

Ezekiel 37: 1-14
Psalm 130
Romans 8: 6-11
St. John 11: 1-45

Lent IV 2023.

“To set the mind on flesh is death, but to set the mind on the Spirit is life and peace.”

Romans 8: 6

A smaller thing within a larger thing tends to be affected by the larger thing – whatever it is... For example, our moon is affected by earth, the planet in which we live. Our earth circles around the sun; the earth’s orbit through our galaxy is because of the presence of the much larger sun, relatively close to us in the universe. The bigger unit affects the smaller one...

It’s also true in our relationships: A child in school is affected by his or her classmates; a school class is partly shaped by being part of a school; the school is within the Ministry of Education, and so forth... Our homes are within a neighbourhood, which is within a city or community, within the province of Ontario, within the nation of Canada. We’re usually affected by the bigger presence...

The Christian Church, large as it is, is within the global population. Christians function within a larger culture – a larger population of people who have different views of God, or – who don’t believe in God at all. We are a bit like a ball, floating in a bucket of water...

Sometimes Christians have had a transforming effect on culture – such as when Christians worked for the eradication of the slave trade... Sometimes, the culture is *neutral* to Christianity. For example, the Church has existed within different political climates, from ancient kingdoms to modern democracies... Sometimes, though, the *culture* has affected the Church – and that’s not always been good! We have collectively sometimes bought into the notions of power in the world around us, rather than self-sacrificial love and humble service, following the example of Jesus Christ himself...

The Christian Church was formed within an ancient Roman culture, and the Greek culture was also a powerful influence nearby. (For example, the New Testament part of the Bible was originally written in the Greek language...) One of the features of Greek culture was an emphasis on the intellect – on using our *minds*... Some ancient Greeks were dismissive about the natural world, or the way our bodies function. Bodies and bodily fluids and babies and sex and the natural world were thought to be a bit *déclassé* – a bit beneath educated folks, thought many ancient Greeks. The really important action was having these amazing ideas and philosophical arguments...

These were ideas simmering in the wider educated culture in the first century eastern Mediterranean...

Now, taken as a whole – and we need to embrace the message of the Bible as a whole, not just our favourite bits – taken as a whole, the Bible has a lot to say about the natural world being the product of a gracious, creative God. If we just take a snippet from today's second reading, we might think that Paul is putting down the natural world, and our bodies, or that our bodies are entirely sinful...

Verse 7 reads this way: "To set the mind on flesh is death, but to set the mind on the Spirit is life and peace." Paul might have had a bit of the Greek influences in the back of his mind when he wrote this verse...

Following this, there has been a strand in the Christian Church throughout the ages which has been a little dubious about the natural world, and our bodies, and the very real danger of sin... It has sometimes led to a kind of extreme contemplation – like when the early desert monks would live in the wilderness by themselves, to try to escape the distractions of women and money and such... At other times in the Church's history, there's been a strand of Protestantism which has been prudish... For example, I was astonished to read a few years ago that in the early years of America, a sea captain was put in stocks in the public square after he got back to port. What was the sea captain's offense against the community? After having been at sea for *2 years*, when he returned home, he was so happy to see his wife that he had kissed her in public!... So, there has been a strand or theme in parts of the Church, historically, which have been a bit suspicious of the natural world, and our bodies. They've been associated with sin, or to be against God's purposes in Jesus Christ...

Let's keep in mind that God himself has given us bodies, and God himself is the inventor of sex. God didn't create us, and then think, "What on earth is that married couple up to? I had no idea that would happen!..." God has created a beautiful world, and it's up to us to take care of it, and to enjoy it. God himself became flesh in the person of Jesus: "And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us," St. John tells us in his Prologue.

Not only that, God sometimes uses the natural world to accomplish heavenly purposes. For example, in the dominical sacraments, God uses water for the spiritual re-birth which takes place at baptism. God uses the elements of our dinner tables – bread and wine – transformed by his eucharistic presence...

Now, let's not let ourselves off the hook! We can sin in all kinds of ways, and some of those sins can include the misuse of the natural world... We can pollute our bodies with harmful drugs; we can pollute our rivers for economic gain; we can misuse the natural appetites like eating or drinking or human sexuality. All of us have the capacity to twist God's gifts in selfish or broken ways...

The “renunciations” in the vows at Baptism make this clear: “Do you renounce all sinful desires that draw you from the love of God? I renounce them...” We would like to pretend that when there is sin in the world, it’s all *everyone else’s* problem... If we’re being honest, though, we admit that this is part of the human condition. It includes *us*... We can express sin in our thoughts, our speech, our actions, or in our laziness (when we don’t bother to do the right thing)... Often – though not always – sin can include how we use or misuse our bodies...

The remedy, of course, is to throw ourselves utterly to the mercy of God, who in his gentle, gracious, yet firm way, restores us and makes us whole, by the Spirit of Jesus Christ. We’re not supposed to sit and stew in our sinful state, but to be restored and washed and made clean, by accepting the gift of the One who hung on the cross for the sins of the whole world...

Anything has the potential to lead us to sin. But we don’t have to look at the natural world as evil or always against God’s purposes. God’s deepest desire is for the redemption of his whole creation – one glorious Day, it will be complete!...

In the past few weeks, we’ve been thinking about the “Lambeth Calls.” We’ve looked at Inter-faith relations, Human Dignity and Evangelism, and Anglican Identity. We’re going to conclude today with 2 more Lambeth Calls: “Science and Faith,” and “Environment and Sustainable Development...”

Let’s remember that many Anglican bishops serve in the developing world, and experience first-hand when there is environmental destruction or the selfish misuse of creation. Let’s also remember that absolutely nothing is outside God’s oversight. Every corner of our hearts, every second of our lives, we are called to surrender into God’s redeeming work...

So, here are a couple of questions, from the Lambeth Calls, to talk through together:

1. The bishops were clear that Science and Faith, properly understood, are not in contradiction to one another, but reveal God’s nature together. What do you think science can teach us about God?
2. What words of hope can you offer, to someone who is discouraged or anxious about our present environmental challenges?
3. Part of the gospel is about modest living and self-sacrifice – not popular themes today. What is a small step we can take, as a household, or as a parish, to help the natural world become healthier...?

(Prayer)