

Sermon – 17th September 2023 Holmbury St. Mary

God's Future for Creation

Readings: Romans 8: 18-27 Revelation 21: 1-6 & 22:1-6

Prayer

Introduction

Let me start with a confession. I like science fiction. As a child I used to love watching Star Trek and Dr. Who. Sometime during the 1990s I noticed that there had been a change in the way that these series work. Back in the 60s and 70s each episode more or less stood on its own (or, in the case of Dr Who, a set of 4 episodes). But then the people writing them started to get a bit clever and developed what they would probably call a “story arc” – an underlying story which gradually unfolds. Each episode, even though it may still tell a self-contained, complete little tale, contains clues to a bigger picture. Events and characters which seem to play a small and insignificant part in one episode resurface later, and gradually many different threads are brought back into play to reveal a much bigger canvas.

A fancier term to “story arc” might be **metanarrative**, or master plan. And the question before us today is whether there is a Story Arc or Metanarrative underpinning all of creation and history, everything we see and experience? In short, “What is the meaning of Life, the Universe and Everything?”

Some people believe that history is circular. This is the Hindu concept of endless cycles of reincarnation – things will keep going round and round and round. Others may say that nothing ever really changes, we are in a steady state. Scientific materialism presents us with two apparently conflicting approaches. The Second Law of thermodynamics predicts increasing entropy – over time things become more and more disordered and chaotic (like my garden). On the other hand, the concept of evolution suggests that life on earth is becoming more and more complex, and seeks to explain this through random mutations and natural selection.

In contrast to these, the Jewish and Christian faiths hold that history is linear and purposeful. The universe had a beginning and it is heading inexorably towards a conclusion, its end point. The Bible reveals this metanarrative. Right from the beginning we see glimpses of where it is all heading.

You might well be thinking to yourself, the world may be going somewhere, but if so it is not going in a good direction. Things are going from bad to worse.

However just because history is heading somewhere, doesn't mean that it must follow a steady upward route, with things getting steadily better. On the contrary, Jesus said that we should expect things to get worse before the end.

Romans 8: Suffering and Glory

In our first reading today, from Romans 8, Paul talks about **suffering** and says that creation has been subjected to **frustration**, and is in **bondage to decay**. It is **groaning** (along with everyone else it seems).

However, each of these negatives is paired with a positive view of the long-term future of creation.

Firstly, *Our present sufferings are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed.*

Suffering and glory go together. Just as they did in Jesus' life. But the glory, when it comes, will be so wonderful that the suffering will become insignificant. It may be hard for you to accept this, but, however difficult life is for you right now, God has something in store that will cause you to forget all the pain, heartache and disappointments.

Secondly Paul says that *creation **was** subjected to frustration ... but it **will be** liberated from its bondage to decay and brought into the glorious freedom of the children of God.*

The world is in a mess. The word *frustration* speaks of futility, emptiness, lack of purpose. Almost every week of this year we have had news of natural disasters – fires, floods, famines – many of them probably caused by climate change and global warming. Beyond this we have pollution, and species extinction. We can quite see that Creation is in bondage to decay. But Paul says there is a future for creation. It **will be set free** from this bondage. The whole of creation will join the glorious freedom of the children of God. He has spent the first seven chapters of Romans explaining how Jesus' death has set us free from the law of sin and death. Now he is saying that this extends to the whole of creation. Adam's sin affected everything – not just humanity, but all of creation. In the same way Christ's death on the cross has redeemed not just humanity but the universe.

Are you worried about the state of the world? You are not alone, but rest assured, God is in control and will put it all right.

Thirdly, we read that *the whole creation has been groaning as in the pains of childbirth, right up to the present time.* There is pain, but it is not a terminal pain – it is the pain of childbirth. With the joy of seeing her baby, a mother's pain fades. In verse 19 Paul says that *the creation waits in eager expectation of the sons of God to be revealed.* It is a picture of every blade of grass, every insect, every mountain, every star, straining to see the dawn - God's new family revealed.

What are you groaning for? What are you looking forward to? Things in our lives may be in crisis, just as things in the natural world seem to be in a state of disaster. But don't panic. God has a plan and will fix everything in his time.

Paul sums up Creation's Story Arc with the word **HOPE**. Suffering will give way to glory. Frustration and bondage will be supplanted by liberation and glorious freedom. Creation is groaning, but this is temporary and part of the process of renewal and rebirth. It is all tied up with the new humanity that God is bringing into being through Jesus.

In the New Testament the word Hope means something quite different to the way we often use it. It is not a desire – like saying “I hope it doesn’t rain for our picnic tomorrow”. It is more like a child waiting for Christmas – it will certainly come, we just need to be patient and wait. We could translate it as Anticipation. God wants us to live not in fear and despair, but with anticipation for a bright future.

Revelation – the series finale

So where exactly is creation headed? Isaiah paints a picture of peace and harmony, with the wolf and the lamb living together and an infant playing near the cobra’s nest.

But to get a fuller picture we can turn to the very last two chapters of the Bible. Revelation 21 and 22.

St. John sees *a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away.*

Tom Wright explains that this is not a matter of God throwing away his first creation, and trying again, having a second shot at getting it right. Rather it is God abolishing everything that has to do with the tragic effects of human sin. The new world will be like the present one ... full of beauty and delight ... But without all the sorrow and ugliness, particularly without death, tears and everything that causes them.

I have always loved the picture of God wiping every tear from our eyes, just as a mother might tenderly wipe away the tears of her child. As we open our eyes again, suddenly everything truly is all right. There will be no more death, or mourning or crying or pain, because everything will be renewed and put right.

A friend once told me that she didn’t feel any desperate need to travel the world, as many others of our generation sought to do. She said, “One day I will be able to visit every part of it and see it, perfect, just as God always planned for it to be.” I realized that she was right. That will be quite something. Creation will be made new.

Far from being declared redundant and discarded, the earth, along with the heavens, will be renewed. We don’t go “up to heaven” to be with God, but God comes down to make his dwelling amongst us, in the very heart of his new city.

John sees this *Holy City, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride, beautifully dressed for her husband.* The most important feature is that the throne of God and of the Lamb are right there in the city. It will be bathed in the radiance of The Lord God and the Lamb, so there will be no more need for sun or moon. It doesn’t have a temple, because the whole city is the dwelling place of God.

The final chapter of the Bible brings us back to the story of the Garden of Eden. Remember there were two trees in the Garden. Mankind ate from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, but were banished before they could eat from the tree of Life. Now we meet the tree of Life once again. It is not one tree but an avenue alongside the great river flowing through this immense city. It is amazingly fertile, producing fruit every month of the year. And its leaves are for the healing of the nations.

Revelation brings us to the fulfilment of the story arc of history. The curse and banishment from the first garden will be lifted. We are invited to eat from the Tree of Life and become part of a healed and renewed creation.

Conclusion

God has given mankind stewardship over creation, and that mandate continues and will continue until Jesus returns. It is true that we have miserably failed to care for our world in the past. However, we should not despair over a broken world. God is in the business of fixing broken things, and he will put everything right. He wants us to live in hope with anticipation and assurance that all things will be made new. Not just made new – but transformed and made perfect. God's future for creation is far more glorious than anything we see now, or anything we can imagine. Just as when a caterpillar is transformed into a butterfly there will be continuity but yet everything will be unbelievably better.

Amen.