

Sunday 24 October, 2021

Sermon given by the Ven Canon Heather Patacca at St Paul's Cathedral Melbourne on Sunday October 24, Creation-tide 3.

Readings: Gen 1.26-2.4; 1 John 1.1-4; John 2.1-11

William Shatner, the 90 year old actor, has finally gone where he had never gone before. Despite what his alter ego, Captain Kirk, on the TV show Star Trek looked like he was doing, the actor has in the past few weeks set a record for being the oldest person to fly to space. After the flight, he spoke of the moment of leaving our atmosphere and tipping into the blackness of space, a blackness he described as death. His overwhelming response was desperate sadness that we are seemingly hell-bent on destroying this glorious blue planet, with its exquisite beauty. 'Shatner described the payoff of floating above the Earth as "profound." He said that space travel is not something a person can understand until "you're up there and you see the black darkness, the ugliness."

"From our point of view, space is filled with mystery ... but in that moment, [of leaving our atmosphere and tipping into the blackness of space] it is blackness and death. In this moment down here, as we look down, [Earth] is life and nurturing. That's what everybody needs to know," Shatner told reporters.'

In an article in the Los Angeles Times last year it was noted that: *When a SpaceX Falcon Heavy rocket blasts off on a plume of white smoke, hot gases shoot out of its 27 engines, creating a thrust equal to 18 Boeing 747 aircraft.*

Upon reaching orbit, the world's heaviest operational rocket will have burned about 400 metric tons of kerosene and emitted more carbon dioxide in a few minutes than an average car would in more than two centuries. That kind of shock to the atmosphere is stoking concerns about the effect that launching into orbit has on Earth, and it's about to get worse.

In these past few weeks we have seen a surprising number of space trips by billionaires. Elon Musk, Jeff Bezos, and Richard Branson seem obsessed with getting to and living on Mars. If an alien from outer space who in the last month or so had just arrived on earth from elsewhere in the galaxy, was watching the news, they'd be forgiven for thinking that humans are preoccupied with the necessary preparations for our exit from this earth. It would be understandable if that alien thought we were planning for the demise of the earth.

How ironic that a trip to space adds to the issues we face in the use and abuse of the physical resources of the earth.

Today in our Creation-tide series we reflect on the physical resources we are blessed with on this life-filled nurturing planet, how we use and preserve them. And whilst we can point the finger at others who in our own view are wasting resources, ruining our environment, we are not thinking today about what other people should do, but will ask the question: What can one person do? What can you or I do to ensure we are caring for the earth and resources therein? What is our framework for thinking about this?

The starting point today is again the beautiful poetry of the creation story in Genesis one, which sees God's creating-work on day 6 in the creation of people, male and female, made in his image. God provides food for all the creatures he has made, and finishing his good work, God rests on the seventh day. That provides the framework from which we ask questions.

We hark back to the beginning, not just because we call this season in the church calendar Creation-tide, but because who's we are, and who's this world is, and who provides the resources is answered therein. So we begin by naming ourselves as God's, made in his image, and naming this world as his. We begin by acknowledging his provision for us in this good world.

In 1 John 1, we hear John start at the beginning too. Just as John begins his Gospel by laying out the foundation that Jesus is fully God, creator, source of life and the light that shines in the darkness – here John writes a complementary paragraph about the work

of that same logos, the word made flesh. John expands what that meant for those who saw Jesus, spoke with him, heard his voice, could touch him. John says:

1. What was from the beginning

What we have heard

What we have seen

What we have looked at and touched with our hands

3. What we have seen and heard,

We proclaim also to you.

John refers to the whole sweep of Jesus – the person, the teaching, the miracles, the death and resurrection, the ascension. God walked with humanity, God talked with humanity, and anyone who heard, saw, touched this reality could never make it less than pivotal.

Here we have the declaration of what was from the beginning. John says: seen with our own eyes; touched with our own hands; this word of life revealed to us; and now through us to you; this eternal life that was with the father, and shone a light in the darkness of separation from God, so we could see how fellowship with our father and his son, and with each other, worked. John is stressing the centrality of Christ, and that unity – intimate fellowship in the community of Christ – can only thrive when we are unified as to who Jesus is.

