

‘Fully Alive’

A Johannine reflection: a theological response to climate change

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The changing climate is putting a number of questions freshly to Christian theology, and to Christian discipleship. For example:

- What sort of trust should we place in technology?
- If human ingenuity has unwittingly caused the damage to the environment, is it human ingenuity that can repair it?
- What are our responsibilities to the poorest and most disadvantaged parts of the world that have done least to cause climate change, and are least able to adapt?
- What are our responsibilities to the future, and to intergenerational justice?
- In the light of the world’s need for energy security, are we capable of the sort of international cooperation essential for reduction in carbon emissions?
- Why do we foster the illusion that human flourishing can be achieved by limitless industrial growth, when we know a major cause of environmental damage is burning fossil fuels?
- How are we to handle our vulnerabilities, anxieties and fears in the face of what can seem like an overwhelming impending catastrophe?

Many of these questions have at root a spiritual and moral, and therefore theological basis.

But underneath all these is a prior question, on which I want to concentrate: what should be our human relationship to the rest of the created order?

That question could be addressed in a number of ways. Michael Northcott in his magisterial book *A Political Theology of Climate Change* (SPCK 2014) points up a number of contradictions. For example:

- Why do many climate scientists increasingly use *apocalyptic* language about dangerous global warming, yet climate change is such a low political priority?
- Since burning coal is such a threat to life, and reduction in fossil fuel dependency so urgent, why is humanity planning another 2000 coal fired power stations?
- Why is the UN search for emissions targets seemingly so unworkable?
- Why, after the G20 agreed in 1999 to end fossil fuels subsidies, has nothing happened?

Michael Northcott talks about the ‘separations’, or ‘pulling apart’, that started with Francis Bacon’s 17th century mechanistic model of nature. God is separated from the world; matter becomes separated from mind and spirit, nature from culture, science from ethics, facts from values. The triangle of relationships between God, humanity and the earth breaks apart. Since then, humanity’s relationship with the rest of Nature has been understood in a different way. It is worth reflecting that in the New Testament the concepts of throwing apart, dividing, separating, setting at variance, are covered by the word ‘*diabolos*’. The ministry of Jesus, by contrast, is predominantly healing, gathering up fragments, restoring, putting back together.

Part of the mission of God to make all things new includes a repair of the breach between body and spirit, nature and culture, science and ethics – essentially a restoration of the relationships between God, humanity and the earth.

We can find that triangle of relationships in the Hebrew Bible: God, Israel and the land; a triangle which then becomes a symbol of the more basic ‘cosmic covenant’ between God, humanity and the earth.

The cosmic covenant features in Irenaeus and in Augustine, and Francis of Assisi. But it got lost, Northcott argues, in the displacement of God in the 17th century. And this lies behind our contemporary crisis of not knowing who we are in relation either to God or nature, and the development of what Naomi Klein calls ‘extractivism’ – a dominance-based relationship in which we humans place ourselves above the earth’s ecosystems and can – indeed must – control and exploit the earth as if it were an inanimate machine.

Other writers have made a similar point. Carolyn Merchant writes of *The Death of Nature*. Philip Sherrard called his book *The Rape of Man and Nature*. Bill McKibben wrote *The End of Nature*; and Alister McGrath has called for *The Re-enchantment of Nature*. What is at issue here is the fracture of the triangle of relationships between God, humanity and the earth, and so the loss of the Christian understanding of humanity serving under God in the care of the world. To pick up a phrase from John Donne's sad reflection on what the new science of his day had produced, 'Tis all in pieces, all coherence gone.'

Climate change then, in James Lovelock's colourful metaphor, is 'Gaia's Revenge'.

