

World Environment Sunday

Pitt Street Uniting Church, 11 June 2017

A Contemporary Reflection by Rev Ms Jessica Morthorpe

Trinity Sunday

**Genesis 1: 1 - 2, 4a; Matthew 9: 35 – 10: 8; Contemporary Reading:
“*Song of the Builders*” by Mary Oliver – from *Why I wake early*.**

This reflection can be viewed on You Tube at <http://www.pittstreetuniting.org.au/> under “Sunday Reflections” tab

Many of you will have seen or heard of the ABC’s awesome “War on Waste” series - an entertaining look at the amount of waste produced by Australians and how to reduce it, with one of the hosts from the Chaser - which aired in May (you can still catch it on iView if you missed it). The program has succeeded in sparking conversation around Australia about the types and amounts of waste we produce, and its impacts. It’s exciting to see, and I hope churches will take this opportunity to connect with their communities around waste issues.

Personally, I’ve been thinking about the series a lot: feeling guilty every time I put something in the bin and trying to be even more vigilant about taking my keep cup with me everywhere. I have now started saving soft plastics to go in the special soft plastic recycling bins at the supermarket. I’ve been trying to implement some ideas provided in the Zero Waste Facebook groups I’m part of. I’ve also been reflecting on how I seem to be particularly wasteful when I’m tired, stressed or in a hurry.

I have a growing sense that being green is all about lifestyle, about the hundreds of tiny daily decisions we make, all rolled together. When we talk about environmentalism or caring for creation in public discourse, there is a sense in which we tend to see it as a few discrete actions. We want everyone to ‘*do the right thing*’ so we try to make things easy for them, try to set it out as just a few quick steps. And there are many steps we can take that ARE quick and easy and make an important difference.

But when you reflect on going deeper, on making real and challenging commitments, like developing a zero-waste lifestyle, it quickly becomes obvious that these kinds of easy changes barely scratch the surface of what is needed. Of course, companies and governments want us to believe that being ‘green’ is about living the same way but adding in buying a few eco-products occasionally so that we create a new market they can exploit - it’s safe and easy and it makes them money. It fits within our current lifestyles, consumerist culture and the framework of capitalism. And it’s so easy to go along, so easy to give into the temptation to let them reassure us, to let ourselves believe that ‘our share’ can be achieved quickly and easily and then we can move on to other things.

I think, deep down, we know that we are in denial though. When we hear about the projected impacts of climate change and see the destruction of rainforests, bleaching of coral reefs and rapid extinction of species around the world, we know that this can’t be a problem that is so easily solved. We sense that there must be bigger changes needed.

After all, when scientists start talking about this as the time of the Anthropocene, a time when the impact of humanity upon the world has become so great that we might deserve to have a geological epoch named after us – you know that this is a big deal.

We are creating the sixth great extinction. We - one single species- in our destructiveness, are wiping out so many other creatures that the Earth has not seen such extinction in millions of years. We are now a force as significant as a meteor impact or the end of an ice-age. Think about that for a moment. The enormity of it.

As a Christian, reflecting on such death and destruction sends me looking for hope, looking for resurrection and new life. Looking for what wisdom the Gospel and the Scriptures have to offer us in this situation. What does God think about waste?

While the Bible doesn't include many passages specifically focused on waste in the 'reducing our rubbish' sense, probably because it seemed like less of an issue in a less populated world; there is a strong sense throughout scripture that God is a pretty frugal being, and wants us to be too.

After all, when Jesus fed the five thousand, he instructed his disciples to gather up all the leftover fragments "*so that nothing may be lost*" (John 6:12).

Likewise, God's prophets repeatedly condemned those who lived in greed and abundance and offered no aid to the poor and needy (eg. Ezek 16:49).

In the laws handed down to the Israelites, God instructed them to leave the edges of the fields when harvesting crops, so that the poor and wild animals might also have food (eg. Lev 23:22, Deut 24:19). These laws also instruct the Israelites not to cut down the trees when they are attacking a city, since the war is not against the trees. God didn't want wasteful destruction to be part of the chosen people's behaviour.

Our own Uniting Church Basis of Union says that "*there is no gift without its corresponding service*". While the Basis' authors spoke of spiritual gifts, I believe there is a word here for us also. Our purchases are gifts from God, but with each gift comes a corresponding service – a responsibility to recognise the resources that go into producing each and every thing we use. Not just the big things, but also the clothes, coffee cups and food that we use and consume every day. Our purchases may pass through our lives quickly, but each item takes many contributions to make – God's water, fertile land and resources, the work of God's people.

