5 October 2019: Creationtide Evensong
Ordinary Time during Trinity
Job 38:1, 4–18; Colossians 1:2–20;
The Right Reverend Steven Croft, Bishop of Oxford

Space: the final frontier. These are the voyages of the starship Enterprise. Its five-year mission: to explore strange new worlds; to seek out new life and new civilisations; to boldly go where no man has gone before.

The opening lines of Star Trek were first broadcast in 1966. They make an important assumption. The assumption is common to all science fiction and to all of our culture for more than a hundred years. The assumption is that the universe is full of intelligent life.

There are two trillion galaxies in the universe. Each contains about 100 billion stars. HG Wells and Star Wars and Doctor Who take it for granted that there is life on other planets and sooner or later we will find it. But what if they are wrong? What if we are the only ones here?

James Lovelock is one of the world’s most influential scientists. He is the author of more than 200 scientific papers and the originator of the Gaia hypothesis: that the earth is a living system. He lives near Chesil beach and celebrated his one hundredth birthday in July.

To mark that great milestone he published a short book, the Novacene, co-written with Bryan Appleyard.

Lovelock believes that Earth contains the only intelligent and reflective life in the entire universe: human beings. He believes this as a scientist: the conditions required for the evolution of intelligent life on earth are he believes so demanding that it is highly unlikely that such life exists elsewhere. We are alone and, Lovelock argues, our very existence is in danger because of catastrophic climate change.

Ponder that truth for a moment. There are two trillion galaxies in the universe each containing 100 billion stars. The only part of this vast creation able to see and reflect on those stars, able to think and reason, able to tell stories and find meaning and to love is
humankind. And what are we doing with our beautiful and fragile common home, this wonderful blue and green planet, this haven of life?

Here is the paradox of our generation, the terrible knowledge which we cannot unknow, the burden and the opportunity we bear: we are part of creation; we are the spoilers of creation; we are the stewards of this very earth. Unless we awaken the whole of humankind to the responsibilities of that stewardship then the earth will change beyond recognition within two generations and even the praise of God will fall silent.

“The Lord answered Job out of the whirlwind: “Where were you when I laid the foundations of the earth? When I made the clouds its garment and thick darkness its swaddling band?” (Job 38.1, 7).

“In Christ all things in heaven and on earth were created, all things were created in him and for him”, says Colossians.

We declared our faith a few minutes ago with these words: “I believe in God, the Father Almighty, the maker of heaven and earth”.

According to the Book of Genesis, the Lord God sets humankind first in a garden, to till it and to be its steward. We understand far more than we have ever done the wonder of this garden, the variety and wonder in creation, the relatedness of our ecology, the majesty of physics, the intricate chemistry of life.

And we understand more than we have ever done what we are doing to the earth: the plastic choking our oceans; the greenhouse gases heating the earth and distorting the climate; the melting of the polar ice; the plundering of the rain forests; the permanent extinction of so many species; the clear and present danger to the earth.

We are beginning to understand what needs to be done. But will the changes come in time? The global environmental movement has become a movement of the very old and the very young reminding those who take decisions, those who consume the earth’s resources, those who are distracted by a host of less important things, that the entire earth and the entire future is in peril and we need to take action in the next five years which will mitigate the damage and that action involves all of us and needs to begin today.

Towards the end of his great encyclical, Laudato Si’, Pope Francis challenges the whole earth and every Christian to an ecological conversion (Laudato Si’ 216 ff.). Francis quotes his predecessor, Benedict, who writes, “The external deserts in the world are growing because the internal deserts have become so vast”. Every church and every Christian
needs this ecological conversion, a renewed relationship with creation, founded on wonder and thanksgiving, on humility and simplicity, on hope and self-restraint to help renew the earth.

The churches and the faith communities have a vital role to play in the next chapter of our planet’s story. The majority of people living on our planet profess to be believers. The future is therefore largely in our hands.

The Church can access a deep ethical tradition of respect for creation, altruism and moderate consumption. We are able to connect personal lifestyle questions and public policy. As Anglicans we are part of and help to lead a global communion which transcends national and generational interests. These are the potential gamechangers globally in the next decade.

The Church of England’s voice on creation and climate change needs to grow louder, more insistent and more urgent and so does our voice as a Diocese. I spent Tuesday of this week hosting a meeting of 30 environmental experts to give fresh energy and vision to our work as a Diocese in caring for the earth.

Climate will be our focus in Lent 2020 as a Diocese and as a national Church as we prepare for the Lambeth conference and as the United Kingdom prepares to host the global climate talks in Glasgow a year from now. This louder public voice will need to be supported by changes in lifestyle and in our combined carbon footprint which set an example and give integrity to our public voice.

We are called to summon all those around us back to the principles of wise stewardship of the earth and of our common home. Thank you for all that you will do as parish representatives in this calling. May God strengthen you in our common calling.

In all the vastness and beauty of the universe, there may only be one planet which is home to intelligent and reflective life. God has made this beautiful and fragile earth, through the wisdom and glory of his Son Jesus and the power of the Creator Spirit. The responsibility of dealing with the climate emergency has fallen to our generation. We must not fail. May God bless us and strengthen us in that task. Amen.