

Christ in Creation
Churches Together in Cumbria Environment Group
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The incarnation was the historical event when the divinity of God, in Christ, came to share our life and our humanity on this planet. It was an act of divine empathy, not only with humanity, but for the whole of creation. Christians believe that that sharing and empathy continues through the hope offered in the sacrifice of the Crucifixion, the Resurrection and Pentecost. As we increase our knowledge of creation and with it the knowledge of how we are damaging the planet, humanity now knows what we need to do to restore the Earth. Humankind must, as far as we can, teach and pursue that lesson of Christian hope which is heroic. The lesson we teach is one of sharing and empathy with the whole of creation, with the living planet and all parts of the biodiversity that fulfils and sustains our biosphere. The survival of more than humanity depends on this sharing.

To share is the vital lesson that the incarnation teaches us.

Darwin's scientific vision showed that the evolution of life, within a constantly changing environment, was always seeking perfection. In Christ we believe that humanity evolved a new perfection and compassion. Jesus is the Great High Priest, the exemplar for all who are called to be the priests of creation. Humanity is, we believe, made in the image of the eco-centric God, in that we have the God-given intelligence to understand and choose, in part, our own place within creation and evolution. The wisdom inspired by Christ's sharing life and teaching should inspire Christians to fulfil that divine calling to planetary stewardship (see the partner paper *Theology of Creation*).

Jesus called himself the Son of Man, but he was also man of the Earth. He was sustained by it and walked it. Was he also a sacrifice for that living environment we call the biosphere? Francis, in the 13th century, saw the whole of creation as God's fellowship and Christ's Kingdom. The equality and sacredness of all life was his original Christian insight. There are profound, non-violent, deeply compassionate implications in his austere lifestyle. His example challenges us in the light of our greedy use of the Earth's gifts.

J.R. Lovelock in his Gaia Theory describes the sensitive feedback systems that sustain our environment. The Earth's atmosphere has co-evolved with life and is sustained and changed through feedback loops; 'it is always as good as it can possibly be'. This coincides with Genesis 'and God saw that it (*creation*) was good' as well as Darwin's 'evolution always seeks perfection'. There is a balance in all life which human beings ignore to their long term disadvantage. If humans are 'made in the image of God' then we too must be eco-centric, seeking the good of all our neighbours in creation. Can Christ's life and inspiration be seen as a feedback for the entire Earth?

Humanity's ingenuity in the careless use of science and technology is now damaging our climate and the Earth. Sustained by the generosity of the Earth our empathy, compassion, religious faith and practical hope, combined with our scientific knowledge, could be a spiritual ethical feedback loop which could begin to save the planet and be part of continuing evolution. Humanity is successful in science, technology and economic growth but we are failing in compassion, the ethical applications of that knowledge that our religions teach. Could Jesus' incarnation, the forgiveness and salvation he offers, his inspiration, his teaching and concern for the poor be the ethical feedback loop which could change the present greed-driven course of humanity to the blessing of planetary sustainability and spiritual growth? That new economic course of

comfortable austerity will not be easy, but it is one that must be tried and maybe is the Christian test for this century and what could become a new age.

Christ asked us to love God, our creator, and our neighbour as ourselves. God the creator must be eco-centric and therefore concerned for the whole of creation; is not our neighbour also the living planet on which we depend? Does not that neighbourliness also include the animals, plants, trees, insects and the complete web of life? Is not humanity part of the feedback systems that sustain life? Could it be that our intelligence is one of the God-given designs to sustain the planet? Are Christians called to steward, share, empathise with, love, sustain and respect creation as Christ and Francis did? Is this homo sapiens' priestly service, challenge and place in evolution inspired by the Christ who shares? ('We all share in one bread': Common Worship Eucharist.)

