

Ecology & Environment

- *Understanding the gospel as deep 'green'*

TOUCH THE EARTH

Everything is connected

The first colour photographs taken of the earth from space revolutionised not only our view of the world but also our self-consciousness¹. This beautiful blue and white orb, flecked with amber, set like a jewel against the black velvet of space; it was a 'biosphere' in every sense of the word. From time out of mind we have known we were dependent upon our habitat, but these stunning pictures reminded us in a new way of the fragile nature of our existence. We are part of a delicate 'ball of life' in which everything is connected; we are an 'ecosphere'.

'Ecology'² is a name that has been formed from the two Greek words: *oikos* ('house') and *logos* ('understanding'). It is used primarily to describe the study of plant and animal systems in relationship to their environment; with particular emphasis on the interrelationship and interdependence between different life forms. It quite logically includes the relationships between human beings and the major impact we have on the environment. Of necessity it must therefore involve politics, economics and philosophy as well as the biological sciences. Inevitably the study of ecology raises deep moral issues and in fact becomes the point at which science and spirituality are most intimately connected. The term ecology is sometimes also used to include the inner connectedness of people and their relationship to the environment. The fact that you cannot study ecology without encountering spirituality is of profound significance to the Christian church.

So ecology may begin by looking at a single living organism in relation to its surrounding environment, but it inevitably involves the whole intricate fabric of creation; from the sensitivity of the ozone layer to the subtleties of the human heart. True ecology is deep ecology. It has been profoundly observed that whenever we pick up even the smallest fragment of the living world we soon discover that the whole universe is attached to it. All this is of profound significance to the Christian because it parallels exactly the biblical understanding of *shalom*; as we have seen, the wholeness, integratedness and harmony of all things rooted in the creative and sustaining power of God. Ecology is a subject at which the Christian community of faith *should* always have been at the forefront. We, of all peoples, should be those who touch the earth and have a holistic vision of creation. But sadly this has not been the case.³

¹ These pictures were taken on Christmas Day 1968

² The word was first coined by the German biologist Ernst Haeckel in 1870 but ecology did not receive the full recognition as a distinctive branch of science until the 1930's

³ The subject of ecology and the environment is usually approached as 'an ethical issue', we want to argue that their significance is very much more than that, it is an 'existential' issue (to do with the very nature of existence itself) that embraces and touches on many detailed ethical issues.



Cry of the environment

We are living in the midst of a global ecological crisis, experiencing environmental degradation greater than most people realize, close to (some even think beyond) the 'tipping-point' from which there may be no possibility of return. One stark assessment by James Lovelock is that only 20% of humanity will make it beyond 2100:

"The world we know today will vanish, it will become a desert world, with civilization, if it continues, existing in the Arctic-basin, Siberia, Scandinavia, and on islands like the United Kingdom, Japan and New Zealand. But most of the rest will be scrub and desert. There will be a few people living there, as there always are in deserts, but there won't be enough food grown to support large numbers. I doubt if by the end of the century as many as a billion will survive."⁴

Those who have been and continue to be most acutely aware, concerned and active for change, call themselves 'Green', the colour of verdant life. In spite of the urgency, the clear statistics and sustained worldwide media coverage, any change is frighteningly slow. Most people, however, Christians among them, are 'pale Green' in thinking and 'egg-shell Green' in practice! It is not the purpose of this unit to document the extent of the crisis and debate a response; this is done extensively elsewhere. Rather we will take a simple snap shot of the issues to form a backdrop to our particular discussion.

Some of the major effects of the ecological crisis:

- Global warming due to the 'green house' effect
- Ozone depletion as a result of use of CFC's
- Toxic waste creating soil and water pollution
- Deforestation and habitat destruction
- Soil erosion leading to land degradation
- Acid rain effecting forests, land and architecture
- Species extinction and reduced bio-diversity
- Poverty and debt
- Widespread famine and world hunger
- Human and cultural debasement

Some of the primary causes of the ecological crisis:

- Excessive burning of fossil fuels
- Questionable nuclear and chemical production
- Indiscriminate waste disposal
- Intensive use of fertilizers and antibiotics
- Sustained over fishing of the world's oceans
- Extensive mono-culture agribusiness
- Over consumption of non-renewable resources
- Accelerating population explosion

⁴ James Lovelock speaking on 'Close Up' – 'How Climate Changes Culture' BBC World Service 2nd Nov 2007



- Unsustainable political and economic systems
- Unequal distribution of wealth
- Imbalance in the control of trade and manufacture
- Absence of life-shaping spiritual and moral values

Some of the related issues to the ecological crisis:

- Animal welfare and rights
- Genetic engineering
- Nuclear weapons and the arms trade
- Global media with its economic and social impact

Some of the responses required to the ecological crisis:

- Challenge all political and economic practices that harm creation
- Address poverty by empowering local communities
- Encourage population control that is appropriate to specific cultures
- Restrain all over consumption in energy, food and materials
- Recycle and develop less material-intensive technologies
- Education and the practice of creation-sensitive lifestyles and values

Question: How and why did it get like this?

Face of the infidel

A zoo in the United States had a cage with the notice, 'The world's most dangerous animal'. Behind the bars was a large mirror, which meant that the unsuspecting visitor was confronted with their own reflection. It spoke the truth. Human beings have a unique position in the whole created order; they are the most powerful and potentially the most destructive of all living species. This is illustrated in the way in which they have always dominated their environment and have now thrown it into crisis.

