

Petersfield Christian Ecology Group Conference on Saturday 7th October 2006



Address by Fr John Ryder - CVAUK Spokesperson.

Sir Crispin Tickell, the outgoing Chancellor of the University of Kent, had this to say about the world which we are now facing:

There has been more change in the last 10 years than in the last 50 years. And there has been more change in the last 50 than in the last 500.

This change has caused a demand for energy which is causing us every year to use reserves that took a million years to lay down.

We obviously cannot continue along this path for much longer.

The practical necessity for a change in the habits of mankind is obvious. We should have taken significant action decades ago. Some people blame Christianity as being one of the major causes of this lax attitude. To such people I have this tale to tell.

A Rabbi and a soap-maker, who was an atheist, were walking down the road together. The soap-maker was explaining to the Rabbi how useless religion was - how it had been around for centuries, but the state of humankind was no better.

The Rabbi listened patiently, until they came across some filthy urchins, playing in the gutter. He stopped, pointed to them, and said: "Look how useless soap is. We have had it for centuries, yet look how dirty these children are!"

The soap-maker spluttered in protest: "You can't blame soap if people don't use it!"

"Exactly!" said the Rabbi, "it is the same with religion."

There are however some misconceptions within the Christian fringe which could be blamed for the West taking so long to wake up to the environmental damage it is causing.

These are ideas which should properly be called Gnosticism, rather than Christianity.

The most dangerous idea is that the New Testament replaced the Old. This results in a dichotomy between things material, which they see as being represented by the Old Covenant, and things spiritual, which they see being represented by the New. Thus the coming of Jesus is seen as the superior replacing the inferior.

Which, in their eyes, gives them freedom to exploit the material world, which they see as something of little or no significance.

All this is wrong, of course. Jesus did correct certain misconceptions his fellow Jews had about the Old Covenant, but he and his followers remained devout Jews to the end. Jesus had come to fulfil the law, not to replace it. As our Lord himself said, "I tell you the truth, until heaven and earth disappear, not the smallest letter, not the least stroke of a pen, will by any means disappear from the Law until everything is accomplished." To the Jew, and thus to Jesus, there is no dichotomy between the flesh and the spirit, between things material and things spiritual. To exploit or neglect one is to damage the other.

The other common Gnostic fallacy is that Jesus came to save people from the world. Those who look at Christianity this way see the material world at its best as being neutral, as a commodity to be used by people, and therefore disposable. But God so loved the world - not just the people in it - that he sent his only-begotten Son to save it. He made the animals and plants, the earth and the air - and his love rests upon it all, not just on us: nothing is disposable.

Once these misconceptions have been dealt with, the Christian justification for concern with the environment is embarrassingly simple, and has a longer pedigree than secular concern. In fact 9 years before the United Nations set up the World Commission on the Environment in 1983, the World Council of Churches had already coined the term 'sustainable development' and brought it into universal currency.

But to begin at the beginning, with just two verses from the first chapters of Genesis:

God saw all that he had made, and it was very good.
And there was evening, and there was morning--the sixth day.

The Lord God took the man and put him in the Garden of Eden
to work it and take care of it.

From this we see that all of creation, animals and birds, earth, sea and air are all God-made, and God-loved.
And we human beings, being made in God's image, have been created to love and care for it as God does.

But we have all sinned.

Greed, impatience and the arrogance that makes us think we are more important than the rest of God's creation has wrought massive destruction, accelerating as man's numbers increase, and as man finds more ways of making and using unnatural and non-biodegradable substances.

One of the basic principles of the care of historical buildings or antique furniture is that anything you do must be reversible. The earth we have been given is of infinitely greater value than our finest stone-age monument, medieval cathedral or Queen Anne chair. We should not do anything that causes permanent change, or damage, to our environment.

It is also obvious to anyone of good will that, as we are called to love all men as Christ loved them, we need to sacrifice present gain to provide a sustainable future for our children's children.

