

Companions with Creation

- living as the meek that inherit the earth

DOMINION AS COMPANION

Fill the earth and subdue it

We are made from the earth (Gen 2:7). We are inextricably a part of nature. We are formed from the soil into which God breathed his breath of life. We are made by the power of God and in that sense a mixture of heaven and earth. But none-the-less we are woven into the fabric of nature, we are intertwined with the clay and threaded together with the shared life of all living things. We are 'earth-people' (cf *adam* - human; *adamah* – earth), it provides our total environment and intricate life-support system.¹

We are made in the image and likeness of God (Gen 1:26). This makes us unique and different from any other creature. We have minds to make sense of the world and a free will to choose either for or against God. We are creative with the ability to bring about great change. Eastern orthodox thought sees us as 'mediators' between God and the natural world; with Jesus as the primary example. It is our work to engage with God to set creation free. We work together; one plants, another waters but it is God who gives the growth' (1Cor 3:7-9). Our choices and actions seriously affect the material world but it is God who brings about ultimate destiny. It is argued that the phrase 'image of God' is not referring to an endowment but a development and a relationship; we are 'to image God' by showing nurturing, sustaining love towards creation.

We are given a unique mandate from God (Gen 1:26, 28; 2:15); it is quite unlike anything that is given to any of the other orders of creation (cf Gen 1:14-18, 22, 29-30) and presents us with much greater responsibility:

- '... let them have *dominion* over the fish of the sea, over the birds of the air, over the cattle, over all the wild animals of the earth and over every creeping thing that creeps upon the earth' (Gen 1:26)
- 'Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and *subdue* it; and have *dominion* over the fish of the sea over the birds of the air and over every living thing that moves upon the earth' (Gen 1:28)
- 'The Lord God placed the human in the garden of Eden to *work* it and *take care* of it' (Gen 2:15)

There are four key verbs in the mandate and how we interpret and understand them is vital:

- **Dominion:** Heb *radah* - to rule over, to trample ('like a winepress')
- **Subdue:** Heb *kabash* - to subdue, to stamp
- **Work:** Heb *abad* - to serve like a slave
- **Take care:** Heb *shamar* - to watch over and preserve

¹ Some would argue that we are also 'star-children'; our experience of life was only possible due to essential amino acids, originally formed in the furnaces of dying stars, finding their way to earth.



The key to true interpretation of the biblical 'cultural' mandate is to hold the two creation traditions together and let the variety of words used speak with one voice. The tragedy of so much Christian interpretation has been to take words from the first tradition only, and to apply them crudely.

The words in the first tradition (Gen 1; almost certainly the more recent) are very strong; to have 'dominion' and to 'subdue' seem even harsh. The key is to recognise that these words are inseparably linked with the primary characteristic of 'imaging God'. They are words that are always linked with the role of 'kingship', but must be interpreted only in terms of the character and values of God's kingship and rule alone. We are to rule only as God rules. The fundamental biblical understanding of the nature of kingship is 'servanthood' (cf Mt 20:28; Phil 2:6-7) and 'shepherding' (cf 2Sam 5:2; Ezk 34:1-31; Jn 10:11). This is not domination but restraint; they were not allowed to eat meat (Gen 1:29-30), they were not allowed to eat of the 'tree of knowledge' (Gen 2:17). Obedience to God and feeding on the 'tree of life' were the key requirements. In as much as the words 'dominion' and 'subdue' are forceful they anticipate the potential, and eventual, presence of evil and destruction in the cosmos. Humans are to join with God in standing against it and providing protection for the animals, birds and sea creatures.

The words of the second tradition (Gen 2; almost certainly the oldest) give a contrasting picture, 'to work (to till)' and 'to care' stress sustaining relationship. There is empathy and mutuality. We are to be 'earthkeepers' and are to use the natural world responsibly. It has been well said that, 'the soil is to be a partner to be cherished not a captive to be raped'. Creation is not a commodity; it cannot be owned, but only nurtured, because it belongs to God (cf Ps 24:1; 89:11; 1Chron 29:11). It too is 'our neighbour' and so we must love it 'like ourselves' (cf Lk 10:27). The character with which the working and caring takes place will be that of the fruit of the Spirit (Gal 5:22). The whole creation is to experience justice, restraint, compassion and the deep rest of both Sabbath (Gen 2:1-2) and Jubilee (Lev 25:8-25).