Human beings have taken up an anthropocentric stance upon the earth. They have objectified the natural world; seeing themselves as standing over against it, separate and isolated from it. They have seen it as hostile and to be controlled, and existing solely for their use and benefit. They have stressed their intellectual superiority as a license to exploit at whim. Where has this thinking come from?

Earth is not their brother

In 1854 the Native American chief Seattle spoke in response to the US government's desire to buy their traditional lands and settle them in reservations. Little is known of chief Seattle's life but this interpretation of his words⁵ is a moving testimony to primal people's harmony with nature and a damning indictment of so-called 'Christian' civilization:

⁵ Adapted from New Internationalist Sept 1975 p15-17. These words are an extended and adapted paraphrase of Native American feeling using Chief Seattle's speech as a starting point. This modern



“The great chief in Washington sends word that he wishes to buy our land... How can you buy or sell the sky, the warmth of the land? The idea is strange to us. If we do not own the freshness of the air and the sparkle of the water, how can you buy them? Every part of the earth is sacred to my people. Every shining pine needle, every sandy shore, every mist in the dark woods, every clearing, and every humming insect is holy in the memory and experience of my people... We are part of the earth and it is, part of us ... The perfumed flowers are our sisters; the deer, the horse, the great eagle, these are our brothers. The rocky crests, the juices in the meadows, the body heat of the pony, and people - all belong to the same family”.

“We know that the white person does not understand our ways. One portion of land is the same to them as the next, for they, are a stranger, who comes in the night and takes from the land whatever they need. The earth is not their brother, but their enemy, and when they have conquered it they move on. They kidnap the earth from their children they do not care. They treat their mother, the earth, and their brother the sky, as things to be bought, plundered, sold like sheep or bright beads. Their appetite will devour the earth and leave behind only a desert. I do not know. Our ways are different from your ways. The sight of your cities pains the eyes of the red peoples. But perhaps it is because the red person is a savage and does not understand. There is no quiet place in the white person’s cities. No place to hear the unfurling of the leaves in spring, or the rustle of insects wings. But perhaps it is because I am a savage and do not understand. The clatter only seems to insult the ears.”

“So we will consider your offer to buy our land. If we decide to accept I will make one condition: the white people must treat the beasts of this land as their brothers. I am a savage and I do not understand any other way... What are people without beasts? If all the beasts were gone, people would die from a great loneliness of spirit. For whatever happens to the beasts, soon happens to people. All things are connected. Whatever befalls the earth befalls the children of the earth. If they spit upon the ground they spit upon themselves. This we know: the earth does not belong to people; people belong to the earth. This we know. All things are connected like the blood that unites one family. All things are connected. Whatever befalls the earth befalls the children of the earth. A human individual did not weave the web of life; they are merely a strand in it. Whatever we do to the web, we do to ourselves.”

“Even the white person, whose God walks and talks with them as friend to friend, cannot be exempt from the common destiny. We may be related after all; we shall see. One thing we know, which the white person may one day discover - our God is the same God. You may think that you own him as you wish to own our land; but you cannot. He is the God of all people, and his compassion is equal for the red peoples and the white. This earth is precious

amplified version of the words of Chief Seattle were written in 1972 by Ted Perry for a television documentary produced by the Southern Baptist Radio and Television Commission.



to him, and to harm the earth is to heap contempt upon its Creator. The whites too will pass; perhaps sooner than all other tribes. Continue to contaminate your bed, and you will one night suffocate in your own waste.”

“But in your perishing you will shine brightly, fired by the strength of the God who brought you to this land and for some special purpose gave you dominion over this land and over the red people. That destiny is a mystery to us, for we do not understand when the buffalo are slaughtered, the wild horses are tamed, the secret corners of the forest heavy with the scent of many people, and the view of the ripe hills blotted by talking wires. Where is the thicket? Gone. Where is the eagle? Gone. And what is it to say goodbye to the swift pony and the hunt? The end of living and the beginning of survival... One thing we know, our God is the same God. This earth is precious to him. Even the white people cannot be exempt from the common destiny. We may be related after all. We shall see.”

These powerful prophetic words were spoken in kindness and their sensitive wisdom have been a strong influence upon many in the Green movement. Their challenge, like others, of the perceived western ‘Christian’ values has led many to be hostile to our faith.

Christianity questioned

Western culture is the primary root of the ecological crisis; the Christian church is seen as having been the shaping force of that culture, and therefore to blame. In 1967 Lynn White made this point in a damning article in the magazine ‘Science’, in which he said:

‘Christianity is the most anthropocentric religion the world has seen. In absolute contrast to ancient paganism and Asia’s religions, it not only established a dualism of man and nature but also insisted that it is God’s will that man exploit nature for his proper ends’⁶

These words have been quoted and re-quoted and this attitude has become established thinking among many in the Green movement. John Passmore has also written:

‘Christian theology cannot give itself a genuinely Green hue without ceasing to be distinctively Christian and giving up its sense of human metaphysical uniqueness’⁷

Tragically, from an historical point of view, it is by no means untrue.

