

Gibraltar Synod Opening Service 2020

Genesis 1.1-25; Psalm 33.1-9; Romans 1.18-23; John 1.1-14

My dear friends, it is good to be among you once again as we begin our work this week as a synod. As you know, a “synod” is more than simply a meeting. Synod is a theological word which means “together on the way”. It is the Church of God being together on the way of Jesus. That is what we are about in these days. We seeking to be “together on the way” of Jesus, as leaders in this archdeaconry. And as leaders, we return to our communities, after the synod, ready to invite others into this great procession of God’s people, on the way, which we call the Church.

We are at the start of a new decade. It has not begun well. Politicians have taunted each other with weapons, just drawing back from the brink in Iran and Iraq. A new virus is spreading. The family of European nations is about to be altered radically in a few days’ time, as one country has decided it wishes to walk, not together, but on its own.

But much more serious than all of this, as we have seen in news reports from Australia, Indonesia, and elsewhere is that we have begun a decade of extreme climate emergency. Those who have planned this synod wish to turn our attention as God’s people, quite rightly, to this urgent matter of our responsibility as caretakers of our home, Planet Earth. As we face this impending emergency our scriptures today speak to us clearly.

When you open the Bible *to the first page* you come to this momentous passage on creation. We read that the whole world was created by God, who saw it was “very good”. The first verses of scripture affirms that nature—sky, sea, land, and the creatures that dwell there—has great value in God’s eyes. A little later in the same opening book of the Bible, human beings appear, men and women created in the divine image and likeness, and – interestingly put into the *garden of paradise to care for it*.

A quick aside about this text from Genesis: I know you do not need reminding, but you do know that Genesis is not a scientific document, don’t you? It is not a historic description of what happened at the beginning of the universe. Scientific reporting is completely alien to the genre of Biblical writing. We do not read Genesis because it is deemed to be scientifically and historically, and even *literally* true. We read the Bible because we, the people of faith, are seeking in the sacred text the *eternal word of the Gospel*, the good news of God’s love and care for us. So this poetic text from Genesis *is filled with truth*, but not scientific or historical truth. It is a more wonderful and mysterious truth about God’s gracious, creative power; it is the wonderful good news about God. So we have got that out of the way!

The other major reading today zeroes in to the core of Christian faith: the truth that in Jesus Christ God became a human being to redeem the world, to heal the world, to restore the world. The gospel proclaims beautifully: “The Word was made flesh and dwelt among us”. This is the most radical statement that Christians make: God became created matter. The all-holy, eternal God, creator of the Cosmos, personally joined our fallen and corrupt world in order to restore it and save it. This is known as the doctrine of incarnation, from the Latin *in carne*, “into flesh.”

Now friends, here comes some deep theology! Theology is not boring, it is exciting! I hope you can share my excitement: we tend to think *flesh* means what is physical, perishable, vulnerable, finite, the very opposite of what is *divine*. Right? But it is not quite so simple. Some of you know that I am a bit of a science fiction buff. But not only science fiction – I am also fascinated and attracted to the great scientific field called cosmology – that branch of science that looks at the origin and evolution of the universe. It is with the backdrop of cosmology that I think about this flesh that the eternal word became:

The prevailing cosmological theory today holds that everything that exists comes from a single moment about 13.7 billion years ago. A single speck exploded in what is rather inelegantly called the

Big Bang. As all the matter expanded, swirling galaxies formed; gravity pulled atoms together which formed stars. Burning stars turned basic hydrogen into the more complex elements that we have in our periodic table. Around our particular star some elements formed the planets of our solar system, including Earth. Three and a half billion years ago another momentous change took place on earth: some molecules coalesced to form living cells. Over eons these living cells burst forth and flowered into all the living beings we have today. talk about being fruitful and multiplying!

So, out of the Big Bang, the stars. Out of the stardust, the Earth. Out of the matter of the Earth, life. And this life has developed in a multitude of ways: single celled plants and protozoa, trees, fish, insects, reptiles, mammals among whom eventually emerged human beings. Everything that exists has its origin in some explosion billions of years ago. So quite literally, human beings are made of stardust.

We know from biology that human beings share with all other living creatures a common genetic ancestry. Worms, cabbages, blue whales, we are all genetic kin in the great community of life – the building blocks of DNA are the same. But we are no ordinary animal: our human brains are so complex that we experience self-conscious intelligence and freedom. We experience love and thought. The Jewish philosopher Abraham Heschel says human beings are the “cantors of the universe”; we, among all the creatures of Earth, uniquely are able to sing praise and thanks to God, in the name of all the rest of the cosmos.

Here is what I find so wonderful, so amazing, so humbling in this theology: when the Word became flesh, when Christ was born of Mary, like all human beings he carried within himself this ancient signature of the cosmos, the geology and life history of the Earth. He became part of the whole community of life that descended from common ancestors in the ancient seas, and which goes back to the cosmic dust of which we are all composed.

Incarnation therefore means that by becoming flesh, God confers blessing on the whole of cosmic reality, in its materiality. There is no longer a barrier that distances us from the divine. Flesh and divine are now one: The material world becomes a *sacrament*, remember that a sacrament is *an outward and visible sign of God’s real presence*. That is why Pope Francis says, “A Christian who fails to protect the environment is a Christian who does not care about the work of God.” Human action against the planet, against other creatures, is nothing less than a profoundly sinful violation against God.