Nothing here is abstract. It is the reality of Jesus' personhood. This word of life is the creative expression of God. The physical, tactile, sensory reality of God walking among us, demonstrating God's heart, showing God's priorities, revealing the very nature of God himself. It is the deep engagement with what God declared 'good' in Genesis, engagement and involvement with the world he loved so much that he would send his only son.

So if we ask what one person can do at this point, we can say that one man, Jesus, died, rose, and ascended to heaven, to restore us to fellowship with our heavenly father, gave us eternal life. (read verses).

The aim of John's letter is that those who read it have fellowship with their heavenly father and his son, Jesus Christ. And along with that, that we have fellowship with one another as those who know eternal life through Jesus Christ.

Here is a second answer to our question about what one person can do. We each can have fellowship with God, and with others. You see that suddenly we are not lots of 'one persons', but a whole group of people, knit together as those who follow Christ. We follow the same Jesus who lived on this earth, was physically involved, who could be seen, heard, and touched, who shared in fellowship with us. This picture of Christian community, based in the vertical and horizontal relationships we share is the context in which we 'do this life, do eternal life'.

So what can one person do becomes a better question – how do I show my fellowship with my heavenly father and his son Jesus Christ? Obviously we do that with the support, prayer and love of those we are in fellowship with as brothers and sisters. Our question is answered through the way we go about our daily work, as though we work for Christ. It is obvious in the way we share our home lives with family and friends, as those who are God's own children. And it is clear through our engagement in our communities through the way we live on the earth, the world that was beautifully made, because we do that from the perspective of our collectively belonging to the creator God's family, so what we do declares the intrinsic value of what God has made.

Back through Church history, there have been Christian communities who have sought to remove themselves from physicality. Our physical life is so important to God that he, God, emptied himself, as we read in Philippians, to get into life physically. The Christ who died and rose again was physically here, fully man and fully God. This world matters very much.

Our fellowship principle can impact our approach to care and management of the resources we are blessed with in our world. Wherever you sit in the political spectrum, there are voices calling for sensible management of what we are blessed with in our own country. Whether you listen to John Anderson, former deputy Prime Minister, and former leader of the nationals, himself a farmer who strongly advocates for a swift move to soil carbon sequestration, or our local member here in the city and leader of the greens, Adam Bandt, arguing for the major parties to take seriously the input from leading Australian climate scientists, or The Labor Environment Action Network, a broad based group of ALP members who are committed to supporting strong action on climate change, there are people all across Australia and the world who are keen to agitate for changes to benefit the planet. The fellowship model, whereby we encourage one another formally and informally is not just limited to our church life. If you feel yourself asking “what can I do to change the approach of those stripping bare the Amazon, polluting the area and leaving the indigenous populations without the natural resources they need to live, or what can I do to ensure wealthy and powerful companies are not mining resources for their own profit and not for a common benefit, or how can I advocate for care for those who are impacted by changes that are occurring to our industries and workforce, or what can I do to raise a grass roots swell toward renewable energy development, or what can I do to ensure we recycle efficiently and effectively through our local government authorities, you are not asking those questions on your own. Laying the foundation for growth, building for our community’s benefit, and taking responsibility for our common life are all part of engaging with this good world, in ensuring all are provided for.

But of course, our starting point for fellowship is here with each other. At the recent Synod, the Dean moved a motion that would involve all of our diocese taking seriously our contribution to the climate crisis. Unfortunately, it was not passed, because it would require spending that was not already in the budget. But of course, this idea is now implanted in all our heads, and I don’t doubt there will be work this coming year to make allowance for this in the budget. The offshoot of this is that those of us who were engaging with other synod members via whatsapp or phone message groups started talking about what might be involved and how each of us would actually do this, and

what we were already doing, and I was asked what we are doing at the cathedral. So I mentioned this sermon series. I mentioned our commitments to include climate-aware language and intentions in our ministry and mission goals, for it to shape our future planning for our buildings and site. And, I hope you don't all mind, but I volunteered us to come up with paradigms and ideas that the cathedral can share with others in our diocese, so within our fellowship we model honouring the good world that we have been provided by our glorious God.

Much better than heading off into space, to a place that is darkness and death, we are invited to engage positively with the preservation and flourishing of this world. 'We write these things so that our joy may be complete', John writes in v 4. There is godly joy to be had here, friends, and you are invited through sharing in fellowship with our heavenly father, and with us as your brothers and sisters, to hear, see, touch and declare the eternal life that has been revealed to us through Jesus Christ.