

# **‘Tilling and Keeping’ - sermon by Jonathan Chaplin**

## **10 April 2016**

### ***Genesis 1: 26-30; 2:4-9, 15-17***

- Let me pick up from what Bryony was saying about the challenge the world is facing arising from our use and distribution of energy use: [slides from **Energy Factsheet**]
- the West is using far too much of it while millions elsewhere have too little of it
- we’re still heavily dependent on the fossil-fuels which generate the CO2 emissions that cause climate change
- and we’re converting to renewable energy at too slow a rate
- here’s a particularly dramatic image of what this insatiable demand for energy is doing to the environment [**2 x oil sands slides**]
- this is the enormous oil sands development using up about 15% of northern Alberta, around the Athabasca river
- oil in the form of bitumen is extracted from huge sand deposits near the surface and converted into crude oil
- the process is very costly and causes massive environmental damage: it’s been called it ‘the world’s most unsustainable development’
- it’s an example of ‘extreme oil’ – oil that’s harder and harder and more and more expensive to extract: it seems to me it’s an act of desperation by a western society still clinging on to the lifestyle it feels entitled to protect at almost any cost
- even former President Bush admitted in his 2006 State of the Union address, that “we are addicted to oil” - but then adding, depressingly, that “the best way to break this addiction is through technology”
- The result of this and all our other abuses of the environment is that, as Pope Francis said last year in the important statement he made: ‘...the earth, our home, is beginning to look more and more like an immense pile of filth’
- our attitude to energy is a window on our souls: its revealing something disturbing about our attitude towards our fellow humans and to the whole of the natural environment
- it’s discloses the secrets of our collective heart
- **how did we get here?**
- how have we arrived at a point where our amazing human powers to understand and shape the world – which have produced so much good – have now turned against us to the point that we now seem addicted to self-harm on a massive scale – increasingly powerless to protect ourselves, to do justice to our fellow humans and to preserve an earth hospitable for our children?
- what’s happened in the last few centuries is that we in the West, and through us most of the rest of the world, have become intoxicated by our own powers: powers of exploration, of science, of technology, of wealth creation, the power to conquer nature to feed our own ambitions

- we've told ourselves that we're not merely one creature among many but masters of the universe – bidding for the title of Creator
- we've come to think we're capable of understanding absolutely everything, so if our lifestyles create environmental damage, we'll figure out how to fix it through more technology, as President Bush put it
- we've eaten from the 'tree of the knowledge of good and evil', and told ourselves that it's we who determine what are good and evil; that we're entitled to impose our own order on the world, to control and exploit it for our own self-chosen purposes
- fundamentally, we've forgotten what it means to be human: we've become impatient and disdainful of the calling God gave us at the beginning of creation
- **what is that original calling?** The passages we read from Genesis tell us two fundamental things about it: that we are image-bearers of God, and that we are tillers and keepers of the land
- **start with Genesis 1 vv 26-28** – from the 'first creation story':
- Then God said, "Let us make humankind in our image, according to our likeness; and let them have dominion over [all the living things]."
- <sup>27</sup> So God created humankind in his image,  
in the image of God he created them;  
male and female he created them.
- <sup>28</sup> God blessed them, and God said to them, "Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it; and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the air and over every living thing that moves upon the earth."
- **So what does it mean to be made in God's 'image'?**
- and what does it mean to have 'dominion' over other creatures? Or to 'subdue' the earth? Isn't that where all the trouble started – humans thinking of themselves as lords and masters over everything else, entitled to trample on the earth for their own pleasure?
- the key is in the word 'image': to be in God's image isn't to have a bit of God in us, to share some property of God; creatures don't share any properties with the Creator
- God has made humans 'very good' without making us replicas of himself
- In fact the word 'image' has a very special meaning in its original context;
- in the ancient near east, the term 'image of God' was used only of kings; it was kings alone who were 'images' of God – they were literally God's sole representatives on earth, ruling over their subjects with divine authority
- but in Genesis, it is humankind collectively that are 'made in the image of God' - every human being equally, male and female, bears God's image and so represents his rule – *that* is the fundamental point of being human
- to be human is to be called to share in God's rule in creation – what kind of rule is that?
- not a domineering rule that shows off the ruler's power or feeds his ego or exploits the ruled for the satisfaction of the ruler – not like the gods of the ancient near east
- but a protecting, nurturing, serving kind of rule that allows creatures to be what they are and fulfil the purposes for which they were created in the community of creation

