

Creationtide: Creatures, not Creators

By Revd Lucy Austin



Welwitschia mirabilis

These days one can hardly ever turn on the TV without hearing about ‘the environment’ in what seems to be every other sentence.

Whichever environment is being spoken of at that moment is always presented as being ‘in crisis’. There are just not enough superlatives in our language to cover them all.

And then I start wondering whether I remembered to put the recycling out!

Creationtide, however, asks us to think about something much bigger than recycling bins. It asks us to think about the whole of creation – and about our place within it.

I have seen Welwitschias growing in the desert in Namibia. Truly a miracle plant. It grows only two leaves (they split lengthwise) from the central woody crown. The same two leaves continue to grow to about 4 or 5 metres. Carbon dating indicates up to 3000 years lifespan. The rest of the plant is a massive taproot system reaching deep underground for water. It is entirely suited to its place in creation and to its environment.

In 1967, the American historian Lynn White Jr wrote a famous article arguing that Christianity itself had helped create the ecological crisis. His argument was uncomfortable. Christianity, he suggested, had encouraged us to see human beings as standing above nature, with the rest of creation existing largely for our benefit.

Is that too dramatic? We have sometimes read Genesis rather too much as a divine licence to do whatever we like with the planet. “Have dominion” can become “do whatever you like”. But White’s argument had an interesting twist. Christianity, he concluded, could also be part of the solution. That is worth remembering.

The Christian belief in creation begins not with us but with God. The world is not ours. It is God’s. We are creatures before we are consumers, tenants before we are landlords. If creation belongs to God, then perhaps we should pay it rather more attention.

For much of Christian history, nature was seen as something through which God speaks. The natural world presents another book of revelation. An ant could teach us something about diligence; a rainbow could speak of hope; the ordinary things of creation could point beyond themselves towards their Creator.

This suggests that we might occasionally put down our phones, stop rushing about, and actually notice what is happening around us.

A tree is not simply timber. A river is not merely a convenient water supply. A field is not just somewhere to grow things. Creation has value because God has given it life and called it good.

As Christians we tend to turn to Genesis for the foundation of environmental ethics. The former Chief Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, asked which passages in the Bible he would use to base a Jewish system of environmental ethics. He pointed towards Deuteronomy 20:19 “If you besiege a town for a long time, making war against it in order to take it, you must not destroy its trees by wielding an axe against them. Although you may take food from them, you must not cut them down. Are trees in the field human beings that they should come under siege from you?”

Rachel Carson, writing in *Silent Spring* in the 1960s, offered a much more disturbing version of the same warning. She described what happens when humanity assumes that nature can simply be manipulated to suit our purposes. Chemicals designed to kill a few unwanted insects can end up affecting birds, fish, soil, water and, eventually, us. Her point was brutally simple: if we poison the world that sustains us, we should not be surprised when some of the poison comes back. Science invents a chemical to kill one inconvenient insect and then discovers that it has a rather wider job description.

The biblical story of Babel gives us another way of looking at the problem. Humanity decides that it can build its way to heaven and become like God. The problem is not ambition itself, but the refusal to recognise our limits.

Perhaps that is one of the great lessons of Creationtide: **we are creatures, not creators.** We are wonderfully inventive, extraordinarily clever and capable of astonishing things. But cleverness is not the same as wisdom. We can alter the climate, reshape landscapes, manipulate nature and produce technologies our ancestors could scarcely have imagined. The question is whether we have learnt when to stop.

Wendell Berry, the American farmer and poet, puts the alternative rather beautifully. He encourages us to do things that “won’t compute”: to love the world, to plant trees whose shade we may never enjoy, and to invest in a future we shall not live to see.

That is a profoundly Christian idea.

Creation care is not simply about saving the planet.

It is about gratitude, humility and love. It is about recognising that the world is gift rather than possession.

So Creationtide invites us to look again.

At the garden. The hedgerow. The birdsong. The insects. The trees.

The astonishingly complicated business of a seed becoming a plant.

And perhaps, having looked, we might ask a simple question:

What kind of world are we leaving behind us?

Not merely for our children and grandchildren, but for all the creatures with whom we share this extraordinary, beautiful and slightly battered planet.

And then perhaps we can **do one small thing** differently.

It may even involve recycling.