And while our greed creates mountains of waste, millions around the world go without. So, we have a responsibility to reduce, to re-use, to recycle. To make sure we are responsible for the gifts we have.

Then there is Creation itself. The breath-taking abundance of amazing creatures that have evolved into existence on Earth at this time.

Some have joked that given the abundance of beetle species on earth, God must be particularly fond of them. Perhaps this is a wasteful creativity on God's part. Surely one or two species of beetle should have been enough for God? Even ten? Why do we need something like 400,000 species? That's about 30% of all the animals we know of!

Perhaps you might say that we don't. Certainly, lots of people like to argue to me that we don't need mosquitoes, that perhaps God shouldn't have made them, or doesn't have an essential purpose for them so we should just get rid of them. But one of the things that I love about science is that the more we learn, the more we realise how fragile, how intricate, how inconceivably entangled each and every part of creation is.

How could we have known that the loss of wolves in Yosemite National Park would change the grazing patterns of their prey, leading to deforestation on the river banks, which would then wipe out the local beavers and cause erosion, ultimately changing the path and flow of the river through the park? And that by re-introducing the wolves, we could change the flow of the river again?

How could we have known that commercial whaling, overfishing and the fur trade in the Pacific Ocean, by leaving killer whales without their usual food sources, would cause them to start eating sea otters, which prevented the sea otters from controlling the kelp eating sea urchins, so the urchins cleaned out the local kelp forests, and now, the kelp forests can no longer support fish breeding, leading to a reduction in fish prey for the vast array of animals and people who depend on them.

Such small, simple changes, with such big consequences! In the delicate balance of nature there is no waste. Everything is recycled, re-used, flowing through food webs in the great circle of life.

When God placed us in the garden, with all of this abundance, it was as wise stewards, not wasteful and despotic overlords, though we don't always live up to that calling.

So I'm coming to a new understanding of what it means for us to be truly faithful disciples of Jesus within our time. I think we need to widen our scope and thinking, as the Holy Spirit so often challenges us to do. As Jesus says in Matthew 5: ²¹ *"You have heard that it was said to those of ancient times, 'You shall not murder'; and 'whoever murders shall be liable to judgment.' ²² But I say to you that if you are angry with a brother or sister, you will be liable to judgment;"*

Likewise, we have heard that it was said to be wise stewards and to care for creation, but I say that a central focus of our whole lifestyles should be sustainability. Every Christian should be on a journey to reduce their waste, their energy use and their impact upon God's creation. This is not an optional extra, not something to talk about just occasionally, but something that should be part of our DNA as Christians 7 days a week, 24 hours a day.

I really hate going into Christian bookstores and seeing that big section that many have on Christian Living - that is full of pop psychology books on positive thinking, thinly veiled as 'Christian'; and books about not going further than hand holding on dates; and how to raise kids who don't drink or swear - as though that is what being Christian is about. As though all Christians should wear long skirts and act demure and love the right people in order to be faithful. What self-righteous "crumbs"!

Christ Jesus always calls us back to love, back to what really matters, and none of that is it. Our lives are a gift from God, and as Christians we should be expected to appreciate the value of, and the responsibilities that come with, that gift.

What if instead of *I love Jesus* bumper stickers, we proclaimed our faith to others by saving water, travelling on public transport even when it's inconvenient, helping with conservation projects for endangered species and working continually to reduce our waste as much as possible? What if our 'uniforms' as Christians became overalls, hiking boots and gardening gloves, if our bookstores became full of eco-literature and eco-products and we shared skills, books, tools and fruit and veg from our gardens with our churches each week? What if we could look at the most dedicated environmentalists in the world and know that they must be Christians, that their love for God must be what inspires them to such faithfulness, such discipleship?

Does your heart begin to beat with the same light of hope, the same sense of calling that mine does?

Let us rise to God's challenge. Let us be disciples of the Good News for ALL creation, in all nations, times and places.

So then, we are commissioned to go as eco-disciples, sharing the word of our frugal God, pursuing sustainability and teaching others to do likewise, through the power of holy God, Creator, Sustainer and Redeemer, Amen.