

Oxford Three Faiths Encounter



God, Creation and Us: From Theology to Action Conference Transcription

Revd Dr Liz Carmichael

Sermon delivered at St Giles Church

27th March 2022

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all our hearts be now and always acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our strength and our redeemer. Amen.

First may I express thanks to everyone here who is in the regular congregation at St Giles, and to Daniel, for your welcome this morning to our guests from the Three Faiths Encounter on “Creation, God and Us: From Theology to Action.” We began this Encounter on Wednesday evening and we finish it today after lunch.

We have been exploring, with very interesting input from environmental experts and from theologians from Judaism Christianity and Islam, what we human beings have been doing to our planet, causing climate change and the degradation of our whole environment while creating a very pleasant lifestyle for many of us. And more positively, we have been hearing about responses to that change, and what we ourselves might be doing about it. What is our calling as people of faith in relation to the problems of the climate and our environment? Faith can and does wield influence. We were reminded that 85% of the world’s population identifies with a faith tradition. I’ll come back to that topic shortly to share something about what we’ve learned.

But first a word about this particular Sunday, which Anglicans in particular call Mothering Sunday. It is always on the 4th Sunday in Lent. Lent is the 40 day period of fasting and repentance in preparation for Holy week and Easter. Strictly, Sundays are not part of Lent - and yet we do we do keep them as part of Lent, and traditionally this mid-Lent Sunday is a moment of respite, a day when some rejoicing is allowed and some relaxation of the fast. Hence the simnel cake, a kind of fruit cake with lots of marzipan which we will be enjoying later with coffee and

© Speaker copyright, all rights reserved. You may print this download for personal use, but no further copy or distribution is allowed without permission from the speaker(s).

Oxford Three Faiths Encounter



God, Creation and Us: From Theology to Action Conference Transcription

which traditionally we might be giving to our mothers. So why is this day called ‘Mothering Sunday’? What does that signify?

The tradition that associates this Sunday with mothering developed in two stages. The earliest stage grew out of the liturgy for this day, going back to the Middle Ages, at least as far back as the seventh century. The more recent stage is a twentieth-century Anglican revival. The medieval origin is linked to the particular texts for this Sunday. The medieval introit for the beginning of the Mass on this day was taken from Isaiah 66:10 - 11 and Psalm 122 and it goes: “*Laetare* Jerusalem..., Rejoice with Jerusalem and be glad for her, exult and sing for joy with her, all ye that in sadness mourn for her, that you may suck and be satisfied with the breast of her consolations.” “I was glad when they said unto me, we will go to the House of the Lord.” So Jerusalem, which in Christian thought usually puts us in remembrance of the heavenly Jerusalem, is depicted as a nursing mother; and this image of the heavenly city as our mother is taken up in the Epistle which was read every year from medieval times, continuing in the Anglican Book of Common Prayer. This Epistle is the passage in Galatians Chapter 4 where St Paul allegorises the figures of Hagar and Sarah and says that Sarah stands for Jerusalem which is the mother of us all.

In some parts of England, on this Sunday each year, the custom grew up of individuals visiting the church where they had been baptised, their ‘mother church’, or making visits home to their actual mothers, and of parishes going on outings on this day to the ‘mother church’ of the area, so usually the Cathedral or the original Minster Church. We know about this in part through Letter 22 of Bishop Robert Grosseteste, written when that great Oxford scholar was Bishop of Lincoln in 1235 - 1253. Lincoln was then an enormous diocese, which included Oxford. Bishop Grosseteste wrote to call on the people to “behave in a more seemly manner”, because evidently groups from parishes had been quarrelling about whose banner should go first in the procession, when they went ‘mothering’ to Lincoln Cathedral.

Mothering Sunday experienced a revival in England in the early twentieth century, when a high Anglican church writer named Constance Adelaide Smith wrote several books advocating its observance. She suggested four themes. The first was the Church as our mother; the second, mothers of earthly homes, ordinary mothers - and here Smith was in part inspired by the recent establishment of ‘Mother’s Day’

© Speaker copyright, all rights reserved. You may print this download for personal use, but no further copy or distribution is allowed without permission from the speaker(s).

Oxford Three Faiths Encounter



God, Creation and Us: From Theology to Action Conference Transcription

in the USA, which is somewhat different and falls on the second Sunday in May. The third theme is Mary the mother of Jesus. We began this service by singing “Tell out, my soul”, which is a modern version of Mary’s song, the *Magnificat*, and the Gospel reading told us of Mary’s presence at Christ’s crucifixion. Finally, Smith’s fourth theme is the gifts of ‘mother earth’. The Gospel for this day was, until the mid-twentieth century, the feeding of the five thousand, which lent itself, at least tangentially, to thoughts about our reliance on the earth and its fruits.

