

How do we relate to the Earth?

Pitt Street Uniting Church, Sunday 5 September, 2021

A Reflection by Rev Dr Josephine Inkpin

First Sunday in the Season of Creation. Planet Earth Sunday.

Psalm 33: 1-9; Contemporary reading: *We are children of the Earth* by John O'Donohue (from *Divine Beauty & Beauty: the Invisible Embrace*); John 1: 1-14

This worship service can be viewed on You Tube at <https://pittstreetuniting.org.au/spirit/reflections/>

When you step out of your door in the morning, do you feel that you are stepping into a world of wonder in which you are intimately connected? Or, are you simply stepping into mere location? Is it just dead space which you are crossing so that you can get to where you need to go? Or, do you believe you are walking into a living universe?

Those are questions which the great spiritual writer John O'Donohue used to ask and they lie at the heart of the Season of Creation we have just begun this month. For it matters vitally how we view the world and where we locate God in relation to it.

So much of our politics, our business and trade activities, and our lifestyles, are affected. If we believe that matter doesn't really matter to God, then we will end up acting in problematic ways. Or, as John O'Donohue used to say, if we do believe that when we step out we are walking into a living universe, then our walk '*becomes a different thing*'. So let us explore some of the theological paths which can underpin more loving and sustainable ways of living together on the Earth...

An exercise

Before I offer a few models for ecological faith today, I'm going first however, to invite you into a little exercise. For we all learn slightly differently, don't we? Some of us can handle theology most easily in our heads. Others of us need something more tangible. So today, or during the week to come, you might like to find three pieces of paper, ideally of different colours. Imagine that the first piece of coloured paper represents God, the second represents human beings, and the third represents the Earth, the wider Creation of which we are a part. Can you, I wonder, reflect on how you could put together those three pieces of paper, representing those three elements (God, humanity, and the Earth) in a way which reflects how they inter-relate together?

You might lay them on top of each other in a particular way, roll them all up into a ball, create a spiral, divide them up into pieces and stick them together in another creative way. It doesn't really matter how you go about it. There is no exactly perfect answer. But when I've asked others to try this, they've often come up with wonderfully creative models. Sharing those models with each other is then additionally helpful. For the key thing is to reflect upon how, for each of us, and as a faith community together, we can speak of God, human beings and the wider Earth in relationship to one another.

Three 'S' s

This morning, let me first offer three really unhelpful models which are quite influential in some faith circles and in our wider society, and, also, three models which offer us much more fruitful paths of understanding and living. Let's begin with the three problematic paradigms, or ways of looking at God, human beings and the Earth. Each of these starts with the letter 's'...

Earth as supermarket

Firstly, at least among so-called 'advanced' Westernised societies, the wider Creation is frequently viewed as a supermarket. The Earth is seen as something full of all kinds of objects: things which we can simply pick up and consume. Indeed, if we have a big enough wallet, trolley, and vehicles to cart them away, we can binge on so many of the resources on display. We can gorge ourselves to our heart and stomach's content, at least until we begin to experience reactions. For, in this model, the Earth has no intrinsic value. It is just there, like a supermarket, for human satisfaction. We may not even ask questions about how the items before us are packaged, how they come to be there, or who produces them, in what conditions, and who is benefiting from our consumption. Our society tends just to rejoice at the immediate practicality, extraordinary variety, and often short term, cheap cost to us in obtaining resources.

Now the supermarket model of the Earth tends to be quite a secular one, closely related to modern economics which values immediate profits and quick satisfaction over long term sustainability. Yet associated with it can also be ideas of God as not really connected to the Earth except to set human beings over it as its dominators. That is what happens when we don't properly understand God's command at the beginning of the Bible, in the first chapter of Genesis, where God says (my emphasis):

Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it; and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the air and over every living thing that moves upon the earth"

Let's come back to this, but, upfront, here in the Bible, it is vital to say that 'dominion' does not mean domination.

Earth as stage

Secondly, another unhelpful way of viewing the Earth is to see it as just a stage for human beings to live on, with or without relationship to God. In this model, the Earth is just the backdrop to what really seems to matter to human beings, namely our particular human attempts to flourish. We might be concerned to have pretty scenery and useful props, and we might try to make sure that the stage set doesn't collapse on us. However, Earth is still ultimately only a tool or instrument for human beings.

Now, again, this is not just a secular way of looking at, and treating, wider Creation. From about Reformation times onwards, too much Christian thought and life has been centred on human beings, almost exclusively. Christians have often thought a great deal about how they relate, vertically, to God above us, or within us, and to other human beings. But we have often neglected how we should relate, horizontally, to the rest of God's Creation, and to God within the more-than-human world. Too often, if we are not careful, Christian Faith can then become a matter of 'God and me' or 'God and me and other human beings'. However, God's Creation has always been about far more than human beings, and it is not so much the stage but God's divine play itself. Again, let us come back to this in a moment.

Earth as Site from which to be Saved

Thirdly, especially among Christians, and some other faith groups, Earth can be regarded as the site from which to be saved. Now 'being saved' and 'salvation' are really important words and themes in Christian Faith, and vital ways of speaking about the love of God in Jesus Christ. However, if we see this world as something which is really ultimately worthless, and something from which to escape, we will have distorted the heart of the Christian message. Salvation means much more than escape, and God in Jesus Christ does not so much 'save' us from the world, as draw us closer into the heart of God in every part of existence: not least into deeper relationship with all that lives in this world, as much as in any another world which may lie beyond it.

