

THE BISHOP OF ST ALBANS' PRESIDENTIAL ADDRESS
DIOCESAN SYNOD
19 OCTOBER 2019

Caring for God's Creation

In this Presidential Address I will focus on three topical subjects:

- 'The Big Conversation'
- Caring for God's Creation
- Brexit

The Big Conversation

At our last Diocesan Synod in June, I announced that we want to involve as many people as possible in reflecting on the progress that we've made with *Living God's Love* (LGL) over the past nine years and identify the priorities for the third phase. To enable this, we are having a Big Conversation involving our parishes, schools and chaplaincies across the diocese. We will be thinking and praying together about our future under the banner of 'growing younger'. How can we pass the faith onto the next generation? We want every PCC to engage in a thoughtful, prayerful conversation of how we can grow younger as a diocese. To do this we are providing people to visit each PCC from the beginning of 2020 until the late autumn. The responses will be brought back to this Synod in October 2020 and, based on what we have heard, we will launch Phase Three of *Living God's Love* in early 2021.

Caring for God's Creation

On Monday 23 September a sixteen-year-old Swedish girl, Greta Thunberg, lambasted the United Nations Climate Change Conference:

"This is all wrong ... I shouldn't be up here – I should be in school, across the ocean ... You come to young people for hope? How dare you? You have stolen my dreams and my childhood with your empty words ... And yet, I'm one of the lucky ones. People are suffering, people are dying, entire ecosystems are collapsing. We are in the beginning of a mass extinction and all you can talk about is money and fairytales of eternal economic growth. How dare you?"

Although there have been some criticisms of her, there is no doubt that Greta has captured the imagination of young people across the world. In passing,

I would observe that if we want to grow younger as a diocese one wonderful point of contact with tens of thousands of young people is working together on protecting and cherishing the environment.

Greta has not been alone. For some months Extinction Rebellion has been protesting in cities across the world. Here in the UK, the movement has picketed many different sites such as the BBC, London City Airport and the Bank of England. Over 1300 people have been arrested in London alone. The movement's logo is a circled hourglass, known as the extinction symbol, showing that time is rapidly running out for many species, including mankind.

Now, please be clear: I am not commending any sort of violence, but I do support the right in a democracy for people to demonstrate, as well as for citizens to have the right to move freely and get on with their daily work. We need to give our support to the police who find themselves caught up in the middle of conflicting views and actions.

It's significant that as Christians we have been working on care for God's creation and protecting the environment for a long time. The theological roots of this concern are to be found in the Old Testament.

Over 30 years ago, in 1988, the Lambeth Conference developed a model of mission work for local churches, which has become known as the Five Marks of Mission:

1. to proclaim the good news of the Kingdom
2. to teach, baptise and nurture new believers
3. to respond to human need in loving service
4. to seek to transform the unjust structures of society
5. to strive to safeguard the integrity of creation and sustain and renew the life of earth

This fifth mark of mission arises from the biblical teaching that God is creator of the entire cosmos. The book of Genesis begins with two accounts of creation: Genesis 1.1-2.4a and Genesis 2.4b-3.24. These first three chapters give us two different creation stories. The first one (1.1-2.4a) comes from what is known as the Priestly source, whereas the second account - running from Genesis 2.4b to the end of chapter three - is from the Jahwist source.

The first is the story of creation in six days. The seventh is a day of rest. It is a carefully crafted text and some scholars think that the refrain 'And God saw that it was good' which comes seven times might indicate that it was used in worship.

The whole point of the narrative is to stress that absolutely everything in the entire cosmos comes from God. It's not trying to give us what we consider a modern-day scientific rationale about *how* the cosmos came about but to claim that God is the source. It climaxes in the creation of humanity – we are “made in God’s image” and as such we are given responsibility for overseeing God’s creation.

The second account, which starts in Genesis 2.4b, makes a short, factual statement about creation (“In the day that the Lord God made the earth and the heavens ...”) and then focuses on the creation of humankind in the Garden of Eden. It culminates with the story of the ‘fall’ which explains why there is evil and sin in the world.

Both of these creation stories in Genesis have shaped the doctrine of Creation: the world and all that it contains comes from the free creative actions of a loving God; it is good but it is, in some sense, fallen. It’s not quite as God intended it to be. However, the key thing we need to take from these two narratives is that it is God’s world and we are his stewards. We are responsible for his creation.

But what does this mean for us? Well, although I know something about theology, I am not a scientist, so I only want to make two observations. Firstly, despite the misgivings of President Trump and President Bolsonaro, the overwhelming scientific consensus is that global warming is taking place and we are losing species of animals at an alarming rate. Secondly, the only sensible approach is to take the precautionary principle and act on it. So now we come to the question “What are we going to do about it?”

There are plenty of resources available to help us. For example:

1. Shrinking the Footprint – the Church of England’s national environment campaign.
2. Creationtide is a season in our Christian calendar which runs from 1 September to 4 October, when we give a particular focus on creation. There are many resources for worship and teaching available on the Church of England website.
3. Letters for Creation is a project which brings together young people from across the Anglican Communion to pray, speak and act on climate change.
4. Eco Church and Eco Diocese [let’s watch a short clip]
5. The other useful resource is next year’s Archbishop’s Lent Book: ‘*Saying Yes to Life*’ by Ruth Valerio. It will focus on care for creation, lifting our focus from every day concerns to issues that are impacting millions of lives around the world, and suggest actions we can take to protect the environment. Linked to it will be two practical booklets (for adults and

children) and a Lent campaign of daily social media, offering reflections and challenges.

Brexit

I now want to make a few comments about Brexit. We are all aware of just how divisive this topic has become and I have no doubt that members of this Synod will have a variety of opinions on the subject. None of us know what is going to happen in twelve days' time. However, it is likely that there will be quite a bit of fear and anxiety about the availability of food and medicine, about visas and the right to remain and work in the UK, and about jobs. I will be sending out copies of this Presidential Address and I urge all clergy and other leaders to:

- Ensure as many of our churches are open for prayer on Friday 1 November, All Saints Day. Ideally, it would be helpful if a poster could advertise that the church is open for prayer for 'Brexit Day'.
- Use public worship on Sunday 3 November to pray for our nation and reflect on how we can rebuild trust in a divided nation. The gospel reading set for the day is the Beatitudes from Matthew 5. 1-12, which is a wonderful passage to reflect on the role of Christians in society.
- Think carefully about who in each parish, school or chaplaincy may need special support and reassurance at this time. In rural parishes, that may mean contacting local farmers; in urban areas, some businesses may feel threatened; in all areas, there may be housebound people for whom a timely visit or phone call may bring reassurance.
- In particular we need to encourage everyone to reach out to people from different ethnic backgrounds who are living in our neighbourhood. Following the Brexit vote in June 2016 there was a rise in hate crimes and it is possible the same may happen again.

All of these suggestions are made in response to Christ's command: "Love your neighbour as yourself".

+Alan St Albans

October 2019