Jesus preached practical simplicity. 'Follow me' he charged, 'give up your possessions, the Earth provides enough for your material needs. Without the burden of possessions, you will grow in the spirit.' The chosen poverty of the religious is a vital example to our times. They choose, in their poverty, to limit their ecological footprints so they do not damage the Earth. In this obedient simplicity they follow Christ. In choosing 'enoughness', in simplicity and poverty, they follow him. Material sufficient to our needs seems to be a guiding and limiting principle of creation, spirituality and Christianity. Yet we should not limit our ethical, intellectual and spiritual evolution. In these three areas enough is not enough and we need to expand our understanding. Only in the material sphere should 'enough' be practised. Materially, the less we use the more we grow in these attributes. Spirituality is not sustained by greed.

Jesus, the 'Son of Man', came to make a covenant between the Father and humanity. God is love and through his loving creation sustains us and all life. Within that covenant is an atoning sacrifice which can be found in the whole of the biosphere. Christ lived and died sacrificially. His death, resurrection and Pentecostal flowering mirrors the natural dying, seeding and fulfilment, the renewing cycle of life on Earth. This marks God's and Jesus' continuing activity in our world, materially, intellectually and spiritually as a single evolving continuum, where humanity can harvest.

We share bread and wine in the Eucharist as a memorial of Christ's love, teaching and sacrifice. This uses the sustaining food of bread and wine grown from the fertile Earth and made by human craft. In this meal we find many symbols: a remembrance of Christ through the forgiving and healing gifts of the Earth and its harvest; the seed, the flowering and fruiting by which humanity is fed materially and also spiritually: honouring the sacrifice of the Creator's Son. All this is shared in a community meal. This shared food can be seen as a sacramental act for the whole of creation. The Eucharist, seen environmentally, celebrates what it is to be fed by God, materially and spiritually. In this communal sharing of bread and wine grown from the Earth, representing Christ and his spirit, we find ourselves using an act of worship which has a political and a profound ecological significance.

The Eucharist has a profound ecological significance.
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The crucifixion of Jesus was an act of sacrifice and reconciliation. There is now a need to reconcile humanity to the Earth (*Col 1 .15-20*). In the coming century, perhaps the beginning of a new age, there will be a need for us to find sacrifice; to live more simply than others may simply live; to live within the Earth's generosity; to minimise our ecological footprint and to share the Earth's blessings with the whole of creation. Many religious, including many who are not Christian, are seeking and finding a new covenant with the Earth. They promote new ways of living sustainably. They recognise that we are not only the family of our Father God, but a family

nurtured by the generosity of our Mother Earth. In this we can find joy and suffering, as we can in the teaching of our Brother Christ and the continuing inspiration of our Sister, the Holy Spirit.

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We believe in a caring God and Earth. The life of Christ demonstrates the love of God for and empathy with his creation. Christians must learn to care for that creation as part of our discipleship and our Christ-inspired calling. That means understanding the prophetic truths of the science of creation and having faith in evolution to a new age as a religious imperative. The religious cannot ignore objective peer-criticised scientific truths as part of their ethical lifestyle, even if they are propounded by scientists who do not believe in the divine. Christ came, Christians believe, as an embodiment of the truth and the Spirit, which continues to inspire us and leads to the God-given gifts of science, research and learning. There are two books, in this new age: we need to read the book of ethics, our Bible; and the book of creation, scientific discoveries. Christ's influence is for the here and now as well as the future. There is a vital leadership needed in sustainable communities for the future which can be mirrored in the Socratic leadership of Christ. That leadership is called 'servant leadership' and is an example that many have followed. Servant leadership is a development of human spirituality in that the service has sometimes led to sacrifice as Christ offered himself for the sake of humanity and the whole of creation. Christ's model of the sharing servant leader is one that has inspired many over the centuries from Francis to Gandhi, Maximillian Kolbe to Oscar Romero, and continues to do so in the martyrs Chicos Mendes and Dorothy Stang. Sacrifice is a Christ-inspired heroic for change, which all humanity must embrace and acknowledge.

Is Christianity a feedback system? Can the inspiration of the sharing Christ change the planet's future or evolution through influencing and making a new age for homo sapiens? Can it inspire new ways of living with the planet which reinforce that behaviour? Can we re-discover the compassion which is at the heart of all great religions and is Christ inspired? Can we take up the Christ-inspired task of 'Earthing of Heaven'?

