

A Sermon by Canon Maggie Guite

5<sup>th</sup> June 2011

Sunday after Ascension

The Fifth Mark of Mission: To strive to safeguard the integrity of creation and sustain and renew the life of the earth – ‘Treasuring’

The fifth mark of mission accepted in our worldwide Anglican family is to strive to safeguard the integrity of creation and sustain and renew the life of the earth. Very obviously, it's about the calling to Christians not just to have environmental concerns (it's easy enough to be concerned), but to step out and take action.

On this Sunday after Ascension, when our minds are moved heavenwards with Jesus, (or, in the BCP readings, by the strong assertion in 1 Peter that ‘the end of all things is at hand’), we might naturally move into a very ‘spiritualised’ faith, which could seem to have little to say to the things of earth; but let's look at the bigger picture of what we believe about our exalted Lord. We believe that he is that Word of God through whom all things have their being. When God said ‘Let it be..’, the universe and all that is in it sprang into being. Things *were* – developing, multiplying, and just being themselves. In the Word of God, in some mysterious way, they all hold together. In taking upon himself our flesh we believe that the incarnate Word, Jesus, has taken upon himself the griefs and wounds of all humanity, and carried them to the heart of God; but more than that, we should believe, I'm sure, that he has also carried up with him the griefs and wounds of the whole earth, to the place where he's alive for ever,

making intercession at the Father's right hand, as the symbolic language of our Scripture has it.

And the earth has many griefs and wounds; the integrity of creation is battered and threatened in many ways. We all know that; from the bleeding wound that occurred in the floor of the gulf of Mexico last year, to the extinction, day by day, of one species after another – many of them species we may never have had time to know or name – things are in a serious way. I don't want to enumerate a whole host of problems to you – we can all gain that information in other ways, and from more authoritative sources – but I do want to highlight this fact: the way we do so little to change our ways, even with this vast knowledge at our fingertips, is in reality a spiritual problem. It's not too strong to say that we're held captive by an ideology of consumerism and growth, and we collude with it readily, although we know that its consequences are deadly. In our society we are all consuming much, much more than the world can sustain (even despite recession and austerity). And we do so because it's easy, and we do so because it's in the interests of powerful concerns to encourage us to do it.

Let me give an example of the way our minds have become enthralled. I want to talk about cleanliness. Of course, we all need to be reasonably clean to be healthy; and, in addition to that, it's much pleasanter for those we live with if we don't smell bad. It's a great blessing that the mans to stay clean have been given to us in our culture. But haven't we become a bit too obsessed with it as a society? I remember being in a discussion about personal and health education in a primary school when it was

stated that children should be taught that they need a bath or a shower every day. Really? It's a sign of how strong the ideology was that I felt too embarrassed to challenge this statement, even in favour of such a moderate suggestion as *every other day*, in case my family and I were regarded as disgusting. But all of you here, who are my age or a bit older – did you really have a bath or a shower every day when you were a child? I expect a lot of us didn't – and weren't particularly noxious or unhealthy as a result. In the days of the old tin bath (which admittedly, *was* before my time, and before yours, too!) bathing was probably a weekly thing, and so was washing clothes. Now the social pressure is to send children into school every day in spotless clothes, because it's so easy to fling synthetics into the washing machine (and I've fallen for that one, too). But what does this say about how we regard clean water, which is such a precious resource in the world today – not to mention the carbon footprint involved in running machines so frequently and sometimes heating up the iron, too? There's a great deal to be said for sponging off obvious stains from clothes, but otherwise carrying on a bit grubby, so long as they're not smelly; and as for oneself, there's something in Florence Nightingale's dictum that all that a lady (or presumably a gentleman) needs to stay clean is a pint of water and some privacy.

This view of life may not be so good for the manufacturers of shower gel and frequent use shampoo, nor of washing powders, liquids, capsules, tablets and gels (what will come next in this market, I wonder, to make us feel we need it?); but it might be that this view of life would be a whole lot more sane. It would certainly be

stepping out of the circle of advertising's influence, and helping us to make a smaller impact on the environment.

