

Sermon

Hope for Creation in Christ

Rev. Dave Bookless

Introduction

Every now and then something happens which gives you a completely new perspective on life. It may be an experience – from the wonder of falling in love to the pain of dealing with bereavement, or it may be a new concept or idea. Sometimes a scientific discovery is made which changes how we see everything. Imagine how threatening it was when Copernicus realised that the earth was not the centre of the universe but that it – and all the other planets - revolved around the sun. At that time, some church leaders accused him of heresy and for many more it was a profoundly uncomfortable shift in their world view.

Today we are at one of those moments. As a global community we need to change completely the way we see planet earth and our place upon it. As Christians, we also need to change how we see the ‘Gospel’ and our ‘mission’. In both cases we have been guilty of putting ourselves as humanity right at the centre, of seeing everything revolving around us. We have seen the earth simply as resources for our consumption. We have seen the Gospel as simply the story of God and people. In both cases, we are beginning to realise we’ve been wrong and need to change.

God’s Big Picture

The end of Matthew 21, is often described as ‘the Parable of the Tenants’. That’s our first example of misreading God’s story. Calling it ‘the Parable of the Tenants’ puts us as people right at the centre of it. It’s actually the story of God’s vineyard. Do you see the difference? The focus is not only on us, but on God’s big picture. The vineyard is not simply the stage on which we act out our drama – it is a vital part of God’s – the landowner’s – purposes. In fact you could say that the landowner is really more interested in the fate of the vineyard than he is in the fate of the tenants!

Throughout the Old Testament, God’s people were meant to be an example to the nations around them, to the rest of the world, of how to relate to God and how to live within the land. Today’s Old Testament readings from Isaiah 5 and Psalm 80 remind us that the Jews were very familiar with vineyards, and for centuries had seen themselves and their land, as God’s special vineyard. However, God is not best pleased with the way they have treated his land – they have only produced sour grapes and so God has allowed their vineyard to become abandoned and overgrown. Jesus in his story goes even further and warns the people, in verse 43, that “The kingdom of God will be taken away from you and given to a people who will produce its fruit.”

The big picture of God’s purposes that we glean from Matthew 21 is in many ways a summary of the central story of the Christian Gospel. Today it is valid for us to see the vineyard as the whole of God’s creation. It is the world and all that is in it – it’s the environment. This vineyard, this earth, is something God as owner cares for and wishes to see fruitful – he has put a wall around it and made a watchtower to protect it. He has dug a winepress in anticipation that it will be fruitful.

Then God lends – rents out – his world to us as human beings. We are tenant farmers within God’s vineyard. This takes us directly back to Genesis 1, where we are made to image God in looking after his world. This is the very first command and commission humanity is given – to be God’s deputies, his stewards, in developing and caring for creation. At every stage it is clear that God has not abandoned his vineyard, but rather he has trusted us with it.

When God – the owner – sends servants to collect the fruit of the vineyard, what do we do? We beat, stone and kill them. All God expects from us is that we recognise that all the fruits of creation are his, not ours, that we offer them back to him in gratitude for him to bless before we use what we need. Yet instead, we have tried to usurp God’s place. We have acted as if we own the earth – the vineyard – and as if its produce belong to us to use and abuse. We have ignored the voices of the prophets who cried out – and still cry out – that our misuse of creation is an act of rebellion against God.

Finally, the owner sent his own son, and he too was killed by the tenants. God’s own son, Jesus, was sent to earth to show us how to live in right relationship with God, our neighbour and creation, yet he too was killed by a selfish humanity, ultimately by all of us. Jesus’ story of the vineyard ends at this point – with the killing of the

Son and the judgement that the owner will bring upon the tenants. It is a pre-resurrection story. But what happens if we continue the story in the light of the rest of the New Testament?

Hope for creation in Christ

Looking at this story from the other side of Easter, we know that the Son did not remain dead, but rose triumphant. We also know that his death and resurrection enable human beings to make a new start with God. But what about the vineyard, the world that has played such a big part in God's purposes? Bishop Tom Wright of Durham puts it like this: "God will redeem the whole universe; Jesus' resurrection is the beginning of that new life, the fresh grass growing through the concrete of corruption and decay in the old world. That final redemption will be the moment when heaven and earth are joined together at last, in a burst of God's creative energy for which Easter is the prototype and source."¹

God's big picture is that in Jesus we have hope for transformed people, but also for a transformed creation. The Kingdom of God has broken into this world and the resurrection makes possible our hope that all things can be renewed in Christ Jesus. What that means in practice is that we – as failed tenants in God's vineyard – are given a second chance to find our purpose, to recover our role. One New Testament passage that conveys this eloquently is Romans 8:19-22. Here, St. Paul compares the whole creation to a pregnant woman in the pains of childbirth. Those pains are agonising, but they are also deeply hopeful, because of what is to be delivered. Creation, we are told, is waiting for two things. It is longing to be set free from its bondage to decay – for the renewal that will come when God's Kingdom is fully here, but secondly, and amazingly, we read in verse 19 that "The creation waits in eager expectation for the sons of God to be revealed."

The sons (and daughters) of God are of course us. They are the tenants of the vineyard who have failed in the commission they were given back in Genesis 1. However, now creation is waiting in hope for us to be revealed. What can this mean? Quite simply it means that we are invited to rediscover our role in God's purposes as creation's care-takers, and that this is what the world is waiting for. It is an exciting if somewhat overwhelming discovery. Today's environmental crisis is waiting for the Church to recover its vision and mission and to take the lead in caring for God's world. We do not do this alone, but with the power that comes from Christ, whose resurrection demonstrates and guarantees that creation can indeed be renewed.

We may not achieve or aim for matters beyond us. But there are definitely certain things that we can do to restore and care for the creation right now. Over a 50- year lifetime, a tree generates \$31, 250 worth of oxygen, provides \$62,000 worth of air pollution control, recycles \$37500 worth of water, and control \$31,250 worth of soil erosion- 'A single mature tree can absorb carbon dioxide at a rate of 48lbs./year and release enough oxygen back into the atmosphere to support 2 human beings.' (USDA Forest Service, Michigan State University Extension)Planting trees is something that we can all do. When a single tree can do so much good, let us plant and protect trees as much as we can.When we plant trees we are making a contribution to the future. Planting trees helps the environment in so many ways and adds to life on our planet earth. Yes, as God's children entrusted with the duty of caring for the environment let us plant as many trees as possible which will contribute in some ways to restoration and renewal of land.

Conclusion

There is hope for the planet. That hope does not lie in better science and technology, although those will help. It does not lie in political decisions, although those are vital. It does not lie in frantic, desperate attempts to save a sinking ship. It lies in the person and work of Christ, the one by whom and for whom all things were made, and in whom all things hold together (Colossians 1:15-17), and it lies in Christ's people rediscovering their vocation. In our Epistle Paul says "I press on to take hold of that for which Christ Jesus took hold of me." (Philippians 3:12). Let us recommit ourselves to doing that together, to being those for whom the creation is waiting in eager expectation. Let us be God's people working in the vineyard of his creation to his glory.

The sermon has been originally prepared by Revd Dave Bookless, National Director, A Rocha UK for Churches Together in Britain and Ireland, Creation Time resources 2008. Adapted with permission

A Rocha is a Christian nature conservation organization based in UK but also works in many parts of the country including India. A Rocha projects are frequently cross-cultural in character, and share a community emphasis, with a focus on science and research, practical conservation and environmental education. For more information visit: www.arocha.org

¹ Wright, N. T., 'Surprised by Hope', SPCK, London, 2007, p.135.