Two other ways of reflecting upon the relationship between the natural world and ourselves can be illustrated by the thinking and practice of two monastic orders:

- **Stewardship (Benedictines):** this has the sense of acting responsibly in the absence of the lord or master and anticipation of their near return; being prepared to give account (cf Lev 25:23; Mt 21:33-44). Maintaining the fertility of the soil and working in close proximity to it. The weakness of the 'stewardship' model is that it seems to suggest humans as *apart* from nature, simply adopting 'good management'. Nature is not outside ourselves to be conquered. Nor does it challenge structural change; the powerless are unable to be good stewards.
- **Companionship (Franciscans):** this has the sense of co-existence, inter-dependence and interaction with the world, with each species retaining its separate identity and freedom. It expresses a love for the environment that is neither confrontational nor adversarial. All species share the planet in the 'earth community' or in the 'community of creation.'



So a true biblical understanding of 'dominion' would suggest:

- To be a friend and companion to creation
- To mediate divine life
- To care, protect and love
- To liberate and celebrate
- To share together in meekness

The meek inherit the earth

There is one single word that completely sums up the biblical requirement for a human attitude and response to creation; that word is 'meekness'. Jesus said it clearly:

'Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth'
(Mt 5:5)

Meekness describes someone with real strength under perfect control. They are non-violent, gentle, humble, calm, compassionate and kind. This was a central characteristic of Jesus (cf Mt 11:29; 12:15-21; 21:5). He, as we have seen, is the primary example of how we should move and interact with the natural world. Jesus is the one we follow as disciples, learning from him as we follow in his steps.

Meekness is the key word because of the way it links directly with the biblical idea of kingship, which we have seen is the idea behind 'dominion' and 'subdue'. The powerful words of Zechariah closely link together the themes of 'meekness', 'dominion' and 'peace':

'Behold your king comes to you;
triumphant and victorious is he,
meek and riding on a donkey,
on a colt the foal of a donkey.
He will cut off the chariot from Ephraim
and the war horse from Jerusalem;
and the battle bow shall be cut off,
and he shall command *peace* to the nations;
his *dominion* shall be from sea to sea,
and from the River to the ends of the earth'
(Zech 9:9-10)

The truly meek person, by their very nature, will also be one who is righteous. We saw in our study of Jesus that this was a primary requirement of anyone who would live in peace and harmony with creation:

'For you shall be in league with the stones of the field,
and the wild animals shall be at peace with you'
(Job 5:23)

Meekness and righteousness create the essential rhythm for those who would dance the dance of dominion that is at the heart of the celebration of *shalom*.



At peace with creation

One group of early mediaeval Christians who displayed a wonderful example of the dominion of peace in their relationships with the natural world were those of the Celtic church. They showed a deep reverence for creation; Christ was described as “the true Sun”. Druidic thinking had emphasised the spirit in every single thing, and the Celtic Christians simply baptised this way of thinking into truth. They see the presence of God in all of life; a profound spirituality linked to a deep reverence for the earth that undergirds everything. This is seen in their runes, poems and hymns. It is also seen in the work of the scribes and craftsmen who express their joyful living faith through the forms of the world about them. It is also demonstrated in the fact that the stories of the Celtic saints are filled with accounts about amazing and miraculous encounters between themselves, nature and the animal kingdom:

- Columba’s horse was aware of his master’s imminent death
- Cuthbert is dried by otters having prayed in the sea all night ... and many more

In the words of Guthlac, a hermit of the fens, “Have you never learned in holy writ that he who hath led his life after God’s will, the wild beasts and the wild birds will become more intimate with him”.

The Celtic saints lived in harmony with what was believed to be hostile nature and wild beasts, and showed that in reality it should be one of peace. Their lives helped to free ordinary people from the fear of nature and challenge them to regard all living things with love and respect. They acknowledged that every living creature owed its existence to God. There were times when they also relied upon creatures to show them the will of God:

- Kentigen followed an ungentled ox to found his monastery on the Clyde
- Dubricius was led along the Wye by pigs to where he settled
- Ciaran was led, by a stag, to his hermitage on the shores of Loch Ree

There was a quiet care for living things, human and animal. They believed the biblical maxim of Deuteronomy 11, that ‘those who love God will have plentiful crops and good pasture for their cattle’. This meant that true love for God, is shown by loving creation and showing a proper care for the earth. The Celts were aware of the destructive nature of greed. Some were vegetarian, but all ate simple diets and had regular fasts. Nevertheless, when guests arrived they would always make sure they ate well; cutting down their own food once the guest had left.

