Letter from Rome

Archbishop Sir David Moxon, Director of the Anglican Centre

Many of the churches and much of the world are waiting with eager anticipation for the papal encyclical on the environment, probably scheduled for June or July this year. In Rome the talk is moving in this direction just about everywhere you go. The Anglican Communion Environmental Network has worked in this area for a number of years now and many Anglicans all over the globe are committed to the precepts of eco-theology and care of the environment. Carbon neutrality has become a strong agenda for many in the Christian community. Archbishop Rowan Williams made this a key focus during his time as Archbishop of Canterbury, and coined the phrase, God’s earth our Home. The subject came up as a major issue at the Primates’ meeting in Egypt in 2009 and Archbishop Justin has continued the challenge.

What can we say about a theology of creation?
We will find ourselves in significant agreement with the forthcoming encyclical I would think and we will find ourselves mutually drawn to the spirituality and practice of St Francis and St Clare of Assisi. The priorities of Saint and Pope Francis are coming through again and again. This is an area where we will be one again, and where we as two Christian communities are being called to act together with urgency. Already there is huge synergy around Franciscan approaches to the gospel and to life itself. The Anglican Centre in Rome is now integrating a trip to Assisi into almost every course and field study visit because of this priority. In this way we seek to act in concert with the Anglican Communion and with what will surely become a Roman Catholic global focus shortly.

What gives us this confidence?
In a beautiful and breath-taking vision, the person who was inspired to write Psalm 104 was given a panoramic view of God’s creative power in and through the awesomeness and diversity of life on earth, and of the creation of the earth itself:

“You set the earth on its foundations, so that it shall never be shaken. You cover it with the deep as with a garment: the waters stood above the mountains...You cause the grass to grow for the cattle, and plants for people to use to bring forth food from the earth, and wine to gladden the human heart....You have made the moon to mark the seasons; the sun knows its time for setting. You make darkness, and it is night, when all the animals of the forest come creeping out....O Lord, how manifold are your works! In wisdom You have made them all: the earth is full of your creatures....May the glory of the Lord endure forever....”

Psalm 104 is a rich poem celebrating the cosmic reign of God. God is sovereign over all that is created. In v24 the psalmist describes how God’s “works” bless God their creator, by taking their appointed place within intricate ecosystems that are sustained by this maker of all things, of all that lives and breathes. The Hebrew root of “works” is the main theme word of Psalm 104, occurring six times. The Psalm is a celebration of the good works of creation in Genesis 1 31. Even though the earth has experienced “fall” and is marred, nevertheless the wisdom and light of God still shine through the original good of creation and are not overcome.

The picture here is that everything derives from the wisdom and light of God: the skies, the planet, vegetation, animals and people. God made them all and they witness to God’s wisdom in their making. Even though the neighbouring people of Canaan thought that the sea was a god of chaotic power, this Psalm shows God ordering the chaos of the waters into life-giving springs and rivers. God provides food as well as the animating breath of life itself. The words “breath” and “spirit” are the same in Hebrew, although the breath of living creatures is not the same as the breath of God. This breath is still the giver of life to these creatures. God’s breath brings new creatures into being and God’s “face” is made to “renew the face of the ground.” The reference to plants yielding wine are means of pleasure; sustenance and oil are means of God-given hospitality and joy. Even trees which provide hospitality for birds and animals, witness to the bounty, abundance and providence of God in all that God has made and given.
God’s earth — our home

Working with God for the restoration of abundant life for all creation

LETTER CONTINUED FROM OPPOSITE PAGE

A key principle of the Psalm, especially v35, is that no-one should harm or interfere with the operation of the world as God intends it. We are called to give, in thanksgiving and responsible stewardship, the whole of ourselves to God in life so that we may care for the world we have been given. When a creature is not able to live out, or to realise its God-given potential, then that creature is not able to witness fully to the glory of God. For this reason, a challenge to or the destruction of God’s design can threaten the delicate balance God has put in place and our own destiny. In Psalm 104, we are totally bound up with the existence and destiny of everything else, with springs and hills and trees and creeping things. We are called in Genesis (2:15) to serve and keep the Garden of Eden rather than to consume and dominate it. Our dominion in creation is a dominion of upholding, sustaining and redeeming care.

So we have a responsibility to work with God for the restoration of abundant life for all creation, we are called to work with God for the redemption of the whole earth. We are called to this, to restore what “Adam” damaged. Christ is “the new Adam”, the Way to save and restore our lives and the “Garden of Eden” in which we were first created.

Although we are called to acknowledge God as our creator, and are also called to care for the creation that God has made, some have moved to worshipping the creation rather than the creator. Some have worshipped the creator and ignored the gift of creation itself. The web of nature is not “divine” in itself - which is pantheism - but is “sacred” because it is a divine gift. We are called to celebrate the joy and the beauty of the world around us, and also to be good stewards, gardeners and caretakers within it, before it chokes or cooks. For example, even though the author of Psalm 24 proclaimed that the earth is the Lord’s and every-thing in it, the great cedars of Lebanon that he knew are gone. The author of Psalm 19 proclaimed that the heavens declared the glory of God and the skies proclaimed the work of God’s hands. Today these skies can be smog-ridden and the earth itself eroded by pollution. The author of Genesis proclaimed that God saw all that God had made and it was very good. Today many of God’s good creatures can be threatened with extinction and may go from the earth forever.

O God of all, all creation comes from you. All humankind are one vast family, this world our home. We sleep beneath one roof, the starry sky. We warm ourselves before one hearth, the blazing sun. Upon one floor of soil we stand, and breathe one air, and drink one water and walk the night, beneath one luminescent moon. The children of one God we are, sisters and brothers of one blood. May we so care for your earth, our home, that your lost garden may be restored.

Our current interest in the future of the planet can understandably be based on fear of our own extinction, or self-preservation, or the maintenance of our present life-style. However, the author of Psalm 104 wasn’t thinking of this, or even the sciences of botany, zoology, geology, hydrology and meteorology. The author was thinking about God, because God made all things. The Psalm describes a deep interdependence of air, soil, water and all living things because nature cannot exist apart from God and God’s life-giving and animating breath. This means that the environmental concern of the Psalm is based on a different foundation from the very good efforts of many conservation movements.

A cosmic vision

This vision is centred in Christ in a remarkable way in the New Testament, in Paul’s letter to the Colossians 1:11-20. Here Christ is God’s image, God’s wisdom, the first-born of all creation, the second person of the Holy Trinity, the creative Word, the principle in which all things are created and in which everything holds together. This vision is cosmic and includes the whole cosmos. The mission of those who are called to share in this vision is reconciliation, peace and hope, so that all of life becomes righteous and just. That is to say, it finds its true relationship with God its creator. In rediscovering this right relationship, justice flows forth because God creates right relationships between all things, which is the goal of the divine justice. So the Epistle holds together a doctrine of creation and a doctrine of redemption.

For followers of Christ then, there is a special responsibility to become deeply involved in creation and the redemption of all things by beginning with people, with the salvation of the soul. From this flows the salvation of the whole earth, as people with soul love and keep what God has given in all of life. Jesus said God’s Kingdom would come on this earth, and not another, as it is in heaven. The new heaven and the new earth, in the cosmic Christ, is this earth and the Kingdom Christ came to bring amongst us here. The earth is not destined to be burnt to a cinder. A new heaven and a new earth are a transforming vision of the renewal of this world.

David Moxon

# Prayer derived from a prayer poem by Vern Bennom Grimsley