But that is not the only reason that, as Christians, we should be concerned about the environment. We have been put here to take care of God's creation, not as overlords, not as owners, but as part of that creation, and as God's co-workers: therefore we should do everything we possibly can to slow down, then stop, then reverse, where we possibly can, the damage that mankind has done.

Think of the parable of the talents. The unworthy servant was cast out into outer darkness for not improving what his master had given him. Modern man has done worse, he has systematically destroyed what God has given him. We need to do everything we can to reverse that.

We must not only be concerned about those things which we know will affect future generations. We must even be concerned about those areas of the environment for which we can see no use. Not only because we cannot foresee what use a species of insect or fungi might have - for in them may be found a cure for cancer, or AIDS; but because the earth is the Lord's, not ours: it is there to inspire wonder and glory, nurture and compassion, and not to satisfy our greed.

The elephants of the Namib desert have learned to place their feet so as not to tread on any plant, and they eat no more than a small portion of a plant, so it can the more easily regenerate. If a herd comes to a drinking hole, even if they have not drunk for many days, they will go one by one for a drink, so as not to muddy the water, or collapse the hole.

If only the average human were as unselfish, and as aware!

The Church of England produced a statement before the Earth Summit in 1992 which began: '

"We all share and depend on the same world with its finite and often non-renewable resources. Christians believe that this world belongs to God by creation, redemption and sustaining, and that he has entrusted it to humankind, made in his image; we are in the position of stewards."

For those of you who like chapter and verse justification for this, you will find this in great detail by better biblical scholars than I in the latest (Summer) edition of 'The Bible in Transmission', the Bible Society quarterly, which gives quotes from Genesis chapter 1 through to Revelation chapter 5. I give just one more, from St Paul's letter to the Romans:

The creation waits in eager expectation
for the sons of God to be revealed.

For the creation was subjected to frustration, not by its own choice,
but by the will of the one who subjected it, in hope
that the creation itself will be liberated from its bondage to decay
and brought into the glorious freedom of the children of God.

Pause

That could be the end, but I would be failing in my duty if I did not also point out what I believe to have equal biblical justification, and to be of as great importance to the environment as population size, or the use of fossil fuel.

Before there were so many humans that the use of fossil fuels became a problem, and before man had the scientific skill to produce toxins and thus poison the environment, God had given a diet to mankind. The ideal was plain: to have a diet based on fruit, seeds and leaves: not just vegetarian but completely vegan. Read Genesis Chapter 1, verse 29 if you are in doubt.

It is true that after the flood meat was allowed, in a restricted and controlled way, but reluctantly, and only due to man's sinful appetites: in the same way that divorce came to be allowed, but certainly not encouraged.

Now, with the population of the planet spiralling out of control, to move back towards first a vegetarian, then a vegan diet is all the more important. In fact, every small step taken in that direction is vitally important. Not only because to God the suffering of animals is important: the Covenant with Noah makes that quite clear, and so does the prophet Isaiah. But because 1 hectare of land can produce only 0.2 of a tonne of meat, but 5 tonnes of cereals, or 31 tonnes of walnuts, or 47 tonnes of carob beans. Just as importantly it takes only 60 gallons of water to produce a pound of potatoes, or 168 gallons for a pound of corn, but 8449 gallons for a pound of beef. The implications of these facts is just as important for the environment as they are for the feeding the world's poor.

Just one notable example is necessary: the destruction of the Amazon rain forest is due almost solely to the West's demand for beef.

The environmental crisis has got to the stage where we must pursue every avenue to slow down, and hopefully reverse environmental degradation. One of the uncomfortable truths which is generally ignored is that what you eat makes more difference to the environment than what you drive, and vastly more difference than the type of light-bulbs you use.

And another uncomfortable truth which many on the secular stage will try to deny is that the warnings about all this, and the necessary guidance for its solution are all contained in a collection of books that was last added to about 1900 years ago, long before the problem of environmental degradation was known to exist.