

Whose World is it anyway?

Sermon Notes (numbers refer to PowerPoint slides)

1. We live on an amazing planet – Out of the millions of planets in space it is the only one that we know for certain contains life. It is an incredibly complex, incredibly delicate, and most would agree incredibly beautiful world that we inhabit.

Yet there is a question hanging over planet earth – a question caused by our species and their use of the earth's resources, by the rapidly increasing footprint of 6 billion + human beings. And the question is actually quite a simple one.

[CLICK] Whose world is it anyway? A very simple question, and one we desperately need to ask ourselves, because it holds the key to the survival of human life on this small blue globe.
2. Let's look at a practical example of why this question matters so much. Let's look at the state of Alaska. Who does it really belong to? It contains enormous reserves of oil and gas, yet is one of the world's last remaining true wilderness areas. It was part of Russia for centuries before the USA bought it for \$1,000,000 just over 100 years ago. Its human inhabitants, the Inuit, have lived there for many thousand years, until recently using its resources carefully and sustainably. So, to whom does Alaska belong? To the American Government in far-away Washington DC? To local people? Or is there a sense in which Alaska also belongs to the Caribou, the Kodiak Bears, the seals and the Bald Eagles, for whom it is their only home? Can decisions about such a vast area, which will affect ecosystems all over the world, safely be taken by one nation or does the rest of the world have a say? And of course there is a faith dimension to the question who does Alaska belong to ... but we'll come back to that.
3. Or we could look at farming around the world. Who do the crops and the land itself really belong to? In the UK we throw away 1/3 of all our food at home, and if we include what gets thrown away by supermarkets, something like 53% of all food produced in Britain is wasted. Yet on planet earth hundreds of millions are hungry every day. Is it really our food, or actually somebody else's we're chucking out? And what about GM crops? Should we allow powerful companies to put a patent on naturally occurring genes that they take out of one plant and put into another? What about deforestation - should we be clearing forests that are home to rare and important species of wildlife, or fields that grow food for poor people just to grow biofuels so the rich can fly around the world? Whose world is it anyway?
4. What about what we put into the land and seas? Who owns the soil which can be damaged by lots of pesticides and fertilizers – is it the farmers, or does the wildlife itself have a say ... or future generations that will have to live on the land? And the oceans – who do they belong to? Should we allow them to simply become a dustbin for our toxic

waste and effluent, or should there be laws to protect fish stocks and coral and marine wildlife?

Well, so much for our context, but what does the Bible have to say about the subject 'Whose world is it anyway?'

5. Firstly, the bible teaches us that **the earth is our home**.
I don't know if you've heard the words of a famous old Christian spiritual song – 'This earth is not my home, I'm just a-passing thru'. The song was probably written by slaves looking forward to an escape from their terrible situation so the feeling is understandable, but I'm afraid the theology is terrible! The bible is clear that this earth is our home – that God made us to inhabit it and to spend our lives here.
[CLICK] In Genesis 1, the first human is named 'Adam' which is related to the Hebrew word for soil or earth, 'adamah'. God is saying that human beings are earthlings, made from dust, carbon-based life-forms. Our name is Dusty! We are part of this planet and made from the same stuff as everything else. This is our home.
[CLICK] In fact the Greek word for home 'oikos' is the root word for both 'ecology' and 'economy'. The science of ecology is about house-keeping – about protecting and preserving the complicated web of relationships that make our home function. And economics should be about home-economics – carefully stewarding the limited resources of our home planet.
[CLICK] In Acts 17 St Paul says that God who made the world and everything in it, also made the nations of the world, including 'the boundaries of the places where they would live' (17.26), and he did this, 'so that they would search for God and perhaps grope for him and find him' (17.27). You see, places are important – throughout the Bible God reveals himself to people in particular places, and he calls us to live in and look after those places. So ... the earth is our home, but it doesn't end there. That doesn't mean it's ours to use and abuse as we wish – like a sullen teenager saying 'It's my room and I'll mess it up if I want to'.
6. Secondly, the bible is clear that although planet earth is our home, at the same time **the earth is the Lord's**.
This planet does not belong to us. It belongs to God. It does so, because first and foremost God created it in the first place. He made it out of nothing and so it is by ownership and right. Also, he looks after it. God isn't the sort of artist who makes something and then gets bored and leaves it, moving on to his next project. The bible is very clear that God continues to care for this world – for every mountain and forest, for every bird and animal, for the changing of the seasons and the ebb and flow of the tides. OK, so God made it, and God cares for it, but who did he make it for?
[CLICK] According to Colossians 1.15-17, God made this world not for human beings in the first place, but for Jesus. "All things were made by him and for him". So, why does this planet exist? It exists because the Godhead, Father, Son and Spirit created it out of nothing as a love gift

within the Trinity – it was made for Christ. This is vital! All that this world contains – the land that produced fertile crops, the seas full of marine life, the forests bursting with biodiversity ... and all the resources – the oil, the gas, the iron-ore, the diamonds were not created for you and me in the first place. They were created by and for Jesus Christ.

