

Caring for Creation: the choices we face

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Let us begin at the very beginning, because our journey is long.

Genesis, 1, Verse 1-2

In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth.

Now the earth was formless and empty, darkness was over the surface of the deep, and the Spirit of God was hovering over the waters

And on the sixth day

Verse 26-27

Let us make man in our own image, in our likeness, and let them rule over the fish of the sea, and the birds of the air, over the livestock, over all the earth, and over all the creatures that move along the ground.

So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female, he created them

Verse 31

God saw everything that he had made, and indeed, it was very good.

Genesis 3:22 (After Adam and Eve ate the fruit of the tree of knowledge of good and evil)

And the Lord God said "The man has now become like one of us, knowing good and evil".

So God created the heavens and the earth; and humanity, made in the image of God, and with the knowledge of good and evil, was given the task of stewardship of the earth. But we are reminded

Psalm 24:1-2 The earth is the Lord's and all that is in it, the world, and those who live in it.

for he founded it upon the seas and established it upon the waters.

Echoed in the Lord's Prayer: *"Thy Will be done on Earth"*

For forty years I have explored the puzzles and complexities of the earth's weather and climate, looking deeper for insight and understanding, to help us craft models of the earth system, so we can look more clearly into the future: the weather next week, or the climate for our grandchildren.

The challenges that the Earth faces this century; that we all face this century, are so far-reaching that sometimes it is hard not to turn away in discouragement. But the core issues that we must face will be very familiar to you as Christians. So from what I have learnt, I will offer you some guidance and some advice; both scientific and spiritual.

Let us start with gratitude for all that we have, from all of Creation. It is spring, the time of rebirth in the natural kingdom, a time for planting new seeds that will grow and feed and sustain us for another year. It is the second Sunday of Easter, and our thoughts are on the resurrection. The music around us is uplifting.

Close your eyes for a moment and visualize in your mind's eye the Earth spinning in space in all its beauty, in all its glory. This is our world, our part of Creation. Look at it with the loving, caring eyes of the Creator.

Psalm 24:1 The earth is the Lord's and all that is in it, the world, and those who live in it.

We were given stewardship over this planet – what truly does this mean?

Christians pray daily – “Thy Will be done on Earth” – what is the will of the Creator for this Earth?

With these questions in mind, tuck the spinning Earth into a corner of your vision and come back into this sanctuary.

If gratitude is the first step, the second is to understand reciprocity. If we care for the Earth as sacred, then the Earth will sustain us.

But in reality, how are we doing in our stewardship of this jewel, the planet Earth? Let’s face it, not very well! Our industrial society is having a global impact on the Earth. How did this happen? It started in ignorance as things often do, and with the fruits of the tree of knowledge. A few centuries ago in Britain, the land of my forefathers, the industrial revolution started with the burning of coal to drive steam engines to pump water out of the coal mines, and provide power for factories and trains. This was followed later by the discovery of oil and gas, electric power, automobiles, appliances and computers; all the technological advances that have transformed our world and our lives this past century. The pace has been so breathtaking that it is hard to stop and take stock of where we are going, and how we are getting there, but we must. We have been given so much, we have so much to be grateful for: all we have to do is use what we have wisely – and share what we know with others.

A sense of time is very helpful. When my grand-parents were children, it was the end of the 19th century. Houses in England were heated with coal fires and electric light was just beginning to replace gas lights. The motor-car was new and noisy; and shared the road with horse and carriage. That was a little over a century ago: where would we like our church, our state, our country, our world to be at the end of this century, when our grandchildren are grand-parents? You could say, with God’s help, the future will take care of itself. But we must take stock of our responsibilities, because our technology is no longer a small part of a vast natural world: its impact is global.

In just four generations, barely a century, our human industrial society has become the major driver determining the future of the Earth, its fauna, forests and its very climate. This is new. We have gone from being one small part of creation (who thought of ourselves a little self-importantly as rather separate from it) to the central player, driving the evolution of the earth’s climate and ecosystems. We have become as ‘gods’ but without the wisdom or understanding, or any deep acceptance of our responsibility for the future of the Earth. This did not happen by conscious choice. The discovery of the rich source of energy in fossil fuels simply drove the industrial revolution. All our fossil fuels contain carbon, which was taken out of the air by plants by photosynthesis, millions of years ago, and buried and stored in the earth. Plants use sunlight to make carbohydrates and woody trees from carbon dioxide and water. That is where all our food comes from, today and for all of human history; and most our energy, except for nuclear power. So think of fossil fuels as stored energy, concentrated sunlight. When humanity found the fossil fuels, it gave us a huge energy source, and the industrial revolution took off. Our economy, if it continues with business-as-usual, is on a path to burn all our fossil fuel reserves in a few centuries. This will return fossil carbon to the atmosphere that has been locked in the earth for hundreds of millions of years from a time when the earth was much warmer and had no icecaps. The forests and oceans are taking up CO₂ as fast as they can (about half of what we are burning), but we are burning fossil fuels so fast that CO₂ in the atmosphere has risen by 35% and is now rising at 2 ppm every year. Along with water vapor and other gases we call the greenhouse gases, CO₂ blankets the earth and regulates the earth’s temperature by trapping the heat radiated from the earth. These greenhouse gases keep the earth warm (in fact they heat the earth about 60°F), so the oceans don’t freeze and life on this glorious earth is possible. But burning so much fossil carbon so fast has upset the energy balance of the earth, and is propelling us to a much warmer planet. The last two summers, nearly 40% of the Arctic ice-cap melted. Even the scientific community was stunned; we thought we would not see such melt for another 20 years. As the summer icecap melts, the warming of the north and the melt of

Greenland will accelerate, and sea-level will rise for centuries, flooding our coastal cities and plains. Humanity may summon the wisdom to change direction, but if we do nothing and continue on a fossil fuel path, then by the end of the century, the shift to a warmer climate will cause mass extinctions, the loss of so much of the rich life of this planet; as well as hundreds of millions of environmental refugees, faced with rising seas. We didn't start down this path consciously, but now we know where it leads.

