. There is a recent Oxfam discussion paper called 'A Safe and Just Space for Humanity' which uses the same concept.

What's different now?

Today we have the capacity to destroy the environment to an unprecedented extent.

Swedish scientist Johan Rockstrom has developed the idea of 'planetary boundaries' – picked up by Mark Lynas in The God Species (Fourth Estate 2011). With a rapidly growing world population (growing at the rate of the size the city of Birmingham every five days), we as humans are rapidly exceeding the 'carrying capacity' of the earth to sustain life.

Examples of how we are exceeding the boundaries include:

- *Loss of biodiversity*
- *Availability of freshwater*
- *Acidification of the oceans*
- *Nitrogen usage especially in agriculture*
- *Build up of toxic chemicals in the oceans and rivers*

'The basic matter, however, is not one of economics. It is a matter of morality - a matter of intergenerational justice. The blame, if we fail to stand up and demand a change of course, will fall on us, the current generation of adults. Our parents honestly did not know that their actions could harm future generations. We, the current generation, can only pretend that we did not know.'

James Hansen, US scientist

3. Change Direction! Repent!

Climate Change and the Purposes of God calls the church to repentance

REPENT!

Jesus said: 'The time has come. The kingdom of God has come near. Repent and believe the good news!' (Mark 1:14-15).

Continuing to pollute the atmosphere when we know the dangers, goes against what we know of God's ways and God's will. We are failing to love not only the earth, but our neighbours and ourselves, who are made in God's image. God grieves over the destruction of creation and so should we.

Repentance means finding creative, constructive and immediate ways of addressing the danger. It happens when God's Spirit enables a change of mind and change of heart, prompting a turn from past wrong and a decision to change direction.

For our generation, reducing our dependence on fossil fuels has become essential to Christian discipleship.

? How are we polluting the atmosphere?

? What signs indicate the 'destruction of creation' that you are aware of?

Climate Change and the Purposes of God refers to:

- *Failure to love*
- *Grieving over the destruction of creation*
- *Finding creative, constructive and immediate ways forward*
- *A change of mind*
- *A change of heart*
- *A change of direction*
- *A turn from past wrong.*

? What might this call to repentance mean for you / for your church / for your community?

? Think of ways in which we can bring creation care back into the centre of the Church's mission? Why is it so often marginal?

Think of examples of how this could be done using:

- Preaching and the liturgy
- Sunday School teaching
- Church schools
- Civic cooperation
- Advocacy actions, both locally and nationally.

A further note on Responsibility

The first task given to God's image-bearers in Genesis chapter 1 is to 'have dominion' over other creatures, to 'fill the earth and subdue it'.

Of course, some people have taken 'dominion' and 'subdue' to mean 'exploit as much as you like, without regard for the welfare of other creatures'. Sadly this has sometimes been true of Christians. Many environmentalists are cautious of the Christian church because they assume this is what Christians believe. So we need to be careful with this text.

In fact, until the rise of modern science, most Christians did not believe that this verse meant that human beings should have total control over the whole world. It was the growth of modern science and technology in the 17th century which, though often pioneered by Christian people, led to the 'disenchantment' of nature, and the (wrong) belief that science was about forcing nature to yield her secrets to our human power of exploration.

In the Genesis text, 'dominion' is best thought of as 'ruling' with the sort of care and compassion that God shows - humanity, as it were, in royal service - taking care of God's creation on God's behalf.

'Subdue' is probably best understood in terms of cultivation and agriculture. Richard Bauckham's book 'The Bible and Ecology' (Darton, Longman and Todd 2010), explores all this in detail.

Care and Protect

The second creation story in Genesis chapter 2 depicts God's man in God's garden. The task given by God is to 'till and to keep' (Genesis 2.15). This may also have a 'royal' connotation. This was probably written at the time of Solomon when the King's Garden was an important feature in Jerusalem. Maybe the author of Genesis 2 is using this as a pattern for Eden. In both Genesis accounts, the royal servants must till and keep, cultivate and protect the Garden on behalf of the King.

A further note on the 'destruction of creation'

Extracts from Tearfund partners in their report Dried up, Drowned out, 2012

Africa relies on its agriculture. But agriculture is under threat from the unreliability and intensity of the weather.....Rivers are drying up. The water table is lowering, resulting in empty boreholes, which means that people have to travel further to find water. Deeper wells have to be dug. It is becoming harder to find enough water.

'Floods, droughts and storms used to be every three to five years. Now they are every year.' Higino Filimone, CCM (Christian Council of Mozambique).

'For the last ten years, the frequency of flooding has increased. And there have been frequent storms which have destroyed crops and houses.' Anne Abingeri, Moucecoure, Rwanda

'We have erratic rainfall. There isn't enough water to cultivate, so there's no food, no grain. Food is not available in the villages. Children die. Life becomes miserable. Cattle die without water. The situation has worsened since 2000 and no improvement is seen in the near future. I've also seen people fighting over water a number of times. Since

the problems of climate change, people cannot live peacefully... Every year they are thinking, "This year, what is going to happen? What will we do?" They sit together in the depth of the night and think about what course of action to take in the future'. TK Joy, Tearfund partner Eficor (The Evangelical Fellowship of India Commission on Relief)

Read Isaiah 24:4 - 5

"The earth dries up and withers, the world languishes and withers, the heavens languish with the earth. The earth is defiled by its people; they have disobeyed the laws, violated the statutes and broken the everlasting covenant."

Isaiah is writing in Jerusalem in the eighth century BC. The language of covenant is familiar to the people of Israel, reminding them of God's promised faithfulness, and their calling to obedience to God's ways and God's will. But here the covenant is of God's faithfulness to the whole earth - and the calling is to humanity.

Much later in Israel's history, another writer in a later chapter of Isaiah, reminds the people of God about God's faithfulness in the story of Noah:

This is like the days of Noah to me: Just as I swore that the waters of Noah would never again go over the earth, my steadfast love shall not depart from you, and my covenant of peace shall not be removed. Isaiah 54:9-10.

The call of both parts of Isaiah is for the people of God to return to the Lord, and seek him while he may be found; to forsake wicked ways, and discover again God's redeeming grace.

Read Genesis 9:12-13

God said; 'This is the sign of the covenant that I make between me and you and every living creature that is with you, for all future generations: I have set my bow in the clouds, and it shall be a sign of the covenant between me and the earth.'

The story of Noah is one both of God's devastating judgment against human sinfulness, and also of God's resounding "Yes!" to the continuance of life on earth. In the light of the promises of God's commitment to the earth, and to every living creature, discuss what repentance must mean for us today.

Climate Change and the Purposes of God is a 'confessional' statement

Climate Change and the Purposes of God is a 'Confessional Statement'. In the 1930s Christians in Germany came together to produce the Barmen Declaration, which called the church at a critical time, to make clear its Christian convictions in the face of the rise of Nazism. At various similar critical times in the Church's history, a 'confessional statement' has said: 'this is the time for Christians to stand up and be counted - this is the time to witness to God's will and God's ways. If you are a Christian, this is important to you!' Today is such a time! Our statement says that the call to take responsibility for care of God's creation comes to every church and every believer.



How can we bring creation care back to the centre of the church's mission?