So Mothering Sunday, in its present form, became established in the Church of England and spread around the world in the Anglican Communion. It became traditional for children to present their mothers with posies of flowers, particularly violets, as a sign of love and thanks, and there will be posies distributed as well as simnel cake at the end of this service.

So to the environment. What are we doing to ‘mother earth’? In Christian history, it is St Francis who uses that phrase in his *Canticle of the Creatures*: “Praised Be You, my Lord”, through brother sun, through sister moon, and brother wind, sister water, and brother fire, and through “sister mother earth, who sustains us and governs us and who produces varied fruits with coloured flowers and herbs.” Francis in fact reminds us of the whole of our environment, not just earth but also air and fire and water. One of the most influential recent documents on the environment is Pope Francis’ Encyclical which begins with St Francis’s words in the original Italian, in the Umbrian dialect: “*Laudato Si*”, “Praised be You....”

Probably all of us here have encountered some of the main theological themes and debates around our relationship to the rest of creation and particularly to this small planet, on which we live and on which we depend. What does it mean to “have dominion” (Genesis 1:26) over all other creatures? Shouldn’t we think of ourselves more as part of nature, rather than external to it? If we think of ourselves as stewards, how can we be responsible stewards? How should we think about bio-diversity loss? What is climate justice? How does the command to love God and our neighbour play out in the context of the environment? What is God’s intention for this creation? Does this present creation matter at all, considering that we have some apocalyptic images of its being wrapped up, some time now or in the future, and replaced with a new creation? How does God call us to move beyond just grieving for all that has already been lost? What can we *do*?

© Speaker copyright, all rights reserved. You may print this download for personal use, but no further copy or distribution is allowed without permission from the speaker(s).

Oxford Three Faiths Encounter



God, Creation and Us: From Theology to Action Conference Transcription

Martin and Margot Hodson, who have helped the thinking on these topics in the Oxford diocese for the past decade, came to this Encounter to share their considerable knowledge, scientific and theological, about the present environmental situation, and to bring news of some things that we can do and are being done. I warmly recommend to everyone, of any faith, their recently revised book *A Christian Guide to Environmental Issues*. They provide scientific information, theological reflection, material for Bible studies and practical ideas. Their chapters cover the state of our planet, bio-diversity, climate change, water, human population and consumption, energy, soil, food, sustainable development. A final chapter focuses on practical signs of hope (though these signs are also scattered through the book) and trust in God and God's commitment to this world.

In their presentation the Hodsons pointed us to the thinking of Kate Raworth of this University of Oxford on keeping the balance between human needs and the capacity of the planet to meet them. This capacity can be measured in terms of 'planetary boundaries', that is the actual physical limits in terms of land use, climate warming, the use of water, and pollution that must not be crossed if human life is to continue to be sustainable, including the possibility of sustainable development to improve the living conditions of the poorest. The question of population growth comes into this and remains a thorny topic, contested in particular between North and South. It proved to be quite explosive, even at our conference. We considered the need to move away from measuring development in terms of rising GDP and to seek instead to give real monetary value to the environment. Thus a mangrove swamp that prevents hurricanes from damaging the coast may be worth far more in the long run than a shrimp farm that offers employment but replaces the mangroves with a flat and vulnerable shoreline. And what price Oxford's green belt, which is now under such assault by 'development'?

Another speaker was Kris de Meyer of Kings College London, who works with industry on the very difficult task of helping engineering firms and investors to understand environmental issues and to make real changes to the way they think and operate.

So all in all we have been shown a pretty dire picture, but also signs of hope and a lot of lively questioning and research. Here are some thoughts about practical action on climate change from Martin and Margot Hodson. They write: "The sheer size of the problem can overwhelm any response we might make, such as changing

© Speaker copyright, all rights reserved. You may print this download for personal use, but no further copy or distribution is allowed without permission from the speaker(s).

Oxford Three Faiths Encounter



God, Creation and Us: From Theology to Action Conference Transcription

our light bulbs, but though so many changes seem insignificant they do make a huge difference if everyone does them. The impact of changing to energy efficient appliances can already be measured: insulating your home, switching to green energy, walking and cycling more and if you have a car getting a fully electric one when you next need to change. All these are things that really will make a difference. Beyond that our eco-tip for climate change is to get active. You might like to write to your MP your local councillors or other political representatives; there are many on-line petitions; there are marches, campaigns. If there is to be real action for this most serious of problems, our politicians need to know that we care.”

That’s from the Hodsons, and to that we could add that we need to keep ourselves as well and accurately informed as possible, and we need to help to raise awareness. We can attend local council planning meetings, and we can think how we might influence investment decisions in the private sector, for instance we might suggest calling on Kris de Meyer’s unit at Kings College London to assist engineering companies and large investors to think through how to build and invest sustainably, and not be simply ruled by short term profit.

So may God free us all from the unrealistic hope of unlimited economic growth, and lead us into a sustainable future, grounded on faith, hope and love. Amen.