

Sunday 31 October, 2021

Sermon given by the Revd Canon Dr Bob Derrenbacker at St Paul's Cathedral Melbourne on Sunday October 31, for All Saints Sunday and Harvest Festival

Readings: Deuteronomy 8.7-18

I speak to you in the name of God, the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.+

Over the last few weeks, during this season of Creationtide, our sermons and Bible Studies here at St Paul's Cathedral have focused on the goodness of God's creation and our God-ordained mandate to care for God's creation and steward it with integrity and sustainability. We have reflected theologically and biblically about how God is revealed to us in the goodness of God's creation. And we've heard calls to action to respond to the ways that humanity has abused and exploited God's good creation, which is most immediately seen in the present-day global crisis of climate change.

On this Sunday in Creationtide, we continue to take stock as we think theologically and Biblically about God's creation and our responsibilities towards it, but especially today from a posture of gratitude and thankfulness on this harvest festival that is also marked alongside of the Feast of All Saints.

Indeed, there is so much for us to be thankful for as we ponder God's good creation and how it sustains the lives of all of God's creatures.

Today's Old Testament lesson from Deuteronomy captures some of this, and perhaps even provides a model for us as we give thanks and as we take care and remember. Today's reading comes from a larger section of Deuteronomy where God, through Moses, is calling the Israelites to remember and obey God's commands as they are on the verge entering into the promised land after forty years of sojourn in the wilderness. In today's reading, we see Moses announce to the Israelites that the land they are about

to enter is “good land.” The goodness of the land will be realized in the provisions that the land will yield to the Israelites – plenty of clean, running water; bountiful produce from the land including grains, vegetables, various kinds of fruits and honey; ample supply of minerals and other natural resources. Moses tells the Israelites that they can look forward to “a land where you may eat bread without scarcity, where you will lack nothing.”

But this promise of a good and bountiful land comes with a catch – the Israelites are called to a posture and practice of gratitude, to “bless the Lord your God for the good land that he has given you.” Here, Moses warns the Israelites to never lose sight of the goodness of the promised land – “Take care that you do not forget the Lord your God.” Be careful not to forget the goodness of God in the prosperity of God’s creation that you enjoy. “Do not exalt yourself,” Moses warns, “forgetting the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out the house of slavery....Do not say to yourself, ‘My power and the might of my own hand have gotten me this wealth.’” Instead, Moses says, “...remember the Lord your God, for it is he who gives you power to get wealth.”

Thus, the message of today’s reading from Deuteronomy is perhaps best summed up as follows: “Give thanks for the goodness of God’s creation, and take care that this goodness is not forgotten by remembering that it is God’s bountiful gift to God’s people.” Give thanks, take care, and remember – an expression that is equally as important for us on this Sunday when we give thanks for God’s good creation and during this season of Creationtide when we remind ourselves of our divine calling to steward, conserve and care for it.

In many ways, we are not much different from the Israelites. In the prosperity of the Promised Land, the Israelites were warned of the dangers of forgetting God’s goodness, of the dangers of thinking “my power and the might of my own hand have gotten me this wealth.” We, too, are in need of this same warning. As human beings, particularly when things are plentiful and prosperous, we are often guilty of the sins of materialism and over-consumption, sins which have directly resulted in the degradation of God’s good creation, structural inequality, and the inequitable sharing of natural resources.

Perhaps an obvious place to observe such inequity is in food security and nutrition. The United Nation's World Food Programme estimates that one in nine human beings live with food insecurity and malnutrition – that's over eight hundred million fellow human beings. The Programme also observes that there is a direct link between food insecurity and climate change, with climate change being one of the biggest drivers of food insecurity in the world today. Here in Australia, we are blessed with a food security that is driven, in part, by our prosperity and by a climate that allows for fresh, Australian-grown fruits and vegetables the year round. Ninety percent of the fruit and vegetables sold in our grocery stores and markets are domestically grown (compare this to less than twenty percent in my home country of Canada). Thus, in places like Australia, it is easy for us to forget God's goodness and to take our own food security for granted. Thus, in our gratitude, in our thankfulness for the bounty we enjoy, we need to take care and to remember those eight hundred million humans who are experiencing hunger and famine through food insecurity and our moral obligation as Christians to do something about it.

And of course, one of the ways that we can combat food insecurity is by caring for God's good creation by working to reverse the impact of climate change. So, on this harvest festival Sunday, we recommit ourselves to a posture and practice of gratitude where we take care and we remember, we remember that God's good creation is meant to be shared equitably, ethically, and sustainably.

In addition to this being our harvest festival at the Cathedral, we are also marking All Saints, remembering those who have gone before us as exemplary models of the Christian life in the practice of their faith. Perhaps today it is worth remembering and giving thanks for saints who have modeled a care for God's good creation, a care that was embedded in their Christian faith in particular. Of course, we are all familiar with St Francis, with his feast day marking the beginning of our season of Creationtide. But I'd like to name three other saints who made care for creation an essential part of their Christian lives.

St Benedict of Nursia founded a number of monastic communities in sixth-century Italy. These communities were established around the "Rule of St Benedict," which includes

the vow of *stabilitas* or “stability.” *Stabilitas* is a Benedictine principle that maintains the importance of being grounded in place and in community, and the monk’s obligation to care for and nurture that place and community.

St Hildegard was a twelfth century Benedictine nun who lived in the town of Bingen along the Rhine River. Known for her profound wisdom and Christian spirituality, Hildegard expressed an admiration and respect for all living creatures. She was known to have said that the following insightful and appropriate words: “The Earth sustains humanity. It must not be injured; it must not be destroyed.” She also said: “Humankind is called to co-create, so that we might cultivate the earthly, and thereby create the heavenly.”

St Kateri Tekakwitha was a seventeenth century Algonquin-Mohawk laywoman who was a member of a Roman Catholic mission in New France, in what is today southern Quebec in Canada. Competent in the indigenous practices of food and land cultivation and conservation, she taught these skills to others within her community. Today, she is considered to be the patron saint of the environment, ecology, and First Nations People in North America.

St Benedict, St Hildegard, and St Kateri remind us that the work of caring for creation is the work to which all saints are called. Indeed, it is, I would maintain, part of the “core business” for us as the Church. This is why the Anglican Communion has identified creation care as the Fifth of the Five Marks of Mission, statements that “express the Anglican Communion’s common commitment to, and understanding of, God’s holistic and integral mission.” The Fifth Mark of Mission commits Anglicans around the world to “strive to safeguard the integrity of creation, and sustain and renew the life of the earth.” This is a mark of Christian mission St Benedict, St Hildegard, and St Kateri all exemplified and to which each committed themselves in their lives and work.

As a Canadian Anglican, I’m proud to say that this Fifth Mark of Mission is now included in the baptismal liturgy of the Anglican Church of Canada. In it, the Baptismal Covenant includes this question: “Will you strive to safeguard the integrity of God’s creation, and

respect, sustain and renew the life of the Earth?" To which the baptised respond: "I will, with God's help."

Thus, on this Sunday when we remember All Saints, we, as people made Christians in baptism, recommit ourselves to a posture and practice of gratitude and thankfulness for God's good creation, a posture and practice that causes to take care and remember, to safeguard the integrity of God's creation, and respect, sustain, and renew the life of the earth. This was a posture and practice lived out in the lives of saints down through the centuries, a posture and practice to which each of us are called as Saints in the Church of Christ.

In the name of God, the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.+