Biblical ideas misinterpreted by Christians are said to have stripped the world of wonder and left it profane. It is argued that the spirits of animism protected the world from people, but that Christianity’s destruction of paganism has left nature naked and exploited, the natural world becoming ‘a laboratory rather than a mystery’. We have conceded that the church has largely failed in its relationship with the natural world, but are endeavoring to show that the supposed Christian ideas that have been so damaging are not biblical. The

⁶ Quoted from ‘*Science*’ vol 155 no 3767 [10 March 1967] p 1204-1207

⁷ John Passmore ‘*Man’s Responsibility for Nature*’ 1980 quoted by Ian Bradley in ‘God is Green’ Darton Longman and Todd 1990



church's failure to recognize the intimate relationship between God and nature has a number of sources:

- **Divine impassibility:** the influence of the Greek idea that God is a being beyond the ability of being touched by emotion or events, entirely separate and untouched by creation
- **Anthropocentrism:** people are placed centre stage to the exclusion of nature, which is pushed to the periphery to be exploited; God is the God of history rather than the Lord of creation
- **Gnosticism:** the belief that matter is evil and nature is profane, only the spiritual is important; officially rejected by the church but its ideas have always contaminated its attitudes

Traditional Christian views have reinforced these attitudes. The words of Genesis, '... let them have dominion ...fill the earth and subdue it' (1:26,28), have been taken in isolation and literalistically and used to sanction the rape and pillage of creation:

- **Thomas Aquinas:** 'imperfect beings serve the purpose of the more noble ... the life of animals and plants is preserved not for themselves but for men'
- **Francis Bacon:** 'people may be regarded as the centre of the world'
- **John Calvin:** 'the end for which all things were created was that none of the conveniences and necessities of life might be wanting to people'
- **John Dickie:** 'the world exists for our sakes and not for its own ... God wills the world as a means, but only as a means'⁸

Every animal was viewed as existing to serve some human purpose, for example:

- **Lions:** to make people brave
- **Apes:** to make people amused
- **Fish:** to provide people food
- **Lice:** to encourage people to wash

Every feature of the landscape is there to be 'claimed and named' by the person who conquers it for national control and personal prestige; in contrast to primal communities who name things with a sense of sensitive respect and honour:⁹

⁸ John Dickie was Professor of Theology at Aberdeen University in 1930

⁹ Some examples and contrasts are:

- **Victoria Falls** (in Africa)
 - Named after Queen Victoria by David Livingstone
 - Known in Swahilli as 'Mosi-oa-Tunya' - "the smoke that thunders"
- **Mount Everest** (in Nepal)
 - Named after Sir George Everest, the British surveyor-general of India
 - Known in Sanskrit as 'Sagarmatha' – "the forehead of the sky"
 - Known in Tibetan as 'Chonalangra' – "mother of the universe"
- **Ayers Rock** (in Australia)
 - Named after Sir Henry Ayres the South Australian Prime Minister
 - Known in Aborigine as 'Uluru' (simply a tribal name in that area)
- **Mount Cook** (in New Zealand)
 - Named after the British explorer Captain James Cook
 - Known in Maori as 'Aoraki' – "the cloud piercer"

This whole way of seeing, thinking and acting within the world is walking the way of the infidel, but it is at the very least a subconscious attitude that is still held by the vast majority of Christians.

In its most extreme form these attitudes are summed up in words attributed to James Watt, President Reagan's First Secretary of the Interior, a remark possibly made in 1981: ¹⁰

"God gave us these things to use.
After the last tree is felled, Christ will come back"

These ideas stand in complete opposition with the teaching of scripture. Creation is wholly the work of God (Gen 1:1; Heb 11:3) and it is 'very good' (Gen 1:31). God sustains everything by the divine word of power (Heb 1:3). They have a destiny in 'the new heaven and earth' (2Pt 3:13). God became a human being when in Jesus 'the Word became flesh' (Jn 1:14) and through Jesus' death and resurrection enabled our human bodies to become the temple of the Holy Spirit (1Cor 6:19). All this led William Temple to describe the Christian faith as 'the most materialistic of all the world's religions ... (as it) regards matter as destined to be the vehicle and instrument of spirit'.¹¹

Enlightenment and other factors

The Christian community carries huge responsibility for the current ecological crisis, but not solely. Global ecological degradation is primarily created by Western culture, which is built on mediaeval European 'Christendom' thinking. It created the environment in which secular materialism could flourish; and for the reasons outlined above has been both unwilling and incapable of challenging it.

Secular materialism grew out of the Enlightenment and the negative impact of both rationalism and empiricism. Science, of course, flourished among the Greeks and Arabs before it impacted Christendom in the west. But Enlightenment thinking and the rise of science laid the foundations for industrialization and secularism that are at the root of the crisis. The interconnecting of all these factors is not easy and at the end of the day we all shoulder responsibility.

Eastern faiths (particularly Hinduism and Buddhism) are often held up in contrast to Christianity and the West, as examples of cultures that harmonize with creation. While there is significant truth in this, it must be recognized that they are in fact ultimately world denying. For them the ecosphere is actually an expression of *samsara* (the experience of pain, suffering and re-birth) and *maya* (illusion).

Primal communities with their very particular earth-focus have a great deal to teach us. However, their cultures and spirituality may non-the-less often be marked by fear and the occult.

¹⁰ Originally quoted by Austin Miles '*Setting the Captives Free*' Prometheus Books 1990 page 229, also cited by Bill Moyers '*With God on their Side*' in Ecologist May 2005 pp 22-24

¹¹ William Temple '*Readings in John's Gospel*' Macmillan 1959 p xx-xxi



The gospel is green

The truth is that an authentic understanding of a biblical Christian faith is instinctively 'green'. The gospel is good news that proclaims the liberation and fulfillment of the whole creation. It has been said that Christianity, rightly understood, is more concerned than any other religion about the non-human as well as the human parts of creation.¹² To find a way forward we do not need a new Christian theology, but to explore the roots of a creation-sensitive theology that is the true Christian heritage of faith and calling and return to the original message of the Bible, and in particular to the person of Jesus.

