

Sermon: The Second Sunday of Creationtide 2020

Job 38.1-18, Psalm 139.1-14, Matthew 5.13-16

On this Second Sunday of Creationtide 2020 I want to return to last year with some reflections on the concept of stewardship. After we concluded Creationtide last year, I was left with the impression that some people had not grasped the importance of stewardship as a tool for Christian faith and practice. As a number of us will remember we spent an extended period thinking about our stewardship of God's creation of which we are part, as well as the good things we receive from God such "as the sun, and the rain, and the apple seed" as we sing in a popular North American grace known as Johnny Appleseed, but we also gave consideration to our stewardship as it concerns Christ Church, its ministry and its mission.

The concept of stewardship is linked to the responsibilities of a steward and in the narrower Christian sense it is concerned with the "responsible use of resources in the service of God". This short definition "responsible use of resources in the service of God" supplies us with four fundamental words: God, responsibility, service, and resources, that we will look at it a moment.

People can become nervous when church leaders, clergy or lay leaders start talking about stewardship and to use some words coined by the former Archbishop of Canterbury in a different context, "what is so annoying is that they are almost right" to get nervous! Why? Because stewardship always comes with a call to look at how we order/steward our lives always beginning with a question. A question that can be phrased in many ways. This is how I initially formulated the question. Is God at the centre of our lives or is God an afterthought? Is God at the beginning of the process, God at the centre of the process and at the end of the process? Is what I am giving, the priorities I am making, God-related? We often talk about stewardship arising out of a response our yes to God made known to us in the Christ event. That is where we begin, but having responded, having grown, how does God in us move to our centre, our beginning, and become our end into which we live? How does God stay at the centre through the changes of life

throughout the differing challenges of the present. We at Christ Church are being challenged. The challenge of the virus to our health in the widest sense is one and the challenge to our faith arising out of the pandemic another. They are not mutually exclusive. It is not one or the other, but both and. And we should be giving time to how the pandemic is impacting on our faith.

Part of the difficulty is that stewardship is an abstraction. It is a concept. You might translate stewardship into German as *Verwaltung*, which means how do I administer my talent, my time, my treasure as response. But this has a very secular sound. If we as Christians aren't considering stewardship in relationship to God how then are we doing it? What guiding criteria order the giving of our time, our talent and our treasure, if not in relation to God from whom all things come?

For the Christian, as for Job, as for Jesus the prime reality is God. It is through God that we have our being. Paul the Apostle writes, "... there is one God, the Father, from whom are all things and for whom we exist, and one Lord, Jesus Christ, through whom are all things and through whom we exist". (1 Corinthians 8.6) There is a lot to unpack in that phrase "and one Lord, Jesus Christ, through whom are all things and through whom we exist", but I would want us to see it first in relation to our baptism by which we are made one in Christ. Who is our salvation. Who brings life out of death. In the First Letter of Peter we read, "He himself bore our sins in his body on the cross so that, free from sins, we might live for righteousness; by his wounds you have been healed."

Job in today's reading from the First Testament must endure a prolonged questioning by God. It is sustained. It is relentless. The force of the questioning is summed up in the first question, "Where were you when I laid the foundation of the earth?" along the lines of "Job, who are you to question God?" I am reminded of two things. One is based on the insight as we grow into God that we like Job are prone to conceive of God in such a way that doesn't come close to what is meant when God says to Moses of himself "I am, who I am". Our God, the God of our imagining, is too small. And the other thing I am reminded of is the way Cardinal Franz König, the former Archbishop of Vienna, summed up our quest for meaning

in three questions: "Woher komme ich? Wohin gehe ich? Welchen Sinn hat das Leben? Where do I come from? Where am I going? What is the purpose of life?"

Is God that which permeates everything in us like salt, so that each decision we make is in relation to our relationship to God, the all defining relationship of our being that in turn defines and enriches all our other relationships to our spouses, to our children, our partners, our friends, our colleagues, our employers, our nationhood.

And for the Christian very specifically the God who calls Abraham from Ur of the Chaldeans, who reveals himself to Moses in the burning bush and who makes himself known most fully in Jesus Christ. God's revelation of self leads us to the second word of the words we associate with stewardship, namely that of service. Jesus on the night he was betrayed rose from table and bound a towel around his waist and washed the disciples' feet. This symbolic gesture was to define forever something very central to the life of the Christian service to God, as being one of service to one another, to all things created, such as the animals and the plants, the whole of the environment. If there is a dominion it is that of service grounded in the love of God to which we are responding, which is our responsibility.

Bishops are often referred to as the servants of the servants of God. In the Early Church bishops would put on a garment called a dalmatic. A dalmatic was actually what a deacon wore. All ministry is grounded in service. It is the overriding and defining characteristic of the Christian. It demands a reorientation. The bishop would put on the dalmatic to remind himself of his fundamental duty to God, the Church and the diocese as servant. It is clear that this fundamental characteristic of the Christian way, the Christian life namely that of service sets us apart. It was to permeate the royal houses of Europe. Under the Prince of Wales' coat of arms is a scroll which bears the motto "Ich dien", which is German for "I serve".

We have said that stewardship stands in relation to God and all that he has created not only human beings. We have spoken about service. We have mentioned our responsibility that doesn't stop with our love of neighbour, but embraces the whole

of creation, which is entrusted to our care. It is clear that when we understand that God's creation is good, we can become wise in the things of God through our "responsible use of resources in the service of God".

As Christians we have a responsibility to use what we are given to be part of working towards sustainability. We do not waste food. We do not buy more than we need. We are ready, if possible, to pay more for what we eat. We are not satisfied with the status quo, while knowing that responsible action is costly. We can make a contribution. How we use and live with the resources we have been given can be a sign to us, to others and the world of a new way and a better way, but it will always be in relation to God and grounded in the story entrusted to us, as we write the another chapter of the Acts of the Apostles in our generation. This pandemic is a challenge. Climate change/global warming is a challenge. We are being tested in two ways. I think many of us presently only see the challenges of the pandemic and of climate change, but both of these are a fundamental and existential challenge to our faith. As a people of faith, we are being challenged.

Let me end by saying what an important role we as Christians can have given the various challenges we face: deepening our understanding of the pandemic, as well as global warming, our desire for more just structures that more and more peoples may be beneficiaries of the good things that God is giving and is always desiring to give us. Where do we begin? Let's begin by deepening our understanding of our faith as it is fundamentally understood in our relationship to God as we come to know that Christian stewardship the good ordering or lives under God is grounded in our "responsible use of resources in the service of God". Amen.