**Lesson Plan 3: History of Stewardship**

**Key aims**

* To show how texts like Genesis 1-2 have generated different readings in changing contexts
* To encourage reflection on the ways in which our environmental crisis has prompted new perspectives on biblical texts
* To raise questions about the meaning and interpretation of texts: is there one true meaning (the author's intention?) or are new meanings made in new contexts?

**Resources**

* PowerPoint presentation
* Handouts (one per student)
* Interpretation table (one per student)

**Starter Activity**

Show the introductory video from the ‘History of Stewardship’ section of the Beyond Stewardship website (find a link on Slide 2 of the PowerPoint or see **[http://ex.ac.uk/beyondstewardship](http://ex.ac.uk/beyondstewardship" \t "_blank)**). Invite the students to respond to the key question posed at the end of the video.

**Starter 2**

Your students will probably need 5 minutes to re-read Genesis 1-2.

As a class, discuss the meanings of ‘kingship’, ‘kinship’ and ‘stewardship’. Using slide 3 of the PowerPoint presentation, move the words around the edge of the slide into the appropriate spaces on the Venn diagram. Do all the students agree on which words should go in which spaces? If not, what are the reasons for their differences of opinion?

**Whole class work**

As a class, work through the PowerPoint presentation, which looks at how the biblical texts on stewardship have been understood in different ways during different times in history. The emphasis is on how the context of the reader can influence their interpretation of the text. Students should make notes on their handouts.

**Individual work**

Give each student a copy of the interpretation table. Using the handout, the students have 20 minutes to complete the table to show how the Genesis texts have been understood in different historical contexts.

**Plenary**

Whole class discussion of the following questions:

* Do you think texts have one meaning or can their meaning change?
* How far are interpretations of biblical texts influenced by the concerns of the age in which the interpreter lives?
* Is the emphasis on stewardship the product of what the Bible says, or of our environmental crisis, or both?

**Handout**

**(One per student)**

The History of Stewardship

How interpretations of biblical texts have changed over time

* Awareness of historical context of a text helps us to appreciate why certain things have been said.
* Also, new meanings of the text are created over time as people seek to relate the Bible to their present-day contexts.

**1. Genesis 1-2 in historical context**

* It was written in an ancient, pre-industrial context.
* People had no idea how modern science and technology would develop.
* They did not know that humans would impact upon the natural world in the ways we do now.

*Threats of nature*

* People at this time were more aware of the threats that nature posed.
* Wild animals might cause damage and threaten life.
* Adverse weather conditions could drastically affect food supplies.

*‘Subduing’ nature for survival*

* Given this context, the command to ‘subdue’ in Gen 1.28 could be interpreted as instructing people to take possession of the land and to domesticate animals in order to create a peaceful co-existence.
* ‘Subduing’ nature in this way was crucial to survival.

**2. Modern science: controlling nature for human benefit**

* Renaissance/Enlightenment (16th century Europe)
* Advances in science, technology and philosophy
* People believed humanity could change the world for the better.

*Francis Bacon (1561-1626)*

* One of the founders of modern science
* Saw the scientific task as a vocation based on Genesis 1.28
* God has given humans the ability to understand and control nature, for human benefit:

‘I am come in very truth leading to you Nature with all her children to bind her to your service and make her your slave... [Scientific discoveries] have the power to conquer and subdue her, to shake her to her foundations.’ (Francis Bacon)

*19th century social sciences*

* The development of social sciences in the 19th century reinforced ideas of human dominance.
* They sought to understand, and then control, the laws governing human behaviour and interactions.
* August Comte (a founder of modern sociology) famously described the task of sociology as:

‘savoir pour prevoir; prevoir pour pouvoir’

(‘knowledge serves foresight; foresight serves power’)

* It seemed that the expansion of human scholarship could bring limitless benefits.

*Genesis 1 and human power*

* Only after this time humans be imagined in a position of domination and control.
* But the ancient biblical texts gave support to this idea.
* Genesis 1 was interpreted as encouraging humans to make the most of their God-given power over nature.

**3. An age of ecological crisis**

* In the early 20th century, the optimism of the enlightenment was shattered.
* The First World War, the Holocaust and the threat of nuclear war showed humans to be capable of terrible evil as well as good.
* Ideas of progress towards a better world now seemed idealistic and naïve.

*Environmental damage*

* In recent decades, the impact of humans on the nature world has become increasingly apparent.
* The question now is can we act with sufficient speed to limit the negative consequences of global warming.
* The hope is that the rise can be limited to two degrees, although this is looking increasingly unlikely.

*Genesis and stewardship*

* In this context, interpretation of Genesis which favour stewardship are preferred.
* Often, this is presented as a rediscovery of what the Bible ‘really’ says.
* Previous interpretations are seen as distortions:

‘Humans were created to act nobly in the place of the Creator… this leaves no room for "lording over" or "mastering" humans or any other living things. Tragically, the passage [in Genesis 1] has all too often been distorted and used to justify the domination of both human beings and nature.’ (Brennan R. Hill)

* However, is this interpretation influenced by our situation as well as by the text?

**Interpretation table**

**(One per student)**

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Text** | **Pre-industrial context** | **Enlightenment context** | **Modern context** |
| ‘"...let [humankind] have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the birds of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the wild animals of the earth, and over every creeping thing that creeps upon the earth."’ (Genesis 1:27) |  |  |  |
| ‘The Lord God took the man and put him in the garden of Eden to till it and keep it.’ (Genesis 2:15) |  |  |  |
| ‘"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 air and over every living thing that moves upon the earth."’ (Genesis 1:28) |  |  |  |

**Interpretation table**