

The Lord God took the man and put him in the garden of Eden to till it and keep it.

Over the last few weeks, environmental issues have been particularly in the news with the increasingly heated row over the question of climate change: to what extent it's happening and whether the evidence for it has been exaggerated. And we're all aware that large questions face us both now and in the future.

Christianity and Judaism are sometimes blamed for the environmental problems that we face, and this happens largely because of one verse from the Bible, and that verse is Genesis 1:26, 'Then God said, "Let us make mankind 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"'. 'That's the problem', some people have said, leaping straight to a very questionable conclusion. That's the attitude that makes human beings think that they're in charge and can do whatever they like with the rest of the environment. And so, they allege

that in Christianity and Judaism are the roots of the attitude that has got us into trouble.

Historically, I'd like to argue that this idea is unlikely. It is undoubtedly the case that western countries in particular, through pollution, extinction of species, deforestation and perhaps emission of carbon dioxide have caused some really big problems for the world. But it's interesting that the real problems have happened over the last two hundred years – precisely the period in which religious faith has by and large been in decline in the western world. The attitude of human beings that says that the rest of nature is ours to do what we like with is actually far more likely to come from atheism than it is from Christianity or Judaism and historically it generally has.

But there are also deeper reasons within the book of Genesis itself. Before I say what they are I'd like to add that I'm assuming Genesis does not give us a literal account of how things happened, but rather that, as the Church Fathers believed, it is a story or series of stories that reveals to us theological truth about how things are.

So, reading it as such, that verse about human beings having dominion over the rest of creation must be put in context and one part of the context is God's command to Adam that he must till and keep the garden of Eden. Yes, God does indeed give Adam dominion over everything else in creation, but it's dominion, not domination. He is not just given it to do as he pleases. Rather, he's entrusted with a solemn charge that he must till and keep the garden; in other words look after it, be a good steward of it.

And we see in a very moving part of the story, an example of Adam doing precisely this. Here are some words we heard earlier: 'Out of the ground the Lord God formed every animal of the field and every bird of the air, and brought them to the man to see what he would call them; and whatever the man called every living creature, that was its name'. Adam names the animals and as he names them, he shows yes that he has dominion over them. It is he who gives the name, and in that sense he shows that he does indeed have power over them. But the fact that he names them also shows that he respects the animals. For to name something, you have to acknowledge its existence, its distinct being. In order to name the animals,

Adam must notice the difference between them, the particular characteristics that each one has; the special features that make a giraffe or a beetle or a hippopotamus. In his naming of the animals, he shows not just that he is in control, but also that he respects and cares for all the other creatures that God has given into his charge.

It may sound a strange thing to say, but every time we celebrate the Eucharist, we are making a similar sort of environmental statement. Because, when celebrate Mass, we take those things that God has given. Bread and wine don't just occur naturally in the environment: would that they did! But in order to get them, human beings have to exert their dominion. For us to make bread, we have to grind the wheat and fire the oven. To make wine, we have to tread the grapes and manufacture the bottles. To make these things, then, we take God's good gifts and we make our mark on them. But then, in the Eucharist, we offer back the bread and wine, and they are put in their right place, not as our gifts to God, but as God's gift to us. We say effectively, 'Lord, we have brought these things to you, but now we understand that it is really you who has given them to us'.

They come not from our efforts and our work, but ultimately from you as your loving gift.

And so it is that here at the altar, today and always, we play out that crucial balance that we find in Genesis. The balance is this that yes, human beings do have unique power within the total economy of all that God has made, but yes also, that power is to be exercised as stewardship, not to grab and control the rest of creation as *our* right, but to receive it as *his* gift.