

Sermon for 19 September 2021
Caring for Creation - with Noah!
2. Working with God and creation

Please read Genesis 7.13 – 8.5.

Last Sunday we started to work through the story of Noah, looking especially at what it might tell us about caring for creation and the climate crisis. The main point last week was that we needed to listen and obey, just as Noah did. We have to listen what God's saying to us – to a large extent through people like scientists, and then act on it.

Well now the ark is complete. It starts to rain. And Noah and his family, and all the animals, go into the ark, and God shuts them in. That's an interesting way of putting things, isn't it? 'The Lord shut him in.' (v.16) Was the ark designed so that the door could only be shut from the outside? We need to remember that this story is a myth, and this phrase isn't to tell us something about ark design, but to tell us something about God. It's God who protects them. It's God who saves them. God has already started to save them by choosing Noah and giving him instructions, but now he brings them right through the flood.

On the whole, this is God's initiative. As we said last week, he finds a solution. He finds a way to save life on earth. There's so much grace in this story. But humans like Noah play a part too. And today we'll see how we have to work together with God to care for creation.

So God shut them in. They start a lockdown on a boat – and not just 40 days but about 370 in total! I wonder how they all got on together in the ark. How did the animals and people get on? Genesis doesn't tell us that. And it's a myth, so perhaps it doesn't really matter.

But there could be a point for us here – something about working together, not with God but with other people. To truly tackle the climate crisis, we have to work together – not only in our country but all over the world. Individual people, governments, whole nations have to be prepared to do that – to seek what is best for the earth in every way. If

some people just do what's best for them, it stops us from doing this and threatens everyone.

The climate crisis is calling us to be far less selfish and greedy, and to be really be sacrificial for other people. And part of that is caring for other creatures – creatures that don't have a voice or any choice in this. Rather like Noah and his animals, we're all in the same boat. The climate crisis will ultimately affect all of us.

But another question about lockdown on the ark: I wonder if they prayed. Again, Genesis doesn't tell us. Perhaps it was enough to have followed God's instructions and now they just need to trust him. But what would you do in a storm like this? What did the disciples of Jesus do when they were caught in that storm on the lake? They cried out to him: 'Lord, save us! We're going to drown!' (Matthew 8.25) It's natural to pray in crises. And I think prayer is incredibly important in tackling the climate crisis. Even if other people don't pray, then Christians should be praying about this.

But how should we pray? What should we pray for? Imagine that creation is a sick person who needs healing. How do we pray for people who are unwell? We can pray for a range of people involved with them. Family and friends offering comfort and practical assistance, doctors and nurses giving medical attention. In some cases, especially in other parts of the world, we'd pray that people actually do get some medical intervention; that health care would be better. We pray that God would work through other people.

But, of course, we can also pray that God would intervene and do more than people can do, or do something when people aren't succeeding; that God would intervene 'supernaturally', you might say. I imagine that, when it comes to a sick person, many of us pray for a mixture of these things.

But what about praying for creation? As with illness, we can of course pray for people. For scientists to discover things and innovators to find out new ways of doing things. We can pray for governments to support eco-friendly practices and make appropriate legislation. We can pray for individuals, including ourselves, to take action and change their lifestyles. We can pray for charities that protect the environment, and

other groups who do eco-friendly things together and encourage each other.

But why not just pray for creation itself? Why not pray that in some way God would act to heal his creation? Now I'm not suggesting that as an alternative to other prayers or human action. We can't just let ourselves off the hook and make out that we have no responsibility for this, or that God will simply sort it out without us. But just as people are sometimes miraculously healed, and sometimes people get a greater length of life that can't be explained medically, could it be that God could do things by his grace?

Do you think that's a bit crazy? Well, just think about these things...

First, we know that creation already heals itself to some extent in some circumstances. Some ability to recover is built into it, and research has shown that in certain cases specific natural things can be used to absorb and remove pollutants (see <https://www.realnatural.org/how-the-earth-can-heal-itself-if-we-let-it/>).

Second, we believe that God's kingdom will one day come in fullness but to some extent has already arrived. When the kingdom comes in fullness, God will renew all of creation or bring about a new heaven and earth. So if the kingdom has already arrived, and there are signs of it now, why shouldn't there be signs of it in the natural world?

Third, this fits with the idea that God is in all things and works in all things. And it fits with the idea that all creation relates to God in some way – just as when Jesus calmed the storm.

I'm not the only person thinking this. Vladimir Soloyev, a nineteenth-century Russian theologian and spiritual writer, believed that love is shouldn't just be in personal relationships but in our relation to the cosmic environment. He believed that 'Our love creates spiritual energies which inwardly transform the cosmos itself, imprinting upon it the image of God as love.' (P Gregorios, quoted in Bradley, p.97) So, put very simply, love changes things. And when we love something, we pray for it.

This concurs with what Paul writes in Romans 8: 'For the creation waits in eager expectation for the children of God to be revealed. For the

creation was subjected to frustration, not by its own choice, but by the will of the one who subjected it, in hope that the creation itself will be liberated from its bondage to decay and brought into the freedom and glory of the children of God.' (Romans 8.19-21)

Now I know that was written in a very different age, without the knowledge of modern science, but it connects humans and creation in a spiritual way. When the children of God are revealed... in other words, when some people come to faith and are therefore seen as children of God, that opens the way to the liberation of all creation. Some people would see that all as happening in the future. But if we are children of God now, then why shouldn't at least some of that liberation happen now?

So we need to pray for creation and offer it back to God, and here's an example from nearly a hundred years ago. In 1923 Teilhard de Chardin, a French priest, scientist and philosopher, celebrated what he called a great Mass over the World in the desert of China. And in it, he 'offered the whole cosmos to God and expressed his deep conviction that the destiny of nature is not to be dominated or utilised by man but rather to be offered to him by God.' (Bradley, p.104)

However you pray for creation, it's so important that we do pray. If this is the biggest threat to life on earth at the moment, we really should be praying about it. It really should be in our intercessions every week and even every day – just as much as wars and famines.

There are quite a number of organisations encouraging us to pray for the climate, and at the moment they are encouraging us to pray in the run up to the COP26 conference in November. Christian Aid and Tearfund are among them. There's a campaign called Renew our World, and a group called Climate Intercessors. You can find out more and join them online. There's also going to be a COP26 online church service hosted by Tearfund on 7 November, and a 24-hour vigil for the climate on 5 – 6 November organised by some Roman Catholic groups.

As I said earlier, we have to work together with God to care for creation. And prayer is a way of working with God. In prayer, both God and humans are involved. We might wonder at times why we have to pray. We might wonder why we just feel the need to pray for things. Can't

God do it without us? But in some mysterious way God seems to need or value or respond to our prayers. There's a partnership here.

Finally, at the end of today's passage, it says that 'God remembered Noah and all the wild animals...' (8.1) When God remembers, it really means that he was aware and could see all the time; but people didn't realise that until they saw some change. It suggests that they were praying on the ark, crying out for mercy and protection.

God remembers Noah, and he sends a wind over the earth to dry up the waters. In Hebrew the word for wind also means breath and spirit. God sends his Spirit. And that's what happens when we pray. We can pray for the Holy Spirit to be involved in all creation and in this crisis that we face today; and we can ask him to heal both people and the planet.

Gerard Manley Hopkins' *God's Grandeur* comes to mind. You may like to read it and take some time to reflect on it (see <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/44395/gods-grandeur>).

Richard Wise

Quotations from Ian Bradley, *God is Green* (Darton, Longman and Todd Ltd, London, 1990). The whole of Chapter 5 is particularly relevant to this sermon.