CHRIST AND CREATION

The cosmic Christ

Jesus is presented to us, time and again by the writers of the New Testament, as the Messiah whose work has universal dimensions and reverberations. It is Paul who sums up for us in a single statement the all-embracing scope of the work and role of the cosmic Christ:

'He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation; for in him all things in heaven and earth were created, things visible and invisible ... all things have been created through him and for him. He himself is before all things, and in him all things hold together ... in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, and through him God was pleased to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, by making peace through the blood of his cross' (Col 1:15-20).

Jesus is the key to a Christian understanding of, and response to, the material universe. The frequent references to 'all things' (Gk *panta*) and 'world' (Gk *kosmos*) associated with Jesus refer to the whole measureless structure of the created order:

- Jesus is creator: 'all things came into being through him' (Jn 1:3)
- Jesus is sustainer: 'in him all things hold together' (Col 1:17)
- Jesus is integrator: 'to unite all things in him' (Eph 1:10)
- Jesus is inheritor: 'heir of all things' (Heb 1:2)
- Jesus is saviour: 'reconciling the world to himself' (2Cor 5:19)
- Jesus is atonement: 'lamb .. takes away the sin of the world' (Jn 1: 29)

Even wind and waves obey him

Understanding Jesus as the cosmic Messiah is key to a Christian response to the environment; but 'the Word became flesh' (Jn 1:14). In him the divine and the material coalesced. It is therefore, in the example of his humanity, that we see the practical implications worked out.

Throughout the Gospels we see Jesus as someone who reflected deeply upon the natural world and had a unique power of communion with animals, plants and the elements. He

¹² Ian Bradley in '**God is Green**' London: Darton, Longman & Todd 1990; 3



often went into the wild places to pray or to teach a select group of followers. His parables are filled with images from nature, with 'a conviction that there is no mere analogy, but an inward affinity between the natural order and the spiritual order'¹³. Jesus contrasts the trust of birds and plants with the anxiety of humans (Mt 6:26-30). His observations constantly highlight God's care and sustaining love for creation; the fragile life of sparrows rest in God's tenderness (Mt 10:29), which lets it rain on both the just and unjust without discrimination (Mt 5:45). His death is described in terms of a sacrificial lamb: innocent, vulnerable and atoning.

Jesus' attitude to the natural world was gentle and yet robust. In the incident with the Gadarene swine (Mk 5:1-13) we are confronted with the destructive power of evil in nature; in being exorcised from the demoniac they wreck havoc in the pigs. The cursing of the fig tree (Mk 11:12-14) was an acted prophecy about the fate of Israel. Jesus is deeply sensitive to nature but he is not sentimental when grappling with truth and reality.

Here was one in whom God's creative power and revelation was displayed within, to and through the natural world. Every healing miracle saw him redressing the balance of nature. When he rode into Jerusalem on the back of an ungentled donkey he revealed his empathy with the animal kingdom (Mk 11:2). His walking upon water (Mt 14:22-27) showed his authority over matter. At his death nature was convulsed with earthquake and eclipse (Mt 27:45, 51) demonstrating that the very fabric of creation itself was intimately caught up in his redemptive work. When caught in a sea-storm (Mk 4:35-41) his cry, "Peace! Be still!" not only demonstrated his immediate authority over the wind and the waves, but also proclaimed his ultimate triumph over the chaos forces of the cosmos. That momentary calm was but a fragment, though nonetheless a sign, of the ultimate eschatological *shalom* to come!

Jesus and the wild animals

Early in Mark's Gospel we meet Jesus in the wilderness, 'with the wild animals' (1:13).¹⁴ This concise, easily missed, little phrase comes in a carefully crafted prologue in which the author paints a picture of exactly what Jesus being Messiah really meant. It shows that Jesus' concern for human relationship with God included concern for our relationship with the rest of God's creatures. The grammar in the phrase, 'with the wild animals', conveys a real sense of close association in friendship; there is certainly no hint of hostile confrontation. Mark appears to be clearly saying that the kingdom of God inaugurated by Jesus includes peace with wild animals. The 'wilderness' is the non-human world, the natural home of wild animals; but also the place of spiritual encounter. Jesus has three encounters in the wilderness:

- Tempted by Satan
- Ministered by angels
- *With* the wild animals

¹³ CH Dodd in '*The Parables of the Kingdom*' Nisbet 1961; 21

¹⁴ This section draws on the article by Richard Bauckham '*Jesus and the Wild Animals*' in '*Jesus of Nazareth: Lord and Christ*' Joel Green & Max Turner (Ed) Paternoster 1994; 3-21



Satan is the natural enemy of the righteous and is defeated, angels are the natural friend of the righteous and serve; the wild animals are more enigmatic, they are potential enemies¹⁵ with whom we see Jesus not only in peaceable contact but making friends.