- as Richard Bauckham puts it, being in the image of God is a ‘delegated participation in God’s caring rule over his creatures’ – the ancient hierarchical language of image of God is democratised
- the book of Genesis turns out to be a radical and subversive text in its time, and we need to recover that radicality for our own
- **this is confirmed in Gen 2**, the ‘second creation story’: 2:15: ‘The Lord God took the man and put him in the garden of Eden to till it and keep it’ – we discover quickly again that he also needed the woman to do that
- representing God’s rule on earth means *tilling and keeping* the garden
- obviously the surface meaning is agricultural: it means working the land: that’s how the earliest human societies related to nature – growing crops and herding animals, to survive
- but just as Adam and Eve stand for the whole of humanity, so the garden of Eden stands for the whole of creation: to be human is to ‘till and keep’ the entire creation
- what then are tilling and keeping? What is this awesome project God has invited humans to share in as his images, his delegates in creation?
- **tilling means ‘cultivation’** – working with the stuff of creation to bring something new out of it, something fruitful, productive, beautiful that will serve human needs and the needs of other creatures
- it means unfolding creation’s secrets for the blessing of all creatures: not only through *agriculture* but also through all other forms of human culture – all the ways we fashion and mould what’s around us: raising families, building communities, developing art, science, technology, transport
- God has dignified us by making us his partners in unveiling everything contained within the incredibly complex labyrinth that is creation – ferreting out its wisdom, bringing to light its amazing order and patterns, enjoying it, playing with it, sharing it with others who are equally made in God’s image and equally entitled to creation’s fruits – and by doing that, giving glory back to God
- if ‘tilling’ means cultivation, **‘keeping’ means ‘preservation’** – tending, caring, protecting, honouring other creatures so that they can continue to fulfil the special purposes assigned to them by God
- those purposes certainly include being of use to human beings, as food, as shelter, and resources of many kind – even fossil fuels have useful purposes within limits
- but as Richard Bauckham explained a few weeks ago, the *first* purpose of nonhuman creatures is the same as the first purpose of human creatures: just to be what they are under God, and so to offer their own distinctive voices of praise to him
- so to deliberately destroy one of God’s created species is to silence a unique voice in the chorus of creation’s praise: as Pope Francis says of the tragic loss of biodiversity today: “Because of us, thousands of species will no longer give glory to God by their very existence, nor convey their message to us”.
- and this human vocation – tilling and keeping the earth – is all the more remarkable because we ourselves are thoroughly earthlings – one kind of creature among many, completely dependent on the nonhuman creation at every moment for our very existence

- we're made of identical stuff – molecules, cells, blood, sinew, bone – sharing in the same fragilities as other creatures, and destined in this life to return to the same physical stuff from which we were made:
- as Genesis 2: 7 puts it, we are made of the 'dust of the ground', or 'the dust of the soil' – a sobering reality I was poignantly reminded of just 6 weeks ago when I cast a handful of soil into my own mother's grave
- yet God has appointed *us*, fragile, vulnerable creatures of dust to be his unique image-bearers within creation, to bear the joyful, awesome responsibility of tilling and keeping the earth on his behalf
- but in our modern western world, we've twisted the human task of '*tilling*' out of all proportion so that we've become self-serving exploiters of nature – resulting in devastating damage, both to the ecological systems on which all life depends and to millions of our fellow image-bearers whose environments, livelihoods and lives are now in great danger
- and we've neglected the task of '*keeping*' – abusing the trust placed in us by God and allowing creation to fall into disrepair and dishonour
- we've forgotten how to listen to the earth, which is well capable of telling us its needs if we have ears to hear
- but because we've become deaf to that voice, the earth is now having to shout its lament out loud, urging us to rethink, scale back, accept that enough is enough, and change tack – to repent: to undergo what Pope Francis calls an 'ecological conversion'
- to come down from the thrones we've erected for ourselves and, literally, get down and dirty again – to recover who we really are, earth's humble tillers and keepers, with soil in our fingernails
- thankfully today there are many hopeful signs that we are finally listening to earth's lament and beginning to change course
- in many countries there are many more environmental protections than there were a generation ago; movements for change are springing up everywhere e.g. the Transition movement; there's a highly active group in Cambridge
- even the Paris Summit in December, for all its limits, gave us some glimmers of real hope that the most polluting nations might finally move to prevent runaway climate change
- the rate at which we are changing is still too slow; whether we can speed up fast enough depends crucially on us – as individuals, households, businesses, campaigning organisations, governments, to take the many small and large steps needed to reduce our carbon footprint
- to live more lightly on the earth and so to do better justice to each other, especially the most vulnerable among us, whose crops are failing now and whose homes will be washed away in the future by floods and rising sea levels
- as we at St Paul's work to become an eco-church – bidding for that 'Bronze Award' as Bryony explained! – we're lending our own modest gesture of support to that larger movement of change that's already under way but still has a long way to go
- acting justly towards the earth and each other are not optional extras, not enthusiasms for a minority, not sideshows in the work of the Gospel – they are part of what it means to recover again our true humanity, which St Paul tells us is, as we speak, being renewed through Christ in the image of our Creator (Col. 3:10)

- even the smallest steps we take, as a church and as individuals – the recycling, the meat-free recipe book, the solar panels, many other things – are our witness in this place to God’s call that we become again tillers and keepers of a beautiful but fragile earth, so that we can also live before the world as those made in God’s image and likeness