

**Sermon:** Before I became a minister in the church, I spent 20 years lecturing in Geography – my field was ‘Geomorphology’ or ‘Earth Science’. In the few minutes of this sermon I cannot even begin to explain how important wilderness areas are to the functioning of our planet. Rather, I want to begin by asking two questions: *‘Why should we, as Christians, be concerned about the planet at all!?’* And then the question: *‘Why should we worry about landscapes that are of no use to human civilization?’*

For many churches, that first question is unasked but is there in the background; churches that focus on salvation to an afterlife often devalue our planet and this life. We sometimes hear the criticism: *‘Christians are so heavenly centred that they are of no earthly use!’* For me, the church should be just as concerned for the planet and ‘ecological justice’, as it is for ‘social justice’ and for ‘salvation to an afterlife’. And I say this in simple response to John 3.16: **‘For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son’.**

As to which landscapes or parts of the planet are ‘useful’, we have to be careful! Wilderness areas are described in the dictionary as areas that are: *uncultivated, uninhabited or inhospitable*; that is, areas that are unsuitable for settlement, or areas that do not make a contribution to the economy. But the notion of ‘usefulness’ depends on levels of technology and on cultural values.

Take, for example, northern Canada. To the thinly spread indigenous peoples, who lived on seals and caribou and whose lifestyles were adjusted to the extreme seasons, northern Canada was home! To the society that migrated

from Europe to settle North America, much of Canada was ‘wilderness’. That is, until the discovery of gold. During the Klondyke goldrush, thousands of miners migrated north, deforesting the landscape, digging up floodplains, introducing diseases and lawlessness and destroying the indigenous cultures. The discovery of diamonds and oil last century, continued the process of exploitation and now, with the threatened removal of environmental protection in areas controlled by the United States, landscapes that are fragile are in even more danger. Should that be a concern to us as Christians?

Or, closer to home, what about the seabed in our exclusive economic zone? Last month Trans Tasman Resources Ltd was granted permission to mine 50,000 tons of iron sand annually for the next 35 years from the sea floor 36 Km offshore from Patea. This is part of an area that the Green Party wants declared a protected National Park. The company had been trying for several years to get permission and appeals against the decision are still to be heard. The ore is to be sent to China for processing and the residue pumped back onto the sea bed. Should we be glad that an economic use has been found for the sea floor or should we – as Christians – think that the sea floor has value in its own right and perhaps should be left as it is. Should we worry about environmental consequences that are hard to measure over the long-term.

My strong conviction is that all landscapes – including wilderness areas – have intrinsic value, that is, value in their own right, and should not be judged simply for how

useful to humans they are! We are indebted to David Attenborough and other makers of television documentaries, for showing us how marvellous the networks of life in wilderness areas really are! So, we are not being asked to value sterile and lifeless areas of rock, sand or permafrost, but to realise that the Creative Spirit of God is working miracles of interactive life across the whole world, the world that God loves. So, as Christians, I believe we must treat wilderness areas with respect and learn to love them as God loves them!

I want to turn now to our bible readings. The prophet, Joel, describes a severe drought and then a plague of locusts which he interprets as God's judgement on the wicked and unrepentant people who live in Judah, the area affected. In the Old Testament, God was thought to be directly in control of natural processes and used nature to either punish or bless people.

Today, we understand a lot more about natural processes; we know that in many areas of the world – with or without people – a drought followed by rain and a spurt of growth in vegetation, can trigger locust swarms in which harmless grasshoppers become eating machines that can devastate huge areas. We have also learned how to control and prevent the growth of locust swarms and so reduce their impact.

Joel describes devastation; Isaiah, in a delightful few verses [Isaiah 41: 17-20] outlines blessings that can come when people turn to the Lord: **'When my people in their**

**need look for water, when their throats are dry with thirst, then I, the Lord, will answer their prayer... I will make rivers flow among barren hills... I will turn the desert into pools of water and the dry land into flowing streams. I will make cedars grow in barren land...People will see this and know that I, the Lord, have done it...'**

We have become used to reports of soil erosion, pollution and exploitation of natural resources, but there is one spectacular example of a country practising methods of positive land use. The nation of modern Israel is the only country in the world in which desert occupies a smaller percentage of land area than it did 50 years ago!

Let us turn to Romans 8; I see verses 18 to 23 as a 'word for our time'. To quote: **'Up to the present time all of creation groans with pain, like the pain of childbirth.'** And the previous verse: **'Yet there was the hope that creation itself would one day be set free from its slavery to decay and would share the glorious freedom of the children of God.'**

Notice, it is the pain of **'Childbirth'** and not the pain of **'Terminal Illness'** that Paul envisages. If 'Creation' or 'Nature' can share in **'the glorious freedom of the children of God'**, then the future is startlingly positive! People who have chosen to follow Christ, who are filled with the healing, loving and creative Spirit of God, are freed from self-centredness to act with generosity and compassion towards the planet and its life.

Israel has grown though 60 years of paying for water, of scientific research into drip irrigation, desalination of water and recycling of sewage, of tight government controls over taxation and profit margins, of responsible private enterprise involvement... so that, today, the desert is beginning to blossom...

**Let us Pray:** God of grace and truth, we thank you for the visions and prophetic words embedded in scripture which, when times are right, can motivate and energise individuals and communities to live in harmony with one another and with our planet.

Make us as sensitive to the cries of creation as we are to the songs of the tui, the bellbird, the grey warbler... Give us the will, we pray, to work for the human poor and disadvantaged and also for the fragile ecosystems of wilderness areas, and species of life threatened with extinction. Christ Jesus, in the power of your indwelling Spirit, teach us to care. Amen