

Lent 1 21/02/21

“God said; I have set my bow in the clouds and it shall be a sign of the covenant between me and the earth.” Genesis chap 9

“Just as Jesus was coming up out of the water” Mark 1

During Lockdown we’ve all become dependent on our mobile phones for keeping in touch with family via Whatsapp etc. One of the apps on my iphone I have found most useful is the weather app, helping me plan the day’s exercise, and it’s pretty accurate. In today’s Genesis reading we are told to look up at the clouds and the sky – for signs of God’s love and commitment (the rainbow). This is very ancient thinking, which we found on visits to Canada in what’s termed First Nation spirituality – the connection and mutual dependence between humans and the earth and sky and all creation. And that first reading emphasizes that God’s covenant is with all creation and every living creature, not just humankind. Medieval theology talked about the Great Chain of Being of which we are part, and this was affirmed in Celtic spirituality and by St Francis and Hildegard of Bingen and others.

God’s covenant, Genesis says, is also made in full knowledge of our imperfections and failings – yes the clouds will come, but Redemption is always possible – Good Fridays can always lead to Easter. This is from a poem for Ash Wednesday by Jan Richardson:

So let us be marked

Not for sorrow

And let us be marked

Not for shame.

Let us be marked

Not for false humility

Or for thinking

We are less

Than we are

But for claiming

What God can do

Within the dust,

Within the dirt,

Within the stuff

Of which the world

Is made

And the stars that blaze

In our bones

And the galaxies that spiral

Inside the smudge

Talking about the smudge of ash that's marked on our foreheads during the Ash Wednesday liturgy.

And the Great Chain of Being, connectedness and mutual dependence is at the heart of today's gospel. "Jesus came up – emerged – Out of the water". He emerges from the water – a sort of rebirth. In evolutionary terms we are descended from creatures that came out of the sea – and so the foetus has gills. And when the baby takes its first breath, as it emerges from the waters of the womb, the lungs take over. Jesus emerges from the water and is sent out into the desert – water, earth, sand, human life dependent on one another at the start of Jesus' ministry. Jesus' human life is part of that great chain of being. Read psalm 104 verses 1 & 4-7 for an evocation of that thinking.

God's covenant is with all creation and so there is an inherent dignity and sacredness in all created things. And as that poem by Jan Richardson emphasizes, when your forehead is marked with ash and the priest says "dust you are and to dust you shall return", that theology is made clear. We are part of the humus – that word having the same root as the word humility.

This week we have been celebrating the USA rejoining the Paris climate agreement and joining with other nations in preparing for the COP 26 conference in Glasgow in November. Churches are encouraged to be part of that preparation. And so Hugh chaired the first meeting of the benefice environment group recently. It has excellent membership I thought, two Young Disciples and a resident of Richmond Retirement Village and lots of wisdom and expertise in between. It's there to encourage individual and corporate commitment and action:

- Raising environmental consciousness in all our churches
- Planning the climate Sunday Service
- Forming eco-church
- Meeting our MP
- Implementing an energy audit in all five church buildings
- Encouraging us as individuals to look at our own lifestyles

There has been a wonderful explosion of interest in and commitment to environmental action recently especially amongst young people. Perhaps you have been listening to the reading of Bill Gates' new book "How to avoid a climate disaster" on radio 4 this week. The energy – the genesis – for that great movement starts with the connectedness and mutual dependence proclaimed in today's two readings.

So this Lent I encourage each of you to commit yourself to something, an action that re-emphasizes that connectedness and dependence for you. Last year's Lent book, "Saying Yes to Life" by Ruth Valerio is very much worth reading in this respect, strongly scripturally based and with lots of practical suggestions for action. I was given five fruit trees for my 70th birthday by my family last week and will much enjoy planting them during Lent! Some suggestions from Valerio's book:

- Find out where the food you buy comes from
- Find out what goes into the making of your clothes (did you know that one pair of cotton jeans takes 9500 litres of water to produce?)

- Try to use less fossil fuel dependent energy, less plastic, less meat
- And positively, start each day by affirming in your prayers your gratitude to God for your life, and that you are part of this wonderful created order that God has made and is making.

This is a prayer by John Philip Newell from his book "Praying with the Earth":

For everything that emerges from the earth

Thanks be to you, O God.

Holy Root of Being,

Sacred sap that rises

Full-bodied Fragrance of earth's unfolding form.

May we know that we are of You

May we know that we are in You

May we know that we are one with You

Together one.

Guide us as nations to what is deepest

Open us as peoples to what is first

Lead us as a world to what is dearest

That we may know the holiness of wholeness

That we may learn the strength of humility

That together we may live close to the earth

And grow in grounded glory.