Celtic Christian harmony with nature was also seen in their skills with knowledge of plants and the skills of herbal remedies, which led to their reputation as healers; as well of course the fact that they moved in the power of the Holy Spirit.

CARE OF ALL CREATURES

Animal rights

When talking about human relationships with the natural world, living, feeling animals must be carefully considered.² Some of the greatest casualties of the belief that creation is simply there to satisfy the needs and pleasures of humanity have been animals. They

² This is a huge topic that needs very careful consideration; we can only begin to explore it here in these notes.



have been exploited for their usefulness or exterminated for their threat. Their fate is often determined quite irrationally, depending on human whim or custom³. Popular Christian tradition largely dismisses this topic as not worth careful consideration, beyond a vague belief that cruelty to animals must be wrong. While a minority of Christians has often been vocal on the subject, we need to put it firmly on the church agenda. Not simply because of the rapid extinction of many species, or the modern treatment of animals by agribusiness, but because how we treat animals says so much about who we are as people.

To speak like this is soon to raise the contentious phrase 'animal rights'. While the concept has a much longer history the current use of the term it is very much the product of the 1970's. It is an attempt to extend the concept of 'human rights' to the non-human world. The fact that the idea of human rights does not have an agreed basis, and is suspect by many Christians, guarantees that the subject of animal rights is going to raise strong reactions. It has also become a highly politicised term with all the problems that that brings. However, simply to speak of 'animal welfare' is not incisive enough. The debate can become quite complex and so to make it useful we will keep it as simple as possible.

Two of the main animal rights criteria are:

- The ability of an animal to suffer;
- The fact that an animal shares the gift of life.

We understand human suffering because of our own experience and because we listen to others speak of theirs. Animals communicate quite differently and are we correct in imagining how they feel? Human feelings are deeply personal but acute; why not the same for animals? However primitive a particular animal's nervous system might be their senses are sharp for them. The debate rages; but it seems obvious to the impartial observer whether or not an animal is in good health, distress or pain. The real question seems to be whether we have a vested interest in being blind. If there is any genuine doubt one should surely always err in favour of the animal. Scripture has many instructions about kindness to animals; not mis-yoking an ox and an ass (Dt 22:10), not muzzling the corn treading ox (Dt 25:4), Sabbath animal rescue (Mt 12:11), and much more. But the issues are more fundamental still.

Even more basic is the question of the presence of life. We all know that life is a gift from God and that it is something profoundly precious. On the basis of our arguments earlier, animal life, like all life, is sacred. It is of great significance that both animals and humans were both originally vegetarian (Gen 1:29-30) and ultimately this will also be so (Isa 11:9). The permission to eat meat was clearly a concession to human sinfulness (like divorce), following the Flood (Gen 9:2-4); not a 'gift of the covenant'⁴ as some have suggested:

- This is made clear by the restrictions set; the fact that blood was to be drained and is linked to instructions about murder is significant;

³ For instance in some countries dogs are pets while in others they are eaten; people will be romantic about farm animals and not consider the connection with them when they buy their meat in shrink-wrapped supermarket packets.

⁴ So Oliver Barclay in '*Animal Rights*' an article in Third Way magazine

- While kosher food clearly has a health and hygiene purpose, there is a rabbinic tradition which says it was also to remind God's people that his original intention was for them to be vegetarian;
- The fact that animals were used in sacrifice, heightens not diminishes their preciousness. They took the place of a person in dying; they paid, as they have always done, the price for human sin. They anticipate the coming of Jesus. There is gratitude to God for accepting their life in the place of the sinner's, but there is also the recognition that the animal was not a commodity but a living being.

