

Caring for Creation – the new frontier of mission

For many Christians who care about the world, the current environmental crisis seems not only to be out of reach, but more properly left to others of a more political turn of mind. Christian caring has traditionally focussed exclusively on human need in all its many and desperate forms, but its environmental causes or context rarely seem to figure in the picture. However we are living in remarkable times as the church world wide is recovering its ecological conscience, and many opportunities to rediscover ways of making known Jesus as Lord by caring for his creation are opening up around this needy world. So it is long overdue for us to look again at some of the reasons for what has proved in the past to be a tragic Christian indifference, but is now becoming a new frontier of Christian mission. We need to recognise that it is Christian leaders in the poorer world who are prompting us to see how the devastation of the environment is impacting church and society, and who are asking some of the following questions:

If what surrounds us is God's handiwork and not merely the human environment or human resources, as secular groups would have it, isn't that some indication that we should look after it?

What is the biblical basis for such a concern for creation?

We now recognise that environmental causes more than any other are contributing to human suffering. They have led to more people becoming refugees in the last decade than warfare, and lie behind over half the world's disease. So isn't that sufficient reason for us to re-consider if we need to get involved?

Is creation care biblical?

The way the Bible frames the question "What is Christian mission?" is to ask us who Jesus is, and what it means to follow him as Lord. From the beginning of Genesis to the final promises of Revelation the biblical story is of God's love reaching out to his whole creation, and supremely to people within it. Nothing else can explain the promise of the first covenant in Genesis 9:17 "This is the sign of the covenant I have established between me and all life on earth.", or the ringing hope of Romans 8: 19 - 21 "The creation itself was subjected to futility.. in hope that the creation itself will be set free from its slavery to corruption into the glorious freedom of the children of God". The Bible understands that those who follow Jesus as Lord are led straight into relationship with him, and then the restoration of all their relationships, personal, social and with the wider creation itself. We never find the biblical call to mission beginning with people, and simply trying to work out from there what are the most pressing needs they face. This agenda owes more to the humanism of the renaissance and enlightenment than a robust Christian world view and a true view of mission begins with the question, "Who is Jesus, and how can we make him known in the world? The log-jam in evangelical thinking that has so sadly opposed social action to evangelistic endeavour, rather than understanding both as a consequence of the knowledge that Jesus is Lord, is only one of the consequences of this false point of departure. For people like ourselves, raised in a post-enlightenment culture that puts people and not God at the heart of our thinking, such a re-ordering doesn't always come naturally but we cannot but admit that it is more biblical.

Does creation care matter?

It is unlikely at best, and incoherent at worst, to imagine that God is indifferent to the widespread destruction of what he has created. To think that we can claim on the one hand to love God, and then to be indifferent to his creation, or even worse to live destructively, is even more tragic. As has been well said “It is impossible to say you love Rembrandt while you trash his paintings.” Set the wonderful promise of God’s redemption of creation against some of the current statistics – world-wide we risk losing fifty per cent of the meagre four per cent of plants we have already managed to describe in the wonderful treasure house of bio-diversity which is literally of God’s making. Some groups such as birds are less dramatically at risk – only twelve per cent will be lost in the next fifty years it seems – but then there are only just over nine thousand species to start with. What we are witnessing is casual, widespread, catastrophic destruction even while our awareness of the causes becomes ever more clear. We are in fact seeing the consequences of religious choices as human society on the western consumer model opts for personal comfort at the cost of the survival of the wider creation.

A distinctively Christian response

So much for the beginnings of a theology for creation care, but how can it work out in practice? How does the wonderful prospect of hope for creation take shape in particular places in our own times? For the last twenty years, A Rocha has been working to show how a distinctively Christian response can bring protection to endangered areas and species, and new hope to embattled human communities. Behind it all is a Christian witness that recognises the relevance of the gospel to everything God has made. Now working in twenty countries including Portugal, Lebanon, Kenya, Czech Republic and India, teams are conducting scientific research, educational programs, and through living communities often based in field study centres, they are living out in practice what the gospel means to all comers. From the Alvor marshes of Portugal, to the Arabuko-Sokoke forest of the Kenya coast, or the Bekaa Valley marshes of Lebanon, and even on the post-industrial waste ground of the Minet site in London, UK where an A Rocha team has led the creation of a country park, there are grounds for hope. These habitats that would otherwise have faced severe threats may now continue to show something of the wonder of God’s care in creating remarkable and beautiful biodiversity, and the communities around them have the chance to know more of their Creator and Redeemer.

Funding the frontier

Over the years support for A Rocha has more often been forthcoming from secular sources such as environmental foundations, national governments, or the European Community, who have begun to see how a Christian response can bring vital new insights to intractable problems in nature conservation. However the Christian donor community has an equal opportunity to recognise the essential role of creation care in the world wide task of mission, and to bring vital support to bear around the world. As the crisis deepens, events will make this ever more urgent, and we must pray that our biblical convictions, and our relationship to Jesus the Creator and Lord, will lead us to act before it is too late.