

# Season of Creation Service October 18, 2020

Possible Readings:

Genesis 1:4 10 12 17 21 25 31 God saw that it was good

Isaiah 62:4-5 I will marry my land

Job 12: 7-12. Ask the animals

Psalms 19:1-4 Pour forth speech the heavens declare

Dearly Beloved,

Can I tell you one of the big questions I've faced as a Christian over the past 42 years? Where is the place of my faith in the issues that humanity faces? Climate Change, Environmental Abuse, Social Injustice, Institutional Evil. Where does my relationship with God sit in all of this? I'm still learning. I've learned quite a bit since 2018, which was a painful year for me. What I've learned excites me.

I know that the world is in a mess. Turn on the TV, go to Facebook, read the papers, read books, watch the news. This beautiful world that God created is in a terrible predicament. What can I do as a Christian? I've spent my Christian life struggling to understand my place as a safe, comfortable, well fed white man living in a stolen land, a land that is often abused by human ignorance, fear and greed. It hasn't been easy to face the realities of what I see, and what I should do about it. It seems to me that Christianity has been splitting into a few camps with different explanations of our place in the world. I'll try to describe two I'm familiar with. (I'm simplifying.)

One is the airlift. When the Americans realised they'd lost in Vietnam they sent helicopters into war ravaged Saigon to lift out their chosen people and take them home to safety. There's a strand of Christianity that basically believes that real Christians will be airlifted out of this mess we're all in, so why worry? Just try to get as many people into the helicopter as you can.

I can see another strand of Christianity that believes that Christians were *helicoptered in* as citizens of Heaven to help clean up the mess. A year ago the

only stand of prehistoric Wollemi Pines in the whole world was threatened by fire in Wollemi National Park. A team of firefighters from National Parks and Rural Fire Service were winched down by helicopters into a gorge to try to make sure these precious trees wouldn't burn. The October fire burned the park, but the trees survived.

Does God want to airlift Christians out? Or airlift them in? Both groups can use bible passages to try to prove they're right. Who *is* right? If I stand back and look at the whole of Scripture it's not hard to see a huge story about God's relationship with Creation and God's involvement in the healing of Creation. Scripture is loaded with examples of this. For the past five or so years I've been reading Scripture in a different way and discovering a story that I really didn't understand before. One example would be Paul's letter to the Ephesians. Ephesians 1:3-10 is one long Greek sentence. The first part of the sentence talks about how we as Christians were chosen before the creation of the world to be holy and blameless in God's sight. When I began to re-read through to the end of that sentence I realised that it's was pretty clear *why* we were chosen. We weren't chosen *just* to belong to God forever, we were chosen to *act* on that knowledge in *this* world. The last part of Paul's long Greek sentence says:

“He made known to us the mystery of his will according to his good pleasure, which he purposed in Christ to be put into effect when the times will have reached their fulfilment - to bring all things in heaven and on earth together under one head, even Christ.”

All things in heaven and on earth together. We're part of God's redemptive story. It's not just about us as individuals and the people we think we can save. It's far bigger. It's about all of Creation; all things. The knowledge that as Christians we already belong forever in God's Kingdom gives us a humble, stable, loving power to be a part of the healing of Creation; trees, winds, mountains, birds, people, all things in heaven and on earth drawn together in all their complexity, in an evolving relationship of love.

For years I've struggled with these concepts. It took me forty years to realise what I know now. I read widely. I often read the Franciscan monk Richard Rohr's writing on Creation. I struggled through two of the Jesuit palaeontologist Teilhard de Chardin's books, translated from the French. I also had a chance to talk to a Baptist professor of Theology in Oxford called Paul Fiddes. We heard him preach at New Road Baptist about how people see Jesus. What I came away with was his warning not to fall into the trap of thinking you know all about Jesus. Jesus is always bigger than we think.