There is some urgency about this. For several hundred thousand years, the amount of CO₂ in the atmosphere has gone up and down, through the ice ages and the warm periods in between, but never more than about 280 parts per million. Since the industrial revolution, and especially in our lifetime, it has increased at an increasingly rapid rate. Last year (2013) it reached 400 parts per million. The amount of CO₂ correlates with a rise in average earth surface temperature, and we are on course if we do nothing about it for a rise in earth's temperature of more than 2 degrees. Both The World Bank and the UK Parliamentary Committee on Climate Change estimate 4 degrees, probably more. That might not sound much, but as the global temperature difference between the middle of an ice age and the warm period in between is only about 6 degrees; the likely warming this century is equivalent to about half an ice age change in just a few decades. The earth has never had to adapt so quickly ever before during human civilization. The likelihood of extreme climate disruptions, rising oceans, loss of fresh water, loss of food security, changing patterns of disease and so on, is growing. The UK Parliamentary Committee on Climate Change argues that global emissions need to peak by the year 2020, followed by rapid cuts after that. That's five or so years at most.

What role does the Church have to play in all this?

My main question for today is: can Christian theology and Christian discipleship and mission contribute to a repair of the disjunction between God, humanity and Earth? Can body be reconciled with spirit, nature with culture, science with ethics? Can coherence be restored?

These questions take me – perhaps surprisingly – to the Prologue of the Fourth Gospel.

Of course, whole books have been written about the Prologue. Let me select just five themes and use them as pegs to reflect on some of the questions posed by climate change.

(1) In the beginning was the Word.

There is resonance here of course with Genesis I, with the pattern of six days leading to a seventh: the whole of creation leading to worship.

There are also the hints, such as we find at the end of Job, that the whole created order was there for God's pleasure long before humanity was thought of. 'Where were you when I laid the foundations of the earth... when the morning stars sang together and all the heavenly beings shouted for joy?'

So let our first word in a theology of nature be of humble and joyous gratitude: joy in what God has made; joy in God's gift. For all that we have, life and the means of life, comes to us as gift: gift, we may want to say, of God's goodness generosity and love.

Genesis I also makes clear that we humans are part of the rest of nature, or as we would say, part of the whole evolved creation, and therefore dependent on God for life, and for well-being. Our theology, our discipleship, our ethic, our mission in the light of climate change must therefore be one of proper dependence, of createdness, not of an assumed autonomy. It is sometimes said that because human beings are the cause of the damage to the natural environment, it is human beings who can solve it. While we most certainly do have a responsibility under God for creation care, the preservation or restoration of creation cannot simply be a human task if the creation is continuously created and upheld and sustained by God, and will ultimately be redeemed. Creation is, to use a phrase of Colin Gunton's, 'God's project' of which we are one part.

So what is our human responsibility?

Margaret Barker has emphasized that the pattern of Genesis I is the pattern of the Temple. Day One represents the Holy of holies: heaven and earth together. The veil of the Temple represents the second day

with the separation of the heaven and the earth. Subsequent days give us the seven-branched candlestick (sun, moon and five planets); the table of bread – vegetation; the altar of sacrifice – the animal kingdom; and finally the priest – humanity as male and female.

Together they suggest that the whole cosmos can be understood as God's temple, what Calvin calls the 'theatre of God's glory', and humanity as God's priest – part of the created order, and yet with a responsibility under God to represent God in care for creation, and to give a voice for the whole creation to sing the Creator's praise.

(2) All things were made through him.

There is resonance between The Logos and Wisdom. Much of the Fourth Gospel carries echoes of Wisdom writings.

Genesis 1 speaks of creation by Word and Spirit (God's commanding Word: 'Let there be'; God's animating Spirit). The Spirit in many places stands for the divine Wisdom, who emerges in Proverbs 8 as the mediator of creation.

Irenaeus builds on this when he says that God creates with two hands: the Son and the Spirit, or the Word and the Wisdom.

Wisdom is She in whom all things hold together. Wisdom is the mediator between God the Creator and the created world. So the Bible does not take us either to pantheism in which Nature is God; or to the deism that has such a lofty view of God's transcendence that God is lofted out of any concern with ordinary material things. It points us to Wisdom, the Mediator.

It is Christ our Wisdom, who is in mind in the majestic Christological hymn in Colossians 1.15ff.

'He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation; for in him all things in heaven and earth were created... in him all things hold together... through him God was pleased to reconcile to himself all things... by making peace through the blood of his cross.'