Animals are not made in the 'image and likeness of God', and that certainly makes a difference in what God expects from us, in contrast to them. It also illustrates the particular nature of our relationship with him. Yet we share 'life' and 'flesh' together with animals. We have already seen the many scriptures speaking of animals, with the rest of nature, praising God, and the eschatological vision of human harmony with animals in the age of *shalom* to be at the climax of God's purposes. We have seen that salvation embraces all creatures as it embraces the whole creation. We cannot say for certain that all animals will be raised to enjoy the new heavens and new earth, but neither can we deny it. The questioning words of Qoheleth leave the matter wide open, and who knows the ultimate dimensions of God's grace:

'For the fate of humans and the fate of animals is the same; as one dies, so dies the other. They all have the same breath, and humans have no advantage over the animals; for all is vanity. All go to one place; all are from the dust, and all turn to dust again. Who knows whether the human spirit goes upward and the spirit of the animals goes downward to the earth?' (Eccl 3:19-21).

The animal rights movement places particular significance on those animals that appear to have higher levels of 'consciousness'. But this creates the problem of where you draw the line in terms of animal value. As a Christian we must respect and treat all life as sacred because God created it. Not in the way the Jain's do, fearful of destroying anything. But joyfully and freely living as gently as possible in every circumstance. Our example is Jesus. We saw how he displayed both a gentleness and robustness in his relationship with the natural world. He 'was with the wild animals' (Mk 1:13), they responded to him. The problem with this subject is that we are so part of a culture that has exploited animals for millennia that it is difficult to think of what living differently would be like; but it is a matter needing considerable serious thought.

Our subject raises many issues which we simply do not have the time to examine in detail, but here are a few topics which need thinking about; each has a few questions to consider:

- **Wildness:** what does it mean for an animal to be 'wild'? Does it emphasises the distinctness from humans, its fear (the result of sin: cf Gen 9:2)? Does it also emphasise their dignity? How can we build relationship without destroying 'wildness'?
- **Domesticated:** what does 'taming' an animal mean? What do we destroy in an animal by taming it? How can an animal have dignity, freedom and a relationship with humans?
- **Circus and zoo:** surely the idea of animals being held captive for spectacle and entertainment is something obscene? Isn't doing tricks or being confined degrading?



While the argument for conservation *may* have a short term point doesn't it only show the terrible damage we have done?

- **Blood sports:** are activities like fox hunting, bull fighting⁵ and hare coursing are not only cruelty but graphic examples of the extent of human hostility to creation and animals in particular?
- **Wilderness:** we know that preserving natural unspoiled terrain is vital for wildlife; but isn't the question much bigger? How do places of human habitation relate to the rest of the environment? Do not population numbers, urban development, natural resources, travel, tourism etc, have deep moral, and therefore theological, implications?
- **Economics:** do we recognise the way it undergirds the ethics of modern society? The way it determines the survival or extinction of species, through trade, destruction of habitat and human impact?
- **Culling and vermin:** are these not both examples of humans stepping into natural animal ecology? Doesn't animal overpopulation cause health issues for both them and us, and economic issues for humans? Is this not another sign that we have not learned to live with nature?
- **Animal experiments:** can its use in cosmetics and industry really be defended? Perhaps the arguments from medicine need careful consideration; but had the use of animals for experiment always been unacceptable, wouldn't science have found other ways? Can it not still? Where there is a will is there not also a way?
- **Genetic engineering:** a branch of science that has much to offer humans, but doesn't its use with animals raise other issues? But haven't animals been manipulated by breeding programmes for centuries; isn't this just more effective and efficient? Surely to legally patient animals must be wrong? It must be essential to keep the whole subject under constant review?

It has always been God's intention for humans and animals to have a right relationship with each other. We are to be 'with' them as Jesus was (Mk 1:13), and they can be 'with' us. The biblical text gives no reason to believe that animals cannot be drawn into our lives to work with us, and help us, so long as it is done with gentleness, dignity and respect. 'The righteous person cares for the needs of their animals' (Pr 12:10). But we must reciprocate; we must make sure that our lifestyles serve the natural world, enhancing and liberating it. That is the mandate of dominion. Until the new heaven and earth animals in the wild will hunt and kill and destroy, but as those who foretaste the new age we will respond to them with compassion, gentleness and meekness. We should be the sign of what they will be. And as spiritual men and women in the past have shown remarkable relationships with creatures of the wild can be born.

