

THE MESSENGER

JUNE 2007

How many light bulbs does it take to change a Christian? God, faith and the environment.

Marian Curtis

Climate change is one of the greatest challenges facing our world today, one that will impact on just about every aspect of human life and on the natural environment. We hear a lot about the need to change in order to redress the balance, about reducing our carbon footprints. What should the Christian response be?

Is it true, as some have argued, that much of the degradation and exploitation stems from the Christian understanding of creation, and what it means for man to 'to rule' over it (Genesis 1:26&28)? That, as one vociferous proponent of this view, Professor L White, said in 1967¹ Hence we shall continue to have worsening ecological crises until we reject the Christian axiom that nature has no reason for existence save to serve man¹

In fact nothing is further from the truth. For although, sadly, Christians have often been slow to recognise it, the Christian faith

actually offers important and helpful insights that can, and should, influence our understanding and our behaviour.

For example a Christian understanding of the environment must recognise that:

- creation belongs to God, not to humans. Adam was instructed to 'work it and take care of' the Garden of Eden (Genesis 2:15). The Hebrew wording here contains the meaning of service. We are stewards, God's representatives. We are to act with an attitude of service towards God and creation. Exploitation for our benefit is wrong.

- humankind is part of creation. Part of a glorious, diverse whole. As Hildegard Bingen wrote: God has made all things in the world in consideration of everything else.² There is a connectedness. Humanity is not separate from this.

- we are created in God's image. In the likeness of God who created everything as good. We too have the ability to love and create, minds to explore and understand. Scientific knowledge and spiritual understanding is to be applied to safeguard the integrity of creation, to sustain and

renew the life of the earth.

- at the centre of our faith is the Incarnation, God's supreme act of self giving love for his world. In Christ God comes down to earth and interacts with His creation. He shared our humanity, became part of our world, our sufferings and problems, in order to redeem it. The bible talks about the whole of creation groaning as it waits to be liberated from its bondage to decay (Romans 8:20-22) Christ's power of life over death means that the whole of the universe, not just us, will one day be part of that new creation.

More than that, caring for our environment is, as Archbishop Rowan Williams has said, 'a matter of justice for the human and the non human world'³ Climate change, water shortages, pollution have a major effect on peoples lives, particularly in the poorest part of the world. As Christians we must act – for we are called to free the oppressed, uphold the weak and respond to the effects of our actions for creed and for creation. Our love of God and of all creation requires us to live carefully and to not abuse the resources given to us. Which means changing the way we live.

³www.shrinkingthefootprint.cofe.amglican.org/cofe_env_sgp_foreword.phprinkingthefootprint.cofe.amglican.org

¹The Historical Roots of our Ecological Crisis' *Science* 155 (1967),pp.1203-1207

²Sharing God's Planet: A Christian Vision for a Sustainable Future. Church House Publishing (2007) p. 30

Man's Inhumanity to God

Sylvester the Cat, doing what he normally does in cartoons, is urged by his son "Cease, Father, this inhuman hunt". "Not hunting inhumans", he splutters, "hunting birds".

Very occasionally, we create inhumans, species outcasts. A recent example is Myra Hindley. She was monstered by the press, and anyone who said anything even slightly in her favour could expect to be monstered too. It was wildly extreme, as if anything she touched, even as an old and dying woman, were infected and a danger to others. Harold Shipman, although he killed more people and more recently, received more balanced coverage. Why? Is it that Hindley was a woman? Perhaps, since Ian Brady did not get the same treatment; but then, Ian Huntley did. Is it that her victims were so vulnerable? Shipman's were equally. Or that they were young? More likely, as parents grieving for their sons and daughters reverses the natural order.

It is amazing how few people are elected to this anti-Pantheon. Not criminals like the Krays. Even a genocidal maniac like Idi Amin was being described at the end of his life as 'cheerful man, eats lots of oranges'. At present, the only class-members seem to be offenders against children. It was not always this way: in his time Hitler was a member, and a century earlier even more was 'Boney'. During wartime, soldiers and even civilians are encouraged to believe patent absurdity, such as that all Germans are evil; quite a lot did believe it. Here is a clue: circumstances and even governments can alter this

national perception.

Psychologists suggest that the fault which most annoys us in others is the one that we share. This could explain the Hindley effect: not hatred, but fear; a fear that if we admit belonging to the same order of being we admit that we are capable of the same crimes.

As John says "If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us" (1 Jn. 1:8). Few people claim to be without fault, without sin; but few also go on to consider what John says next, "If we confess our sins, Jesus is faithful and just to forgive us. If we say we have not sinned, we make him a liar and his word is not in us".

