

Bible Study - Session 2

Humanity Sunday



TO RULE OR TO SERVE EARTH

Earth Reading: Genesis 1.26-28

BEGINNING

This study begins with a text, the interpretation of which has become quite controversial in recent years. At the core of the controversy is the question of how humanity should relate to creation.

Begin by asking yourselves the question of whether human beings should be rulers over Earth, stewards responsible for Earth, servants of Earth or friends of Earth? How have you lived your life—as a ruler or a servant?

More than 300,000 harp seals are clubbed or shot to death each year in Canada. 96% of them will be less than 3 months old, and some may be even skinned alive. Is this just the activity of greedy hunters, or does it reflect an attitude in the Western world that human beings have a right to dominate creation, a right based on the reading for Humanity Sunday?

BACKGROUND

The controversy about this text has intensified recently as we have become more aware of our intimate relationship with Earth and all of life on Earth. There are several ways of reading this text.

We can read it from a traditional human-centred (anthropocentric) perspective and emphasise that human beings are specially created by God to rule the creatures of Earth and dominate Earth.

We can read with an awareness of our close connection with creation and interpret the text as a commission to be stewards responsible for Earth and its creatures.

We can read from the perspective of Earth, of which we are a part, and see the text as one reflecting a tradition that is in conflict with the good of Earth and perhaps even with the Gospel perspective of the New Testament.

In this study we will explore these options as we analyse this text and the other texts assigned for this Sunday in *The Season of Creation*.

EXPLORING THE TEXT

Read Genesis 1.26-28

The creation of humans in this text comes at the end of the six days of creating. God creates light, sky, Earth, celestial bodies, birds, fish and animals. Finally, God creates humans.

In this text, the creation process seems to be different when God makes humans. God begins by saying ‘Let us make humans...’ There has long been a discussion about the ‘us’. The most likely explanation is that this reflects the language of the ancient world where God speaks with the council of heavenly beings in this special act of creation.

The next significant feature of the text is that human beings, both male and female, are made in ‘the image of God’. This indicates that human beings are distinctive in some way. Over the centuries the image of God has been interpreted in many ways. The image of God has been identified as a feature that distinguishes human beings from other creatures, for example, reason, a higher level of consciousness, a capacity to worship, the soul or a spiritual dimension and so on.

Discuss: What has been the understanding of the image of God in your tradition or community? Has the image been seen as something distinctive within humans or as something humans have a special capacity to do?

In recent years, scholars have pointed to a custom found in the ancient world where a king who rules over large domains places an image of himself in distant regions. That image functions as a representative of the king in that location. Accordingly, it is suggested that human beings are like images of God the king, representing God on Earth.

If that is the case, then the image of God is not so much something distinctive within humans, but rather a distinctive function that humans may perform as representatives acting on God's behalf.

The question then becomes, what is that function?

That is where the other verses of this reading become important. According to the text, human beings are to multiply so that they can 'rule' over living creatures and 'subdue' Earth. In other words, humans may express the image of God when they exercise their role as rulers over Earth.

Discuss: Does this interpretation make sense to you? Do you see any problems with this way of understanding the passage?

This reading of the text seemed to present no problems for people in the past. They were happy to see themselves as representing God and dominating creation. They read this text as a 'mandate to dominate'.

Others, with an environmental consciousness, have re-read the text and said that 'rule' really means 'be stewards who take care of' creation, and that 'subdue' means something like bringing order out of chaos.

A close look at the Hebrew words for 'rule' and 'subdue', however, seems to suggest that they are very strong and aggressive terms. In Psalm 72, for example, at the point where the king 'rules' in verses 8-9, his 'foes bow down before him and his enemies lick the dust'. To rule clearly means to dominate.

A close look at the Hebrew word for 'subdue' reveals a similar orientation. After Joshua conquers the Canaanites, the whole land lies 'subdued' (Jos. 18.1). To subdue is to conquer.

In Psalm 8, we find the same perspective. God has given human beings dominion and placed 'all things under their feet' (Ps. 8.5-6). In this Psalm, humans are the 'kings' and all other creatures are their subjects.

Discuss: How do you react to this orientation? Try, for a moment, to put yourself in the position of Earth or the creatures of Earth? How would you react to being 'placed under the feet' of humans? What might the voice from Earth be crying from behind this text?

Exploring the Text ***Read Genesis 2.15***

In the second chapter of Genesis, we get an entirely different picture of the role of humans in relationship to Earth. When God makes Adam, the first human, God places Adam in the garden 'to till and keep it'.