Scripture shows the enmity between humans and wild animals being the consequence of sin. At creation people and animals lived in harmony, both being vegetarian (Gen 1:29-30), but human rebellion climaxing in the Flood led to animal fear for humans (Gen 9:2). In contrast there are two biblical expectations as to how the true relationship between humankind and animals might be restored:

- By the truly righteous person (cf Job 5:22-23)
- By ultimate eschatological events (cf Hos 2:18)

The two come together in Isaiah 11:1-9 where the truly righteous messianic king rules a world in which wild animals and humans live in peace:

‘Righteousness shall be the belt around his waist ...
The wolf shall lie down with the lamb ...
... and the weaned child shall put its hand on the adders den.
They shall not hurt or destroy on all my holy mountain ...’

In Jesus all this comes together. He is the individual ‘righteous one’ (cf Acts 3:14; 7:52; 22:14) revealing God’s character, and the messianic Son of God (cf Mk 3:11; 5:7; 15:39) acting on behalf of others. He defeats Satan in anticipation of the final eschatological overthrow of evil; he establishes peace with wild animals in expectation of the ultimate age of shalom. More than that, peace with animals is a vital aspect of eschatological salvation in itself. The words of Mark, ‘he was with the wild animals’ brings profound insight into the true nature of human and divine relationship with both creatures and creation. It has been pointedly observed that:

‘The animals are not said to fear him, submit to him, or serve him. The concept of human domination over animals for human benefit is entirely absent. The animals are treated neither as subjects nor as domestic servants ... Jesus does not terrorise or dominate the wild animals, he does not domesticate them, nor does he even make pets of them. He is simply “with them” ... For us Jesus’ companionable presence with the wild animals affirms their independent value for themselves and for God. He does not adopt them into the human world, but lets them be themselves in peace, leaving them in the wilderness, affirming them as creatures who share the world with us in the community of God’s creation ... This reference is a symbol of the possibility of living fraternally with wild creatures and experiencing the grace of otherness which God gives us in the diversity of the animal creation and is missed when animals are reduced to mere usefulness or threat.’¹⁶

¹⁵ The phrase ‘wild animals’ distinguished them from domesticated animals and usually implied four-footed animals as opposed to birds, reptiles and fish. It was a phrase usually used of beasts of prey often seen as a threat to human life cf Gen 37:20, 33; Lev 26:6, 22; 2Kg 2:24; 17:25-26; Prov 28:15; Jer 5:6 etc. The Judean wilderness of Jesus day had leopards, bears, wolves, poisonous snakes (cobras and desert vipers) and scorpions.

¹⁶ ibid Richard Bauckham p 20-21

By taking a New Testament understanding of Jesus' relationship to the natural world, and in fact the cosmos, as our starting point we are now in a position to rediscover further a truly biblical Christian theology of creation.

Cosmic atonement

Jesus' life, death and resurrection brings about cosmic atonement ('at-one-ment'); the whole creation integrated in peace, justice and harmony:

Jesus does not just die for people, but for the whole creation!

The crucifixion and resurrection have universal implications for both humanity and the cosmos:

"And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, *will draw all things* to myself"
(Jn 12:32)

'... through (Jesus) to reconcile to himself *all things* ...
making peace (*shalom*) by the blood of his cross'
(Col 1:20)

Jesus' death locks him in conflict with cosmic evil, nature is convulsed, rocks shatter, the noon sky is as black as night (cf Mt 27; 45-51). Jesus' resurrection sees sin's hold on creation broken forever; an earthquake flings the tombstone aside (Jn 20:1), a new day dawns at this central ecological moment. Jesus' dying cry, "It is finished!" (Jn19:30 cf Jn17:4), was possibly a form of the Hebrew verb *shalem* ('to make complete') of which *shalom* is the noun. The cross is in fact a 'tree' (cf Acts 5:30; 1Pt 2:24 *et al*) – a symbol of root and branch salvation ... truly *the* 'Tree of Life'

In the eastern Orthodox tradition Jesus is the one who by his life sanctified all matter, and through his death and resurrection carries the whole creation up to God. Jesus is the one who brings into being the new heaven and new earth (cf 2Pet 3:13; Rev 21:1).

THE EARTH IS THE LORD'S

The whole earth shall cry glory

'In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth.'
(Gen 1:1)

'... the worlds were prepared by the word of God,
so that what is seen was made from things that are not visible
(Heb 11:3)

The earth is the Lord's and all that is in it'
(Ps 24:1)

God has brought everything that is into being. The heavens, the earth and all they contain owe their complete existence to him. The earth not only belongs to God, but its very fabric has been fashioned to reveal and to resonate with his power and nature:¹⁷

¹⁷ The importance of natural revelation is discussed in more detail in the Workshop unit 'Credible or Incredible'



‘Ever since the creation of the world his eternal power and divine nature,
invisible though they are,
have been understood and seen through the things he has made’
(Rom 1:20).

Early Christian preaching to primal peoples appealed to the fact of creation and to its cycles, seasons and fruitfulness as a proof, not only of God’s existence, but also of his love and his mercy (Acts 14:15-17). The evidence was so strong that those who ignore it are said to be ‘without excuse’ (Rm 1:21).

The whole of creation was crafted by the wisdom of God (Ps 104:24; Prov 3:19; 8:22-31; Job 28:25-27) and its creative cunning has been threaded through every fibre of the cosmos to be discovered as truth by those who will find it (1Kg 4:29-34).