Wisdom is She in whom 'all things hold together'. It is Wisdom's way that leads us back to coherence.

'Holding together' points us to mutual interdependence. Our human life and flourishing is inextricably bound up not only with our relationship with God, but also with the well-being of the planet, on which we depend for food, sustenance, health, energy and so on. This is why the Fifth Mark of Mission for the Anglican Consultative Council says: 'To safeguard the integrity of creation, and sustain and renew the life of the earth'.

The Stockholm scientist Johan Rockstrom introduced the phrase 'planetary boundaries'. 'A safe and just space for humanity', depends on us not exceeding 'planetary boundaries' – that is not living beyond the capacity of the planet to sustain 9 billion people. We exceed planetary boundaries by polluting our fresh water, by using too much nitrogen and phosphorus in our fertilisers, polluting the atmosphere, letting the oceans get too acidic, losing biodiversity, too rapid change in the use of the land, climate change. And all of this is complicated by the fact that the world's population is currently growing at the rate of a city the size of Leicester every 3 days.

So Wisdom's way, we may say, is something to do with living within God-given limits. There are *moral* boundaries also, which were realized as long ago as Isaiah of Jerusalem. He uses climate language to illustrate the results of human sinfulness. Gaia's revenge is here depicted as God's judgement:

'The earth dries up and withers, the world languishes and withers; the heavens languish with the earth. The earth lies polluted under its inhabitants; for they have transgressed laws, violated the statutes, broken the everlasting covenant.' (Isaiah 24.4-5)

I think we urgently need to recover a sense that 'the Earth is the Lord's', that there are planetary boundaries, and that to live outside God's will and the way of Wisdom is sin. We need to recover a sense of mutual interdependence within creation – which for us means justice, generosity and restraint.

(3) The world was made through him, yet the world knew him not.

I think this means that it is possible to be alive in God's world but not be alive to God. And many of the stories we tell each other about our world, and about climate change, illustrate the displacement of God from our thinking.

(i) There is a story about Management and Control.

From Francis Bacon onwards there is a view of nature as a mechanism that we can exploit for our own benefit, what Klein called 'extractivism'. We humans stand over and above the world, which is there for our good. We can manage; by doing the right research and asking the right questions and pushing the right buttons we can manipulate nature to yield her secrets, and to produce whatever we want to fulfill all our desires. You get this sort of thing in Nigel Lawson's book about global warming. The message I take from that is: 'The earth is very resilient; technological discovery has always come to our rescue in the past; we can manage the world for our benefit; it makes no economic sense to take any action to change energy policy; there is no need to worry.' How does a Christian respond to such complacency?

(ii) At the opposite extreme, there is a story of doom.

People are simply part of the system. This is not a mechanical but an organic model: we are essentially part of 'nature', which is living, developing and unpredictable. We are impotent in the face of Nature's power and Gaia's revenge.

'The earth system is very fragile and sensitive to climate change; we are seriously damaging the environment: be afraid – be very afraid.' In his book about population trends, 'Ten Billion', Stephen Emmott's verdict is 'I think we're f***d'. How does a Christian respond to overwhelming despair?

(iii) There is a third story that seems to be about greed.

Michael Northcott has a comment on the greedy consumption which is a major driver of climate change: 'Nature is calling time on the freedom of the wealthy to raid the planet for resources to sustain industrial civilization, while forcing increasing numbers into poverty of diminishing food and water.' Naomi Klein's new book (*This Changes Everything*) is subtitled: 'capitalism versus the climate.' She argues that we now have to choose between either the attempt to avert environmental catastrophe or continuing with the illusion of limitless economic growth. 'Climate change detonates the ideological scaffolding' on which our contemporary economic and political ideology rests.

The Mayor of London's Margaret Thatcher Lecture (2013) – even allowing for his rhetorical flourish – seems to celebrate greed: 'I don't believe economic equality is possible. Indeed some measure of inequality is essential for the spirit of envy and keeping up with the Joneses that is, like greed, a valuable spur to economic activity.' We are, he implies, a 'market-led' economy in which something called The Market rules; finance trumps every other consideration; everything, including the environment becomes a commodity to be desired, or given a price tag.

