

Season of Creation 2A: The fruit of idolatry
Romans 1.18-25 | Matthew 5.13-16
(Diocese of Guildford Season of Creation Lectionary)

For us to be salt and light in this time, we need to discern what lacks flavour and what is dark about our world. This Season of Creation helps us to come to awareness about this, as we take time to reflect on the way our earth home is increasingly hurting and inhospitable to life. As disciples, as those Jesus urged to be salt and light, our faith must guide us to respond to this reality. To do that, we need to understand the underlying problem.

The burden of St Paul's letter to the Romans is that God reaches out to save us, because left to our own devices we cannot save ourselves. The human condition is profoundly damaged and damaging – there is something in us that breaks things even when we're trying not to – and despite our best efforts we need God to intervene and renew our hearts. All our schemes for improvement, for good government, for healthy economies, for loving relationships, for environmental sustainability, end up becoming corrupted, twisted by self-interest and deceit and the desire for power.

Paul insists that the root of all of this is idolatry. In his time, idolatry took a very physical form – people literally worshipped statues or images that represented the gods they believed were responsible for fertility, harvest, victory in war and so on. "Claiming to be wise, they became fools; and they exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images resembling a mortal human being or birds or four-footed animals or reptiles."

But the essence of idolatry is not so much in the end point, which is a sacrifice made to a false god. The essence is in the failure to recognise and worship the Creator to begin with. It's to make the visible world, and our human needs and desires, the limit and measure of reality.

Instead of looking at the cresting wave or the vast mountain or the intricate daisy and seeing the hand of the One who called it all into being, in our “darkened minds” we decide that the human creature is the author of the world. The truth about the invisible God, Paul says, is obvious if we just meditate on the things that God has made. But something in our nature resists how small and limited we seem in comparison to this Creator, and we turn from worship to the illusion of control.

Life is risky and scary, and as humans we are conscious of this fact, so we seek to get a grip on it in any way we can. For the ancients, that involved bargaining with oracles and sacrificing to gods to try and force their fate into a shape they could accept. Later societies learned scientific methods of agriculture and industry to create wealth. We manipulated farming techniques and markets and trade settings to bring about a secure and prosperous life. We developed medicines that could cure illnesses that would have killed our ancestors. So when we figured out that we could get on pretty well without God, that we could live comfortably and self-sufficiently, the Creator was consigned to the dust-bin along with the gods of rainfall and hunting.

But as humans we are still worshipping creatures – we seem wired to devote ourselves to what we admire, and to seek purpose and inspiration, to find fulfilment. We trust in science and technology to enhance our lives, and follow celebrities in magazines or online because they seem to be having the beautiful, successful life we want. Yet we remain haunted by the fact that despite our technological and other advances, we still experience randomness, bad luck, suffering and unfairness. We haven’t managed to bring this whole earth and all its contingencies under our control.

When we forget the God who made us and imagine ourselves the peak and pinnacle of creation, this creates enormous mental stress – because we were designed to be in relationship with the One who transcends us.

Without that relationship, we try to make our humanity stretch to fill the gap, but we are far too small and sinful to do that well, and end up shaping the world after our greed and neediness.

And now, in our selfishness, we have over-reached. Lacking acceptance of our limits, and failing to remember our proper posture as kaitiaki of a creation gifted to us by God, we have devastated forests, filled the air with warming gases and pollution, treated the oceans as a rubbish dump, and threatened – and in some cases already destroyed – the lives of the poorest people on the earth.

What happened in Nepal recently wasn't a disaster that happened because of earth processes like an earthquake or volcano. It was the direct and predictable result of altered weather patterns – and we know that we will see more and more events like this. Companies and governments that refuse to act boldly on the climate threat are choosing now the avoidable deaths of thousands, perhaps millions, of people and the eradication of species in the years to come.

We were given an intricate, finely balanced, beautiful, wonderful world to live in as our home, and we are gradually making it uninhabitable. As St Paul says, we have “exchanged the truth about God for a lie and worshipped and served the creature rather than the Creator.” This crisis is a spiritual crisis, deeply connected to the problem of human sin, and idolatry.

So given the sheer, overwhelming obviousness of the problem, surely it is time to recognise that the solutions must be spiritual as well. It is time for salt and light – salt to preserve and freshen the goodness that remains, light to show us the pathway back to right relationship with the Maker of the heavens and the earth, and thus to right relationship with the creation.

People of faith must not only be involved in advocacy and sustainability action, and committed to finding solutions to the practical problems, but we must also be bold and constant in naming the spiritual dimension of what we face. We need to be the ones to find ways to recall human communities back into the awareness of what it means to be human in relation to the invisible God who shines through creation. We must be people who refuse the idols of this age – wealth and tech progress and the optimised human body – instead giving our worship and trust to God, and our love and nurture to all that God loves.

It seems so impossible, doesn't it? How vast and how implacable are the global forces that are bent on destruction! Those who distort political economies and co-opt religion for the sake of power are deceptive and ruthless.

But let Jesus' metaphors encourage us. How little salt is needed to bring out the flavours of an entire meal! And all you need is one little lamp on a dark night and you can see it for miles.

The earth is God's, and all that is in it. The human purpose is to delight in and offer up this earth in praise and thanksgiving. Everything starts with these truths. Any form of human society that rejects this foundation and turns instead to idolatry is doomed. Not many people are willing to hear this. But we need to say it anyway, because humans accepting our proper role in creation as those who worship and serve the Creator is the key to the healing of the earth. And maybe, when enough people realise that we have got ourselves into a mess that we can't get out of by ourselves, there will be a turning again to the Creator in whom we live, and for whom we were made.