

## **Sermon given at Service of Worship led by Anne Thomson, at Knox Church Dunedin New Zealand. Sunday 24 April 2024, Easter 4 – Earth Day**

**Readings:** Psalm 23; 1 John 3:16-24; John 10:11-18

### **Sermon**

The Lord is my shepherd, the Psalmist sang – and Jesus said “I am the good shepherd – I lay my life down for my sheep<sup>1</sup>.” The first letter of John tells us that is what love is. But it goes on to say, “How does God’s love abide in anyone who sees a brother or sister in need and yet refuses help?” Love is known not in our words alone but in our actions<sup>2</sup>.

In the face of the destruction we are causing to our environment, and the consequences that has on our sisters and brothers in need, how might we be called to respond as those who follow the good shepherd?

Where to begin? “The earth is the Lord’s and all that is in it<sup>3</sup> – and God saw that it was very good.<sup>4</sup>” We can begin by remembering that the raw materials from which plastics are made are part of God’s ‘very good’ creation. Plastics are remarkable in that they are infinitely flexible, chemically virtually inert, and have thus found their way into every part of modern life.

But we also recognise the brokenness that pervades God’s good creation, the ways in which God’s purposes for the flourishing of all life have been twisted and distorted by the powers that we name as sin and death in our world. The relationship that God intended to have with all of creation, and with us human beings made in God’s image, has been broken.

Plastics aren’t in themselves evil – but the uses we put them to and the extent to which we use them can be.

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<sup>1</sup> John 10:11

<sup>2</sup> 1 John 3:16-18

<sup>3</sup> Psalm 24:1

<sup>4</sup> Genesis 1:31

Plastics are at the heart of a consumer materialist culture which tends to reduce God to a personal feel-good spiritual experience and ignore the false gods that we really worship: comfort, pleasure, self-fulfilment and instant gratification. Too often these are what shape our lives, and we are cut off from God and from one another.

Like the plastic garbage we dispose of and forget, we ignore those bible passages that challenge us to do without our luxuries and seek God's Kingdom first<sup>5</sup>.

Then the manufacture and disposal of many plastics involves known carcinogens damaging people and particularly the world's poorest, who tend to live near chemical plants and handle toxic materials. Yet companies with more power and money than many nations minimize and deny the risks and any responsibility – a vivid example of demonic principalities and powers<sup>6</sup> at work in today's world.

Moreover, the vast majority of plastics are made from petrochemical polymers and monomers derived from oil and natural gas (although they can also be made from plants). When we consider our use of plastic we must also consider our use of fossil fuels more widely and their impact on climate change and pollution of air, soil and water. Even as we realise that we have to keep fossil fuels in the ground, if we are to avoid the catastrophe of runaway climate change, petrochemical companies are planning to invest billions in expanding plastic production, which will enable them to continue their oil production. If trends in oil consumption and plastics production continue as expected, plastics will account for 20% of total oil consumption by 2050.

We were created to be in relationship with God, fellow humans, creation and ourselves, and yet the way we use plastics is now damaging all these relationships.

In the face of this brokenness, how do we respond? Does the weight of all this crush us down into despair and hopelessness? In the face of the weight of the world's sin – which is the theological word for this dislocation and brokenness – God acted in love; Jesus came as the good shepherd who laid down his life for the sheep; and we are called and challenged to lay down our lives too.

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<sup>5</sup> Matthew 6:33

<sup>6</sup> Ephesians 6:12

The first step away from sin is repentance, *metanoia* – to change our minds, to turn around and go in a different direction. Repentance begins by acknowledging our part in the brokenness, the sinfulness, not just as individuals, but also in the societal and systemic sin that we are caught up in. Lack of intent does not equate to lack of harm. Just because we don't intend to pollute fragile ecosystems and neighbourhoods, that does not absolve us from culpability in the damage that our oversized demand for plastics creates.

Repentance means a change in our point of view, and our behaviour. Repentance means turning away from our desire for more, for more convenience, for easy solutions that can too often be 'out of sight, out of mind'. The repentance that we need is both personal and economic. We need to move from consumption to connections with people, creation and God in our own lives, and in our economy. We need to stop putting profits over people and planet.

The change that comes with repentance is seldom instantaneous, and can seem glacially slow. But awareness of the plastic we take for granted in our lives and of the impact that plastic production and pollution is having on our world is a good place to start. Repentance brings us back into relationship with God, with the world that God created and with the animals and human beings who are part of this world. Repentance will turn us towards the path of love – how do we respond when we see our brother or sister in need?

How do we respond when we learn that between January 2018 and March 2021, New Zealand exported over 98,000 tonnes of plastic waste, mainly to Thailand and Malaysia, where it is often dumped, burned or 'processed' in unregulated ways, resulting in water, soil and air pollution. The toxins leached during this process have disastrous effects on the local communities. Cancer rates in these areas are increasing and the overall health of people living in surrounding communities has been on a steady decline. How do we show our repentance, turning in another direction?

There are changes of direction in NZ. Manufacturing new products like fence posts and particle board sheets out of recycled plastic within NZ– thank goodness soft plastics are again being collected for recycling in Dunedin. And changing our behaviour is possible - think how hard it was to remember to take reuseable shopping bags to the supermarket 5 years ago – but we are learning. The ban on many forms of single use plastics that came into law last year means 150 million plastic produce bags have been removed from circulation annually. There are small changes happening even now.

After facing the brokenness of the world, and turning to go in a different direction, Jesus welcomes us to a new life, a new community. How do we encourage one another to care for creation, to care for those whose lives are being destroyed by plastic? There are so many different environmental movements, like Earth Day tomorrow, like Plastic Free July, which began in 2-11 in Western Australia and is now a world-wide thing. How do we as a community here at St Philips encourage and support one another to change our minds, turn around and live differently?

How does God’s love abide in anyone who has the world’s goods and sees a brother or sister in need and yet refuses help? Little children, let us love not in word or speech but in deed and truth.

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