

Stewardship of the Environment

Recent events have reminded us of the powerful forces of nature and the devastating effects they can have. There were the mudslides and flooding in Sierra Leone which took the lives of over a thousand people, as well as many more who were injured or made homeless. There is the flooding in Bangladesh, northeast India and Nepal, where a staggering 41 million people are thought to have been affected and where at least 1,200 people have lost their lives. And now there is the extensive flooding in parts of Texas caused by Tropical Storm Harvey, where already there have been a number of fatalities.

These are all terrible experiences for those affected, many of whom are poor and already have many difficulties to contend with in their lives. These are natural disasters, yes, but the evidence is clear that our climate and weather are being affected by human activity. Human beings are as much responsible for climate change and environmental disasters as are natural forces.

Of course there are those who deny this, even those in positions of power and influence. We need high profile campaigners such as Al Gore to challenge and counter such views.

Concern for the environment is a human imperative if we are to prosper and survive. Yet there is a religious dimension to this too. In the story of creation in the opening chapters of Genesis God gives humanity dominion over all other living creatures. But dominion here does not mean exploitation but rather stewardship.

For much of human history there has been a balance between human needs and the health of the environment. But particularly since the industrial revolution that balance has shifted away towards human needs often at the expense of the environment. And the negative effects of the shift are beginning to show.

The verses we heard just now from the Old Testament (Leviticus 19.1-2a, 9-10; 25.2b-5) reflect that right balance, and within a religious context. Not everything is to be harvested. Some is to be left for the poor and the foreigners. That is a clear message to us today to share the world's resources equitably.

Then there is the command to allow the land to rest every seventh year, just as God rested on the seventh day of creation. We should make use of the earth's resources, yes, but also allow them to regenerate. Religious conviction and common sense, as so often, coincide. For we are stewards of God's creation. That is a message that continues to need to be heard.

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