I was lucky enough to talk to him after he preached. This was in 2018. It was one of those talks I'll always remember. I found myself opening up about our church situation at home. He listened, and thought, then he said: "It depends how you read Scripture, doesn't it." In the middle of our talk he pointed through the door of the church, across the square to the shopping mall and said something I'll never forget. He said that Jesus was doing something in that shopping mall, and we should listen to the people there to find out what it was.

That sent me back to scripture for months. What did I learn? Probably things you already know. The big thing that hit me was the obvious. We don't own Jesus. Christians don't own Jesus. We don't even own the *truth* about Jesus. We know what we know, but the truth about Jesus widens and deepens in us all the time. It's not fixed and static. It's alive, growing in us. We don't own Jesus. Jesus owns *us*. And he doesn't just own us, he owns this ground we stand on, this air we breathe, these gum trees, these goannas, these wallabies, the people of the world, these winds that blow where they will. Where are *we* in all of this? What is our place in troubled Creation?

Scripture shows us that Jesus was a healer. In Acts we read that he continued healing after his death and resurrection. Jesus is a healer, now. Healing is built into the workings of Creation, just as it's built into our human biology. I cut my arm a couple of weeks ago. There was quite a bit of blood. Look at it now. You can hardly see it. When humanity burned less fossil fuels in the recent Covid lockdown the atmosphere started to *heal*. God designed Creation to *heal*.

Christianity changed about five hundred years ago with the Reformation, and then in the Eighteenth Century there was a great revival in England, the first nation to industrialise. The lords of the manor found they could make money by running sheep and they evicted their tenants whose families had lived on the land for hundreds of years. These humiliated people found industrial work in the woollen mills in the cities. It was a time of great social upheaval. People like Wesley shared the Gospel with the poor, taught them to read and showed them they were precious in God's sight. The churches that formed the Uniting Church were all part of a great revival that surprised the established church of the time. The Christians in power couldn't see it coming. Industry changed people, and God spoke to England in a new way.

We're in a time now when we know that the fossil fuels that powered the Industrial Revolution are poisoning the earth's atmosphere. People all over the world, especially the young, are longing for a future they can believe in. God will satisfy that longing and bring healing to the earth, but not through old ways of Christian thinking that were born when the stability of Creation was taken for

granted. There will be a new Christian revival. It will take established Christianity by surprise. It will be like a new wine that can't be contained in old wineskins.

This Season of Creation service might be seen as part of that revival. Some of us are beginning to see reality in a new way. Five hundred years ago Luther said that Scripture alone was the way to see God. He had good reasons to say that in a Europe dominated by a corrupt church, but something is missing in that 500 year old doctrine.

Go back to the Creation story in Genesis. God *spoke* and there was light. God spoke and there was day and night. God spoke and there were plants, animals, people. Of course it follows that God *spoke* and there were wombats, gum trees, possums, koalas, wollemi pines, flathead, dolphins, whales, atmosphere, people. Many Protestant Christians seem to have forgotten that if God *spoke* and Creation came into being, then Creation itself is also the *word of God*. The Franciscan Richard Rohr pointed out to me something that is so obvious to me now. Creation is the first Bible.

Why are we here today in this Season of Creation service? To worship Creation? No. We are here to turn our eyes to Creation so that we can realise more fully the glory of the Creator. The more we find out about the complexity of Creation; insects, animals, fish, trees, air, biology, physiology, ecology, the more amazed we become. It's humbling. There's no limit to what can be learned about the **Creator** from a study of **Creation**. God bless people who look and listen, touch and feel the nature around them. God bless scientists who look deeply into the workings of Creation. God bless the photographers, the nature documentary makers, the artists, the storytellers, the dancers, the poets... everyone who **creatively** illuminates for us how amazing God's **creation** is. Human **creativity** is a part of the **creation** of **Creation's** future.

There's a new movement in Christianity. Common Grace is a part of it. It's small. I think it's part of **Creation**, like a spiritual cell that will reproduce and grow. Great movements of God are born in small groups. Look at the first Christians. A small group.

