

**Notes of a Bible study led by Bishop D Zac Niringiye (Uganda) during the ACEN meeting of Eco-Bishops, women leaders and youth leaders from Southern, Central and East Africa which took place during the Season of Creation, 19 to 23 September 2018, at the Good Shepherd Retreat Centre in Hartebeespoort, South Africa at the Good Shepherd Retreat Centre in Hartebeespoort, South Africa.**



Something went wrong. We discovered this truth so late. At the heart of the Gospel is justice. The victory of the Gospel is the victory of justice. The triumph of Jesus is the triumph of justice. Ecology: even the dry lands are part of God's ecology – some creatures that live in the desert could not live in green pastures.

We made a mistake; friends from the west didn't help us. We have treated the Bible as a book, instead of a library of books and a story we are invited to read. It tells the story from beginning to eternity so we are all in this story.

If we must call it a book let it be a book that reads us. In this way we can look at the Old Testament account and know how to enter it. Jesus enters that account. The road to Emmaus: Jesus was not

the Messiah people were expecting so they did not recognise him. Jesus explained the scriptures to Cleophas and the other disciple, beginning with Moses. We can begin with Moses. The Torah, the books of Moses. In many ways the place to begin is Exodus – and in Exodus the place to start is the story of the burning bush. The burning bush introduces us to Moses – the story of Moses has to be told because of the burning bush, the epiphany it represents. We can look at Exodus before we look at Genesis.

Moses was looking after his father-in-law's flock and he led them to Mount Horeb, where the burning bush event is described. "The place on which you are standing is holy ground." "I am of the God of your father, the God of Abraham, ....etc." What might Moses have asked himself? The Hebrews had experienced 400 years of servitude. Might Moses have asked, "Yahweh, for 400 years where have you been?" The conversation continues. "The cry of the people of Israel has come to me." "I have come to deliver them." "I will send you to the Pharaoh to bring my people, the Israelites, out of Egypt ... *I will be with you.*" For 40 years Moses has been among people who worship the gods of the Midianites. Moses says to God, "Who are you?" Answer: the God who in the beginning created heaven and earth. God gives Moses two pictures to answer 'Who are you?', in Genesis chapter 2 and in Genesis chapter 3.

First picture: Genesis chapter 2. The picture of the garden. Creation as God intended. The place of creation communion. The place of harmony. Named the garden. The Lord planted a garden and there he put the human and plants. The tree of life, and the tree of the knowledge of good and evil were among the plants. The human was to work and keep the garden. The work was joyful and beautiful. God said, the human is free, but this freedom has boundaries (without boundaries it would be 'license'). The condition is that the human should not eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil.

Second picture: Genesis chapter 3. The garden is the place of social justice, right relationships - God, humankind, creation, all in just relationship within the boundary set by God. It is clear in the Old Testament that justice is about relationships. The garden is the place to understand equal justice. What went wrong? Humankind chose to listen to a different story. (Jesus said we should be wise as serpents and innocent as a dove. Snakes are not the devil!) Humankind decided that it needed more than God can provide. Humankind responded to the creature not the Creator. Creature: "You will be like God". But God has already made humankind in the divine image. So this is distortion. This is the nature of lies – to take truth and distort it. (Paul on greed: greed is overstepping your boundaries.)

Human greed breaks the communion in the garden. It's all about this creature called humankind. The theology of human dominion alone – where did that come from? Stewardship is about faithfulness; dominion alone is about greed.

The challenge for Africa, the environment is said to be poverty. No, the problem is greed. It is greed that has created the poor. In chapter 3 we have a picture of estrangement. Creation is no longer part of who we are. (The aboriginal people are teaching us that the land owns us, not the other way round.) Around Africa we can see how greed runs our countries, and beyond we can see how greed runs the world. Humankind and creation are seen as separate entities. Creation is seen as being there to exploit. This is the picture Moses is struggling with in Exodus chapter 3. Outside the garden is agony. Fast forward to Africa. Look at us!

In the Old Testament there is also a different story which creates hope, Isaiah 65:17ff – Behold I create a new heaven and a new earth. (A restoration that begins in Genesis 3.) A redemptive story, a new garden, to which we can bear witness. We are living in this story of recreation, restoration.

We might pray for God to perform a miracle and send rain in a time of unseasonal drought, but God has shown us how rain comes, how it happens. When we abuse creation, rain patterns change. So we need to recreate the swamps, plant trees, etc, so that we restore the harmony. And then the rain will come in its due season.