Dynamic harmony

The truth is that something absolutely fundamental is to be found in the relationship between God and creation. Something that is deeply mutual and reciprocal. The fact that the biblical descriptions of the natural world are said to be without parallel among other ancient writings¹⁸ should in no way surprise us because the relationship between God and creation is dynamic. Scripture repeatedly presents us with a picture of the whole of nature, both animate and inanimate, caught up in praise to God. From the motion of the celestial spheres to the crashing of waves, from the open countryside to the sheltering trees, and all the teeming life forms they contain, there is a never-ending resonant jubilant praise to God (cf Ps 148:1-4,7-10; 96:11-13). Nature is alive in a cosmic creation dance to God; ‘the trees of the field clapping their hands’ (Isa 55:12), and ‘mountains skipping like rams, and the hills like lambs’ (Ps 144:3-4).

God enjoys a personal relationship with nature; the snow, the rain and the waves all respond to his commands (cf Job 37:6; Ps 104:6-7). On occasions animals are agents of his judgment, or a sign to the faithless (cf Jer 5:6; 8:7; 15:13).

In Hosea 2:21-22 there is a remarkable vision of the harmony between heaven and earth, spirit and matter, which God will ultimately establish:

‘On that day I will answer,’ says the Lord,
‘I will answer the heavens,
and they will answer the land;
the land will answer the grain, the vine and the oil;
and they shall answer Jezreel (Israel)’

Here we see a reciprocal dialogue within the creation and between God personally. It originates with God and then flows through the heavens, to the land, between its fruits and to God’s people themselves. A great, ‘chain of being’, in which God is linked in dynamic union.

¹⁸ Cf Yehuda Feliks *‘Nature and Man in the Bible’* Soncino Press 1981; ix

That the whole of creation is charged with the glory and grandeur of God is in no doubt, but the question is how we are to understand the nature of this intimate yet sovereign life-giving bond? Everything truly is sacred.

Panentheism

When it comes to a spiritual understanding about the cosmos, apart from a belief in a creator who is distinct from creation, the other two options are:

- **Paganism:** God equated with the earth
- **Pantheism:** the universe equated with God

Neither of these is acceptable biblically, but neither is an emphasis on a wholly transcendent God who is primarily separate from creation.

In seeking to define the relationship between God and creation we are struggling to clothe mystery in words. God is clearly distinct from creation, yet deeply and intimately involved within it; he became human flesh with which all creatures are interconnected, while the Spirit breathes energy into everything. There are two principles, 'transcendence' and 'immanence', which must be drawn, woven and balanced together. An over-emphasis of either one will create a fundamental distortion:

- **Transcendent:** God as 'other'; without limitations; gives security and leads to worship. It emphasises the act of creation and the strength of sustaining power. The Eastern Orthodox Church speaks of God's transcendent otherness as his 'essence'. God does not depend upon creation for anything.
- **Immanent:** God as 'near'; saturating, embracing, all-pervading, dwelling within and diffused throughout creation. It is much more than 'omnipresent' his presence within creation. The Eastern Orthodox Church speaks of God's activity within the fabric of the universe as his 'energy'. Creation is dependent upon God for everything.

Paul draws out the two inseparable aspects when he spoke to the Athenians:

'The God who made the world and everything in it, he is Lord of heaven and earth, does not live in shrines made by human hands, as though he needed anything, since he gives to all mortals life and breath and everything ... so that they would search for God and perhaps grope for him and find him - though indeed he is not far from each one of us. For in him we live and move and have our being' (Acts 17:24-25, 27-28).

There is continual interaction between God and the universe; each retains its separate identity yet they share a special intimacy. The earth is not *divine*, but it is *sacred*. It is not God but cannot exist apart from him. God gives creation its being and yet gives it the freedom to be. God upholds the cosmos but it cannot in turn impose itself upon God. Much of the biblical emphasis on God's transcendence is a challenge to the pagan gods who sought to deify the powers of nature. God is not the 'earth-mother' but is 'mother' of the



earth:¹⁹ she was born from the womb of God's creative word, and is nursed, cradled and sustained in the divine arms until she comes to maturity.

Spirit upon the waters

We are part of a created order that is not simply the consequence of a past historical event, but also an unfolding continuous creation (cf Isa 40:28; Jn 5:17). The cosmos is nourished, fed and sustained by God (cf Ps 104 esp v24-30). Nature is dependent upon God for its very breath of life (Gen 6:17). We have seen the orthodox view that all matter is charged with divine energy. There is an awesome order and chaos in the very structure and function of matter; and yet even at the heart of the turmoil there are patterns and great beauty. Quantum physics points us to a world in which there is structure but also the turbulent possibility of on-going creation. Studies from snowflakes to DNA show that, everything is unique there is no duplication. So God is constantly acting within the world, offering new possibilities. The Spirit of God is still moving across the face of the waters (Gen 1:2).

Standing on holy ground

We stand within creation like Moses before the bush that burned but was not consumed, and the place upon which we stand is holy ground (Ex 3:2-5)²⁰. We are walking upon the holy mountain of God among the stones of fire (Ezk 28:14). Creation is not divine, but it is sacred; matter may be touched and moulded, but not profaned.

The very presence of Jesus in human flesh gives a sacramental meaning to the material world. He takes the very basic elements of water, bread and wine and makes them vehicles of God's grace in baptism and eucharist. We encounter the divine in the ordinary, the power of the risen Jesus in the tactile and tangible. It is not just that they become encounters with the sacred and with truth, but they declare that in fact the whole creation is to be treated reverently. Our destiny is a resurrection body, the destiny of the cosmos is a renewed heaven and earth; the ultimate experience will be that God is 'all in all' (cf Eph 1:23; 4:6,10).

