

Sermon - 5th Mark of Mission: treasuring creation

Based on Matthew 8.23-27 and Acts 17.16-34

The Fifth Mark of Mission

- Today's focus is on the last of the Five Marks of Mission, which can be described as: to strive to safeguard the integrity of creation, and sustain and renew the life of the earth.
- It might be helpful to be reminded what the Marks of Mission are about.
- These five marks, or characteristics, have been specifically defined in the context of the Anglican Communion - the worldwide Anglican Episcopal Church - although this description of mission is not exclusive to the Anglican Church.
- They are a helpful way for any church community to see and celebrate where they are being missional, and to identify ways in which they might become missional.
- Over the last five Sundays we have explored the first four marks of mission, and so we arrive today at the fifth mark, which can be restated as: to protect, care for and renew life on our planet.

- Now, there are a number of different aspects that we could focus on with this theme -
- however, the particular aspect that is highlighted in our study book from the Anglican Board of Mission is:
- encountering God outside of what we ourselves have created - which we will explore through Paul's speech at the Areopagus.
- Nevertheless, before we go there, I want to draw your attention briefly to the two other pieces of Scripture we have heard today.

Husbanding God's creation

- The first is the sentence taken from the second chapter of Genesis, describing how God took the man of earth that God had created and breathed his spirit into - Adam - and placed him in the earthly paradise of Eden for a particular purpose.
- I'll read it again:
The Lord God took the man and put him in the garden of Eden to till it and keep it.
(NRSV Genesis 2.15)
- '... to till it and keep it.'
- Scripture gives us this perspective that God knows that we can change what has been created, for good or for ill, and emphasises that our Creator expects us to look after his creation.
- This was referenced in our special prayer for today which acknowledged God as having '*first established humankind in the earthly paradise of Eden to husband your creation*'.
- That's quite an interesting phrase - 'to husband God's creation'.
- The word *husband* in this sense, is a verb, and to quote Merriam-Webster's Collegiate Dictionary, it means:
 - "to manage carefully," deriving from an older meaning of *husband*, which in the 14th century referred to the ownership and care of a household or farm, but today means the

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"control or judicious use of resources," and in agriculture, the cultivation of plants or animals.

- So to 'husband God's creation' means to 'manage it carefully, through the control and judicious use of resources'.
- At this point we have to acknowledge that humankind has collectively been a very poor husband of God's creation: we have not made use of the earth's resources in a controlled and judicious manner.
- Which is why the Church has as one of its marks of mission the good husbanding of creation.

Lord of all creation

- The second piece of Scripture we can look at briefly is the short Gospel passage.
- You are probably familiar with the story of Jesus and some of his first disciples on a boat, caught in a storm on the Sea of Galilee.
- They were in danger of being swamped and drowned by the waves, but Jesus reveals his divine power by calming the wind and the waves.
- This story holds a number of meanings, but the particular one that is relevant here is an acknowledgement by those who follow Jesus, that he is empowered by the Spirit of God that is the source of all created life.
- Through the divine Spirit in him, Jesus is Lord of all creation.
- And if, as Christians, we have been baptised into the life of Christ, then we should be recognising that relationship with God's creation in our faith relationship with the Lord of all creation.
- The three hymns in today's service speak of this, and many poets and other hymn writers have been inspired by the Psalms and the Song of Songs that use the imagery of nature to describe the relationships God calls us to enjoy with him, with others, and with his whole creation.

The Areopagus speech: idols

- Which brings me to the passage from Acts: Paul's speech on 'the Hill of Mars' - the Areopagus in Athens.
- It was a place where the high court gathered to debate cases and philosophical and religious ideas that might impact on society.
- After Paul had been encountered arguing his foreign ideas in the market-place every day, he was invited to give a guest lecture.
- Of course he wanted to evangelise, and share with his audience the Good News of God's sacrificial love for us, as taught and demonstrated through Jesus Christ.
- But he knew that they were unfamiliar with the Hebrew Scriptures - our Old Testament - and so he highlighted and commended what they already knew about God, without them having realised that their knowledge was about the God of Jesus Christ.

