



A four-week course
for parishes &
other groups

CHRISTIANITY & CREATION GREEN DISCIPLESHIP FOR CORNWALL



DIOCESE OF TRURO
DISCOVERING GOD'S KINGDOM
GROWING THE CHURCH

Week 3: The Church's Response

WEEK 3: THE CHURCH'S RESPONSE

We looked last week at a (very small) selection of the material in the Bible that can help us to reflect on our Christian response to the environmental crisis we face.

At the end of last session some further Bible passages were suggested for participants to explore, so you may want to open with inviting comments on anything further people have discovered during the week.

Today we look at some of the ways in which the Church has responded, beginning perhaps longer ago than you might have thought, and finding out about some of the academic thinking that has lain behind the actions the Church has taken.

First we open with a Bible reading and a prayer:

Read Colossians 1: 15 - 20

The imagery in this passage, depicting what some theologians have called 'the cosmic Christ', seems a long way from the carpenter of Nazareth who walked the lanes of Galilee preaching, teaching and healing. And yet, as Christians we are called to follow both Jesus and the Christ and it is perhaps through our understanding of Christ's involvement in the whole of the created universe that we may best approach questions of ecology and our care of creation.

Another bible passage you may like to read which speaks into this understanding is John 1: 1 - 5.

Prayer

Creator God, breathing your own life into being,
you gave us the gift of life:
you placed us on this earth with its minerals and waters,
flowers and fruits, living creatures of grace and beauty.
You gave us the care of the earth.
Teach us, creator God of love,
that the earth and all its fullness are yours,
the world and all who dwell in it.
Call us yet again, to safeguard the gift of life.
Amen



THEN & NOW ... FROM 1961 TO TODAY

It is sometimes said that the church's global response to the modern environmental crisis dates from 1961 when Joseph Sittler, a Lutheran academic theologian from Ohio addressed the World Council of Churches on Col 1:15–20. He said: 'For God's creation of earth cannot be redeemed in any intelligible sense of the word apart from a doctrine of the cosmos which is his home ... The way forward is from Christology expanded to its cosmic dimensions, made passionate by the pathos of this threatened earth, and made ethical by the love and wrath of God.'

In essence, Sittler was challenging a prevailing Christian theology which focussed on the call to individual and personal salvation at the cost, in his view, of our understanding of the concern of God for the whole of creation, not just humanity.

The question might be summarised as: “have we had too much redemption and not enough creation?” What do you think?

And from a young theologian today ...

Hannah Malcolm is a project co-ordinator at God and the Big Bang, an organisation that runs workshops for young people on science and religion. In March 2019 she won the 'Theology Slam' competition organised by a group of Church organisations for her piece on climate change and lamentation in the church. You can watch her presentation here: https://www.youtube.com/watch?time_continue=5&v=GknXxsvqToU

Instead of always looking for practical action to take, she suggests that the church should learn how to become “co-mourners with creation”.

“

I am going to ask you to sit amidst the grief you may feel about our dying planet and mourn the brilliant, beautiful lives, both human and non-human, now extinguished by our violence and greed. They are worthy of your lament.

”

PAUSE FOR REFLECTION

How do you feel about this call to mourning?

How might it help you?

How might it help the planet?

AND IN BETWEEN ...

There has been a huge outpouring of effort on the part of the Christian Church over the years in response to the ecological crisis, including:

- Books
- Journals
- Websites
- Statements/ declarations/ encyclicals
- Conferences/ Gatherings
- Activist events/ movements
- Lifestyle initiatives e.g. Tearfund
- Setting up communities with an ecological focus e.g. Maryknoll Ecological Sanctuary in Philippines founded by Maryknoll Sisters.
- Founding organisations and bodies across denominations e.g. Green Christian, A Rocha.
- Developing liturgies and resources for churches/ worship e.g. Season of Creation
- Resources for education and children

As with the biblical material in the previous session, there is too much information available and too many church eco-activities taking place in recent years for us to cover in this course. Suffice it to say that there really has been a multi-faceted and complex response by many people in many different fields, including in the Christian sphere.

PAUSE FOR REFLECTION

There is much going on, BUT ... the question that remains, the ‘elephant in many rooms’ is why this topic continues to remain on the margins of the Church’s life and consciousness. Why do you think this is?



ABOVE: Maryknoll Ecological Sanctuary, Philippines



Christians have responded from across the denominations, and traditions, including

- Protestants (Anglicans, Methodists, Lutherans, Baptists, Quakers, Evangelicals ... and many others)
- Roman Catholics (Franciscans, Benedictines)
- And Eastern Orthodox

Christians have also worked in association with other faiths:

In the Anglican Communion (worldwide Anglican Church), caring for the environment is explicitly one of the five marks of mission and is now regarded as just as important as, and embedded within, the other four.

Again, we are prompted to ask the same question as on the previous page - if the churches all agree that this is so important, why is it so often neglected in our churches?

