

Sermon for Riddells Creek and Mount Macedon

June 7th, 2009

Today we celebrate both Trinity Sunday and World Environment Day. Through one of those weird examples of liturgical serendipity, the two themes support each other. There are lots of reasons to care for the environment; not least the fact that if we stuff it up too badly we humans aren't going to survive. But one of the reasons for Christians to care is that we see in creation the self-expression of the Trinity.

One of the things that Trinity Sunday does is remind us, in case we've forgotten, just how unique, or possibly weird, the Christian understanding of God is. I was reminded of this again on Friday at the meeting of the Victorian Council of Churches' Faith and Order Commission. Some members of the Commission had been on a joint Muslim-Roman Catholic tour of Istanbul and Rome. Naturally, during this tour they talked about what separates Christians and Muslims theologically. Basically, it's the Trinity. That's what makes us different from the other two Abrahamic faiths, Judaism and Islam. We all worship the one God, but we Christians insist on saying that the One is simultaneously Three.

Saying that God is Trinity summarises what faith in the God of Jesus Christ means. It declares that the God who became incarnate in Christ and lives with us now as Spirit, is the One true, living God. When we say that God is Three, we say that the invisible God was made visible in Jesus. Through Jesus' life, death and resurrection we know that God watches over the widow and the poor; God makes the rain fall on the just and the unjust alike; God welcomes the stranger and embraces the enemy. We know all this because God is experienced and known through Jesus Christ. The radically transcendent God, the Lord that Isaiah saw in a vision sitting high and lofty, praised and adored by the seraphs, became radically immanent in Jesus Christ. The Word became Flesh. This is the mystery of God; and this is why I believe that Christians need to hold on to all the strangeness of the Trinity, even if it divides us from the other children of Abraham.

How does this theological mystery relate to World Environment Day and the request from the United Nations that this year we "UNite to Combat Climate Change"? It is our relationship with the triune God that leads us to care for the environment.

The reasons for environmental concern start, unsurprisingly, with God the Creator. The world is not ours; it belongs to God. It was made by God, just as we were. The air, the water and the earth; plants and trees; birds and fish; animals and human beings, are all good gifts of God. The psalms are full of reminders of this: "The earth is the Lord's and all that is in it, the world, and those who live in it"¹ the psalmist writes. The food we eat comes from God, the Psalms tell us: "You visit the earth and water it, you greatly enrich it; the river of God is full of water; you provide the people with grain, for so you have prepared it. You water its furrows abundantly, settling its ridges, softening it with showers, and blessing its growth. You crown the year with your bounty; your wagon tracks overflow with richness."² Psalm 104 is a long hymn of praise to God the Creator, in which the psalmist sings: "O Lord, how manifold are your works! In wisdom you have made them all; the earth is full of your creatures."³ The environment is the good gift of God the Creator; in response, humanity is called to steward, to nurture and protect, these good gifts.

All that is obvious. God made the world and loves the world, and so we are called to care for *all* the world, not just our fellow human beings. We can't abuse the non-human creation any more that we can abuse human beings, because all creation is a gift from the Creator. But the imperative to care for the environment doesn't just come from our relationship with the Creator. It also comes from our relationship with Jesus, the Word of God. In the Incarnation, the Word became Flesh; in the person of Jesus God became radically present in creation, part of the ecology of this world.

¹ Psalm 24:1.

² Psalm 65:9-11.

³ Psalm 104:24.

When we talk about the Trinity we talk about God becoming human. This means that God became part of life on earth, breathing air, drinking water, eating fish and grain. In the human body of Jesus, God has touched every part of creation.

Christ is the one who reconciles and renews all of creation. Paul writes in his letter to the Colossians: “[Christ] is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation; for in him all things in heaven and on earth were created, things visible and invisible ... all things have been created through him and for him. He himself is before all things, and in him all things hold together ... in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, and through him God was pleased to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, by making peace through the blood of his cross.”⁴ All things were created in Christ, and in Christ *all* things are held together and reconciled with God.

Christians have long known that because of the Incarnation our relationships with other people are also relationships with God, that we cannot love God while hating our sisters and brothers. Because in the Incarnation God became part of creation, then the way that we relate to *any* part of creation is the way that we relate to Christ. The Word became Flesh; so how we treat Flesh is how we treat the Word.

Last week, at Pentecost, we celebrated the work of the Spirit. The Holy Spirit, the Lord, the Giver of Life, continues to be active in the ongoing creation of all things, bringing each creature into communion with the Trinity. It was the Spirit who hovered over the waters on the first day of creation, and God continues creating through the Spirit. Job’s comforters were wrong about lots of things, but one of them was right when he told Job: “If [God] should take back his spirit to himself, and gather to himself his breath, all flesh would perish together, and all mortals return to dust.”⁵ It is the Holy Spirit that creates the church, and brings humanity in relationship with God. The Holy Spirit does the same thing for the rest of creation.

All around the world people celebrated World Environment Day on Friday, and I spent some time checking out what they were doing. There was lots of tree planting around the world: mangroves in Malaysia and mahogany trees in the Philippines and native trees in New Zealand. There was also lots of cleaning up: on Friday the students from Apollo Bay School attacked the toxic weed Sea Spurge and today in Jakarta, Indonesia, there will be a Mangrove clean up in Muara Angke Nature Reserve. There were also activities that sounded less like hard work and more like fun: in Kathmandu, the Nepalese Youth for Climate Action had an Eco football match to promote the urgent need to unite to combat climate change; and in Melbourne my old high school had a rubbish free lunch and in the next few weeks will have a clothing and book swap and a recycled fashion parade. There was also at least one event that I found that sounded hideous: Marathon Sarajevo in Bosnia-Herzegovina organised a ten kilometre trail race to increase awareness and provide inspiration and encouragement for environment protection and a healthy life style.

This is a tiny sample of the many different ways that people throughout the world celebrated World Environment Day. People don’t need to be Christian, or even religious, to care about the environment. But Christians an extra reason to care, because we believe that God did not just create the world, in the Incarnation God became part of the world, entering into creation. The doctrine of the Trinity, which we celebrate today, tells us that the whole creation is touched and inhabited by the life-giving and life-transforming God. Thanks be to God. Amen.

⁴ Colossians 1:15-20.

⁵ Job 34:14-15.