Can you raise your hand if you think God approves of slavery? Nobody? There was a time in England when many Christians believed that slavery was God's will. It was a huge part of the British economy. Many wealthy Christians had investments that depended on the slave trade. A small group of Quakers in the eighteenth century came to agree that all people were created equal in the eyes of God and slavery was an offence against God. That idea wasn't popular among

rich Christian investors, who pointed to Paul's verse: "Slaves obey your masters" to try to prove that God approved of slavery. Abolish slavery and you will *ruin the economy*, they said. It took a hundred years, but finally slavery was outlawed in England, thanks partly to Evangelical politicians like Wilberforce. Not long after that it began to be abolished in Denmark, Spain, Sweden, France, Portugal, Netherlands. The movement of God against slavery started with small groups of people; determined people who weren't put off by the rich and powerful. From little things big things grow. I think this Season of Creation service is a small part of a movement of God that will grow, especially if we keep our eyes open to see what Jesus is doing amongst us and the people around us.

I've been thinking lately about the image of the master potter in Scripture. Can I extend that image into a picture of what I think is happening? There is a mess of broken pieces that were once all part of a beautiful creation of the master potter. The potter lovingly picks up each piece and puts it with the others in a big jar of water. Some of the pieces allow themselves to be softened by the water. Others don't, and remain hard and jagged. The potter would love them to be softened, but they can't or won't for whatever reason. He won't force them. That's not how he works, not how he loves. He has gentle hands. He leaves the jagged, brittle pieces for later, picks up the soft pieces and puts them together on the wheel to make a beautiful new pot. I think that's happening now, in us.

I could hold stiffly onto my own jagged shape and refuse to be softened in the water, or I could offer myself up to be joined with other pliable souls and made into something beautiful by the Master Potter whose hands know how to achieve the impossible. I'm a tiny fragment of this great healing. I try not to hold too tightly to my own broken view of reality because I want to be reshaped in the living water that Jesus spoke about. The pieces of clay around me are mothers, fathers, grandmothers, invalids, children, grandfathers, architects, homeless people, poets, doctors, friends, nurses, engineers, carers, inventors, economists, politicians, theologians, musicians, gardeners...everyone who has been blessed to be able to give up their small life only to find that they really are one small part of a beautiful new creation that is being lovingly shaped using the infinite complexities of all the pieces. This understanding grows in me. It has no limit. It's not fixed in dogma. The metaphors widen and deepen as I grow older and they show me more and more how we fit into this beautiful emerging story.

Scripture teaches that we are broken. But I bet most of us could tell stories of what happened when we humbled ourselves before God and allowed Jesus to soften our hearts. It might have been through a crisis where we decided to take the difficult step of forgiving, it might have been a time when we had to let go of who we thought we were only to find out who we really are in God's eyes. It

might have been a time when we had to be brave enough to face criticism or abuse, or the judgement of people around us. Life isn't easy. We don't know it all yet. I just read about a rabbi who told his pupils to hold sacred words on their hearts. One of his pupils said why don't we hold them *in* our hearts. They won't fit, he said. Wait until your heart is broken, then they'll find their way in. Every time we allow Jesus in we're softened and changed to become a small part of this beautiful new creation. If you haven't experienced that, talk to a Christian who has. Be brave. I know it's never easy to let go of who you think you are. If you can trust Jesus you'll become one small connected piece of the greatest story ever told. It's a true story. It's a certain story. If **Creation** was a person, what would she say?

### CREATION SPEAKS

I'm not tired. I'm never frightened or dismayed;  
I'm on the road that leads to who I am.  
My body bleeds, my skin is torn and flayed,  
But all this pain is working to a plan.

There was a time when humans lived with me.  
They showed respect. They listened to my rules.  
And then the arrogant, who thought that they were free,  
Were shown by my reality to be fools.

The road is long, but love will find a way.  
And love is where my story first began.  
The darkest hour is before the dawn of day.  
We're all in the loving hands of the Great I Am.

Yes, I groan. It's painful giving birth  
To a brand new heaven, and a new earth.

We're part of this healing. Part of this birth. We're the body of Christ.

Any questions? I'm not saying I have the answers. I just love questions.