

Sermon preached at Scots
27 September 2009

Readings: Isaiah 65:17–25
Romans 8:35–39; Mark 16:14–16a

“...we are more than conquerors through him who loved us.”

Can you think of a time when you were on a mountain or hill and could see far into the distance? Sometimes such scenes give you a sense that you were in God's presence, that the mountain was the centre of the world, that you could sense the mystery of life? Up there in the fresh air and the warm sun it might have felt like being far away from strife and pollution, from that awful busyness and numbing dreariness of everyday life, that you were in a place where everything was good, just as it should be, just as it was when God created the scene before you.

Frequently in the Bible, God's prophets had visions of an ideal future, a world where the turmoil of war would cease, a world where the dreams of the past would be realised, a world where God would create peace and harmony throughout creation. Today's passage from Isaiah records the yearnings of the people who have come back from exile, knowing that their land was devastated by their conquerors, knowing it would be difficult to cultivate crops, knowing that even Jerusalem on Mount Zion was half in ruins, and offers to them a vision of hope.

The opening lines speak of God 'creating new heavens and a new Earth' just like in Genesis 1. Creation continues in the present and the future. God did not create the world a long time ago and then retire. So now Isaiah announces another of God's continuing creations. Also, the phrase 'new heavens and new Earth' could just as easily be translated 'new skies and new land' so the prophet is talking about the real world they live in, not some distant dream world or spiritual world.

The picture isn't one where the present physical world will first be eliminated or destroyed before this new creation happens. Rather, the new creation is a transforming of this creation by removing the curses that plagued the people. The world pictured by the prophet includes everyday houses, vineyards and vegetables gardens. But there's more, this transformed world includes special blessings for humanity. None of them will die young; they will all live long and enjoy the labour of their hands. They will be blessed and so will their descendants.

And all of this transformation happens on 'God's holy mountain'. The promise of God is that Jerusalem on Mount Zion is still a place from where God's creating power goes out. Mount Zion is the source of God's renewing presence. As a result, Jerusalem itself will be re-created into a city of joy. That joy, however, won't just be confined to the people. God will rejoice in the holy mountain together with the people of God who worship there. Ultimately, the mountain too celebrates.

The final image is of peace on that mountain where 'the wolf and the lamb' live together. It pictures wild creatures living at peace with weaker creatures. Lions and oxen are found eating straw. And the snake eats dust, not live animals. Here 'They shall not hurt or destroy in my holy mountain.' The world of God's holy mountain will be transformed into one of peace between all creatures that once harmed each other. This mountain is 'peace mountain'.

Is this ideal world of the text feasible in terms of the normal ecosystems and life cycles of creation? Can the entire world be transformed into a vegetarian ecosystem? Or is there a message here that transcends such a simplistic ecology? Perhaps the animals here are also metaphors for human parties that fight each other.

That may be a clue to how we view the ecological crisis. Many mountains and parts of the wild have been polluted by human exploitation. A classic example is the Ok Tedi mine located high in the rain

forest covered Star Mountains of Papua New Guinea. This is one of the largest gold and copper mines in the world. But from these mines have flowed tailings that are full of toxins and sediment that have polluted the Ok Tedi-Fly River system, destroyed fish and smothered vegetation. From this mountain and many others, poisonous power rather than rich renewal has flowed from the mountain. Mining activities have turned the mountain into a symbol of human greed and destruction. The mining continues; copper and lead are still part of our lives. Abuse of the wild is a daily event. We have our own examples over on Mt Te Aroha and at Waihi to reflect on.

You see, part of our way of thinking comes from our sporting and adventure side of living. Mountains are something to be 'conquered,' a bit like how we've 'conquered space'. Even Everest after being conquered, still requires men and women to take great care, and lives are still lost on its slopes and ice falls, something captured well in the latest film about Everest. "Conquering" something in this way spills over to our sense of ownership and power over something, the mountains are there for us to master.

But reaching the top of Everest or any other mountain is not a 'conquest'. A view from the top reveals how utterly dependent we are on God and how God's creative power and loving care extends across vast expanses of creation. Paul in this chapter from Romans has the whole theme of creation responding, and that we as humans are involved intimately in that not as masters on top of, but as dependent beings, dependent on creation and on God's love. That is how he can say that 'in all things we are more than conquerors through him who loves us'.

What makes us genuine 'conquerors' is being connected with the love of God in Christ. This is not a conquest of mountains but a victory over fears and forces that could separate us from Christ. This is not a conquest that destroys but something that secures our connection with the deep love of God. No height nor depth nor anything else in creation can separate us from that love. This is one of the most powerful words of assurance in the New Testament. Paul assures us that nothing can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus.

That also means that no matter where we are in creation the love of God in Christ is present. No matter what mountain or ravine we reach, the love of God that sustains creation keeps us connected with Christ. The love of Christ is not only a force in our hearts; it is also a powerful presence in creation.

It is significant that Matthew has Jesus delivering the commission to 'go and make disciples of all nations' from the mountain. It takes us back, on the one hand, to the reading from Isaiah where the good news of peace comes from God's holy mountain. On the other it refers also to the scene in the temptations where Satan has taken Jesus to a high mountain and showed him all the earth. But today in the added ending to Mark, the commission has a different emphasis. Here Jesus asks the disciples to proclaim the Gospel, the Good News about God's love in Christ Jesus, to 'the whole creation.'

In other words, the love of God in Christ is not only for the redemption of human beings but of all creation. This creation, abused and broken by human sin, is also the object of God's loving care. This groaning creation will also be liberated, says Paul in Romans 8. Peace is made with creation through the blood of the cross, says Paul in Colossians.

Christ and creation are bound together. The Christ with whom we are connected loves us and preserves us in creation. Nothing can separate us from the love of God in Christ. But the love of God in Christ extends further than our personal lives. It reaches to the ends of the Earth, the depth of creation, the core of the cosmos. That love which redeems us will renew creation. And that same love empowers and inspires us to work for the preservation and renewal of this creation.

The Word of Christ is among us. Hear this Word.