The task we face, to transform our infrastructure and energy economy from an inefficient one based on burning fossil fuels to an efficient one based on renewable energy sources in just one generation, is huge. At first it seems overwhelming, but the astonishing thing is we already have virtually everything we need. The same technology that created our current human-driven world has at the same time given us all we need to change it; and the cost of transforming our society is tiny compared with the cost of doing nothing. So why doesn't our society, the richest and most powerful society on earth, just face up to the challenge – if the cost is so small compared with the cost of doing nothing? When our human world is threatening the created world, it is surely time to examine our priorities? The question of course is one I am sure you have often heard in church: *where does our real allegiance lie?*

In recent decades, most of the population of the US, including business interests and an acquiescent consumer society has been clinging to the same business-as-usual scenario. Even though this is fast taking us and the Earth on a path we should fear to tread. Now the fate of our one Earth and its ecosystems, as well as food, water, peace and justice for humanity are all intimately linked? So where do we look for guidance for this millennium? We must look directly to the Creation, because our deep interconnectedness is now our one reality. From my perspective, the laws of science and the laws of the creation are not separate: they show us the paths ahead. There is only one world and one reality: it is our understanding that is partial. We must try to understand the world with all the tools we have, because with understanding we get a clearer picture of what is truth, in all its paradox, richness, complexity and tragedy. We need this understanding, this truth, because it liberates us to face our responsibilities to each other and to this world. Without it we just cannot see through the web of confusion and deceit around us.

We have to link our science and our spiritual vision.

What are the strengths of science?

- It is based on integrity, honesty and communication
- This is a critical contribution in a society lost in ignorance and deceit.

There is still a sea of 'false evidence' around us about climate change: much of it outright propaganda, designed to appear plausible, but with the intent to produce uncertainty, confusion, fear, apathy and delay; so that some can profit in the short-term. Only honesty and respect for the truth can free us from this deception.

But science has severe limitations.

- It can deal well only with the tangible, the measurable and the communicable
- So clear answers are often elusive in the complexity and interconnectedness of the living natural world, which of course includes us. This is where our freedom lies.

Now much of western theology (and even much of what we were taught in school) comes from a time when humanity had a limited understanding of its place in the creation; but the details of what people believed didn't matter too much because our global impact was small. But that has all changed. Now humanity has a global impact on the natural world, and understanding our place in it is paramount. Science and technology created this situation, and must help us find a way out, by helping us understand the earth as a global system, and why it is now out-of-balance.

But science is not enough. Just consider the prayer, the affirmation

“Thy Will be done on Earth”

This is a vision of something much broader and deeper than individual human will, which encompasses the Will of the Creator for the Creation. This vision “Thy Will be done on Earth” requires that people of faith have a deep understanding of the Earth and the whole Creation. In fact, to fulfill the Will of the Creator for the Earth, we must embrace the science of the Creation – the science of the Earth - as one of the pillars of our faith. Only then is it possible to understand and fully accept our responsibility for the stewardship of the Earth. This is a radical shift for many Christians in our society, as many have been taught that if doctrine and science disagree, then they should choose doctrine over science. But in essence this is to deny the Creation and the Creator in favor of human belief systems. And right now our human world is threatening God’s world and “all that is in it” - so it is time to rethink our priorities.

So think about fixing the global climate problem this way. The task is huge, the threat seems overwhelming; and yes, we will need help from the Creation; but the astonishing thing is that we already have everything we need - if we look deeply and mobilize our communities. We cannot be effective alone, and we have to mobilize or our society will go on with ‘business as usual’. We cannot just pray that God will fix things, because we are the cause, and we know it! If we ignore what is happening to the Earth, and pretend that only our consumer society matters, the Creation cannot help us. This is human arrogance: in biblical terms a great sin against God’s world; calling for repentance, a change of heart and a change of direction! But “Healing flows from repentance”. If we change direction and work with the Creation rather than against it, then the Creation can work with us.

The Earth will warm for decades because we have taken little action in the past two decades, but the choices we make in the next 20 years will determine how much the climate warms by the end of the century, with vast implications for this planet, its ecosystems, our children and grand-children. We know what needs to be done, but do we see it clearly enough? In just one generation, we need to rebuild the infrastructure of our society so that it is energy efficient, and is powered by renewable sources, rather than fossil fuels. We need to decrease fossil fuel use a few percent per year for 30 years. This means a shift of attitudes and priorities, rooted in an understanding of the path forward. We need humility because there are so many choices and we need to be open to all that is possible. We need to help the poorer parts of the world, as their suffering will increase immensely, remembering it was the actions of the rich countries that set the Earth on this path. But above all, we need deeper connections to each other and our communities and to the Creation to give us the courage to see clearly and face change.

We need to take the Creation into our spiritual practice,
so that “Thy Will be done on Earth” becomes a reality.