Sisters and brothers: we must acknowledge that the environmental emergency is a spiritual problem. And environmental justice is not just another item on a long list of things that the Church promotes, like mission, evangelism, peace: the care for creation is at the heart of all we are about. It is Christian! The Metropolitan Police in the UK have declared groups that work peacefully to advocate climate justice, such as extinction rebellion, or Greenpeace as extremist groups. Martin Luther King Jr while in prison wrote, “The question is not whether we will be extremists, but what kind of extremists we will be. Will we be extremists for hate or for love? Will we be extremists for the preservation of injustice or for the extension of justice?”. The Church’s concern for the environment is not political – it is not about simply embracing the manifesto of the Green Party. It is Christian – and if the Metropolitan police have it is extremist, then so be it. We Christians are extremists!

Now some feel that this *cosmological* theology is eccentric because surely theology is about *human beings*, after all. But what an arrogant position this is – as if *all* that God is interested in is *us*! But note that in this Genesis story the first blessing pronounced by God is NOT a blessing on humankind, but a blessing on the other living creatures! So much for our *anthropocentric* world view! Our abuse of the earth part of the sin of humankind. And it is a sin based on a bad theology which assumes that *we* are the centre of the universe, and therefore things are here for our taking and abuse.

The refrain in this Genesis poem is that God saw that creation was *good*. Even those things we might question as being good – like mosquitos, or disease-causing microorganisms, or Brussels sprouts. But as we think of our humble place in God’s creation we realise that just because it might not seem good *to us* – we are not the centre of the universe, and God did not make a mistake about that part his creation that we don’t happen to like. Everything is good. The Gospel of St John underlines this for us: “All things were made by God, and without God was not anything made that was made.” Everything is here for a reason. Ecologists know this. As soon as we touch one element in an ecosystem there are consequences for the whole system. Kill off nasty foxes and the population of rabbits will increase. Then the amount of grass will decrease because the increased population of rabbits would be eating it, and reduced grass means more carbon dioxide in our atmosphere. Everything is good and *connected* and part of God’s plan.

So Genesis and St John’s Gospel present us with great theology. So what? What about our own parish, our own communities, our own challenges locally? Friends, we worry these days in the Church of England about decline in numbers and attendance (except in our great Cathedrals where people are still increasingly finding a home). Now here is a thesis I have been promoting for a while now: I maintain that if the Church begins to demonstrate to the world *in her life and in her teaching* that she believes in something *supremely important and valuable to humanity*, then people will wish to join this movement of Jesus. People nowadays tend to regard the Church as an institution devoted to the *spiritual* matters of her members, to our own “well-being”, to our own needs. (Or that the Church is only interested in sex! That is a trailer for Wednesday!)

Sadly few people in the world today, and especially young people, expect from the Church an interest and practical involvement in down-to-earth matters like the environment. People come to our services and perceive little that relates to such matters as the wellbeing of our planet. Now here is where we can begin to transform this perception. As Anglican Christians our services are *sacramental*. They are not airy-fairy, nebulous events. Our liturgies involve flesh, blood, water, oil, human touch, beauty for the eyes and ears, and if we are lucky, even for our noses! Our worship as sacramental Christians involves this very created order, this physical world, which God entered in the Incarnation, and which is now in danger. The Church’s attention to the ecological crisis is not something which should be considered novel or trendy. It is rooted in our theology, it is rooted in our liturgy. All we celebrate in our liturgies is related to this widespread concern for the care for creation.

There is a reason why the eucharist is at the heart of our life and why it is *central* to our Christian existence. Never let it be displaced: It is so much more than a mere memorial or a nice cosy fellowship sharing. At the Last Supper Jesus took bread and wine into his hands and he gave thanks to God for them. Human beings tend, in our sinfulness, to grab things without any thankfulness to God. In the eucharist we present in our hands the material world as a gift – the bread, the wine – and give these back to the Creator with thankfulness (*eucharistia*, in Greek). “Through your goodness we have this bread to offer, this wine to offer”, we say. By bringing these gifts to the altar we acknowledge that all of creation is a gift of God; and we say thank you; we acknowledge that we’re not masters of the earth, it’s God’s earth and we’re are God’s servants and stewards.

The Lord in the incarnation became material flesh, and in the eucharist the Lord becomes present again in *material* signs. The Church teaches this is not some spiritual airy-fairy presence, but a *real* presence, in the matter of the sacrament. This is so that we might in turn know that we find Christ in this world of ours. We find Christ our Lord in the stardust which composes all creation. We find him in the stardust which we share with our sisters and brothers. In this Blessed Sacrament we see the earthen, material, fragile and finite web of creation of which we are a part and God lovingly chose to enter.

The Eucharist is the lens through which we view all of reality, that reality of a cosmos where God is fully and really present. May we approach Christ in the Eucharist with a renewed sense of the ecological significance of the sacrament we share, the divine gift we receive, the communion in which we are called to participate and the duty we have as members of the body of Christ to “care for our common home”.