**Stewarding God’s creation**

Today I want to focus on one of the fundamental commands that we have received from God as his people. In fact, the first command right back in Genesis 2. It is about stewardship of creation.

We know the creation story from Genesis 1

God in his Trinity created everything out of the formless void. Something out of nothing. Only God can do that.

We may recall the sequence: He created light; He separated the day and night; he created the sky; He created the land and the Seas; He created the seed bearing and fruit bearing plants; He created the Sun and Moon and stars to give us light; He created all the living creatures, then finally he created humankind

*Genesis 1:26 Then God said, “Let us make humankind in our image, according to our likeness; and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the birds of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the wild animals of the earth, and over every creeping thing that creeps upon the earth.”*

And God blessed humankind.

*28 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.”  God said, “See, I have given you every plant yielding seed that is upon the face of all the earth, and every tree with seed in its fruit; you shall have them for food.  And to every beast of the earth, and to every bird of the air, and to everything that creeps on the earth, everything that has the breath of life, I have given every green plant for food.” And it was so. God saw everything that he had made, and indeed, it was very good.*

Just as an aside, and making Karlene smile, it appears that we were originally intended to be vegetarians!

All is clear – God the creator created everything.

And in the New Testament that Godly creative ability is attributed to Jesus Christ, the Son of God.

*Colossians 1:15 He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation; for in him all things in heaven and on earth were created, things visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or powers—all things have been created through him and for him.*

The whole created order, in time and space, owes its existence to Christ. He is its true origin. He sustains it. Without him, it would have no ultimate meaning.[[1]](#footnote-1)

But in Genesis 2 we too are given a role

Genesis 2:7 *then the LORD God formed a human from the dust of the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and the human became a living being. And the LORD God planted a garden in Eden, in the east; and there he put the human whom he had formed.*

And here is the first command of God to humanity.

Genesis 2:15 (NRSV)

*15 The LORD God took the human and put him in the garden of Eden to till it and keep it.*

We are to look after the place. “I am putting you here, and this is your job.”

Let me wander down a stray rabbit hole for a minute: you will notice that I did not say “Man” but “human” and the reason for this is that the term for ground is adamah. The human, Adam, is derivative of adamah. We do not have a satisfactory word in our language in this… Adam is simply a (genderless) human being as such.[[2]](#footnote-2)

God formed ha-adam of dust from ha-dama (earth).[[3]](#footnote-3) If you like, prior Genesis 2:21 we could be described as an earthing, arising from the earth.

It is only in Genesis 2:21-24 that there became sexual differentiation. ha-adam said: this shall be called woman (issa) because from man (is) was taken this.[[4]](#footnote-4)

Humans are radically different from other creatures, not on the basis of superior gifts, but because of a direct and unique relationship between man and God; that into humans alone has God ‘breathed’; that is to say, only humans among creatures are spiritual, because the life of God indwells them.[[5]](#footnote-5)

Anyway, back to the main path: what I want to speak of today is about our role in creation.

Verse 15 tells us that we are put on earth to till it and keep it (NRSV); to work it and take care of it (NIV); to serve it, and to keep it (YLT).

In Hebrew (according to our Carey lecturer Michael Rhodes) the words are avad and shamar which can mean “work and keep” or “serve and protect”

Either way, we have stewardship of creation. It is our job to look after creation. That is our mandate from God. Our task is to care for the earth the way the Creator would. We are to continue God’s creative work.

The words that Christians in the past have focused on concerning the world is “dominion and subdue” taking it to mean exploit and pillage because it is ours to subdue and dominate.

Some teachings from the 19th century John Nelson Darby have caused some Christians to say because we are getting raptured from this world into a new world, that it doesn’t matter what we do to this earth because in the end it will be toast so we can strip mine, destroy the environment, make animals extinct, exploit the land and seas, fill the air with pollution because it doesn’t matter in the long run.

They forget that God’s design is for humanity to be a servant of the land, that we are called to represent the Creator within the community of creation.[[6]](#footnote-6)

God created humans to participate in his joy-filled creative work and live in harmony with creation[[7]](#footnote-7)

The mandate to us to take charge over wildlife and the plants and trees is expressly to help them flourish and thereby obey the Creators command to “be fruitful and multiply”[[8]](#footnote-8).

Scripture not only speaks of humanity being fruitful and multiply but also all the animals and plants as well.

Genesis 1:21 *So God created the great sea monsters and every living creature that moves, of every kind, with which the waters swarm, and every winged bird of every kind. And God saw that it was good. 22 God blessed them, saying, “Be fruitful and multiply and fill the waters in the seas, and let birds multiply on the earth.”*

God makes it clear that in subduing and ruling the world, the earth’s provisions are not the exclusive property of humanity[[9]](#footnote-9) to do with whatever we want, but they are to be enjoyed by the other creations. Our mandate is to care for creation for all to enjoy, human and non-human.

So the question has to be: Just how well are we serving and protecting this beautiful blue marble in the dark sky of the universe?

Not too well, would be my summation.

The Royal Society suggests that extinction rates in the recent past have been running 100 or more times faster than in pre-human times, and that the pace of extinction has accelerated over the last few centuries [and commented that] if this continues, the loss of species will soon amount to a large fraction of all species on the planet.

And they reported that the main direct causes of extinction are loss and degradation of habitats due to human use of land and sea; overexploitation of wild populations; and the impacts on populations and ecological communities of invasive alien species, pollution, and climate change[[10]](#footnote-10)

We don’t seem to be doing too well on the protecting front.

On land nor at sea. We use the oceans as a dumping ground

The Great Pacific Garbage Patch spans waters from the West Coast of North America to Japan.

It occupies 1.6 million square kilometres, fifteen and a half times bigger than New Zealand.

