

A Season of Creation, part 3 – 15 September 2024

Message – Desolation

Creator, Redeemer, and Giver of Life, help us to hear your voice, to see and value creation as you do, and to see and value others as you do. **Amen.**

Our desolation extends to more than just the environment. There is a gap in attitudes towards the environment between younger and older people but the gap extends beyond that. Social attitudes are a complex thing, they are dependent on our stage of life, the events of the time, and when we were born. Individual attitudes are even more complex than this.

The traditional church denominations lament the lack of young people in their midst. Yet, a simple look at social attitudes would reveal a sizable gap between the attitudinal values and priorities of young people and these churches.

The world today is a very different place from the one in which any of us grew up, excepting the servers and acolytes who at times sit behind me! We are perhaps most conscious of technological advances that have changed the ways in which we communicate, particularly, the internet, so called smartphones, and the growing use of video calls.

There are, however, many other changes. While churches just about cope with the, not so new, technologies, we appear not to be engaging at all with the other changes that are affecting younger generations.

Young people today face a degree of uncertainty in the

workplace that was last seen in the great depression. Those of you who were born in the great depression and in World War Two, referred to as the silent generation, will have some idea of the effects that uncertainty has on life. Yet while there are similarities, the causes and the culture today are very different. An obvious change is in housing, in the span of my working career, the median house price to income ratio has doubled. If you know any young people and take time to talk to them, you will know some of the similarities and some of the differences.

Major social changes are taking place. The church should be speaking out where these changes are disadvantaging one group over another. We perhaps feel powerless. Yet, the response to the great depression was the establishment of social security and a response to the war was the establishment of a public healthcare system. Today, we can see there is injustice and inequality, we live in a world with decreasing social concern, what should our response be?

One of the areas of deep concern of younger people is mental health. There are increasing levels of mental illness and they place an increasing emphasis on a healthy work-life balance. It is another topic on which the church is largely silent. Yet, in broad terms, faith is known to be good for our mental health, good on top of the benefit of meeting socially with others, so a double benefit.

Sadly, in the mental health arena, the most vocal parts of the church have a reputation for doing harm. I have met a host of people whose churches have found diverse ways of wounding those who are already wounded. That these people will trust a chaplain is remarkable, one wonders just

how many do not have such trust.

The people I have met have really heard the message of the gospel, love and God's grace, but have experienced a church that does not live this out. I suspect there are times when we, here, have wounded people too. Not necessarily intentionally, such interactions are complex. Nonetheless, if we approach everyone with positive regard, as a child of God, we stand a reasonable chance of getting most of it right and they will probably manage to forgive us for the rest, recognising that we too are broken humans!

The church should be a place that young people can turn to to be built up and strengthened. The life experiences of people here, means there is a lot of wisdom to be shared, so long as we remember to listen first, always remembering, we have two ears and one mouth for a reason!

Another major area of concern for young people is equality. Our society is a work in progress, yet the churches lag even behind that. Where is the equal love of God for all people seen in the life of our church? This raises hard questions for the church, for our traditions, and requires engagement.

Generally, people become more conservative and cautious as they age, on top of this, for their age, as a group the silent generation are significantly more conservative than subsequent generations. Yet, this is also the generation that lead many of the changes in the sixties and seventies.

Recognising the tendencies of those of our own cohort, or generation, can help us reflect on how we should be different. Where is the passion for putting things right and reforming unjust systems. We now recognise new

injustices; the need for the passion to put things right is as great as it has ever been. God's love is constant but our expression of that love needs to change as our understanding of the world changes.

Perhaps the greatest cause of anxiety for young people today is the environment. Again, attitudes differ across generations. (<https://www.nature.com/articles/s41467-021-24245-y>) In case you are wondering if there is any evidence for this in New Zealand, my wife's colleague, Taciano Milfont was lead author on an article published in Nature Communications, which found there is indeed a generational gap but also that concern is growing equally among young and old, though the gap remains.

We have care for creation as one of our five marks of mission. It acknowledges that we cannot seriously talk of God's love and grace while people's homes are being destroyed as a result of things that, collectively, we can do something about. While we may debate the exact details, we can point to many things that show that we are not caring for God's very good creation.

Disruption of the climate, climate change, is fiercely debated. A few still deny that it is happening at all, more debate the causes. The causes are complex. Looking at other damage we do, we are a part of the problem. We need to be a part of the solution. There are Christians who believe that life on earth is only about whether you get to heaven and so they do not need to care for the earth, which ignores the consequences others face because they do not care for the earth. We return to the need to include care for creation in the five marks of mission.

Air pollution is undebated and the more we learn the more harm we realise it is doing. Including reducing our own life expectancy. Even self-interest should help us address this.

Damage to the oceans takes multiple forms, over-fishing, acidification, waste chemicals, waste plastics, intensive fishing techniques, the list goes on. Even on the simple basis of how many people eat the produce of the sea, we need to care for our oceans. Yet, they are also a major sink for carbon, which will be disrupted if they become too acidic.

Deforestation continues at an alarming rate. We are not using the land that has been cleared in a sustainable way and so more land have to be cleared. We are fortunate that some of this country is too difficult to farm. It has allowed significant ancient native areas to continue. How do we help others to preserve what they have that remains?

Desertification is occurring in many places this may be part of a natural cycle. However, our air pollution is destroying that microorganisms that live in many deserts and that enable them to be repopulated when conditions change. We are creating a barrier to natural recovery processes.

Destruction of habitats means that many species face extinction. And, it is happening here, we have less than ten percent of our wetlands remaining. Wetlands sustain a phenomenal diversity of wildlife, provide a carbon sink, and often provide a buffer to the worst effects of storms.

Despite, the studies that say we are growing enough food, world hunger has been increasing since 2016. The consequences of malnutrition are lifelong. I hope that we agree with Christian Aid and believe in "*Life before Death.*"

It is no wonder that younger people have a sense of the desolation we are causing in creation. Most of us will not face the consequences to the degree they will, we will not pay the price, our children and our children's children and beyond will. Yes, technology may help us but at what cost. We do not know but we know there will be a cost. What is the inheritance we are leaving for our children.

It is not just about the cash we leave them in the bank, it is about the condition in which we leave creation, our home and their home. Creation is the first testament of God; it is God's holy temple. There are no shortage of people trading in creation today. Creation is rarely honoured as the house of prayer that it is. Yet, more and more people are finding creation is where they connect with God.

We must learn to lament. Lament is not without hope but is an honest assessment of where we are now, with the certainty that God has not abandoned us but will journey with us to better care of God's good creation.