Why care? Why act? Why pray?

Part 1:

In the first part of this two-part theological reflection, Rev Dr Jonathan Arnold, Diocesan Director for Communities and Partnerships, reflects on why caring for creation is an intrinsic part of our Christian faith and our calling as church.

In St. John’s Gospel we hear words of life: ‘In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being.’ We may be familiar with this message, but to take it seriously is to realize that the very essence of Christ, the eternal Word, the Logos, is woven into the fabric of our universe, and without this divine essence, nothing that exists can be sustained.

Our relationship with the created world is not detached from our faith. On the contrary, our theological response to our environment is at the heart of the Gospel and of our faith. For Christ is the essence of all creation, and his redemption is for the whole of that creation. The story of our salvation is the story of God’s work in and through His creation, a God who creates and re-creates: ‘For behold, I am making all things new’, says the Lord in Isaiah’s prophecy. God invites us to join in His work, the Missio Dei, and to live life in all its fullness, a life where all creation is orientated towards the praise of God, where all created beings recognize our inter-connectedness and joint responsibility.

In order to live such lives, we must recognize not only that human ecology cannot be separated from environmental ecology, for we are all inter-related, but also that we need to go deeper and bravely feel the pain and anguish of a world where thousands of species have already become extinct because of human action, where biodiversity is being destroyed, and where people flee their homes because of hostile climates. As Christians, we pray for the courage to be committed to creation as set out in the Gospel of Jesus – the eternal Logos who is at the heart of creation and its redemption.

The Anglican Communion’s Five Marks of Mission encourage us to proclaim the Good News, to teach, baptize and nurture new believers, to respond to human need by loving service, to transform unjust structures of society, to challenge violence of every kind and pursue peace and reconciliation, and to strive to safeguard the integrity of creation, and sustain and renew the life of the earth. But it is not just the last of these that relates to our environment. With Christ’s divine essence at the heart of creation, all these areas of mission are affected by how we respond to, and care for, our environment – and how we now act on the devastating consequences of climate change.

So what can we practically do? As people of God, and as a Diocese, we have committed, through Synod and the Environment Strategy, to learn the facts about today's environmental degradation and human-induced climate change; to speak the truth about the emergency and the changes that are needed to safeguard the environment and mitigate climate impact; to take the necessary action to reduce greenhouse gas emissions to net zero by 2030, and to model ways in which our faith and congregations can enable all of God's creation to flourish; to fight social injustices caused by the environmental crisis.

What is our Christian response to the current climate crisis? We must take heart and act. Be grateful for the beauty and bounty of creation, freely given by a generous God; be creative in our ideas and conversations; be compassionate through acts of love and mercy for the whole of creation; be courageous in our proclamation of the Gospel of justice. We must pray, especially for COP 26, for world leaders and those with influence; and let us listen and watch for God’s action and join in, building communities and churches with climate action at the heart of our mission and purpose

Part 2:

In the second part of this two-part reflection, Rev Dr Jonathan Arnold reflects on the spiritual practices which help us make creation care a central part of our Christian living.

In their recent booklet on climate action and mission, Grace Thomas and Mark Coleman write of the need for both practical and prophetic action:

‘Both strands of climate action, practical and prophetic, are missional in a holistic sense. They are faithful ways of working towards the kingdom of God here on Earth. They take seriously the words of Scripture and the actions of the biblical prophets in whose steps we follow. They seek to build the church through prayerful and committed witness.’

Archbishop Justin Welby has recently written: ‘To live out my Christian faith is to follow Jesus. That must include standing alongside the most vulnerable and marginalized on the frontlines of the climate emergency. As faith communities my prayer is that we might stand together, emissaries of hope and love, calling for God’s justice and peace upon this precious world. Now is the time for action.’

In these words, we see that prayer and prophetic action are not separate parts of our faith, but closely linked. Prayer leads to solidarity, hope and love, which in turn leads to justice, peace, and action. Through prayer and prophecy, we can, as Alister McGrath has suggested, seek to ‘go beyond the superficial grasp of our faith, discover its depths and riches, and be refreshed and transformed by them.’

There are four ways we can do this, that align with Bishop Rose’s four priorities for our Diocese: prayer, evangelism, generosity and reading the Bible. These four priorities apply not only to our faith but to our understanding and perception of, and relationship with, our environment.

Prayer

Prayer is creative. By listening to and conversing with God through a personal relationship of faith and love, we are enabled to prayerfully listen to, and learn from, those who speak truth to power about climate change, and to challenge our MPs, policy makers and legislators. Through prayer and contemplation of God’s Word, we can become powerful prophets for change. Contemplative and reflective prayer can lead us to share in the work of climate change by creative conversations with everyone from the poorest to the richest, the weakest to the most powerful. If we are to act aright, we need to walk closely with God as our guide through prayer.

Evangelism

Jesus says, ‘you are the salt of the earth’ (Matthew 5: 13). What marks us out as disciples of Christ is the effect we have, like salt, or yeast, or light, in other words, how we think, love and act. It was C.S. Lewis who wrote: ‘I believe in Christianity as I believe that the sun has risen – not because I see it but because I see everything else.’ We know God is at work because we see the effect. When Jesus commanded, ‘Go into all the world and proclaim the good news to the whole creation.’ (Mark 16: 15), we are bidden to join in with the work of God, the Missio Dei, and open up the amazing possibilities of God’s mission and work in the world.

Generosity

‘Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me.’ (Matthew 25: 34-40). Climate action is a work of love and compassion for our world, for future generations, and for the poorest in our societies. Every day, people are being forced from their homes because of uninhabitable or infertile environments due to climate change. Social deprivations can be caused by climate change. Therefore, our acts of love for our neighbour, as commanded by scripture, are both to care for those affected by the consequences of climate change, and also to generously take steps (with our time, money, attention, skill, and choices) to reduce carbon emissions, and to encourage other individuals, organisations, and governments to do the same.

Reading the Bible

In order to prayerfully and generously proclaim God’s love for creation, we will need what John Stott called ‘double listening’ –listening both to the Gospel and to the environment around us. This means, in the words of St. Paul, that we need to be ‘transformed by the renewal of our minds’ (Romans 12:2). We cannot act until we have listened to God’s words, prayerfully meditated upon His will, and transformed our minds and hearts to serve God’s mission. By doing so, we let the Gospel speak into the most pressing and important subject of our time.

By prayer, evangelism, generosity and reading the Bible, we can abide in, and with, Jesus. From this dwelling with Christ, we are given the strength and guidance to act. Exactly what prophetic action we take will depend upon where the Holy Spirit leads us. Each one of us may have a different gift to offer that leads to greater solidarity, hope, justice, peace, helping to change our lives and actions and bring about a better future for the planet.