Quoting a sea captain who passed through it: "As I gazed from the deck at the surface of what ought to have been a pristine ocean, I was confronted, as far as the eye could see, with the sight of plastic. It seemed unbelievable, but I never found a clear spot. In the week it took to cross the subtropical high, no matter what time of day I looked, plastic debris was floating everywhere: bottles, bottle caps, wrappers, fragments.'"[[11]](#footnote-11)

Our sea birds and fish are dying because their stomachs are full of plastic which does not pass through their bodies and which gives them no nutrition.

Nope we are not doing too good in protecting our seas either.

Not only with land and sea and air but also the space above us. Since the dawn of the space age in the 1950s, humankind has launched almost 50,000 tons of material into space, about 10,000 tons of which remains in orbit.[[12]](#footnote-12) Our destructive abilities are endless.

Even here in New Zealand, we are not good in caring for creation.

According to David Parker, the Environment Minister, “Every year New Zealand generates more than 17 million tonnes of waste and sends almost 13 million tonnes of that to landfill,” said.[[13]](#footnote-13)

That is 3 ½ tons of waste for each and every New Zealander every year. It has to go somewhere.

A report in 2022 showed that Invercargill was the deadliest place in New Zealand when it comes to air pollution - more dangerous than larger cities. We topped the death-rate rankings for air pollution from vehicle exhaust and domestic fires and industry combined.[[14]](#footnote-14)

Not only are we not caring for the environment that God has given to us to be stewards of, but we are also killing ourselves because of our lack of stewardship.

How can we care for, protect and serve the creation that God has commanded us to care for, protect and serve?

You may ask why I am addressing this in relation to church. This seems to be an environmental issue more suited to a Greenpeace rally or some other environmental agency.

But I raise it because God commanded us to be stewards of his creation.

Tom and Christine Sine, writing about how Christians should live in the world, commented that “One of the primary evidences that a person had chosen to follow Christ was the dramatic difference it made in how they stewarded their lives and resources.”[[15]](#footnote-15)

We are to live out the mandate from God.

But how are we doing with the mandate from God given right at the beginning to “serve and protect” creation? Not globally, not nationally, not even city wide, but here in our own sphere of influence.

It irks me, for example, that in our rural area of Myross Bush, we do not have recycling bins. Everything goes in the big bin for the landfill – glass, plastic, cardboard, you name it, all into the landfill.

Plastic silage bale wrap is an environmental hazard too in rural NZ. You can’t burn it or bury it. In 2021, a company set up to recycler such wrap collected 2600 tonnes of bale wrap and pit covers.[[16]](#footnote-16) And that is just the tip of what’s out there.

However, on our farmlet, we do compost compostable things and food scraps go to the chickens.

It may seem we are doing too little too late. But that is not true.

As followers of Jesus, we can model what looking after creation looks like.

We can influence institutions to take creation care into consideration.

We can pressure corporations and governments to make changes to the way they do things so that creation is kept intact and not trashed.

Some will say that this task is secondary to the Gospel but remember that creation is central to God’s design for humanity and human sin affects the planet in disastrous ways. We are to steward creation as God’s partner here on earth. The energy we expend on environmental issues is not wasted energy. It is consistent with gospel proclamation.[[17]](#footnote-17)

We are part of an initiative called “Serve our City” on 15 September. It is a chance to show that we care for God’s creation.

PPTS This is some things that were done last year under the Serve the City banner:

That was last year. Now there are 7 churches involved and over 450 people and 18 projects.

Some groups are repeating the same projects as last year, others are doing up the Onslow St Cycle Park and working in more schools.

Our church’s tasks are the clean-up of Glengarry streets and parks. Also helping at Waverley Park Primary School. In the old days we could have gone out on the public roads and picked up the litter thrown from cars along the way, but now you need a traffic management plan to do that. Health and Safety and OSH. So, we will do our bit around here.

It may not seem a lot, just to clean up our area of rubbish but every little bit helps.

It shows we care and it shows our responsibility to God’s command to us.

So join us on Sunday afternoon the 15th and make a difference to our suburb.

Think about how you can care about the environment entrusted to us by God in all aspects of your life, whether it is in recycling, whether it is reducing the air miles of your food, whether it is using less fossil fuels, whether it is planting bird friendly and bee friendly plants in your garden. There are so many ways we can make little differences to the way we steward creation.

1. Dick Lucas *The Message of Colossians and Philemon* 48 [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Eugene Petersen *Christ Plays in Ten Thousand Places*. 76 [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Phyllis Trible *God and the Rhetoric of Sexuality* 79-80 [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Trible 95 [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. George Carey *I Believe in Man* 25 [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Daniel Zacharias “Graceland: Land as relational gift in the Bible” in *NAITS* Vol 17 168 [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Carmen Imes *Being God’s image: why creation still matters* [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Zacharias 169 [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Ibid [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. https://royalsociety.org/news-resources/projects/biodiversity/decline-and-extinction/ [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. <https://education.nationalgeographic.org/resource/great-pacific-garbage-patch/> AND https://www.cnet.com/science/the-great-pacific-garbage-patch-the-floating-islands-of-trash-three-times-the-size-of-france/ [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. https://www.usatoday.com/story/news/nation/2023/11/14/space-junk-nasa-european-agency/71566411007/ [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. https://www.beehive.govt.nz/release/government-plans-transform-recycling [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. https://www.rnz.co.nz/news/national/470488/air-pollution-invercargill-revealed-as-deadliest-centre-study [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. Tom & Christine Sine *Living on Purpose: finding God’s best for your life* 120 [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. https://plasback.co.nz/thousands-of-tonnes-of-plastic-recovered/ [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. Carmen Imes *Being God’s Image: why creation stdill matters*  [↑](#footnote-ref-17)