

Should we be saving souls or seals? What Christianity says about Biodiversity

There is an irony about the title for this webinar. It starts by setting up a false dichotomy, asking whether we should be saving souls or saving seals. There is a simple and clear answer of course: both! We live in an era of tribalism and polarised extremes – of division into opposing camps and then, informed only by the echo chamber of social media, we hear simply the voices we want to hear, and – like a child having a tantrum – we put our fingers in our ears at opposing voices and shout ‘fake news’.

Maybe it's because I'm an Anglican, but when I hear people saying it's “either – or”, I want to say, “how about, both – and”. So, let me rephrase the question. What did Jesus say we should be doing, saving souls or saving seals? And the surprising answer is, neither! Jesus never talked about ‘saving souls’. He did, of course, warn of the danger of gaining the whole world but losing your soul (Mark 8:36). But Jesus commands his followers not to ‘save souls’ but to ‘make disciples’ and there’s an important difference. Saving souls puts the emphasis entirely on life beyond death, on the next world rather than this one. Making disciples doesn’t ignore eternity, but the emphasis is on a transformation that starts now. Disciples are those who pray as Jesus taught us to: your Kingdom come, your will be done on earth as in heaven. Salvation is not an escape plan for our souls. It is God’s plan for renewal and restoration for the whole creation. Disciples may be saved *from* sin and death and hell, but they are saved *for* the transformation of all that God created, sustains, loves and seeks to redeem.

And that brings us to ‘saving seals’ ... and to biodiversity. Biodiversity is a word that you won’t find in the Bible, but the concept behind it is profoundly biblical. In Genesis 1.31 we read that God looked at all that he had made and behold it was all very good. Note the word ‘all’. *All* God made is the variety of life and the systems that sustains it – what today we call biodiversity. And God proclaims it all very good.

In fact, as we look through the great themes of the Bible, we find that God’s passion for biodiversity runs like a spine throughout the scriptures. Once we remove the tinted glasses that make us read the Bible as if it was written only to us as individuals, and realise that this is God’s cosmic story, the pattern is very clear. God has a passion for biodiversity that runs from beginning to end:

1. CREATION:

It all starts with creation itself – God, who is a community of love – Father, Son and Holy Spirit – chose to create an interdependent and infinitely varied world, overflowing with diversity, beauty, complexity and artistry. God’s pleasure in creation is shown not only in the repeated refrain, ‘and it is good’ in Genesis, but in the Psalms, the Wisdom literature, and the way the prophets and Jesus himself constantly use nature to illustrate truths about God and about how we are to live. Most importantly, biodiversity – the variety of life – was not created primarily for humanity to enjoy. It was created, we read in Colossians 1, by and for Christ. So, the value of biodiversity lies in its being created as an overflow of the love between Father, Son and Spirit.

2. COVENANT

Secondly, in the biblical narrative, once human alienation from God causes a breakdown that affects the whole earth, God offers a new start in the first great biblical covenant. The account of Noah rescuing individuals of every living kind to join him on the ark is a second great affirmation of God’s passion for biodiversity. These creatures include those that are unclean, inedible and dangerous – they are not there for Noah’s sake, but rather ‘that their kind might continue upon the earth.’ They matter because God values them independently of whether they’re useful to us. The great creation-wide covenant in the form of the rainbow emphasises this. Repeatedly in Genesis 9, it is described as a covenant with ‘you and your descendants and every living creature on the earth’, and in one verse ‘my covenant with the earth’. God has a saving covenant relationship that includes biodiversity.

3. CHRIST

Thirdly, the incarnation, life, death and resurrection of Jesus give a uniquely Christian understanding to the value of biodiversity. John’s Gospel tells us that the Word became *flesh* – the Greek word *sark* which is the word for all animal flesh, even for meat. Jesus did not just become a human (*Anthropos*), although he did. The Gospel deliberately emphasises that the Creator became a creature – and in so doing he elevates the value not just of human nature but of all creatures. In Jesus’ life and teaching we see the tradition of Wisdom drawn from observation of nature taken to its pinnacle – almost all

of Jesus' parables and illustrations draw on the natural world – agriculture and the seasons, birds and flowers, fig trees and foxes. Yet, it is in Christ's death and resurrection that we see the full scope of God's purposes for biodiversity. Romans 8 tells us that the whole creation is yearning to be liberated from its bondage to decay, and Colossians 1.20 claims that Christ's death on the cross enables 'all things in heaven and on earth' to be reconciled to God. The saving work of Christ at the very heart of Christian faith, celebrated in the Eucharist and proclaimed in the scriptures, includes all creatures and the whole creation. All that has been damaged and broken and distorted by human sin and greed is to be restored and redeemed.

4. COMPLETION

If Creation, Covenant and Christ are God's three great interventions in the story of the world, there is a fourth that is still to come, when Jesus returns. The promise that is implicit in Christ's death and resurrection is to come to fruition in the great eschatological hope. Hinted at by the Old Testament prophets, with their visions of *shalom* – a restoration of peaceful relationships between and amongst wild animals, domestic animals and human beings, the Bible gives us suggestive hints and few clear clues about the future of this earth and the creatures that inhabit it. All the imagery of both Old and New Testaments aver that biodiversity will be part of God's eternal plans: the lion and the lamb, the snake and the child, the four living creatures worshipping before the throne which appear to represent humanity, wild animals, domestic animals and birds. Of course, there are also passages of judgment and destruction. It is clear that future hope is hope beyond judgment: that there will be discontinuity as well as continuity between this world and the new creation. We cannot save the planet, or save biodiversity purely by our own efforts: this is God's work and will require a radical remaking of the whole created order. Yet, as with Noah's ark, all that God created in joy, sustains in love and saves in grace will be included within God's eternal plans – and that includes biodiversity.

5. CHURCH

And that brings us, finally, to look at the place of the Church in God's plans for biodiversity. The Bible does not have a lot to say about this explicitly, and perhaps that's why we've been so slow to recognise this is part of our calling. Yet, if we take God's purposes from creation to new creation seriously, we must seek our role. If Christ is to redeem and save biodiversity, do we simply sit back and wait? No, and a thousand times no! If we are disciples of Jesus we are called to live with his values, and to anticipate in our lives the reality

he will bring. Romans 8 makes the astonishing claim that ‘the whole creation is waiting for the sons and daughters of God to be revealed’. Who are the sons and daughters of God? They are the Church – God’s family, and Christ’s body here on earth. Creation is waiting for the Church. Astonishing as it seems, we have a role in God’s plans for the redemption of creation. We are called to be Christ’s hands and feet, Christ’s heart and voice, here on earth, yes to bring the good news of Jesus to lost souls, but also to see Christ in the poor and the prisoner, and also to proclaim and demonstrate that Jesus is Lord by enabling creatures made to glorify and worship him to do so as God intended. So, biodiversity conservation is an inescapable consequence of saying ‘Jesus is Lord!’

Rev. Dr. Dave Bookless