

Earth Day Sermon 22 April 2012

“Oh! I have made a terrible mistake! Can I get out of this?”

This is a statement that could have been made by the disciples as they met the risen Lord. They had, after all, run away from, denied and abandoned Jesus when the going got tough. Then they have to face the one they have let down so badly.

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This could be a summary of the feelings that many of those who turned to Christianity through the preaching of Peter, Paul and the other Apostles. People who have lived their life with little regard for the presence of a real, knowing and loving God. What they could not see they have not overly worried about. They have just let the mainstream consensus thinking about things be good enough for them. Then when they hear that living in faith, in justice and righteousness and, above all, in love really matter, suddenly they are faced with themselves having fallen far short.

For the audiences of Peter and Paul in today’s readings, and the disciples who meet the risen Lord, the answer is always, “Yes. You can get out of this.” Through God’s generous grace and forgiveness of all who truly turn to him, following his commandments and living the new life, as the old prayer book puts it, there is a new beginning open to them.

This is joyful news, especially when the depth of your mistake hits you. It is a wonderful new life that is made open to you by God. For many, they think of it as being born again, given a completely fresh start. Life in God is so radically different from their old life!

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This also applies to the preaching of the environmental movement. Just as a “good life” could be had by disregarding calls to justice, fair-trade, care for the poor or attention to the human dignity of all people. So a “good life” can be had by disregarding the growing chorus of voices that speak of the costs of our extravagance. Imported lettuce in December, flying here and there for fun, driving, heating, un-insulated church buildings, and a long list of items you know of too. These all incrementally add up. But we don’t want to look at them. We like flying fresh fruit in from exotic places, we like to heat an entire house even if most of the rooms are mostly empty. We enjoy the freedoms of personal transportation. And it is nice that Canada is avoiding the worst of the recession by the cash flow from the Alberta Tar Sands.

Part of the work of environmentalism is the same as evangelism. It is to ask people to stand back from their lives for a moment and ask big questions.

Is this who I really want to be? Am I living all of my life in a way that I am proud of? Could I stand before God and say of every aspect of my life, “I am proud of this”?

Secular environmentalism points out the change in weather patterns, the vast change in the oceans, the poverty and warfare created by enlarging deserts, the floods and storms and droughts that are ever more severe. They warn us that we are spending our grandchildren’s inheritance, and leaving the world a worse place than we found it. They say people will look back at our generation and ask, “How could they have been so short-sighted? How could they have been so selfish and blind?”

Spiritual environmentalists say something else.

The creation stories describe God saying, "Let there be light. Let there be animals, let there be trees and fish and birds..." Every thing that came into being is a spoken word of God. It is when God speaks that something comes into being.

When the Dodo bird was hunted to extinction one of God's words was silenced. When forests are clear-cut, and all the complexity of plants, bugs, animals and birds are gone, whole sentences of God are torn from the book of creation. When the rivers run fouled with pollution, when we poison the sea with toxins and the air with fumes we destroy the creation as God made it. We alter the words of God to suit ourselves.

It has often been said that the other book of the Word of God is nature. Looking into nature with the eyes of faith we find God. So many people say they find God on a mountain, by the ocean, in a sunrise or the quiet of a forest. Yet we are ripping out the pages that don't suit us, deleting words without even noticing, cutting and pasting the creative Words of God into a sentence that suits corporate profit or consumer pleasure.

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There are two answers for this, as there are always two answers for all of what we call sin.

Firstly we cannot undo our sins. If you hurt your neighbour, then repent, she still has a bruise. If you dump your waste in to the river, then repent, the fish are still dead.

But secondly, if you turn from your sin and commit to live the new life, walking in God's holy ways, you will be held in God's love and given grace to live in your world and community.

Just as you will take extra care of the people you have wronged and hurt, when your cruelty has become apparent to you, so you will take extra care of God's creation when you have comprehended your disregard for his careful work. In Repenting we promise not to do wrong again, and then we find peace with our Creator, with each other, with our world.

I have to confess to you that I am only mid-way in this repentance. I repeatedly do things which I choose not to look at with clear light in regard to the creation. I drive too much. I fly to see the people I love. I buy food which has been grown in earth soaked in chemicals. I eat animals that have been raised in horrifying conditions to make their flesh cheap for me to buy. I eat food out of season and out of my area because I like it, and I don't let myself ask where it came from or how it got here too cheaply. I don't think too much about the environmental brutality of the Tar Sands because I hope that I will be dead before the consequences of that project become fully apparent, and I will not have to face the anger of my grandchildren.

But I will have to face God, and I will be ashamed before my Creator. I will have to say, "I have sinned against your Word in Creation, knowing that I did. I have lived in untruth, choosing not to look in your light, preferring the darkness of questions unasked. I let my life be easy and comfortable, knowing it would be paid for by those you made and love. I knew I was doing wrong and I did it anyway."

In this I am pretty much a child of my age and a member of western society. We live in a time of unparalleled wealth and we imagine we deserve it. We do not want to go back to the 50's or earlier when we were, by default, much more in balance with God's world. We do not know how to go forward into righteousness. It is hard. But if I am to stand in the presence of the Lord and hold my head up as his faithful child, I had better do something about this rather than just say, "Oh! I have made a terrible mistake! Can I get out of this?"