Now this may not seem like subject matter for a sermon – but the main point I'm trying to make in raising the issue of cleanliness is that I really feel I have to be quite *brave* to say what I've just said. A new consumerist social norm has somehow come into being which demands *en suite* facilities with every hotel room, because we feel absolutely entitled to turn on the hot water at any moment we want, using much more than we need to. This social norm is enslaving people's minds, as well as damaging creation. You may not agree with me about the necessity – or not – of daily showering; but I hope you'll recognise the power of the consumerist process we're all caught up in, which affects even our most basic activities

Such secular organisations as Weighwatchers or Alcoholics Anonymous demonstrate that if you want to break free of an addiction or unhealthy compulsion, regular accountability to others helps! And if what I say is true about our addiction to consumerism, surely this is something we should work on together. I'll come back to this thought a bit later.

During Lent quite a few of us enjoyed Richard Bauckham's book *Bible and Ecology*, which certainly isn't a hectoring or miserable read, designed to make us feel guilty. His central theme of the 'the community of creation' arose out of a joyful consideration of so much in the Bible that Christians have sometimes ignored – God's concern for the whole of creation, and for us *within* it. The way he expounded unfamiliar bible passages, or ones

we've often skated over, bringing out a vision of the community of creation, made for a wonderfully rich read. If you haven't read it yet – or only had time to read extracts during Lent – the whole book is in our church library for borrowing, and I thoroughly recommend it. But, catching the vision should affect our actions; and this is where it would be good to make our life *as a church*, and not just as individuals, more converted towards Treasuring creation – seeking to safeguard its integrity, and sustain and renew its life. When we share the endeavour together, it becomes easier to do the actions which constitute such treasuring – whether the actions involve campaigning, or abstaining, (or simply changing the way we do things).

In one of my last parishes we had a look at the 'Ecocongregation' scheme. (Some of you may know of the parallel Ecoschools scheme – the Leys is proudly flying the flag of an Ecoschool now.) In that small village church, there weren't enough people with the time or the energy to pursue the goal of making that church an 'ecocongregation'; but perhaps there might be here? It's an award scheme, monitored from outside, whereby churches undertake actions to make their lives greener in every sphere – from including the theme of creation more richly in their worship and teaching, to making relevant changes in how they manage their premises, carry on administration or do youth and children's work. It also encourages churches to take the green theme into their outreach and mission; for example, working with the wider community on local environmental projects – be it litter-picking or bulb planting, for example. It's been found that when Christians do this sort of thing with

others, it opens many doors of personal contact and pastoral care. And it also gives the lie to the commonly-held idea that Christians are among the worst people in the world for caring for the environment.

A church that's interested in becoming an ecocongregation starts with a 'check-up' on its life, which is explicitly designed to celebrate what's already being done well, and then to move the congregation forward in further achievable steps. And, in moving forward, a lot of small changes can add up to a great deal, also helping all the individuals who make up the church to reassess their own lives and make better choices.

This is just one possible approach to the fifth mark of mission which the brainstorming group on 'Treasuring creation' might like to consider. I'm not saying it's the route we should definitely take – they or we might think the whole ecocongregation scheme was too big a demand for our congregation at the present time, or that there were other steps we could take which would be more appropriate. It's just an example – an idea of the sort of direction we might move in.

But let me return to the early part of this sermon – the reason we have for doing anything: Our Lord Jesus Christ – risen, ascended and glorified – is the Word through whom God created all things. In him (the epistle to the Colossians tells us), all things hold together. And yet we know that in the human world there is rebellion, brokenness and grief; for this we believe Jesus never ceases to intercede at the Father's right hand. In the rest of creation, too, there is brokenness and grief – which, on

our earth, is accelerating at an alarming rate under the impact of human activities. Jesus must be interceding for this too, and carrying it in his heart.

Next week we shall celebrate Pentecost – the day when the ascended Christ involved humanity in the mission which flows from his intercession . He sent his people the power of the Spirit, the Lord and giver of life, as our Creed says. This mission of God can't be a narrow one – it must be as wide as life itself , out holistically by his people in the world. We're all called to be caught up in God's mission – each individual, and every church community. Admittedly, none of us can do everything, but in the church as a whole we should find signs – that is, marks – of commitment to every aspect of what God would have done. This how we can sum up our calling to God's mission: it's a vocation to Telling the good news, Teaching the faith to new believers , Tending the weak and vulnerable, Transforming unjust structures in society, and finally, Treasuring the earth God has made to sustain us all.