

Does God really care about creation?

Part of One Small Step, leading up to COP26

Christ Church

Wednesday 27 October 2021

Common misunderstandings

My talk this evening is entitled ‘Does God *really* care about creation?’ The short answer is, ‘Yes’. The slightly longer answer is, ‘Yes he does – but too often Christians don’t.’

Why not? Well it is only recently that the climate emergency has become so clear. When I was at school, climate change was something we covered, but only briefly. The thing I remember being worried about wasn’t the impending climate crisis, but that we might run out of oil by 2050!

Even the IPCC’s famous hockey-stick graph showing the rise in global temperature is only 20 years old. Let’s not forget how quickly the crisis has accelerated. For most people – including Christians – creation care has been a side issue – until recently.

But there's another reason for inaction among Christians – and that comes from the Bible. Or rather, from a couple of common misunderstandings of what the Bible says. It's these I'd like to address this evening.

There are two verses in particular that can cause some Christians to dismiss creation care as leftie new age nonsense. The first comes right at the beginning of the Bible in Genesis chapter 1, which tells us that God created the world. Personally I'm not worried about whether or not it was literally seven days because God could have made the world in seven seconds – the point is that the world has a Creator, it is not a cosmic accident.

On the sixth day, Genesis tells us, God created humans:

God blessed them, and God said to them, 'Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and **subdue** it; and **have dominion** over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the air and over every living thing that moves upon the earth.'

Genesis 1.28 (NRSV)

The argument goes like this: God told people to **fill the earth and subdue it**, and gave us **dominion over** all of it – which means we can do what we want with it, even if that ruins it.

That verse goes with another verse from the very end of the Bible, in Revelation chapter 21. In these final chapters of the Bible, St John describes a vision of how things are now behind the scenes, and how things will end, where the world is heading.

He says this:

Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth; for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away.

Revelation 21.1 (NRSV)

The argument goes like this: God is going to wipe all this away and give us a fresh new world to live in, so what's the point? Why care for it, if God is going to get rid of it anyway?

(1) subdue, (2) dominion, (3) new – those three words summarise the reasons why Bible-believing Christians shouldn't care about creation. Our only option is to disregard the Bible as outdated and irrelevant – possibly even dangerous.

Except, it isn't. The Bible is God's Word to us so we need a little more humility when we read things that are difficult. And, we need to put a bit more effort into trying to understand what God is actually saying to us through it.

(1) Subdue

There's no getting around the Hebrew word *kabash* which means 'subdue' or 'enslave' – it is most often used in a military context, where to 'subdue' the enemy requires you to use all your strength.

And actually **subdue** is an accurate word to describe a lot of the things we need to do when making the most of the world God has given us. Digging and preparing soil for growth requires a *lot* of strength. Pruning plants and cutting back hedges is a way of *subduing* natural growth for better overall health. Weeds need to be fought back continually so they don't take over.

The point is God gave us creation for food and enjoyment – both of which take a *lot* of effort. The problem is we have gone too far: modern advances and technology enable us to subdue creation too easily and too much, so we no longer use it, we *abuse* it.

(2) Dominion

That's where the second word comes in: **dominion**. The Hebrew word is *rabah*, which is the word for royal rule. In fact in this verse some Bible translations use the word 'rule' instead of **have dominion**. But before we throw our Bibles in the bin we must ask ourselves: what sort of rule does God require?

Psalm 72 gives a clue. It was written for the coronation of King Solomon, who ruled Israel 3,000 years ago. It uses the same word *rabab*: **may [the king] have dominion from sea to sea** (8).

But what does that **dominion** look like? Yes, it involves being served by his enemies (9-11), but also hear this:

For he [the king] delivers the needy when they call,
the poor and those who have no helper.

He has pity on the weak and the needy,
and saves the lives of the needy.

From oppression and violence he redeems their life;
and precious is their blood in his sight.

Psalm 72.12-14 (NRSV)

In the Bible, royal rule done rightly is not about domination but stewardship, care, and protection; the most common picture the Bible uses for rulers is that of a *shepherd*.

Therefore when in Genesis humans are commanded to **subdue** and **have dominion** over creation – that doesn't give us licence to do whatever we want. It doesn't give us permission to spoil and abuse the good creation God gave us. Instead it gives us our role: to be *stewards* and *shepherds* of all God has given us.

(3) New

17 years ago I volunteered for a Christian environmental charity called A Rocha. I thought caring for creation was a good thing to do, but not a particularly high priority for Christians. *People* were the priority: Jesus didn't tell us go and hug a tree, but to go and make *disciples* of people.

What changed my mind was the word 'new'. Let me explain.

There are two kinds of 'new' – and each has its own word in Greek. The first kind of new is *neos*, and it means brand-new, recent, fresh, like a new-born baby or the sun rising on a new day.

The second kind of new is *kainos*, and it means fulfilled promise, something becoming what it was meant to be, like a caterpillar turning into a butterfly: it *is* new, but it isn't *brand* new.

Do you see the difference? *Neos*-new means brand-new, fresh; *kainos*-new means made-new, transformed, maybe even *recycled*.

This is how the Bible describes someone becoming a Christian:

| If anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new!

2 Corinthians 5.17 (NRSV)

Would you like to guess which of the words for 'new' Paul uses there? *Kainos*. When someone becomes a Christian, God doesn't delete them and start again – he transforms and renews us, he starts to make us into the people he always meant us to be.

In Revelation 21 when John says **I saw a new heaven and a new earth**, can you guess which of the words for 'new' he uses? *Kainos*. This world is not going to be wiped out so God can start again, but transformed and renewed, *exactly like God does with his people*.

It turns out that making things new is what God does. He takes the old and the messy and the painful and the broken and the ugly and the spoiled and *he makes them new*. This is what God does: **'See,'** God says in Revelation 21.5, **'I am making all things new.'**

The Bible has a word for this: *resurrection*. The resurrection of Jesus has already happened – the resurrection of the world and God's people has *already* begun, though it is *not yet* complete: **'I am making all things new,'** God says: this is a work in progress. He loves his people and he loves his creation – he doesn't want to start again, he wants to resurrect it, to transform it, to *renew* it.

God cares for **all things**, for *all* creation – and so should we.