

## Good shepherds of creation

David Lawrence

### The most dangerous species

The popular science fiction film *The Matrix* depicts a world in which the human race has been displaced as the dominant species by intelligent machines. In one disturbing scene, a representative of the world's new rulers describes their search for an adequate description of the human race. It settles upon characterizing humanity, not as a form of animal life, but as a *virus* – a species that, left unchecked, will spread remorselessly, infecting and in the end destroying the very environment on which it depends for life.

It is a disturbing image, all the more so because it is difficult to claim that it lacks justice. Of all the species on the planet earth, the human race has shown the greatest ability to adapt to different environments, to displace and destroy other forms of life and, ultimately, to come close to rendering those environments incapable of sustaining our own existence.

Only in recent decades have we come to realize just how much our lives impact one another. The irresponsible use of carbon-based fuels threatens whole peoples through global warming. The export of pollution by economically more powerful nations, by subcontracting production to regions with less strict environmental and labour laws, may bring greater economic prosperity to poorer nations, but often at the cost of the health of both workers and neighbours. Over-consumption of food, particularly meat, in many economically wealthy countries, has led to colonizing and often ruining vast acreages of precious land.

We must avoid the scare-mongering that has often discredited environmentalism in the popular mind, but it is clear that the human race, and the planet that sustains it, have reached a turning point. Millions of people already suffer as a result of the wrong directions we have taken environmentally and their numbers look set to be dwarfed by those who will suffer if we do not change direction.

### Hard truths

There are hard truths to be faced. And the hardest truth is that they must be spoken in different ways to different people.

### *To Christians and churches in wealthier nations*

The desire for ever more possessions and ever growing consumption is deeply embedded in the economically wealthier societies of our world. The witness of our churches in these societies is compromised, because too often we have

colluded with the deception that progress and economic growth are the same thing. To change the self-understanding of these societies will be long and difficult. It is a process to which our often-marginalized churches can contribute but cannot enforce, however much we might desire it.

While we work with others to change our economically richer countries, we must also change our lives. We must become the living examples that these societies need to see: we must learn to walk lightly on the earth, to prefer having enough to having everything. We must learn to weigh the consequences of our consumption carefully, finding lifestyles that reduce our impact on the environment and bring greater benefit to the poor – for instance, through the purchase of fairly-traded goods. We must speak out against what our societies are doing to God’s creation.

*To Christians and churches in less wealthy nations*

We must recognize that for our economically less developed societies to follow the same path to “development” as the richer nations would mean disaster for everyone. In the search for life in fullness for all we must be wiser and more self-controlled than those who have gone before us elsewhere. We must find paths to development that are sustainable and gentle on the land. The resources do not exist for the whole world to follow the profligate example of the economically developed countries. To attempt to do so would leave to our children and to our children’s children the heritage of a planet blighted by pollution and exhausted of its natural resources. It would be, quite simply, the way of death.

**Our mutual care**

As Christians, we recognize that in caring for our local and global environments we care for each other. A healthy environment is not a luxury we seek for our private enjoyment, it is the necessary foundation of life in fullness for the whole human family and for the wider web of life. And if to care for the environment is to care for each other, it is also true that when we degrade the environment, we degrade one another. We are called to a life that is festive – and it is in the nature of a feast that there is enough for all and to spare – without being excessive.

**The integrity of creation**

But we must be careful not to focus only on the human race and its interests. The created world that sustains us has, the scriptures tell us, its own integrity and its own story. It was, in God’s eyes, “good” before humankind walked upon the earth, and it moves towards a fulfilment that is inextricably intertwined with our own redemption – straining on tip-toe towards the day when the children of God will be revealed. (Gen 1-2, Is 55.12, Rom 8.19-21).

The call to the stewardship of that creation is not some new burden imposed upon us by the growing crisis of the past 50 years.

First, it is not new. Made in the image and likeness of God, we were called from the first to exercise a dominion like that of the God we see in Jesus Christ, who became the servant of those he came to save. (Gen 1.26, Phil 2.1-8).

Secondly, it is not a burden. God's creation is good in itself. In its beauty and its diversity, it shows us something of God. To separate ourselves from creation, to treat it with contempt, is to close off a precious avenue to closeness with God and so a precious opportunity to live life in fullness. (Rom 1.20).

### The need for realism

We cannot always rely on the instincts of those who work most closely with nature because the painful truth is that often they have been the worst offenders. Nor is a natural world that goes un stewarded necessarily good – the scourge of HIV/Aids and the terrible cost of natural disasters give the lie to such a naïve and simplistic view. While we believe that creation reflects the glory of God and is good in itself, we cannot forget that this is, in some sense, a fallen world.

It is not merely a matter of returning to a closer relationship with the environment, it is a matter of returning to a *right* relationship. Just as we celebrate the one who came as good shepherd to bring life in fullness, so we need to recognize our own responsibility to shepherd – to guard, to cherish, to nourish and to lead – creation to fulfil God's intention that it be something worth celebrating.

### Think global, act local – and personal

The stewardship of creation to which we are called is both corporate and individual. Our churches are not true to their calling unless we stand publicly against the degradation of creation and its exploitation in ways that are not sustainable. In doing so, we may also discover new and creative ways of working with, and learning from, other faiths and cultures than our own.

Equally, we as individual disciples are not true to our calling if our lifestyle denies our duty to care for creation in a manner befitting the creator's co-workers. We are called to embrace the gift of the natural world, to tend it and to discipline it lovingly, just as God embraces, tends and lovingly disciplines our own lives. "Individual actions may seem insignificant but together the small steps of many people can have an astonishing impact. Each person's joyful choices can be a visible example to others and give them courage to follow."<sup>1</sup>

For rich Christians to preach moderation to the poor while clinging to lifestyles that mock that message would be an abomination. But we must distance ourselves from the impression that being ecologically responsible is solely about "giving up" things. We can rejoice that there are those whose radically alternative lifestyles challenge many of the values of our age. We also need to

explore sustainable lifestyles that work for those who have little energy for creativity after a day's work, for the family who must find practical forms of transport encompassing the needs of young and old, for the many around the world who must satisfy their physical hunger and thirst before they can satisfy their hunger and thirst for beauty.

Science and technology are not autonomous – like all human activities they come under the judgment of God – but to reject unthinkingly the potential benefits of scientific progress and its application in technology would be as damaging as to ignore the dangers of their selfish and thoughtless application. What we need is science applied in the service of creation rather than in the service of human greed.

### Naming the lies

Last but not least, we must all reclaim the plain meaning of words. Language has been enslaved in the service of those who desire to create in people an insatiable appetite for “more”. We must stand up and proclaim to all who will listen that to live deprived of clean air, access to natural beauty, and food free of pollutants is not “development” in any meaningful sense of the word. To live on the backs of the exploited and on the edge of environmental breakdown is not “freedom”. And to define the quality of our existence by the number of our possessions or the extent of our economic power is but a pale shadow of life in fullness.

### Questions

1. What simple changes could you make to your lifestyle to reduce your negative impact on the environment?
2. What positive actions could you take to cherish and enhance your local environment?
3. What partners could your congregation find in campaigning for change at a local level?
4. How far does your congregation take environmental considerations into account when deciding about its life, its spending, its premises? How could it do better?
5. Is your church active nationally in promoting sustainable development and opposing the abuse of the environment? If not, why not? How could it do better?

### Note

1. The Catholic Bishops' Conference of England and Wales, “The Call of Creation – God's invitation and the human response: the natural environment and Catholic social teaching”, [www.ofm-jpic.org/ecology/callofcreation.html](http://www.ofm-jpic.org/ecology/callofcreation.html)