

## Address from Nigel Guthrie, 9 May 2021

Psalm 98, John 15: 9-17

Jesus said ‘This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you.’

Thomas Fuller, the 17<sup>th</sup> century churchman said ‘He that plants trees, loves others besides himself.’

And Warren Buffet, the American tycoon and philanthropist said ‘Someone is sitting in the shade today because someone planted a tree a long time ago.’

In the calendar of the Church of England the next three days leading up to the Ascension, are called Rogation Days; the word Rogation coming from the latin word ‘Rogare’ to bless. In the countryside Rogation processions ask God’s blessing on the fields and crops and usually at St Michael’s we hold a procession (although today we are simply holding outdoor prayers at the beginning of Mass). We are all vividly aware of how much the earth needs blessing now. The festival of Rogation is finding a new value within church life as all of us, urban and rural, realise that we rely on a complete functioning ecosystem to make life possible and good.

We usually think that Jesus’ command to love one another means that we should be respectful, kind and generous to those around us, here and now. And let us pray that we should always try to act like that! But what if our actions here and now cause pain, degradation, hunger and disaster to those who come after us? What if our use of the world’s resources now causes others in the future to lack what we have enjoyed? What if our failure to act causes suffering to those far away, whose lives are already vulnerable through poverty and climate change – something being highlighted by Christian Aid?

I recently found a book on my shelves which I was sent in 1972 from the family of my mother’s American pen friend. They lived in California and the book is entitled ‘The Last Redwoods’. When I picked it up recently I expected a rather sentimental view of the grandeur of the Redwoods and a lament for their loss. But in fact the book is a fascinating account of the former extent of the coastal Redwood Forest in northern California and of the attempts to secure its future. When the book was written in 1969 more than 90% of the original 2 million acres of Redwoods had been lost to logging and only half of what was left was in its pristine state.

Redwoods can live for more than 2,000 years, but most of the forest, which had existed for millions of years, had been lost to commercial felling in just one century.

I learned quite a bit about these amazing trees which can grow to over 100 metres in height and 8 meters wide near the base. They have bark that can be a foot or more in thickness which repels moderate fire and their high tannins make them highly disease resistant. They can even make their own rain by capturing the fog in the foliage which condenses to provide moisture for the tree. You may know the fine specimen nearby at Killerton Gardens which is a mere 41 meters high!

Yet these monarchs of the natural world have been exploited with no concern for long term management of the forest and the consequences of this exploitation have been realized for a long time. Save the Redwoods league was set up in 1918 and continues its work today and it's been fascinating to learn about it from their website. Back in my 'The Last Redwoods' book there is a story about an area of Coastal Forest at Bull Creek which was supposedly saved in 1931 in one of the early projects of 'Save the Redwoods' supported by John D Rockefeller. But only the flatlands and immediately adjacent slopes were part of the scheme with the rest of the large watershed being left in private hands. In 1947 industrial logging really got going in the rest of the valley leaving the soils with no protection. Research had shown that there had been serious flooding every 50 years or so, but with the rest of the valley heavily forested the damage was always limited because the water was absorbed and the land was held together by the structure of the forest. Then in 1955, following the logging there was torrential rain in the watershed and massive slides of rock and gravel from the slopes were washed down eroding the streams and making them torrents which in turn undermined hundreds of mature trees further down the valley, forever changing the character of the forest and the waterways. Following further flooding in 1964 another 400 mature trees were lost from the conservation area. Gradually restoration work has gone on but it will be hundreds of years before areas of forest will be fully restored and land which was developed or put to other uses adjacent to the protected areas may never be restored. 'Someone is sitting in the shade today because someone planted a tree a long time ago.'

This story from the middle of the last century struck me as a vivid illustration of what we are up against in blessing the earth today. Small scale improvements are good and significant but they need to be part of a larger plans which include all of our land so that good management can lead to a virtuous circle of environmental improvement. Our wonderful conservation groups including the National Trust,

RSPB, Woodland Trust and local wildlife trusts need and deserve our support. And they are increasingly working together with other charitable and government bodies on large scale restoration of habitat. Locally you might like to find out about the restoration of wetland locally at the mouth of the river Otter at Budleigh, which happens to be by one of our favourite walks.

David Attenborough is 95 this week. He has said “**In the end, important actions can only be taken by big business, by industry, and by politicians.**” For better or worse we know this is true. If large scale and urgent action is to happen international cooperation is needed and it is good for us to pray at this Rogation time for the forthcoming COP 26 UN Conference due to be held in Glasgow in early November this year. In the story of the Redwoods it is shocking how long it has taken to accelerate effective conservation measures and the same is true in so many other areas of work towards sustainable living. Like it or not we need the urgency which David Attenborough and Greta Thunberg bring to their environmental work. But we also need to be engaged ourselves, not only in doing our bit to live sustainably but also in making our views known to politicians and other leaders, because it is only by public pressure that matters will rise to the top of a crowded political agenda.

In several Old Testament passages the writers envisage the whole creation praising God; people and animals, trees, mountains and hills, rivers and seas. God blesses the earth and in turn the earth, and everything in it, blesses God. It is a joyful vision and one that is severely compromised by the damage which is being done to our wonderful earth. Surely there can be no more important legacy of love for those who come after us to put our best efforts into looking after the earth that God has entrusted to us