



Talk for UN World Environment Day, 5 June 2016 Helen Hutchison, Diocesan Environment Officer

Within our lifetime, coalminers took canaries into the mines with them to provide a warning that toxic gases were present. These tiny birds were particularly sensitive to the odourless carbon monoxide gas and their death throes alerted the miners to get out of the mineshaft as quickly as possible. Canaries were taken into British mines right up until 1986 when electronic detectors were introduced.

But the term ‘canary in the coalmine’ lives on. Only when people use the phrase today it’s to raise the alarm that yet another species, be it insect, bird, monkey, rare orchid or elephant is falling in numbers to a worrying extent, or is at the point of extinction. Even here in leafy Hertfordshire the sudden and as yet not fully understood death of bee colonies is our canary in the coalmine warning us that something is going very wrong in our countryside.

I begin this talk with a brief description of species extinction. (*I am indebted to the work of Martin and Margot Hodson for this information (1)*). Then I will consider the economists’ approach to nature which sees nature only in terms of its economic ‘value.’ Finally, I will ask ‘has nature any value to God?’ And if it does have a value to God over and above its usefulness to humans, how should this affect our thinking about this growing threat to creation?

Biodiversity loss, as it is called, is occurring at a faster rate than the ‘natural rate’ seen in the geological record, maybe 1000 times faster. The last major extinction event happened when an asteroid hit the Yucatan Peninsula in Mexico some 65 million years ago and wiped out the dinosaurs. The present extinction event has been entirely caused by humanity. In 2014 the World Wildlife Fund reported the shocking statistic that we had lost 50% of our wildlife population in the last 40 years.

I am not going to dwell on the main reasons for diversity loss here, but simply to list them: habitat destruction, pollution, human overpopulation, exploitative farming practices and more recently invasive species, possibly caused by climate change.

When we talk about species extinction, ‘can we afford to save species from extinction?’ (See L Hickman, the Guardian 12 October 2012 as reported in Hodson et al).

Economic arguments are more likely to be taken seriously by the world’s leaders and economies but this is to view nature as only having value in monetary terms. Thus, says Hickman:

- “Species need to be preserved to provide as broad a gene pool as possible for pharmaceutical research and agriculture. Each time a species is lost its genetic material is lost to the future world.
- Species need to be preserved to maintain the robustness of our global eco-systems. If we knock out too many links in our global ecology, we may find that our own life support system will collapse.
- Species are needed to preserve nature for tourism, and access to healthy natural environments. This is slightly more ethical but still saying that nature’s value is in relation to human wellbeing.”

Hodson et al argue that “one of the dangers of using economic arguments to value nature means that we could in time create hierarchies of value in the biological world. Plants and



animals that are of special value to tourism will score high as will human food species and plants of known medical value. At the top of the list will be large and beautiful mammals, attractive birds and commercial fish. At the bottom will be unattractive insects and reptiles.”

Drawing on this morning’s readings, I turn now to ask what is the value of nature to God?

When God finally answers Job, out of the storm, after all the terrible things that have happened to Job, we imagine that Job will finally get an answer to the thorny problem of why God allows suffering. But instead of answering Job’s complaints, God spends the next 4 chapters talking about the wonders of creation and challenges Job to admit that none of these wonders are any of Job’s doing. God says: “Can you tie the Pleiades together or loosen the bonds that hold Orion? Can you guide the stars season by season? Does a hawk learn from you how to fly when it spreads its wings towards the south? Does an eagle wait for your command to build its nest high in the mountains?”

Kevin Durrant, Author and Baptist Minister (2), asks “Why does God choose to respond to Job’s questions about human suffering by giving him a lecture on ecology and zoology?” Durrant suggests that maybe God wants Job to realize that there’s no point in trying to understand why suffering exists in the world until we have begun to understand why the world itself exists in the first place. In other words, before we ask why suffering we should first ask why the world...why the crocodile.....why the hippo?