Bread of gentleness

One topic we did not address above was vegetarianism. It has always been a contentious issue among Christians, but is gaining growing support within society as well within the church. We need to consider the subject carefully.

⁵ In Spanish cultural understanding the bull fight is seen as a symbol of humans challenging the threat posed on their survival by hostile nature (symbolized by the attacking bull); this stands in complete contrast to the biblical understanding of 'dominion', which is about 'harmony'.



Food is essential to individual lives and central to human communities. Further more, 'we are what we eat'. The source of our food has serious moral implications and therefore spiritual significance. There are a variety of reasons why people today are becoming vegetarian:

- A belief that killing animals is morally wrong
- A protest against cruel food production methods
- A challenge to the economic waste in meat production ⁶
- An avoidance of the fats and chemicals found in meat

We have seen that it was God's original intention that both humans and animals should be vegetarian. Following the Flood God's people in biblical times clearly ate meat, though with kosher restrictions. We know that Jesus ate fish, and there is no reason to believe that he did not eat lamb and other meat. If he had been vegetarian we would have expected the Gospel writers to say so. The subject of eating or not eating certain foods was clearly an issue in the early church and there are a number of clear statements on the matter.⁷

- 'Thus (Jesus) declared all foods are clean' (Mk 7:19)
- 'For everything created by God is good, and nothing is to be rejected, provided it is received with thanksgiving; for it is sanctified by God's word and by prayer (1Tim 4:4-5)
- 'Some believe in eating everything, while the weak eat only vegetables. Those who eat must not despise those who abstain, and those who abstain must not pass judgment on those who eat ... Also those who eat, eat in honour of the Lord, since they give thanks to God; while those who abstain, abstain in honour of the Lord and give thanks to God' (Rm 14:2-3,6)

These verses have nothing to do with vegetarianism as such! Though they are very helpful in developing a Christian attitude towards food. They were in fact written to a church that was struggling with two issues:

- The influence of Judaisers who were trying to get Gentile Christians to keep a kosher diet;
- The fact that most meat sold in the pagan market place had been sacrificed to idols.

In some circumstances in the past the eating of meat may have been necessary for some people, but this is no longer the case. Apart from extreme situations no one needs to eat meat any longer. In the light of an estimated 100 billion animals being killed each year worldwide for food or scientific experiments the needless slaughter of animals needs to be challenged. Considering what has been discussed in this unit as a whole there is a very strong argument for Christians to become vegetarians today. If they were to make that choice it needs to be done in the light of some very clear principles and as a demonstration of the unique nature of Christian freedom:

⁶ The fact that it takes 20lbs of corn to produce 1lb of beef and that 1/3rd of all the world's cereals are used in meat production; vegetarianism could release much more food to the people in a hungry world

⁷ Jesus sets the sacrificial animals free when he cleanses the temple (cf Matt 21:12-17; Mk 11:15-19; Jn 2:13-22).



- The New Testament does not directly teach about vegetarianism, but neither does it exclude it, even though some Christians would try to argue it does;
- To suggest that vegetarianism is an essential requirement of the gospel would make that person a 'Judaizer'; it can only be a free faith choice;
- While animal life is sacred a Christian should not actually say 'meat is murder' but rather that 'discipleship is gentleness';
- There is the need to recognise that food is a very sensitive issue for individuals and communities; it is a key form of their self expression;
- Hospitality is a gift that must never be violated, 'eat whatever is put before you' (Lk 10:8); if your host serves meat eat it with gladness living by the 'law of freedom' (Ja 1:25) which is motivated by love;
- Meat is not unclean, we are not contaminated by it (Rm 14:14-17); that sort of attitude comes from other religions, we live by the freedom of gentleness.

A primary motive for the Christian vegetarian is to be making a prophetic statement, to themselves and to any that want to hear it; 'It was Gods original intention and it is his ultimate intention and I choose to live in the light of that'. For people who eat the 'bread of gentleness' the key words are compassion, meekness and joy!

SERVANTS AND PRIESTS

Sharing *shalom*

The gospel is Green! Of that there is not the slightest doubt. As disciples of Jesus we should expect to be involved in all the activities and attitudes that make for a sustainable lifestyle in a world of limited resources and fragile ecology system. But we must bring to this movement that which is distinctively Christian; not simply to enrich it but because it is the truth! The fact is that 'Green peace' is nothing short of the fullness of God's *shalom* encompassing the whole earth.

