

The ark and the covenant

In a lecture last week at Southwark Cathedral sponsored by the Christian environmental group Operation Noah, the Archbishop of Canterbury set out a faith-driven vision of how people can respond to the looming environmental crisis. Here is an edited version of what he said

The story of Noah is a great archetypal story, one to which we constantly return to learn something of the truth of our own situation and make better sense of it.

If there's one thing most people still remember about Noah and the Flood, it's that the ark was full of animals. Noah collects breeding pairs, and, when the floodwaters have subsided, they are famously told to go and "multiply" (Genesis 8:17). Noah is made responsible for the continuation of what we would call an ecosystem.

In all sorts of ways, the story in Genesis deliberately echoes the story of Creation itself, using many of the same words and phrases. The Creation stories of Genesis 1 and 2 see the creation of humanity as quite specifically the creation of an agent, a person, who can care for and protect the animal world, reflect-

ing the care of God himself who enjoys the goodness of what he has made. With Noah, that care is expressed in terms of saving a future in which humanity and the animal world share the same space.

The image of Noah summoning the creatures to the ark may be meant to recall God bringing the animals to Adam so that they can be named (Genesis 2:19): once on the scene, humanity has to establish its relationship with the animal world, a relationship in which meaning is given to the whole world of living things through the human reflection of God's sustaining care.

Nothing could be clearer in the biblical text than the belief that humanity is meaningless seen independently of the world of diverse life-forms in which it is embedded. The Flood story ends with the making of a covenant, a binding treaty, not just between God and

humanity but between God and all living things (Genesis 9:8-17): God is committed to life, to the continuance of life on earth, and whatever happens he will not let life disappear. And although the focus in the story of the Flood has been on animal life, it is clear that the horizon of the text extends much wider. The one thing we should not imagine is that God's covenant means that we have a blank cheque where the created world is concerned. The text points up that God's promise has specific implications about how we behave towards all living beings, human and non-human. It is not a recipe for complacency.

Read in this way, the Bible seems to be saying that Creation finds its focus in three things: the possibility of life, the transmission of life and the interrelated diversity of life. So if we focus, as we can hardly help doing, on humanity as the supreme creative possibility – the form of life that reflects the love and intelligence of the creator – this has important implications. The supreme possibility is to show something of the nature of God within the creation, and the "specialness" of humanity turns out to lie in its role as protecting (through the exercise of that love and intelligence) life overall, not only of human life; it is a crucial part, but still only a part, of the interdependence of all living things. So for humanity to be a point of focus in Creation is not for it to be separate from the rest of creation or to have solitary privileges and powers over creation. It is to realise that it is unimaginable without all those other life forms which make it possible and which in turn serves and conserves. And if that is the case, then respect for humanity, a proper ethical account of humanity, has to be bound up with respect for life itself in all its diversity.

Genesis tells us that when we are called to relationship with our creator, we are in the same moment summoned to responsibility for the non-human world. That's how we express our relationship with the creator, our reality as made in God's image. In this way, the creator has joined together the sacredness of human life with that of life itself. There is no way in which we can grasp human dignity and value it independently of human life's

Liturgical Studies

New MA in Christian Liturgy



SARUM COLLEGE

learning to nourish the human spirit



An ecumenical programme including pastoral, historical and theological approaches to Christian Worship.

Delivered through intensive study periods in the beautiful setting of Salisbury's Cathedral Close, the course is accessible to those who live throughout the UK and overseas.

Book now: the Core Module runs from 2 to 5 November

Optional modules include: The Eucharist; Christian Initiation; The Liturgical Year; Liturgy, Mission and Cultures; Music in Christian Worship; Christian Prayer; Worship, Art and Architecture.

All can be taken individually by non-MA students.

Validated by the University of Winchester.



Other study options

- Research programmes
- Supervised sabbatical study
- Pastoral liturgy programme for parish renewal

Visit www.sarum.ac.uk/liturgy-and-worship or call 01722 424827 for further information

involvement with all other life, vegetable and animal – the varied life of the rainforest as well as the many species of pollinating bees.

This vision of an ethical perspective based on reverence for the whole of life is not often heard in discussions among Christians about environmental ethics but perhaps it deserves some further exploration. The Noah story lays out a clear vision of the human vocation as including the care and preservation of the conditions of all life, care for the future of life.

To act so as to protect the future of the non-human world is both to accept a God-given responsibility and appropriately to honour the special dignity given to humanity itself. In Christian theological terms, it is to accept the renewed human dignity and authority that flows from the self-giving of Christ and his bodily Resurrection, which is itself a sign



One of the huge ice shelves on the Antarctic Peninsula that has disintegrated into the ocean. Photo: Reuters/Pedro Skvarca/IAA-DNA

of God's concern with the material world and his commitment to its transfiguration. Thus respect for the living material world and human self-respect belong together.

