

A Biblical View of the Ecological Crises (3): Incarnation

Sixth Sunday after Pentecost

July 19, 2009

A sermon preached in Glebe Presbyterian Church

Toronto, Ontario

Galatians 3: 23- 4: 7

Matthew 5: 21-43

We now come to week 3 in our series on the Bible and the Ecological Crises. It's the middle week and in many ways this is the pivotal sermon because today we look at the life and teachings of Jesus Christ, the centre of our faith. We are facing a big challenge here because nothing that we have in the gospels about Jesus' teaching has much to do with ecology. If we are going to use his teachings for ecological purposes then we will have to read things into these teachings that weren't really there in the first place, which is always a dangerous thing to do. The only excuse I have to offer is that I am only doing what the Christian church has been doing throughout its history. Theologians and church leaders have been interpreting Jesus' teachings in various ways for 2000 years now, so what we do today is nothing new. So with that in mind let us pray:

Prayer for Illumination

Last week we looked at God's relationship with God's people as given in the Law of Moses, also called the Torah, and we tried to uncover what role, if any, that the Torah might play on the ecological crises. Obviously, this ancient law could never have anticipated our modern problems; its food and dietary rules were developed for a desert people without access to refrigeration and no understanding of disease. The emphasis of the Torah is the health of one small tribe of nomadic people, competing with other small tribes for water and arable land. When Moses read the law to the people just before they entered the Promised Land, he told them that obeying the law would give them life and prosperity, while disobeying the law would bring death and adversity. "Choose life" was his advice, his warning, his plea. But clearly, the things a small tribe of nomadic people who lived 4000 years ago should do to "choose life" are very different from what other people in different times and circumstances should do.

We Christians come to the Torah through the teachings of Jesus Christ, a first century Jew who was brought up to follow this law, which was ancient even in his day. When Jesus read the Torah, he was reading a document that was already 2000 years old. In his day, the chosen people were no longer a small nomadic tribe and the Promised Land was now occupied by the mighty Roman Empire. Clearly, the strategies needed to "choose life" were different in Jesus' day from what they were when the Torah was first written. And now, 2000 more years from the time Jesus lived we also need new strategies suited to our day, which will be different again from his take on the Torah. So our question is, "How should we read these ancient scriptures so that we respect their status as 'the Word of God', and still be able to apply them to our time and place." I believe that we can answer that question by looking at the way Jesus approached the same scriptures and applied them to his day.

Before Jesus adapts the scriptures to first century Palestine, he tells us how much he respects the Torah when he said:

Do not think that I have come to abolish the law or the prophets; I have come not to abolish but to fulfill. For truly I tell you, until heaven and earth pass away, not one letter, not one stroke of a letter,

will pass from the law until all is accomplished. Therefore, whoever breaks one of the least of these commandments, and teaches others to do the same, will be called least in the kingdom of heaven; but whoever does them and teaches them will be called great in the kingdom of heaven. For I tell you, unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.

So Jesus has a very high opinion of the Law. Even so though, right after he says this he proceeds to revise the law in rather dramatic ways. When the Law says we should not murder, he says that we must not even be angry with our brothers and sisters. When the law says, “do not commit adultery” he says that anyone who looks at someone with lust has already committed adultery in his or her heart. When the law says “an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth”, he says that we should walk turn the other cheek, and walk the extra mile. These are not nitpicky changes. Jesus has expanded the Law beyond its letter to expose the truth behind the law, the principles on which the law was first given.

It seems to me that we are called to do likewise. We are called to look for the truth behind the law, the way in which the Law needs to be applied in our day so that we will “choose life”. How do we do that? How do we choose life when we know from modern science that we live in an age of death – more species are facing extinction in our day that at any time since the days of the dinosaurs. How do we choose life when we know that our survival as humans depends on the survival of our ecosystems just like every other species, and we know that the survival of any ecosystem is intricately tied up with the health and population changes of all the interacting species in that ecosystem. Finally, how do we choose life when we know that all life forms on the earth have come from the same source. Everyone knows from the theory of evolution that we are related to chimpanzees and other great apes, but we often overlook that are also related to zucchini and bacteria; we have all descended from the same single-celled creatures in the primordial ooze of eons ago.

So with this reality in the back of our minds listen again to Jesus as he talks about loving our neighbours:

You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.’ But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be children of your Father in heaven; for he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the righteous and on the unrighteous. For if you love those who love you, what reward do you have? Do not even the tax collectors do the same? And if you greet only your brothers and sisters, what more are you doing than others? Do not even the Gentiles do the same? Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect. (Mat. 5: 43-48)

Jesus taught that when the Torah tells us to love our neighbour, the definition of our ‘neighbour’ must now be expanded to our human *enemies* as well as our human *friends*. And to make sure that we don’t miss it, Jesus underlined this teaching again the parable of the Good Samaritan, when it was the Samaritan, the hated enemy of the God’s people, who stopped by the side of the road to help his enemy the Jew, after the half-dead man’s religious leaders had passed by on the other side.

But we now know from ecological science about the close relationship we humans have with all other life-forms on the earth. Surely, they are our neighbours too. I suggest that when we try to follow Jesus’ application of the Torah in our day we will have to expand the definition of who our neighbour is even further than he did to now include all the other species of God’s creation. So, in Jesus’ famous story of the Samaritan and a “man lying half-dead in a ditch”, who might that man represent in our day? Might our neighbour also include the

wild orangutans of North Borneo who are being systematically annihilated as the jungle of that island is cut down and replaced with coffee plantations? Might our neighbour include whatever cod are left off the coast of Newfoundland after the Grand Banks had been fished to death in our day? We human beings breathe the same air and drink the same water as all the other creatures of the earth. When the other creatures of the earth are threatened with eternal death, so are we! When the neighbour we love in our day includes all the creatures on the earth, then surely we are “choosing life” not only for them but also for ourselves. Surely, this is God’s plan for the earth to be filled with all of God’s creatures, living abundant life together. Surely, this is the good news of the gospel in our day.

Certainly the definition of neighbour does not exclude our human neighbours. We are still called to feed the hungry, clothe the naked and give shelter to the homeless. However, I believe that our call to follow Christ in our day cannot stop with giving help to human victims of injustice and exploitation, but must also include all of our relatives, human as well as non-human. Social ministry and ecological action are both sides of the same coin. Furthermore, ecological responsibility lies at the very heart of our Christian vocation to “love God and love our neighbour as we love ourselves.” All the law and the prophets come down to these basic truths, which are at the heart of our decision to “choose life” as God has called God’s people to do from the very beginning. This is our special gift and our special challenge in our day.

Thanks be to God.

Amen