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- It is helpful for us to be reminded that Paul was a Jew, and the Jewish temple in Jerusalem did not contain an image of God.
- Rather, it contained a hidden space - the holiest of holies - that no-one could see as it was behind a curtain.
- In a sense, the holiest of holies was a focus for the *idea* of God.
- Because nothing that was manufactured by humans could ever be representative of God - God is the creator of creatures, not something created by creatures.

Areopagus speech: you already worship him

- Paul's Jewish sensibilities made him *'deeply distressed to see that the city was full of idols'* (Acts 17.16), and so he seized on the empty altar inscribed with the words "To an unknown god".
- And he told them that this was the God that they already acknowledged - the God who created everything and is thus not dependent on anything we can materially provide.
- And then he quoted their own philosophers and poets - Aratus, Euripides, and Epidemes - rather than the Bible, to show how God had already been inspiring these people, as they *'would search for God and perhaps grope for him and find him—though indeed he is not far from each one of us. For "In him we live and move and have our being"; as even some of your own poets have said, "For we too are his offspring."'* (NRSV Acts 17.27-28)
- At the end of his lecture some scoffed, some were intrigued, and some became believers.
- We are even given the names of two of these new disciples: *'Dionysius the Areopagite and a woman named Damaris'* (NRSV Acts 17.34).

God has preceded us in our mission

- This story, like many of the stories in the Book of Acts, gives us some important lessons as our parish's Mission Action Team is currently in the process of discerning who in our wider community God is calling us to intentionally engage with - just as Paul intentionally engaged with those who met and debated on the Areopagus in Athens.
- People who want to share the Good News of Jesus are often tempted to do so using the language or jargon of the Church - without realising that one needs to already be a long-standing member of the Church to be familiar with Christian terms and concepts.
- In fact, even in the Church community we can confuse each other when we use words like sin, reconcile, love, heaven, and eternal - because we might have different definitions for even these simple words.
- For example, people sometimes think that being loving means being nice, whereas being nice can actually be a cover for being unkind to someone.
- So when we want to share the Good News of Jesus, it often pays us to get to know the people we want to share it with first - like Paul did with the Athenians.

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- And then to be open to recognising where God might already have made his ways manifest - even though these people might not realise that they are already following unknowingly in aspects of the Way of Jesus.
- For those who are engaged in intentional mission work, this requires a humility in recognising that sometimes non-Christians can be closer to God, even unknowingly, than many Christians are.
- Just as Paul quotes from the hymn to Zeus "*In him we live and move and have our being*", he makes it clear that some of the Greek poets are already referring to our Creator God.

Encountering God outside of what we ourselves have created

- At the start of this sermon I offered a simple perspective of Paul's lecture: Encountering God outside of what we ourselves have created.
- This is what Paul points the Athenians to.
- They have already created many idols, which are obviously represented through physical statues, shrines and temples.
- The problem is that we can easily dismiss the concept of an idol as merely a statue - whereas it can be anything that we have created: the dollar bill, the car, the national flag, and so on.
- And even in the church things that we have created to help facilitate our worship and engagement with God can become idols without us realising it: the church furniture and furnishings, the pipe organ, the liturgy, and so on.
- And this is one of the reasons why God's creation is so important - because we also need to be able to encounter God through what God has created, to be reminded that God is not limited *by* our Church, and God is not limited *to* our Church.
- In fact, sometimes the only way we can truly meet with God *inside* the Church is to first have the humility to acknowledge God *outside* the Church.
- And God's creation is often the best starting point.
- Because, as the final verse in Genesis chapter 1 states: '*God saw everything that he had made, and indeed, it was very good.*' (NRSV Genesis 1.31)
- And we are reminded that God has purposed us to participate in his creation as husbands and stewards of it, and that we have a missional role to protect, care for and renew life on our planet, because it is of God, and God blesses us with it.