PAUSE FOR REFLECTION

Do you have experience of working with other Christians or people of other faiths, or indeed people of no faith, on protection of the environment?

Spend a few moments sharing this in your groups now.

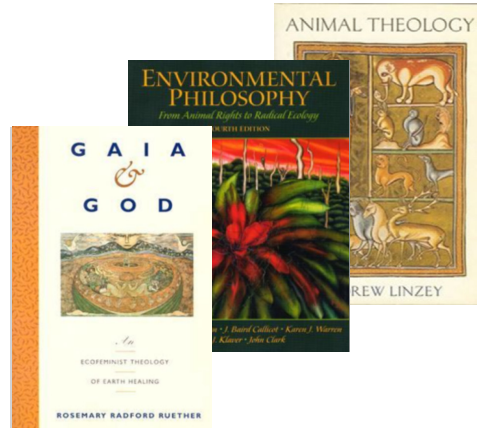
UNDERLYING THEMES IN ECO-THEOLOGY

Academic dialogue on the interface between Christian faith and environmental concerns has taken place under a bewildering array of headings in the past 50 years or so, including:

- Celtic, Native American, African and Aboriginal spiritualities
- Mystical theology
- Animal theology
- Theology & science
- Deep ecology
- Eco-feminism
- Creation spirituality
- Liturgical theology
- etc ... etc ...

Don't worry if you don't understand all these terms. They are just to illustrate all the work that has been going on!

Overall, however, we can draw out three themes or approaches which stand out and which we shall now spend some time reflecting upon:



Stewardship Ecojustice Sacramental

What do these terms mean to you? How do you think they could be relevant to a Christian approach to the environment?

In the boxes on the facing page, these themes are summarised, together with some of the challenges that they may also lead to.

Considering each box in turn (or you may like to invite different groups to consider one box each and then summarise for the others). Think about which aspects of each theme resonate with you and/or your church and whether you agree with the possible challenges suggested.

How important do you think it is to develop an approach that is balanced between all three of these positions?

THE STEWARDSHIP THEME

- Maintains the distinction between God and creation and between humanity and nature.
- Sees creation as entrusted to our care.
- Calls us to attend to the goodness of creation by preserving, sustaining and nurturing it.
- Commands us to love what God loves.

BUT it can also ..

- Suggest overtones of arrogance and the supremacy of the human within the natural order.
 - Suggest that God resembles an absentee landlord rather than indwelling the natural world.
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THE ECOJUSTICE THEME

- Extends the dignity of humanity to include the natural world.
- Appeals to a vision of right relationships between God, humanity and creation.
- Sees that those who cause the least environmental devastation suffer most from its consequences.
- Is derived from biblical principles such as Sabbath, Jubilee etc
- Calls us to live simply so that others may simply live.

BUT we may want to ask ..

- Can principles of justice and ethics worked out for humanity extend to the earth? Isn't nature, in fact, 'red in tooth and claw'?
 - What happens when the needs of some conflict with the needs of others for justice?
-

THE SACRAMENTAL THEME

- Understands God as revealed in nature to which we are called to respond in transformative acts of praise.
- Sees God indwelling sustaining and renewing creation
- Calls us to celebrate the goodness, beauty and diversity of creation.
- Sees sin as the refusal to see our place within the wider created order.

BUT ..

- For some, this approach blurs the distinctions between God and the natural world, leading to pantheism (the belief that God and the natural world are contiguous). Is panentheism (the belief that God is in nature but is also more than nature) credible under a sacramental approach?

CLOSING REFLECTION & PRAYER

This prayer comes from 'Laudato Si', Pope Francis's call to the world, published soon after he took office, to care better for the earth and all its inhabitants, human and non-human. Have someone in the group read the prayer aloud, then spend a few minutes in silence before inviting a second voice to read it again.

All-powerful God, you are present in the whole universe
and in the smallest of your creatures.
You embrace with your tenderness all that exists.
Pour out upon us the power of your love,
that we may protect life and beauty.
Fill us with peace, that we may live
as brothers and sisters, harming no one.
O God of the poor, help us to rescue the abandoned
and forgotten of this earth,
so precious in your eyes.
Bring healing to our lives, that we may protect the world and not prey on it,
that we may sow beauty, not pollution and destruction.
Touch the hearts of those who look only for gain
at the expense of the poor and the earth.
Teach us to discover the worth of each thing,
to be filled with awe and contemplation,
to recognise that we are profoundly united with every creature.
As we journey towards your infinite light,
we thank you for being with us each day
Encourage us, we pray, in our struggle
for justice, love and peace.
Amen

To ponder this week:

In preparation for next week, when we shall consider the practical implications of everything we have learnt over the course, spend some time considering which of the three main approaches on the previous page to these issues (stewardship, eco-justice or sacramental) most reflects the thinking of you and/or your church. Like most problems in life, we need to balance our approach across all three headings. Is there a particular way of working that you feel has been over- or under- emphasised thus far in your experience? Is there a way in which things need to be 're-balanced' for you or your church? If so, what might that mean?

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