Admitting sin and asking God's forgiveness are central to Christian belief. Each service contains a Confession when we ask forgiveness for the ways that we have grieved God by not living up to His demands. Confession on its own is not enough, there must be true repentance and a genuine intention not to sin again: these are the price of absolution.

The hard part is in John's last sentence. If we say that we are without sin, God will bring us to judgment (Jer. 2:35), because no-one can be pure or righteous by God's standards (Job 15:14). To claim otherwise is to claim to be something other than human; and humans can not free themselves from the consequence of that, which is that we are all capable of the worst sin, all have the capacity to be a Myra Hindley. It is by striving against sin, and with God's grace, that we avoid it.

We know that Sylvester is living in a cartoon world, and he will never catch Tweety-Pie; but we know that – if he lived in the real world – he might.

Sin

'Sin' is a word like 'naughty': it has been deprived of a very powerful meaning and given a nursery one instead. 'Naughty' in Shakespeare's time meant literally 'of naught', valueless, a nothing. Now the advertisers have taken over both words, and use them to mean not much more than a slight self-indulgence, a departure from one's diet perhaps, which can be put right the next day.

To a Christian 'sin' is a central concept. It is a disobedience to the known will of God, especially if deliberate, and the estrangement from God resulting from such a disobedience. That is why Milton started *Paradise Lost* with 'Of man's first disobedience....', because it was that disobedience that cost mankind paradise.

The New Testament regards sinfulness as the inherent state of humanity, which Jesus came into the world to heal. Christian theologians divide sin into actual and original sin. Actual sin, consisting of evil acts, words, and deeds, is in turn divided into mortal sin, in which the perpetrator deliberately turns away from God, and venial sin, a less serious transgression committed without full awareness of wrongdoing.

Habitual sin is called vice. The seven deadly, or capital, sins are pride, covetousness, lust, anger, gluttony, envy, and sloth. The opposite of sin is virtue, but in Christian practice the opposite of sin is grace, ie the merits of Christ's virtues given to humanity.



Gazelles

The Bible contains some passages of extraordinary sensuality that might surprise those not used to reading it. For example, the Song of Solomon contains the most delicate poetry of erotic desire: "Listen! My lover! Look! Here he comes, leaping across the mountains, bounding over the hills. My lover is like a gazelle or a young stag. Look! There he stands behind our wall, gazing through the windows, peering through the lattice." The young woman accepts her lover's advance, and the imagery of his language that follows is clearly sexual: "The fig tree forms its early fruit; the blossoming vines spread their fragrance. Arise, come, my darling; my beautiful one, come with me."

Few secular songs or poems can come close to the sense of desire and fulfilment of this passage.

The world is full of delights for people to enjoy, as St James says (1: 17-18) "Every good and perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of the heavenly lights, who does not change like shifting shadows. He chose to give us birth through the word of truth, that we might be a kind of first fruits of all he created." This is not of course a call to sybaritic self-indulgence, any more than the Song of Solomon is to promiscuity. James goes on to say "therefore, get rid of all moral filth and the evil that is so prevalent and humbly accept the word planted in you." "Oh well", says the reader, "back to the fire-and-brimstone message" but looking past the off-putting tone one can see the teaching: the gifts are to be enjoyed not to be abused. James encapsulates it,

"Do not merely listen to the word, and so deceive yourselves. Do what it says." (V.22).

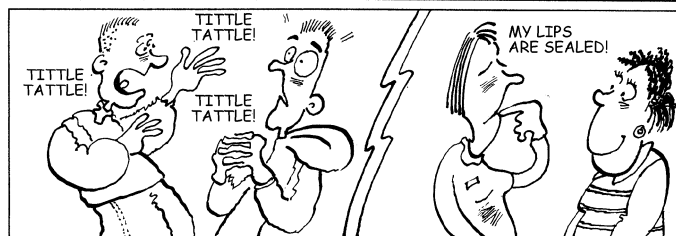
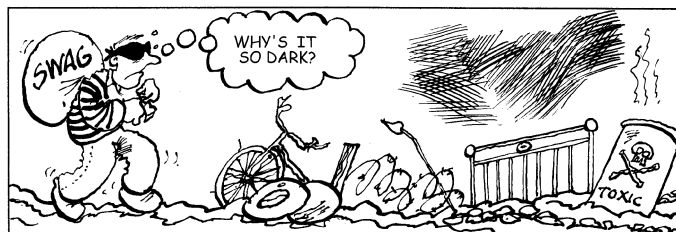
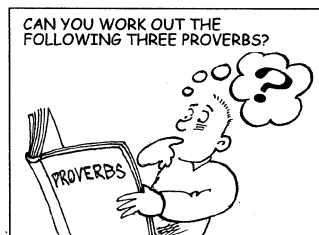
Jesus Himself taught about this. In St Mark's Gospel (ch.7) there is a story of the pharisees challenging Jesus because He and His disciples did not perform ceremonial washing before eating. Jesus replied that they were hypocrites, and quoted to them the prophet Isaiah: "These people honour me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me. They worship me in vain; their teachings are but rules taught by men." He rebukes the pharisees, "You have let go of the commands of God and are holding on to the traditions of men." The appeal to Isaiah would be stinging to them, since they regarded themselves as scriptural scholars.