[CLICK] In fact scripture states over and over again that God retains his ownership rights over this world. Psalm 24.1 'The earth is the Lord's and everything in it'; Psalm 50.10 'Every wild animal of the forest is mine and the cattle on a thousand hills.' If we look around at the state of the planet today, we can see how totally we have ignored the clear fact that this is God's world. We have treated it as our world – a 'natural resource' for us, rather than a natural treasure for God. Worse, we have treated it as expendable, something that is only valuable when we chop it down, dig it up, or turn it into a commodity – rather than something that has intrinsic value because God made it, God cares for it, and it finds its value in relation to Jesus Christ.

7. Well then, if the earth is God's not ours – how are we supposed to live on it? This is a key question, and a key part of the answer is that **the earth is on loan to us**. Psalm 115 states "The heavens and the Lord's heavens, but the earth he has given to human beings." At first sight, this might seem to contradict what I've just said – that the earth is the Lord's, but dig a bit deeper and it makes perfect sense. Whilst it is 100% God's world not ours, there is a secondary sense in which God has given us this world – not to use and abuse, but as a precious gift on loan.

[CLICK] We can understand this by looking at the story of the people of Israel in the promised land. You might think that, if there were ever a case of people owning land it was surely God's chosen people in their promised land, but God tells quite clearly that they are but 'aliens and tenants' within 'my land. In other words they – and we for that matter – are not owners of this earth outright. We have it on loan from God. Margaret Thatcher, when she was Prime Minister, spoke of us 'having a full repairing leasehold on planet earth', and in that she was absolutely right.

[CLICK] To put it another way, it's a bit like being lent a valuable piece of property by a friend – perhaps a Nintendo Wii, a precious piece of jewelry, or even their car or house. It is ours ... to use and to enjoy, but also to protect and look after on behalf of the true owner. In the Gospels Jesus again and again compares the Kingdom of Heaven to a landowner who leaves his estate, or his vineyard, in the hands of tenant farmers – stewards. Their stewardship is about how they care for the landowner's estate. We are called to be responsible stewards of planet earth – using it well and wisely, and answerable to God as owner for how we treat it.

8. Finally, **caring for the earth is part of our worship**. If the primary purpose of human existence is to worship God and enjoy him forever (as the Westminster Shorter Catechism puts it), then we need to

remember that caring for God's precious planet – that he cares for too, that he made for Christ – is part of worshipping Jesus. We are called to worship God both in our attitudes and our actions regarding creation.

[CLICK] The very first command we are given in Genesis 1 – our very mandate for human existence – is about ruling over earth and its creatures on God's behalf. This is what it means to be the image of God. Yet we have constantly failed to be good stewards. However, through Jesus – the true Lord of creation, we have the change to make a new start.

[CLICK] In Romans 8, St. Paul uses the image of creation as like a pregnant woman, groaning in longing to be set free from its bondage to decay. Yet in the same passage we read that creation is waiting for something else. It is waiting for 'the sons and daughters of God to be revealed'. What does this mean? It is a reference back to Genesis 1 – our first mandate to care for creation. Through the example and the saving work of Jesus that now becomes possible, and creation is waiting for God's children – those who follow Jesus – to take up their call again. Creation is waiting for us to worship God by caring for this fragile and wonderful world.

[CLICK] Of course we have a wonderful example of creation-care as worship in the story of Noah – a man who responded to God's call in rescuing all kinds of animals and birds from destruction. Today we need to look again at the radical message of Noah – because it is a reminder that God cares not only for people, but for all that he has made, and that his call to us is to worship and obey him in caring too. Wildlife conservation done to the glory of God is Christian mission.

[CLICK] Finally, let's remind ourselves of some of words from the most familiar Christian prayer of all – when Jesus asks us to pray that God's will be done 'on earth as in heaven'. This is a call to prayer, and a call to worshipful action. It is a call to envisage the earthing of heaven – God's kingdom rule beginning to take place here, not just in our churches, not just in our human societies, but on earth – throughout the creation.

9. So, whose world is it anyway? Whose World?

The earth is our home

The earth is the Lord's

The earth is on loan to us

Caring for earth is part of worship

Let's resolve to put this into practice in our church, our homes, and our lifestyles - to care for God's creation to his glory.