However, most Christians have embraced and been seduced by an earth-alien culture. References to nature in scripture are viewed romantically and treated merely as symbols or as illustrations with little connection to reality. This needs to be challenged. Why don't we burst into praise like the psalmists at the beauty of nature (148:1-14), or repent like Job when confronted by God's majestic works (42:6) or gain wisdom like Solomon from the mysteries of creation (1Kg 4:29-34)? We must discover God revealed in nature as well as scripture. We need to learn, once again, how to walk with God in the garden at the cool of the day (Gen 3:8).

We shall be arguing that the following maxim distills a true understanding of Christian eco-theology and ethics:

"Everything is sacred;
live gently in this sacred world with wisdom" ²¹

¹⁹ What was true of Israel could be said to be true of the cosmos as a whole cf Dt 32:18; Isa 42:14; 46:3-4; 66:12-13 etc.

²⁰ In the Eastern Orthodox church the 'burning bush' is a primary ikon of creation spirituality; it reinforces the understanding that 'everything is sacred' and the responsibility to 'walk with gentle wisdom'.

²¹ A maxim coined by Noel Moules in 1998



FUTILITY TO FREEDOM

Bondage to decay

Something has gone terribly wrong; we call it sin and evil²². It has affected, not only the human race, but also the whole creation. Nevertheless, Christians have a 'living hope' (1Pt 1:3) that shines like the rim of dawn breaking over the curvature of the earth bringing in a new day beyond the night. One New Testament passage, which explores this subject, and the remarkable hope it points towards, is Romans 8:18-24:

'I consider the sufferings of this present time not worth comparing with the glory about to be revealed to us. For the creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the children of God; for the creation was subjected to futility, not of its own will but of the one who subjected it, in hope that the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to decay and will obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God. We know that the whole creation has been groaning in labour pains until now; and not only the creation, but we ourselves, who are the firstfruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly while we wait for adoption, the redemption of our bodies. For in hope we are saved.'

The origins of evil are shrouded in mystery. At one level the details seem quite clear, we are told that 'through one person sin entered the world' (Rom 5:12), and God's subsequent words to Adam are, 'cursed is the ground because of you' (Gen 3:17). Two things are clear:

- Human sin has had a deep and lasting destructive effect on creation (cf Isa 24:3-5; Jer 4:23-26; 14:4-6)
- The natural world is the innocent party in the whole affair : 'subjected to futility, not of its own will' (v20); 'God saw that it was very good' (Gen1:31)

It is quite clear that not only originally, but in fact continually, human rebellion against God brings profound suffering to nature; witness the pollution and destruction of the environment. But is this the whole story? Is there not also a deeper and more mysterious malevolent force at work that has now imprisoned us as well as the cosmos? A Satanic rebellion? In Paul's words it seems so:

'for creation was subjected to futility,
not of its own will but by the will of the one who subjected it, in hope ...'
(v20)

These words refer to God, and seem to point beyond human sin. They are not suggesting that God created sin, but that the mysterious primeval rebellion is not only perfectly within God's control, but will also work out for awesome good; hence the hope. This is the enigma of both evil and salvation at work in the world.

²² This subject is discussed in much greater length in 'The Problem of Evil' in the Workshop unit 'Quest & Questioning'



However, the present stark reality is 'suffering', 'futility' 'bondage' and 'decay', with anguished 'groanings' not only from humanity, but also more particularly from the depths of nature itself. But remarkably they are not 'death throes', but 'birth pangs' and labour pains'. They are 'cosmic contractions' that will lead to the birth of the new heaven and new earth.

For all this talk of hope we cannot be complacent. The anguish of the environment must concentrate our minds because, we who are responsible for so much evil in the world, if we are in Christ, are the firstfruits of change and are therefore responsible to work for creation to bring in this new age.

Heavens set ablaze

There is a second contrasting passage in the New Testament which we need to look at very carefully because it has had a strong negative effect on how the majority of Christians think about the destiny of a creation convulsed in evil, though we will see in fact it is extremely positive; these are the dramatic words in 2 Peter 3: 5-13:

'... long ago there were heavens and an earth created out of water and by means of water by the word of God. By these the world at that time was deluged with water and destroyed. But by the same word the heavens and the earth which now exist have been held in store for fire and are being kept until the day of judgment and destruction of ungodly people ... On that day the heavens will pass away with a roar, the heavenly bodies will be dissolved in the heat, and the earth and the works in it will be found. Since all these things are to be dissolved in this way, what sort of people ought you to be, ... waiting for and hastening the coming of the day of God, because of which the heavens will be dissolved in flames and the heavenly bodies melt in the heat. But according to his promise we are waiting for new heavens and a new earth in which righteousness is at home'.

Some initial comments are essential:²³

- These words come from a longer passage, in which the author speaks to people who are raising doubts as to whether God will ever finally come and judge the world;
- These words focus a warning about people being judged; the references to the earth and the heavens are not the primary emphasis;
- These words are expressed in apocalyptic and eschatological imagery and must not be pressed too literally.

²³ This section draws significantly on Richard Bauckham's 'Word Biblical Commentary: Jude, 2 Peter' pub Word 1983. This commentary is very important and need to be consulted in detail when considering the whole passage in question, which it is, essential to do remembering that the comments above are only concerned with how the text might help us understand issues concerned with eschatology, ecology and the environment which were not the primary intention of the biblical author.