Start from here and the significance of small changes is obvious. If I ask what's the point of my undertaking a modest amount of recycling my rubbish or scaling down my air travel, the answer is not that this will unquestionably save the world within six months, but in the first place that it's a step towards liberation from a cycle of behaviour that is keeping me, indeed most of us, in a dangerous state – dangerous, that is, to our human dignity.

Without some rethinking of our current obsession with growth in consumerist terms, we can be sure of two things: inequality will not be addressed (and so the powerlessness of the majority of the world's population will remain as it is at the moment); and the dehumanising effects of the culture of consumer growth will worsen. Only if we start thinking along these lines can we see our way through the difficulties often referred to about holding together the imperatives of environmental care and economic development.

We need to keep up pressure on national governments; there are questions only they can answer about the investment of national resources, the policy priorities underlying trade, transport and industry and the legal framework for controlling destructive practices. But we ought to beware of expecting government to succeed in controlling a naturally unpredictable set of variables in the environment or to produce by regulation a new set of human habits. We need equally, to keep up pressure on ourselves and to learn how to work better as civic agents.

In his new book *Why We Disagree About Climate Change*, Mike Hulme [cites] the Carbon Reduction Action Groups, first estab-

lished in 2006, as a means of expressing local civic responsibility by working with the idea of personal carbon allowances and sharing "skills in lower-carbon living". To quote: "CRAGS adopt the position that individuals need not accept the existing political and governance arrangements and can subvert these traditional arrangements through local action" (p. 307).

And in addition to all this, encouraging local government initiatives and legal challenges to bad business practice are just as necessary a part of a comprehensive strategy; pressure in this area needs to be as effective as campaigning directed towards national governments. A campaigning strategy targeted exclusively at the level of national directives or international protocols ignores the potential of a broad platform of tactics in diverse contexts.

More importantly it ignores the potential of the crisis to awaken a new confidence in local and civic democracy, its potential to foster a new sense of what is politically possible for people who thought they were powerless.

The threat posed by climate change and environmental degradation tends to make us think about survival and look for solutions that will guarantee survival. What if we reframe the question more like this? "When we find ourselves facing massive insecurity of this sort and when we sense that we have somehow sacrificed our happiness along the way, what is it that we have lost? And how can we work to restore it?"

Without trivialising the ravages that have been inflicted on the whole material environment by the consequences of industrialisation, we could say that the human soul is one of the foremost casualties of environmental degradation, in the sense that the processes of environmental damage have both reflected and intensified a basic spiritual malaise. Many of the things which have moved us towards ecological disaster have been distortions in our sense of who and what we are, and their overall effect has been to isolate us more and more from the reality we're part of.

Our response to the crisis needs to be a reality check, a rediscovery of our responsibility for the material world. And this is why the apparently small-scale action that changes personal habits and local possibilities is so crucial. When we believe in transformation at the local and personal level, we are laying the surest foundations for change at the national and international level. They are not two alternative paths but aspects of one essential impulse, the restoration of a healthy relation with our world.

■ **The full text of Rowan Williams' lecture is available on www.operationnoah.org**

You have always wanted to study in Jerusalem

So come to the **TANTUR ECUMENICAL INSTITUTE IN JERUSALEM**

for

- Three-month Autumn or six-week Winter Program
- One-month Summer Programs
- Christmas or Easter Laity-Enrichment Program

Contact:

Revd Michael McGarry, CSP

☆☆☆

Fax: 972 2 676 0914

Email: tantur@netvision.net.il

Visit our website:
www.tantur.org

Administered by the University
of Notre Dame, USA



Reg Charity: 1103280

Society of Saint Gregory

Annual Conference

James Crichton Memorial Lecture

The Word of the Lord

Rt Revd David McGough
auxiliary Bishop in Birmingham

Saturday 14 November 2009

St. Chad's Cathedral, Birmingham

12 noon	Mass
1 pm	Lunch
2 pm	Crichton Memorial Lecture
3 pm	Annual General Meeting
4 pm	Evening Prayer

Members and non-members alike are warmly invited. To book a free place (so that we can cater for you), please either email: secretary@ssg.org.uk or telephone Mary Rouse on 07540 532785. Further information from www.ssg.org.uk.

This eighth James Crichton memorial lecture is supported by a donation from the Lisbonian Society.

liturgy and music alive in the Church today