We must be prepared to work in common cause with those who share similar concerns but have a different motivation. Our presence will encourage them, our values enrich them, and our witness may well draw some of them to discipleship of Jesus, the cosmic Messiah. We, with him, are truly the friends of the earth.

A Christian creation vision sets salvation and history into perfect perspective. This should energise us with joy and freedom to live creatively as servants, artists, mediators, priests, and redeemers within the world. But it should also sensitize us to the pain, the anguish and the evil that grips the natural world. We need to hear the deep groaning as the cosmos awaits its liberation. We take our place as fellow sufferers with the poor and needy in the world; human, animal the inanimate, recognising our key role in the process of salvation. We do not worship wild nature but we should seek the wilderness as a place to worship, with nature and our Creator.

Creation communities

The task must involve the whole church. It is of crucial importance to encourage individual Christians to develop creation - sensitive lifestyles and attitudes. This is also because the work of bringing the gospel to 'the whole creation' [Mk 16:15] is dependent upon



communities of faith worldwide. We must expand our concept of the gospel to embrace all that God has created. To see the atonement in engulfing cosmic terms, Jesus reconciling 'all things' to himself.

We have a priestly role within the world. We are intermediaries between the spiritual and the material. We recognise creation as a sacrament communicating God to us. The role of the priest is to enquire of God, to teach, and to bring reconciliation when relationships have broken down. As the church we are to be hearing what God is saying about the human response to the environment, to communicate that and to work for establishing harmony between people and the natural world. As a priestly community our concerns are for justice, peace and the integrity of creation.

In conclusion, there are two important biblical symbols of salvation, which have much to say about the role of the church in the natural world at a time of deep ecological crisis:

- **The ark:** while chaos raged with the flood outside within the wooden craft there was complete harmony inside. A righteous human family living in complete harmony with a wide variety of wild animals, who are also living at peace between themselves. This becomes a picture of the fact that salvation from the destructive forces of chaos will inevitably have to bring all living creatures living together in harmony. The church has been viewed as an ark since its earliest centuries; as a community we should be at the forefront of embracing the created world and protecting it from the enveloping chaos and seeing it gripped by shalom in the process.
- **The whale:** this has been one of the most powerful symbols of the modern ecology movement, but it has also been an important biblical symbol of salvation. It rescued Jonah from the chaos of the deep that in turn became a picture of Jesus' embrace by death leading to the salvation of the cosmos. It has been said that, 'solidarity with the whale has been within the Christian tradition as long as there have been Christians'. The church identifying with living creatures amid the storm of ecological crisis will once again prove to be an important means of God's salvation being experienced.

So the church is to stand within the world as a creation community, reaching to the ends of the earth in compassion and gentleness drawing all things into the embrace of God's shalom.

Questions & Reflections

1. What would you say to the Christian who says that Green issues have nothing to do with the gospel?
2. Individuals recycling, becoming vegetarian, walking and cycling, low-energy living and other creation sensitive life style choices are said to provide minimum effect in the face of the global environmental crisis. What would be your response to this observation? What distinctive contribution do you think the Christian faith community ought to be making in both action and debate over ecology issues? Do you think the Christian gospel is green? What are the implications of your answer?



Reading & Resources

Ian Bradley '**God is Green**' pub Darton Longman & Todd 1990
Tim Cooper '**Green Christianity**' pub Spire / Hodder 1990
Matthew Fox '**Original Blessing**' pub Bear & Company 1983
W Granberg-Michaelson '**Tending the Garden**' pub Eerdmans 1987
L Gruen & P Singer '**Animal Liberation**' Camden Press 1987
Sean McDonagh '**To Care for the Earth**' Geoffrey Chapman 1986
Art & Jocele Meyer '**Earthkeepers**' Herald Press 1991
Jonathon Porrit '**Seeing Green**' Blackwell 1984
Theodore Roszak '**Person/Planet**' Granada 1981
T Sargent '**Animal Rights and Wrongs: A Biblical Perspective**' Hodder 1996
Fritz Schumacher '**Small is Beautiful**' Abacus 1974
P Singer '**Animal Liberation**' Jonathan Cape 1976