What if simply to meet the needs and desires of human beings wasn’t the reason the world was created?

Certainly God’s speech effectively punctures humanity’s over-inflated view of itself: God says to Job: “were you there when I made the world? If you know so much, tell me about it. Who decided how large it would be? Who stretched the measuring line over it? Do you know all the answers?”

Creation is emphatically centre stage here and God seems to be impressing upon Job that he is simply a part of this wonderful interconnected universe. If Nature has value it is because it is valuable to God who created it.

“There is a great temptation for us to think and act as though the world was made purely for our use and enjoyment,” says Durrant. He goes on: “We allow animals and birds to remain crammed in battery farms so that we can enjoy cheap food. We don’t concern ourselves with the quality of their lives because surely the purpose of their existence is to provide us with food and finance.”

We can find support for this in the Bible reading of Genesis. Humankind is commanded to be fruitful and to subdue the earth. This reading is now challenged by biblical scholars who see this as perhaps in the past encouraging us to believe we were given dominion over the rest of creation.

‘Responsible leadership’ is a suggested contemporary alternative to the dominion view. Human beings may have been called to rule over all living things, but as we read in St Paul ‘only on Christ’s behalf, in his image and for the benefit of his creation.’ This then should inform our thinking about global biodiversity.

If we accept that nature does have a value to God over and above its usefulness to humans, how should this affect our thinking as individuals and church communities to this growing threat to God’s creation?



Durrant compares the rich fool in our New Testament reading, to our own western civilization which has, he says, produced a bumper crop - whether it is major advances in science and technology, impressive achievements in culture and communications, or companies making massive commercial profits. Our response: it's all good so let's keep building bigger and better.

Some of this progress benefits those in the global south. Many governments fund development aid to help poorer countries. New technology, such as solar panels for example, are transforming the lives of people in many parts of Africa. But the problem is that the way we live now in the west requires huge amounts of energy, creates a lot of pollution and waste and is doing terrible damage to nature.

"The rich farmer in our reading," says Durrant, "hadn't got the wit to see that there might have been other more noble things to do with his bumper harvest than build bigger barns. He could have used some of his wealth to help the poor or fund a project that would benefit his community. But instead he congratulated himself as a lucky man who had all the good things he needed for many years." In today's world he would probably offer to offset the value of the land he had destroyed building bigger barns? Would that, do you think, make it more acceptable?

The rich farmer asked 'what can I do?' Today in the west, people say 'what can we do? Yes, we know there's environmental damage done in the name of progress and profit, global warming from our energy demands, loss of species - it's just the way things are.'

But as people of faith, we should heed the words of the theologian John Bell who speaks of consumerism as something that now binds us. We need to be released from this binding. Christian discipleship in the 21st century, he argues, requires a reassessment of our values. If we don't, future generation will pay the price for our overconsumption.

Edward Echlin (3), an ecological theologian, writes that Christians must offer a prophetic alternative to our dominant culture which is set on relentless growth. In this we are not alone. Millions of individuals, churches and faith groups across the world are saying the same thing. As someone in the UN said recently, "this global mobilisation of all the major faiths of the world is historic and unprecedented."

Former Archbishop Rowan Williams has said "we must abandon an economy of growth for one of life, that we should choose life." I read that comment as life in all its glory from the smallest ant to the endangered Kenyan elephant.

I pray that what we have started to-day with our Methodist partners here at St Peter's "may guide us to a new way of living, an economy that concerns itself with quality, life, love and sharing in community, in a spirit of hope and gratitude to God our Creator, Sustainer and Reconciler in Jesus Christ".

Amen

Footnotes:

- (1) **[A Christian Guide to Environmental Issues](#)** by Martin J Hodson and Margot R Hodson, published by the Bible Reading Fellowship 2015
- (2) **[The Earth will Teach You](#)** by Kevin Durrant published by Wide Margin 2014
- (3) **[Climate and Christ - A Prophetic Alternative](#)** by Edward P Echlin, published by The Columba Press 2010