Everything that exists depends entirely upon the will of God. He created the world by his word out of the chaos of water, and by his word and by means of water he destroyed evil once in the Flood, finally, by his word and by means of fire he will destroy evil in the future. There are forces in the cosmos which God controls that can lead to both the destruction and creation of worlds. They are not the real threat, because God has sovereign rule; the real threat is his inescapable moral judgment when the 'day of God' breaks. God will not allow wickedness to last forever; human wickedness which has deeply effected both human society and the ecology and environment of the natural world.

When it comes to the description of the actual events that are described as taking place 'on that day', both the text and its interpretation are difficult. We must remember that the images of 'purging evil with fire', 'dissolving' and 'the heavens passing away' are classic Hebrew prophetic images about what happens when God comes in power. It seems best to understand the apocalyptic language as saying that God is going to use the eschatological fire to strip away everything that contains or covers evil so as to reveal the earth, its people and their works standing unprotected and naked before him. Not unlike man and woman before God in the garden after they had sinned. The judgment is not so much destructive as revealing people and their sin before God in a way from which they cannot escape. All sin is going to be discovered and all evil is going to be judged. This is the primary message. This passage is not talking about the annihilation of the earth, but the revelation and destruction of all wickedness. Yes, there will be a cosmic conflagration; but its purpose is to purge the cosmos of wickedness and evil.

The writer of 2 Peter is seeing the future judgment in terms of the original Flood (Gen 6-8) in the past; only next time the medium will be fire, not water. Then the cosmos was dissolved when the waters of primeval chaos, the deep, out of which the original creation had taken place, broke in upon it to convulse it. Out of it a new creation emerged; and that is what will happen a second time.

The fire will purge the cosmos of all evil, and what will appear from the flames will be a new heavens and a new earth. The promise referred to is found in Isaiah 65:17. These words emphasise the difference of the new from the old. What is vital to realise is, that it is a *renewal* of the original creation not its abolition or destruction. The earth and the cosmos that we know have an eternal future and destiny in God. They will be purged and changed, as we will, and together we will move forward to enjoy the fullness of God and his shalom. Notice that the major characteristic of this new world will be 'righteousness'; a quality we have repeatedly seen is essential if there is to be harmony between people and all aspects of creation.

All things new

Sin is a terrible reality, but it is only part of the story. There is a greater and more wonderful reality which these two passages (Rm 8:18-24; 2Pet 3:5-13) point us towards. We are moving through and towards a crisis, as a result of which, both the natural world and ourselves will come to experience perfect and freedom and relationship with God and with each other.

The church, obsessed with sin and anthropocentrism, has been blind and negative about creation. It has emphasised original sin and judgment in destructive terms. It has



concentrated on personal salvation and on a heaven that is other-worldly. It has set history against nature and salvation against creation. In fact history has been seen as emancipation from nature.

The church needs to see again. It needs a true vision of both salvation and history that is set against a backdrop of the whole cosmos and creation. While it needs to recognise the fact of sin and failure, it must also rediscover the truth of the original blessing²⁴ where God declares all that he has created is 'very good' (Gen 1:31). While the gospel is a proclamation that brings individuals to integrity and righteousness, it is in fact a cry to the whole creation that it too will be free one day. The death and resurrection of Jesus have shaken creation to the roots and will continue to do that until God's kingdom is fully come. His atonement is the basis for the reconciliation of all things.

When we place the two passages we have been studying together, they complement each other perfectly in showing us that we are caught up with the whole creation in an eschatological drama which sees the heavens and the earth reborn anew through the crisis process of struggle and fire.

The experience of the age of shalom, the whole integration of people with creation and both with God, awaits us:

'The wolf will live with the lamb,
the leopard shall lie down with the kid,
the calf and the lion and the fatling together;
the lion shall eat straw like an ox.
The nursing child shall play over the hole of the asp,
and the weaned child put its hand on the adder's den.
They will not hurt or destroy in all my holy mountain;
for the earth shall be full of the knowledge of the Lord
as the waters cover the sea'
(Isa 11:6-9)

God will fulfill his promise to 'make all things new' (Rev 21:5).

Questions & Reflections

1. What can we do to put the issues of ecology and the environment on the agenda of every local church?
2. How significant is the example of Jesus in determining our personal relationship to the natural world?

Reading & Resources

Ian Bradley '**God is Green**' pub Darton Longman & Todd 1990
Tim Cooper '**Green Christianity**' pub Spire / Hodder 1990
Matthew Fox '**Original Blessing**' pub Bear & Company 1983

²⁴ See Matthew Fox '**Original Blessing**' Bear & Company 1983



W Granberg-Michaelson '**Tending the Garden**' pub Eerdmans 1987
L Gruen & P Singer '**Animal Liberation**' Camden Press 1987
Sean McDonagh '**To Care for the Earth**' Geoffrey Chapman 1986
Art & Jocele Meyer '**Earthkeepers**' Herald Press 1991
Jonathon Porrit '**Seeing Green**' Blackwell 1984
Theodore Roszak '**Person/Planet**' Granada 1981
T Sargent '**Animal Rights and Wrongs: A Biblical Perspective**' Hodder 1996
Fritz Schumacher '**Small is Beautiful**' Abacus 1974
P Singer '**Animal Liberation**' Jonathan Cape 1976