Christ has made a difference. His life, death and resurrection have given us new non-violent inspiration for all life which could, if we humans choose wisely, guide us to restore the planet's generosity. Christ, who overcame selfishness, sin and evil, is the sharing exemplar for humanity. We humans, and all life, can find in Christ a new resolution to restore, empathise with and share the Earth. We believe that we religious are called to offer our compassion, our faith, our scientific and other knowledge and our virtue to make the Christ-inspired changes so that homo sapiens can now fulfil that century-long challenge of healing God's damaged creation. Can we discover an empathy with the planet of which we now have a new vision? Now, at the crisis point, we need again and again to answer Christ's call to repentance and forgiveness with a return to that wholeness of both the Earth and, consequently, humanity's place in creative evolution. Then humanity can fulfil our priestly stewardship by caring for the planet that cares for us. Then we will not only love one another as Christ commanded us to do, but the whole of creation. Then we can ask if humanity is God's priesthood for creation, the God whose nature is eco-centric and whose creation humanity is asked to serve.

Two contemporary questions remain, although all of the gospels can be explored ecologically. The first is 'Who is my neighbour?'. Jesus in Luke's gospel (*Luke 10.25-37*) uses the parable of the Good Samaritan to emphasise that everyone is our neighbour. Today we understand so much more about our interrelationship with God's creation and our caring Mother Earth that this question must be asked again in the light of these new discoveries and insights. The conclusion that St Francis came to in the 13th century is that all creation is our neighbour. The second is the

parable of the Sheep and the Goats (*Matt 25.31-46*) when the righteous asked ‘Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, when did we see you thirsty and give you something to drink. When did we see you a stranger and invite you or needing clothes and clothe you?’ Jesus replied ‘Whatever you did for one of the least of these my brothers and sisters, you did for me’. Without active concern for the Earth and its myriad biodiversity, we religious will never ever be able to achieve those generosityes or meet the challenge of ‘making poverty history’; for that poverty, often environmental, stains our times and challenges our calling to be the servants, stewards and priests of creation. We religious have no other option than in our own small hopes, wisdom and virtue to ‘try it’, hoping that the love of God for us and for all his creation will endorse our small but not insignificant collective efforts to sustain for all the only ‘living’ planet we know, and whose complex life processes we increasingly understand; for spirituality must be inspired by ecology, as its ethics must discipline economics.

Christ’s teaching calls us to risk a new spiritual will if we are to come to terms with the inner and outer conditions of our lives and the health of the planet. We must modify those conditions if we want to try and regain spiritually, and perhaps only spiritually is this possible, a significance for the Earth and our place in the dignity and generosity of creation. Realising and sharing in the Earth’s health and healing must be our calling, and this empathy leads to more than our salvation.

The Earth is the Lords and all that is in it. 1Cor 10.26

As mentioned above, the two ‘books’ which we use and compare are, first, the book of ethics; what ought to be. This we call our Bible, or our gospels. These we must own. The second is the book of nature or creation, which we call science; how the world works. This is our book of truth, or seeking truth. The second is the book of what is, the first the book of what should be. From this will come a praxis; what we must do, the practical actions of humanity, inspired by Christ: seeking virtue, being and doing good for our Earth and all its life, and being prepared for sacrifice to fulfil that promise.

The Christian story is one of hope. It is a story that began in Bethlehem, was fulfilled in Jerusalem and communicated to us at Pentecost. It is a heroic story of empathy, sharing, compassion, leadership, sacrifice, resurrection and change. It is one we can have faith in and it is mirrored in the evolving story of the Earth. It is a story in which we hope and where we apply love. It is a love that yearns and learns to understand and fulfil the promises of Christ, for Christ is an ideal to be sought but never completely realised. If we hope for a world that is good, if we apply that hope to living sustainably with our Mother Earth, then we too will help to create that garden where all that we see, feel and touch will be good. Humanity has the Christ-inspired responsibility to ‘try it’.

Sources

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