Put simply, material existence, matter, matters to God. The Word of God, John's Gospel tells us, was incarnated, made flesh, made matter, to help us see and understand this. Sadly, there are some ideas of salvation which ignore this truth. Especially in the USA, some Christians, for example, believe that salvation will come with a so-called 'Rapture': when a small section of right-thinking, righteous-living, Christians will be snatched away from the Earth, saved from this world. Most Christians do not hold such strange narrow views. Yet part of our ecological crisis is still linked to very limited conceptions of salvation.

Bad theology leads to bad politics – three 'C's

How then are we to explore richer and more biblically grounded understandings of faith which take seriously God's wider Creation? The models and metaphors of Earth as a supermarket, a stage, and a site from which to be saved, continue to be very influential. They shape the thinking and actions of so many, don't they? They help, for example, to explain why such a prominent professed Christian as our Prime Minister is locked into approaches to climate change which ignore the Earth and God's deep involvement in its groanings. It is not just that Mr Morrison has particular political priorities. It is also that his kind of Christianity sees Earth as variously a supermarket of God's gifts, a stage for human beings, and, ultimately, essentially only a site from which to be saved. So, if we, as Christians, are to play our part in caring for the Earth, we must indeed be active in practical ways. However, we also have a particular role in addressing such destructive models of faith and offering something better. Let me therefore, offer three alternative, much more orthodox, and, vitally, much healthier metaphors. Instead of three 's' words, here are three 'c' words...

Earth as Communion

Firstly, instead of seeing Earth as a supermarket, we need to affirm Creation as above all, a Communion. The great 'geologist' Thomas Berry famously put it this way: '*the universe*', he repeatedly said, '*is a communion of subjects, not a collection of objects.*' Unless we understand that, he used to say, we will never really 'get' to the roots or answers to our ecological challenges. Earth is not a treasure-house of resources, a supermarket, for human beings to consume. It is a living, breathing, profoundly interconnected reality in which we, as human beings, are inextricably a part. For, as St Francis of Assisi famously taught and sang, all parts of Creation are our siblings, part of us, as we are part of them.

Moreover, God is also intimately bound up with all of Creation. That is what the Catholic tradition has always sought to point us towards when it has talked about a 'sacramental' universe. Sometimes this has been restricted to certain official sacraments, or rituals. But it is about so much more. God, the great teachers tell us, is not separate from Earth and matter. God may be infinitely more than we can ever see or touch. Yet God is also alive in everything which has life.

Some theologians have also expressed this recently in enlivening new ways, not least in encouraging us to view Earth, metaphorically at least, as God's Body. If we value the earth in that way, what difference would that make?! For, as Jesus showed us, God is among us, as well as beyond us, in every seed and tree, and movement of the world. God's dominion is not about domination but actually about loving relationship.

Earth as Covenantal relationship

This leads us, secondly, to seeing Earth not as a stage for human beings alone, but, as part of Covenantal relationship. That is what our Reformed Christian tradition has always sought to point us towards when it has spoken of our mutual responsibilities to God and others. Sometimes this has been restricted just to human relationships, even only between certain Christians. But it is about so much more. For core to the Hebrew Scriptures especially is the affirmation that we, as human beings, are invited into a covenant not just between God and us, but with the land, and wider Creation as a whole. Again, some theologians have recently expressed this too in enlivening new ways. Hearing what science now tells us about the interconnectedness of all things, they encourage us to see ourselves, Earth, and God, as part of one, intimate and diverse, flourishing web of life. If we damage any part of this web, we damage every part, and not least ourselves. What God in Jesus Christ thus does, is to renew the broken threads of the web of life and enable us to thrive afresh.

Earth as Creating anew

For, thirdly, and finally, we are led away from seeing Earth as the site from which we are saved, to Creating anew. That is the very heart of God, isn't it? Salvation is not about escape for individual souls, or for humanity alone. It is about the renewal of all things. That is why the Bible speaks of '*a new heaven and a new earth*', where even the lion will lie down at peace with the lamb. Too often in Christian theology, we have talked too much about sin and death, human beings and limitations. These are also real, particularly in ecological terms, as we see today. Yet the centre of Christian Faith is love, which does not dwell on sin and death, but seeks new life and new creation for all. It is also a dynamic love and re-creation, which is why we might do well to speak of God as the One who Creates rather than as a Creator who acted once aeons ago. Again, some theologians have recently begun expressing this in enlivening new ways. They help us see, for example, that ideas of evolution are not opposed to God. Rather, to see God in evolution - ever creating, ever renewing, ever bringing new life - is to help us share in God's work of salvation in the here and now.

How will we then relate?

So what models and metaphors touch you?

How do we see God, human beings and wider Creation together?

How will you and I picture, and shape this, with others, so that every day may become more fully God's Season of Creation? We might like to explore that in our own time with the little exercise with three coloured pieces of paper I suggested earlier.

How will we use enriched understanding to change our world?

In the name of Jesus who showed us that the whole Earth is a Communion of subjects who matter, who renews our Covenantal relationships with all things, and who calls us into sharing in God's Creating anew. Amen.