



The Parish of St. Mary York

# Faith in Action

*Building hope for tomorrow in the face of climate change*

## Not My Circus?

Guest Author: Kevin Stockall

One of the questions that we sometimes encounter when we think about how the Church should respond to the climate crisis is based in our understanding of what our God-given relationship to creation really is.

Is it true that humanity was given 'dominion' or 'domination' over the creation, as we read in Genesis 1:26 & 28? And were we not instructed to 'subdue' the earth in the same passage?

And if we understand those words as they have been long understood, does that not give us the power, as God's agents, to use all of creation as we choose to use it, even if our use of that creation damages and impairs it? Is that what dominion and subdue mean?

And if that is true, how can environmental concerns be the Church's concern if all we're doing is exercising the power that God gave us in the beginning?

These are all very important questions; and because some in the Church have argued that 'dominion' gives us absolute power to use the natural world as we wish, with no limits or boundaries, it's easy to imagine that all these discussions and concerns about climate change have no place in the Church's witness; that it's "*not our circus; not our monkeys,*" as some like to say, or that it's not our problem!

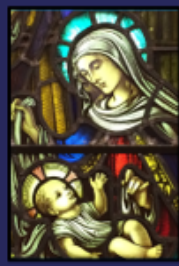
But is that true?

To answer that last question we have to look more deeply at the four commands that God gives to humanity in the opening chapters of the Book of Genesis; four actions that we need to understand better if we're to know what our God given responsibilities really are.

Those four actions are these:

- ***Radah*** - Dominate
- ***Kabash*** - Subdue
- ***Abad*** - Till
- ***Shamar*** - Keep

Does that help? Maybe not, but we'll begin to look at each of these four central commands in my next column.



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## Not My Circus? “Radah”

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Doesn't the Bible tell us that God gave us animals and plants to dominate however we want? For example, in Genesis 1: 27 to 28 we read...

*So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them. And God blessed them. And God said to them, “Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth and subdue it, and have **dominion** over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the heavens and over every living thing that moves on the earth.”*

In this account of creation God uses the Hebrew word '**radah**' which translates to 'have dominion over' or 'rule'. We think we understand this familiar word as meaning '**to dominate over**,' like a mediaeval ruler dominating over his subjects, using them for his own ends, whether pleasure, prestige, or war. But a closer look at **radah** shows us that this is not the type of 'dominion' God wants us to have over creation.

In Leviticus 25, for example, harsh **radah** is forbidden. And in Ezekiel 34:4 God condemns the '**radah**' of the uncaring shepherds:

*Ho, shepherds of Israel who have been feeding yourselves! Should not shepherds feed the sheep? You eat the fat, you clothe yourselves with the wool, you slaughter the fatlings; but you do not feed the sheep. The weak you have not strengthened, the sick you have not healed, the crippled you have not bound up, the strayed you have not brought back, the lost you have not sought, and with force and harshness you have **ruled [radah]** them.*

God wants our **radah** of creation to not be harsh, cruel or selfish, but to reflect God's act of creation, and our role as image bearers of that creating God. Our **radah** needs to flow from the goodness of God's act. If God is love, then we must show love towards creation.

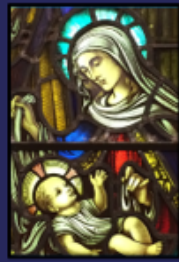
We are called to heal those parts of creation that are sick, bind up those parts that are injured, bring back those parts that are straying, and search for those parts that have become lost.

We are not to be destroyers nor consumers of creation, but **shepherds** of creation, just like the Good Shepherd laid down His life for the sheep. **Radah** is the kind of authority that helps its subjects to develop and grow as God intended, rather than exploiting them.

Understanding **radah** is especially important in this age where humanity is affecting the entire planet. The Earth is warning us, in its Creator's Name, that we have been doing wrong. Much of our **radah** has been dysfunctional. We have destroyed (e.g. rainforests) for our own selfish ends, and consumed (e.g. oil, fish, cattle, minerals) for our own greed and power.

Environmental destruction and climate change are not merely biological, political or economic matters, but a matter of our obedience to the God who has made us in his image and created the world with love.





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## Not My Circus? *Kabash*

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*And God said to them, "Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth and **subdue** it and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the heavens and over every living thing that moves on the earth." ~ Genesis 1:28*

The second word that we need to look at from the Book of Genesis is the word *kabash*, which is even less common than *radah*, so we must be very careful about its meaning.

*Kabash* is translated in a variety of ways:

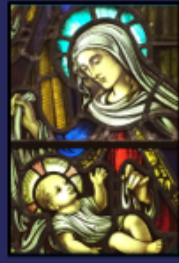
- 'subdue' etc. 8 times
- related to 'bondage' 2 times
- related to 'subjection' 2 times
- 'force', 'keep under' 2 times.

But, to better understand its meaning we need to look at other Hebrew words which can be translated as 'subdue' or 'bring into subjection', such as: *chashal* (to make feeble), *kana* (to humble), *kara* (to cause to bow), *shephal* (to make low), *lachats* (to press or crush). All these speak of subduing something against its own nature or will. In one form or another they all speak of conquest.

By contrast, *kabash* is mainly used to speak of how God subdues the land; not by humiliation or force, but by making things as they should be, by *shalom* (peace). That is, subduing something **in line with its nature** and **for its own good** and for the good of all else; not in the way that a tyrant crushes a revolt, but in the way that a parent with a crowd of noisy children, calms them down – subduing them – and they become happier as a result.

If this is true, then humanity's subduing of the creation implies effective action to bring it into the state that it should be – a state of dynamic balance and peace in which blessing emerges. And if we understand the text correctly, in God's plan human beings are a necessary part of this process.

We're not given a mandate to oppress creation or destroy it or deny its nature, destructively treating creation and its creatures as mere resources. Like *radah*, *kabash* speaks of how we are given the responsibility of subduing what God has made for the good of the things being subdued, rather than just for our own convenience or pleasure.



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## Not My Circus? *Abad* and *Shamar*

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*The LORD God took the man and placed him in the garden of Eden, to **till** it and **tend** it.  
Genesis 2:15: JPS TANAKH translation*

Thus far we've looked at two of the four commands that God gave to humanity at the time of Creation: to have dominion (*Radah*) and to subdue (*Kabash*) the created order. And in both cases, we noted that the authority given by God to humanity requires of us a respect for the goodness of God's image in creation, and a responsibility to use our gifts in a way that allows creation to flourish according to its own nature. This time we're going to look at the final two commands: to till (*Abad*) and to tend (*Shamar*).

*Abad* has a huge range of meaning, which include agricultural images of cultivating, plowing, tilling, and dressing. In other situations, it speaks of labouring and serving. But in Moses' encounter with God in the Burning Bush, God promises that when Moses has led the People of Israel from slavery to freedom, they one day will 'worship' God on the same mountain where God is speaking to him; and the root of the word worship is *Abad*.

In the Scriptures, *Shamar* likewise has a wide range of meaning. It speaks of watching, waiting, and observing; keeping, caring, and preserving; as well as guarding and protecting.

So, on the most obvious level *Abad* and *Shamar* speak of the basic tasks needed to provide food for humanity: tilling and tending the soil; planting, seeding, weeding and harvesting. But together they require the willingness not just to take, but to give and preserve; balancing the impact of using God's gifts with the need to guard them for the future. And when we recall that using these gifts in such a way carries with it the image of worshipping and serving the God who has given the gifts, we are reminded of the great responsibility we've been given: to use creation carefully and wisely is not just prudent, it's not just good asset management, it's an essential part of the worship we offer every day to the God in whose image we've been made.

