

Being ‘neighbour’ to the earth

By Kevin Treston in [The Good Oil](#) Feb 2020

The story of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:30-37) is surely one of the most evocative and loved parables of Jesus. The lawyer’s question, “Who is my neighbour?” is a disturbing challenge to us to reflect on whom we choose to be ‘neighbour’. Jesus revolutionised the identity of ‘neighbour’ of his time to embrace all people, including those who were sworn enemies of Judaism such as Samaritans.

Perhaps we might expand the scope of neighbour as people to embrace the earth as ‘neighbour’ and allow the earth to enfold us as ‘neighbour’. Certainly it would be more in accord with the history of humankind to recover the memory of those thousands of years where the earth and people were interconnected in myth, ritual and living together in partnership.

How are we ‘neighbours’ to the earth and how do we allow the earth to be ‘neighbours’ to us?

Never before in history has humankind accumulated so much knowledge about the universe. The science of Copernicus, Galileo and Darwin and countless others have revealed for us a vast evolving universe of billions of galaxies and stars and a wondrous diversity of life forms. Modern science and cosmology have demonstrated the interconnectedness of all things in creation. Science has also exposed the consequences of human vandalism which has diminished the well-being of creation by pollution and exhaustion of the biosystem. All too often planet sustainability is pushed aside for uncontrolled economic growth.

Being ‘neighbour’ to creation is a challenge for every single person on the planet as well as all religious traditions. However, in this article I will explore being ‘neighbour’ through a Christian lens.

Ambivalence would best describe how Christians have historically related to the earth. On a positive note, we recall the earth-friendly traditions of the Benedictines, Franciscans and creation-centred people such as Meister Eckhart and Hildegard of Bingen. However, negative influences left mainline Christianity with a heritage of ‘otherworld’ bias in its dominant spirituality. Christian theology was significantly influenced by dualism, a separation of spirit and matter. Plato’s philosophy and movements such as the Gnostics (first to second century), Manichaeism (third to fourth century), Albigensianism (thirteenth century) and Jansenism (seventeenth century) endorsed the idea of spirit as good and material things as bad. During the last 50 years, mainstream Christianity is slowly recovering its earthly roots as an incarnational religion.

How might Christians be ‘neighbour’ to creation?

The first imperative for Christians as ‘neighbours’ to the earth is to live out the implications of the Incarnation: “and the Word became flesh and lived among us” (John 1:14). According to a Christian belief, divinity and humanity became fused together with the advent of Jesus who became the Christ. Each person, created in the image and likeness of God (Genesis 1:27) is also an incarnation. Matter and spirit are one in our humanity. We do not simply belong to the earth, we *are* the earth: “then the Lord God formed man from the dust of the ground...” (Genesis 2:7). The first covenant, symbolised by a rainbow, was between God, us and the earth: “I will remember my covenant that is between me and you and every living creature of all flesh that is on the earth” (Genesis 9:16). A holistic vision

for humanity is always about nurturing a creative relationship of the trio of God (*theos*), humans (*anthropos*) and the universe (*cosmos*).

The mission of Jesus is summarised in John 10:10: "I came that they may have life and have it abundantly". Being 'neighbour' to creation is to celebrate and promote 'abundance of life' to self, others, creation and our graced life. By fostering abundance, not scarcity, we look for opportunities to bring to a greater fruition our talents, the talents of others and the well-being of creation. Whatever diminishes the integrity of creation diminishes us. Working for justice in alleviating poverty, violence and ecological vandalism is a given for 'neighbours' to the earth. The abused traveller by the wayside in the parable of the Good Samaritan is the face of forest degradation, toxic spills, species extinction and human deprivation.

We are 'neighbours' to creation when we befriend the earth and enhance its abundance. In the book of Job we read: "But ask the animals and they will teach you; the birds of the air, and they will tell you; ask the plants of the earth, and they will teach you" (Job 12:7-8). Indigenous people of every land have been telling us for years that nature has much to teach us. Western people are often afflicted with what US writer Richard Louv called 'NDD' ('nature-deficit disorder'). When we learn to pause to wonder at the magical colours of sunsets, feel the wind on our face, observe the myriad of colours in a flower, hear the songs of morning birds, then we become attuned to the rhythms and the chorus of nature. The Aboriginal leader Narritjin Yirrkala reminds us: "We belong to the ground. It is our power and we must stay close to it or maybe we will get lost". It is difficult to be 'neighbour' to the earth unless we welcome the earth as our friend, the source of oxygen enabling us to breathe, providing us with daily food and teaching us about beauty, colour and imagination.

Humankind lives within a cycle of birth and evolution of species, rainforests and deserts, fertility and aridity, floods and bushfires, rainbows and droughts. We learn to be neighbours with the earth when we seek to transform the chaos of nature, its fires, drought, floods and earthquakes. In Christianity the cross is a symbol, not of despair, but of hope. Death is not an end but a movement to a beyond. Calvary is to give way to Easter. The chaos of creation invites us to be neighbours to one another in compassionate support and grounded within the cycle of earth's rhythms.

In the parable of the Good Samaritan when Jesus asked "Who do you think was a neighbour?...", the lawyer answered, "The one who showed him mercy". The earth is neighbour to us by showing mercy through providing us with daily sustenance, life-giving oxygen, resources, creatures (I love Darcy our dog!) and wondrous displays of colour. We are neighbours to the earth by showing mercy through a passionate commitment to enhancing the integrity of creation.

Do we choose to be 'neighbour' to the earth or "pass(ed) by on the other side" (Luke 10:33)?