Sermon Joining in the mission of Creation - Rev Dr Amelia Koh-Butler

Sunday 11 October

A number of years ago, I was called by the church to be the rural educator for NSW-ACT. This urban, half-Chinese Youth Minister was handed car keys and told to journey across the state and territory, finding out what people needed and resourcing them. I had never lived on the land among farmers, although I had friends and relatives I had visited on the land.

The context was new and different. It was early in what was to become an 11 year drought. I learnt about the land and her people.

I learnt about drought and life cycles.

During droughts there can be bushfires.

Places that get droughts also get floods and storms.

After drought, comes the breaking of drought - the rains. After the rains, come ‘hoppers (grasshoppers) and mice plagues and lost crops.

With storms can come lightening strikes and more bushfires… and sometimes more floods.

Over history, we can see the cycles repeating. Many of those cycles are described in the Scriptures… patterns of droughts and migrations to follow-the-food. We remember the stories of Joseph and his brothers, of other floods and times of want, both in Israel and in places of Exile.

We remember when people journeyed through deserts and wondered ‘why are we here and where are we going?’ Will God provide for us? How do we know if God is with us or not?

When people struggle for food or water, the question is always there: does God care? If God cares for us and really loves us, why doesn’t God make it easier for us? Why doesn’t God provide - what we want, when we want it? If God has such a good plan for us, why isn’t it working the way we want it? Why are God’s priorities so out-of-synch with ours?

So, it might help us to consider creation… to look at what is happening in the world and what is being revealed in front of our eyes. There is revelation in creation… what we might call ‘general revelation’… what is apparent for us all to see.

We see the beauty of the earth. We praise God for nature and wonder, for intricacy and design, for ecosystems and life itself.

We are also seeing signs that some things are not quite right.

When we talk about Climate Change today, we are not talking about the God-given cycles of creation. We are talking about how the work of humanity is impacting on those cycles.

God gave people the task of caring for creation. Creation was given into our care. What has happened, though, has been a stripping of creation, a story of use and abuse. What we see now are cycles that are more extreme, out-of-kilter with the intention of the Creator. This is no longer recognisable as God’s good creation. Rather, the world now shows signs of how Humanity has stained God’s good creation.

Sure, we still see signs of beauty and holiness… but we also see brokenness and pain - Clive reminded us last week that the Apostle Paul talks about the groaning of Creation.

This week, we have some images from the Prophet Isaiah, where love and planting and growth are linked with digging and clearing and cultivating. We think about vineyards and how grapes are cultivated. Most vignerons plan carefully what grapes they will grow and tend the vines. When the vines are not tended correctly, the good grapes will not produce, rather there will be wildness and waste, unable to be pruned or hoed.

The story is linked with the tension between justice and violence.

When we read the prophetic imagery, we might think of this as an analogy for community. We are connected to a vine that can be cultivated well or can become wild if it is not tended.

“I am the vine” says Jesus… but we still need to tend to our connections to the vine to bear good fruit.

Yet, the imagery is also tangible. It is earthy and we are invited to look at the reading as grounded creatures. We who are made of the substance of the earth can think spiritually about earthy things.

We are not asked to exist only spiritually or only in an earthly way. We are both. When we read the scriptures there are both spiritual and physical truths we have to grapple with. Ours is an embodied faith. As it is in Heaven, so we should be behaving on earth.

The parable of the wicked tenants in Matthew 21 seems to pick up on similar imagery to the song in Isaiah. It takes the story further. It tells us of the Son who comes to bring in the harvest, but is killed as a result of the greed of the tenants who were meant to care for the vineyard for the owner.

Jesus places himself as the Son - the stone rejected by the builder, but made the cornerstone, on which everything must depend. In this story, we are challenged to consider, are we to be counted among the wicked tenants? are we looking at the vineyard as ours OR are we tending to the vineyard of creation so that all creation can bear fruit for God.

When creation is harvested for greed, it does not serve God.

When injustice tears at the fabric of creation, we must act.

When communities drown due to rising sea levels, we cannot stand by, as if it is not our problem - for we are God’s people - and we are called to act our of love and compassion for all God’s creation and all God’s creatures.

There is no part of God’s creation - land, seas, sky, animals, people - that is beyond our responsibility. God commanded us to care for creation. We are to be the good tenants - the good stewards - the ones who serve the Vineyard Owner… so that the fruits of Creation become As it is in Heaven.

Time for Reflection

God is calling you to be a Carer of Creation,

a Steward of the Earth, a good Tenant of God’s Vineyard.

* How can you be God’s good Carer, Steward and Tenant?
* What can you do for Land, Seas, Creatures, People?
* How can we work together for the healing of creation?