Jesus went on to say, "Listen to me everybody and understand this, Nothing outside a man can make him 'unclean' by going into him. Rather it is what comes out of a man that makes him unclean". Mark explains, "In saying this, Jesus declared all foods 'clean'." True though this is, Jesus said much more: He said "For from within, out of men's hearts, come evil thoughts, sexual immorality, theft, murder, adultery, greed,

malice, deceit, lewdness, envy, slander, arrogance and folly. All these evils come from inside and make a man 'unclean'."

Picture Proverbs

THE BOOK OF PROVERBS IS A COLLECTION OF WISE SAYINGS FROM THE HEART OF THE OLD TESTAMENT.



see Proverbs ch.4v.19, ch.11v.13 & ch.14v.1

Christians have no kosher and treif (cf Exodus 22: 30), no foods which are either clean or unclean. Nor do they have places they may and may not go, compulsory rituals or scholarship with semi-biblical authority. Instead they have a series of Ten Commandments notoriously hard to pin down, and the word and example of Jesus Himself. Only by obeying Jesus and understanding that evil comes from men's hearts will one be able to apply those Commandments; and to know how to enjoy all the fruits of the earth; and to have the joy of the Song of Solomon.

June



2007

Services in June

3rd June

10.30 Worship Together
6.30 Holy Communion

10th June

10.30 Holy Communion
6.30 Evening Prayer

17th June

10.30 Morning Prayer
6.30 Holy Communion

24th June

9.00 Holy Communion
10.30 Holy Communion (with children)
6.30 Evening Prayer

CRICKET

St. Michael's will be playing against St John's in Greenwich Park on 10th June

PICNIC & CONCERT

Proms in Blackheath Park will be on 7th July

ST MICHAEL'S HOLIDAY CLUB

Holiday Club, the 'Green Scene', at St Michael's is from July 26 to 29. Bookings are now open. Contact the Parish Office or Leah Philbrick for details

CHRISTIAN HOLIDAYS

If you feel like everyone else has a summer holiday booked, or friends to go away with, but you haven't, then don't despair - you are not alone. Thousands of people like you feel the same way. And that's why friendsfirst (the Christian friendship service) has organised 2 holidays for you to go on this summer where you'll meet lots of other people and come away with new friends.

The first is to North Wales between 21-28th July and the 2nd is to the Isle of Wight between 15th - 21st September. Both are situated in lovely hotels, are full board and cost a maximum of £295 (with discounts available). For further details contact Katharine Gray at friendsfirst on 0121 427 1286 or write to her at friendsfirst, PO Box 8377, Birmingham, B17 9TE

If you're not looking for a holiday but would like to meet other single Christians for friendship or relationships then give friendsfirst a call anyway for further details about their friendship service which has been putting Christians of all ages together since 1999.

SAINT COLUMBA'S PRAYER

My dearest Lord,
Be Thou a bright flame before me,
Be Thou a guiding star above me,
Be Thou a smooth path beneath me,
Be Thou a kindly shepherd behind me,
Today and evermore.

J - i - C # 102 - 104

June 1st has an unusual property every year (including leap years) – what is it?

In what order are these words:

eight; eat; effervescent; eye; emphatic; ewer

What links Othello, the SDP, a wartime monarch, an up-and-coming monarch, trees planted by order of Napoleon, an execrable poet, our neighbour parish and a short shirt?

Solutions

Potato, tomato, noodle, orange, carrot, sprout, longan, banana

It contains 'y' with both its sounds, consonant and vowel



...what do you mean you don't like our latest church banner? From the first of July you're legally obliged to display it!!

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St Michael's: making time for the things that matter

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