Climate and creation: a theology of caring for the planet
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Creation is good. For the Christian, all of creation comes under God's rule and any considerations of our right relation to the natural world flow from God's reign and lordship. The earth is not ours to dispose of as we wish: 'The earth is the Lord's and the fullness thereof.' (Psalm 24) The starting point, then, for any reflection on climate change has to be Genesis, Chapter One. Creation, even without humanity, is intrinsically good. By verse 3, 'God saw that the light was good' and this formula of goodness is repeated four more times before the creation of humanity. The trees, oceans, plants and animals have their own intrinsic merit independent of and wholly separate from humankind. The importance of this cannot be overstated.

The threat of climate change threatens not only millions of human beings, but thousands upon thousands of species of plants and animals. The era of climate stability which has so far been a characteristic of the Holocene period now threatens an unravelling of God's creation. Our response to this challenge is clear. Our behaviour is driven not by fear of consequences, but because we want our actions to be in total conformity to God's will for his magnificent creation. Engaging in activities which threaten the bounteous diversity of the natural world is nothing short of a blasphemy against the Creator, through whom all life lives and moves and has its being.

Adam, in Genesis 2:15, is instructed to 'till the land and to cultivate it.' The Hebrew words are abad and shamar and carry with them the sense of 'care and protect' or 'look after'. This passage is probably what most people have in mind when they invoke the word 'stewardship'. These early passages show an intimate relationship between the earth and humanity. Man is formed from the soil. But humankind also has a vocation to nurture the land and join in God's continuing work of creation. These very specific Hebrew verbs, 'tilling' and 'nurturing' are only found on one other occasion in the whole of the Bible. After the giving of the Torah (law) to Moses on Mount Sinai, the Israelites are called upon to protect the scrolls of their holy statutes in the Ark of the Covenant which is to reside inside the Holy Temple. The protection and safeguarding invoked here, is the same as Adam's vocation to act as keeper of the land.

Noah is the human who truly practices stewardship, in his obedient response to nurture the earth's biodiversity. First the symbolism of the Ark: often seen as a metaphor for the Church, or even the planet Earth. The forty days and nights of rain reveal that the fate of both humanity and the animals are all bound up together. Just as man in Genesis is formed from the same creative breath (ruach) as the rest of creation and made of dust, so we discover that humanity's fate is shared with that of our fellow creatures. Whether it is
through our study of eco-systems or the complexity of food chains, the interdependency of our relationship to that of our surroundings cannot be denied. We are all part of a web of creation. Every time our lungs take in oxygen, we confirm the interdependency between ourselves and the God-created world. We do not observe nature from a distance; we are an integral part of that story. When we see the threats that global warming brings to large swathes of the natural world and the background extinction rates already occurring as a result of our plundering the planet for short term gain and profit, we have to ask ourselves: ‘Is this unprecedented gamble with the earth’s atmosphere that we are taking commensurate with the noble ethic of care, obedience and responsibility practised by Noah?’

Jesus teaches us much about how to live in right relation with creation. Jesus’ relationships are non-exploitative and non-self-centred. His warnings are constantly about how the pursuit of material wealth and covetousness block the path to God, because they are idols that deflect us from our true goal. ‘Lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven, for where your treasure is there also is your heart.’ (Matt 6:20) When we’re told that camels have better chances of passing through narrow gates than the rich entering heaven, Jesus is not being a puritan. The Creator has created a world in which humans can enjoy the abundance of riches provided: but it must be done justly (benefiting the marginalized) and in such a way that we don’t lose sight of the big picture. This ethic of simplicity has a huge amount to say to a world which, in its bondage to consumption and debt, is losing sight of the overarching perspective and living beyond its environmental means.

Long before the advent of Jesus, the Old Testament laid down clear ethical principles about how God expects us to behave with regard to how we relate to his Creation and distribute its benefits among the human community. Jeremiah makes a link between humanity’s greed and the environmental ruin that ensues using language that is eerily relevant to life in the twenty first century: ‘They have become rich and powerful, fat and sleek and do not plead the case of the fatherless or the rights of the poor… The nobles send their servants for water, they go to the cisterns but find no water, the ground is cracked because there is no rain in the land, the farmers are dismayed and cover their heads.’ (Jer.5:27f; 14:3)

In other words, care for the environment is also a matter of justice. When we despoil the earth, who is it that lives nearest to the landfill sites and the rotting dumps on the margins of our cities? The poor. Who are the peoples of the earth who stand to suffer the worst effects of the forecast droughts, floods and sea level rises predicted by the United Nations Panel on Climate Change? The answer should be unpalatable to a Christian or any person of a decent ethical standing: those who have polluted the least.

But all is not doom and despair. The Judaeo-Christian legacy is one that tells the story of a God who is always the God of the second chance, ‘Come back to me with all your heart’ (Hosea). ‘Give me the heart of stone within you and I will give you a heart of flesh’ (Ezekiel 36:26). This is a God who takes his people out of slavery in Egypt, who constantly sides with the weak and those
without voice, and a God who snatches victory from the darkness of the tomb on the third day. His eternal love is undying, but he demands a transformation of heart, the true meaning of the word, 'repentance'.

The climate crisis is, as is frequently said, a uniquely menacing challenge that demands, in Al Gore's words, 'moral imagination'. We need to rediscover the Biblical tradition of a right relationship with creation, and ponder more the teachings of the wisdom literature. Humanity needs these age-old truths and insights into the unchanging human condition and our relation to the natural order more so now than ever before.