A closer look at the text reveals that the Hebrew word for 'till' normally means 'serve'. The role of the first human then—and presumably all humans—is to 'serve' and 'preserve' Earth.

If we compare this text with the preceding reading from Genesis One, we discover that they seem to be diametrically opposed. The first reading has 'rule' and the second has 'serve', the first reading has 'subdue' and the second has 'preserve'.

Consider the following table:

	Gen. 1.28	Gen. 2.15
Humans are to	'rule' living creatures 'subdue' Earth	'till/serve' Earth 'preserve' Earth

The verbs in the first reading imply royalty and domination, those in the second indicate service and preservation.

Discuss: In the light of the current ecological crisis we face on planet Earth, which of these readings is preferable? And why?

Conscious of the Crisis

One of the many ways in which humans have 'dominated' life on this planet and shown little concern for living creatures, is through the destruction of whole species. It is not simply a question of hunting animals or fishing our rivers. Humans have had an attitude of superiority that has led to many species becoming extinct and others being endangered.

We have removed the forest habitats of some species, polluted the water habitats of others and poisoned the soil habitats of still others. In the name of human progress, many living species have been considered disposable. And sad to say, we have often done so as a right to dominate! Our past slaughter of the whale, perhaps the largest living being in creation today, is a good example of our desire to dominate.

Discuss: Identify some local endangered species which groups are now seeking to preserve. On what basis would you join such a group?

Exploring the Text

Read Mark 10.41-45

We are faced with a problem. We have two biblical texts—Gen. 1.26-28 and Gen. 2.15—which seem to present diametrically opposed positions about our role as humans in relationship to Earth. The first says 'dominate' and the second says 'serve'. Which of these perspectives do we choose and why?

One answer is to listen to the voice of Earth. Which of these viewpoints reflects compassion for Earth? Which of these positions would Earth support for the benefit of all creatures on Earth, including humans?

A second response is expressed in the Gospel reading for this Sunday. There Jesus expressly compares the way of Gentile rulers and those who follow Christ. Roman rulers are tyrants who dominate their people (Mark 10.42).

Among Jesus' disciples, however, 'ruling' and 'dominating' are not on! Instead, Jesus' disciples are to become slaves who are willing to serve others (10.43-44). And the model for that remarkable re-orientation is Jesus himself. As the Son of Man, Jesus came not to be served, but to serve; he came to live and die for others not to dominate them (10.45).

Discuss: In other words, the message of the Gospel reflected in Jesus' words guides us as we choose between the two Genesis texts discussed above. How? What then does it mean to serve Earth as a disciple of Christ?

Connecting with Christ

Read Phil. 2.1-8

The Gospel reading from Mark already makes it clear that we relate to all things, including creation, differently when we become disciples of Christ and are called to serve. And this service is not the command of a king who demands our subservience! This service is not the authoritative expectation of the ruler of Earth!

On the contrary! We are called to serve because Christ first served us. We are called to be servants because Christ is the supreme servant who gave his life for us and for all creation.

The full extent of that giving is only apparent when we follow the line of thought reflected in the text from Philippians. For Christ, who calls us to serve, is the very Son of God who created us. And this Christ emptied himself of all the power and dominion that belongs to God and becomes a human being. God joins the web of creation.

The emptying of power and rule, however, goes even a step further. This Christ not only becomes a human being but takes on 'the form of a slave!' (2.7). A slave! The power orientation is completely reversed. God becomes a servant. Christ becomes a 'slave' who 'serves' until he dies on the cross...and continues to serve!

And Paul urges us to have the 'same mind' as Christ Jesus. Paul urges us to 'serve' rather than rule, because Christ 'served' us by becoming one of us and one with a piece of creation.

Discuss: What are some of the ways in which we can 'have the same mind as Christ' and in so doing 'serve' both our fellow human beings and the creatures which are part of the creation God loves?

CLOSING WITH PRAISE

Song

Participants may wish to close by singing two verses of the following song, using the melody of 'Praise my Soul the King of Heaven'. The song is written in honour of St Francis of Assisi.

Mother Earth, our mother birthing
Ev'ry creature from the ground.
Jesus too was flesh and breathing,
Kin to all that's green and brown.
Celebrate with all creation:
God has joined the web of life.

Sister Air, our sister lifting
Ev'ry creature born with wing;
Jesus shared the breath of forests,
Breath that makes our spirits sing.
Celebrate with all creation:
God has joined the web of life.

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PRAYER

*Christ, we know you came to serve
and give your life for all creation.
Teach us to serve as you serve
and not to dominate the creation you love.
Amen.*

