

CHRISTIANS AND THE ENVIRONMENT

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I heard that the title you have chosen for the discussion meeting this week was “Christians and the Environment”. I thought it would be appropriate to use the theme to challenge our ideas on this important subject for Christians.

We have read in the first chapter of Genesis the account of the work of God in creating the world. In the beginning, his Spirit hovers over the universe. I believe his Spirit is constantly with the Universe, hovering in concern over his creation. We hear that God brings order out of chaos and he brings purpose to nothingness. He creates the rhythms of life and life itself, it evolves as his will.

So, the day and the night, the light separated from the darkness, the land and the sea, the creatures of land, sea and air are all formed. Each day God creates something, he looks back each evening and sees that what he has made is good and has potential. That account is the poetic response of humankind asking questions. Something, it appears, was missing. God realises this and creates man and woman, representatives of the human race. We were given the role of carers for the planet, to use what it produced. Was there ever a time when we were innocent? Suddenly something went wrong.

It was evident to the thinkers of the ancient world that God had not planned for humans to plunder the earth for their own benefit. They were too knowing for their own good. The care of the earth brings responsibility. Human beings are naturally curious. We find we have a problem and discover methods to solve it. We want to make life easier and better. We find we can interfere with nature and we can't wait, we want it now.

The earth has been millions of years in evolving. We have occupied it for thousands. Ever faster we are using it up. For instance, fossil fuels took millions of years to be laid down, yet in a few thousand years, we are rapidly using it up. It has taken generations for plants and animals to evolve. For the last few centuries, we have been able to help the process with selective breeding to create greater yields and disease resistance. If this is done to provide more food for hungry people or to eliminate human and animal suffering, it must be good, but if it is done for profit to benefit only some, it isn't. We have found that single crop production over vast areas has led to land erosion. Feeding processed waste to animals has led to their illness and this has been transmitted to humans. Using fossil fuels has given us clean and comfortable homes and fast transport. But only some of us, in the richer countries.

When we look around the world, we see poverty, hunger and disease. Is this how God wanted his world to be? We have a challenge. We can look at the world as our property, with the raw materials for our exploitation and see it there for us to use. Or, we can see it as our dwelling place, which is God's and we are his tenants. We are responsible for the earth and for its well being. We should be sharing its benefits with our neighbours and we should be keeping it in good order to pass on to our descendants. These thoughts will be a challenge to us as we work out how to do it.

We can take heart if we follow the teaching of Jesus. We can love God by respecting his creation and love our neighbour by sharing the good things in this world with them. The challenge is: how do we do it? From the book of Revelation, we see that the end can be as good as the beginning. God can make all things new. The heavenly vision is of things being different. Christians need to be thoughtfully involved in the stewardship of our world and add our voices to the questions regarding the use of it. But we need not despair. I leave you with the words of a song used by the Iona Community.

Behold, behold, I make all things new, beginning with you, starting from today.

Behold, behold, I make all things new, my promise is true, for I am Christ the Way.