

The Waters of Baptism: The Baptismal Call to Creation-Care

By Kyle Norman

Scripture continuously conveys God's care for the created world. The very first commands given to Adam and Eve related to how they were to live within, and care for, God's good creation. While we may argue the finer nuances of what "dominion" could mean, it is clear that the created world was to cohere to a divinely willed harmonious order. Undoubtedly, we are aware of how Adam and Eve erred in their obedience to the divine command. Yet even with the close of the garden, scripture continues to declare God's desire for the good and proper treatment of all living things.

This care for God's creation has always been an important element to Christian witness. Historically, Christians have frequently reflected on the sanctity of creation. St. Francis of Assisi is, perhaps, the most popular example of this. For Francis, Christian witness and creation care are intimately tied. Similarly, John Wesley turned his theological musings to God's presence within the created world. Wesley wrote a large tome titled *A Survey of the Wisdom of God in Creation* in which he attempted to describe the various ways creation revealed God's power and goodness. Ultimately, for Wesley, creation not only displayed the grandeur of God's power but was also means to experience God's grace.

If environmental stewardship is so prevalent, both in scripture and throughout church history, should this be any different for us today? Has our Christian witness progressed so far that it no longer needs to concern itself with care for creation? Personally, I doubt this to be the case.

In 2019, my own Anglican denomination passed a resolution marking the period from September 1st to October 4th as the Season of Creation. We did not create this season; rather it is a participation in a larger ecumenical movement, known as the Global Season of Creation. During this season, churches are encouraged to give focused attention and prayer towards issues relating to creation-care.

This is not the first time the Anglican Church of Canada has addressed the important connection between environmental stewardship and Christian witness. In 2013, the Anglican Church of Canada included creation care as part of our baptismal covenant. The statement reads: "Will you strive to safeguard the integrity of God's creation, and respect, sustain and renew the life of the Earth?" As in all other matters of our faith, the church is called to respond, "I will with God's help." Caring for creation is now implicit in living out our baptism. For all baptized in the Anglican Church, one cannot live out his or her baptismal identity without taking up the call to care, respect, and work towards the renewal of the earth.

Yet the call goes even deeper than just one's individual commitment to recycling and waste management. Within our baptismal liturgy, these promises are never taken on solely by the newly baptised, or by their parents or sponsors. They are affirmed by the whole congregation. That is, the baptismal covenant is a testimony to the nature of the Christian community. The community of faith affirms, as essential to its own self-understanding, the call to continual devotion to spiritual life (seen in affirming devotion to the apostles' teaching, fellowship, the breaking of bread, and prayers); the call to social justice, evangelism and mission, and now, the call to environmental care. In fact, the New Zealand Anglican Church is currently considering including such a statement within the vows of ordination. In New Zealand, then, to be a Christian priest is to model the Christlike dedication to environmental stewardship.

There is, here, a deep recognition that Christian life calls for a particular ethic regarding the nurture and care of the environment. We are called to view creation in a particular way. We view the world not through the lens of domination or exploitation, for we recognise that “The earth is the Lord’s and all that is in it” (Psalm 24:1). A lack of care for that which God has crafted is ultimately a lack of care for God’s presence, for God is actively present in the intricacy of the created world. God not only created the world, but God’s spirit of love continues to sustain it. G.K. Chesterton once wrote:

Is it possible that God says every morning “Do it again” to the sun: and every evening; “Do it again” to the moon. It may not be automatic necessity that makes all daisies alike; it may be that God makes every daisy separately, but has never got tired of making them . . . The repetition in nature may not be a mere recurrence; it may be a theatrical *encore*. Heaven may *encore* the bird who laid an egg. (Orthodoxy 69)

God’s kingdom is concerned with, and rejoices in, the livability of the planet. Each day brings about the activity of the Spirit within the intricacy of creation. The rocks and the trees cry out in testimony to their Creator. Thus, our involvement in creation care is a continuous involvement in the activity of God’s kingdom. We simply cannot claim that we love God while, at the same time, turning a blind eye to the pressing ecological concerns we see around us. Such blindness is antithetical to life in the Kingdom of God.

Living out our baptism, therefore, is more than simple intellectual assent or mystical reflection. Faith involves the “boots-on-the-ground”, “rubber-meets-the-road” response of life. This means that discipleship is not just about knowing the teaching of Jesus, we must embody our faith. Baptism is incarnational in nature as it calls us to live our lives of faith in a particular time and place. God calls us to live faithfully *here*, and thereby enter into the struggles and sufferings of the world around us. Discipleship can never be removed from the issues effecting our world. In this way, it is of the utmost importance that Christian people, of all denominational sizes and shapes, commit to working for the safeguarding, and renewal of the earth.

WORKS CITED

Chesterton, G. K. *Orthodoxy*. Garden City, N.Y. Image Books, 1959.