Lesslie Newbigin (*Truth to Tell*) gave his response to that sort of idolatry:

'When the free market is made into an absolute, outside of rational control in the light of ethical principles, it becomes a power that enslaves human beings... The idea that if economic life is detached from all moral consideration and left to operate by its own laws all will be well, is simply an abdication of human responsibility... If Christ's sovereignty is not recognized in the world of economics, then demonic powers take control.'

John's Gospel gives us a different story, a different way of looking at our relationship to the world in categories that are not mechanical or merely organic, but personal, relational and covenantal.

- instead of management: a story of interdependence, cooperation and fellowship;
- instead of despair: a story of compassionate love and mercy leading to hope;
- instead of greed: a story of generosity and of self-giving restraint and service.

In summary, the Gospel story directs us to love: God so loved the world; Christ loved his own to the end; love one another. And the first Letter of John identifies love with justice: 'If a man has enough to live on, and yet when he sees his brother in need shuts up his heart against him, how can it be said that the love of God dwells in him? (1 John 3.17-18). Love, in John, is primarily love of the deprived, the poor, the needy. It is love, for God and his people and his earth, that will motivate transformative action for renewal.

So in a world of climate change, we take from this that the environmental agenda and the developmental agenda have to belong together. We are talking of what Christian Aid calls 'Climate Justice'.

How can we tell this different, Gospel, story?

Archbishop Rowan draws on the title of one of Mary Midgely's books *The Myths we live by*:

'The church's contribution [to the climate change debate],' he says, 'has to consist not primarily or exclusively in public lobbying, though that is important, but in its showing forth of a different myth'. The Archbishop elaborates that in terms of the truth of creation's relation with the Creator and especially the role of human work and thought within that. This, he says, 'is what is exhibited every time the Eucharist is celebrated.' I would add that we also show forth a different myth by loving our neighbour and doing our neighbour justice.

The Operation Noah Ash Wednesday statement '*Climate Change and the Purposes of God*' included paragraphs about love and justice:

'The prophets put economic behavior at the forefront of their call to justice. Today the challenge is to seek a different, sustainable economy, based on the values of human flourishing and the well-being of all creation, not on the assumption of unlimited economic growth, overconsumption, exploitative interest and debt.

'People in poor communities are mostly innocent of any role in causing climate change, whilst the nations that pollute most refuse to accept their responsibilities. Loving our neighbour requires us to reduce our consumption of energy for the sake of Christ, who suffers with those who suffer. To live simply and sustainably contributes significantly to human flourishing... In the future, Christians may be called to receive into their communities refugees forced to leave their lands through climate change.'

(4) The Word was made flesh and dwelt among us, and we saw his glory.

The scientist / philosopher Michael Polanyi depicts reality as multi-leveled, each level with its own mode of interpretation, from physics and chemistry, then biology, psychology, sociology, ethics, and theology. Each 'level', so to speak, depends on but is not reducible to lower levels.

The incarnation of Christ then is the Word becoming flesh right down to the level of our genes. The Incarnation is what Thomas Torrance, in a vivid metaphor, calls 'the intersecting vertical coordinate' which gives all the other levels their coherence and meaning.

The incarnation of divine Wisdom is the repair for our cultural splits between body and spirit, nature and culture, science and ethics. If John Donne spoke of 'all coherence gone', the Incarnation points to 'coherence restored': God, humanity and Earth reconnected.

And Incarnation leads to the Wisdom of the Cross: 'through him God was pleased to reconcile to himself all things, by making peace through the blood of his cross.'

In Margaret Barker's *Temple theology*, this is the language of the High Priest emerging through the veil with the shed blood of sacrifice to bring cleansing and blessing to the temple: Christ's death bringing cleansing and blessing to all creation. This is what Allan Galloway and Joseph Sitler call 'cosmic redemption'. Or to use Colin Gunton's phrase, when he is referring to Irenaeus' teaching that creation is both good and also on the way to perfection, 'creation is a project' which has its origins in the covenant love of God, and goes by way of the Cross to the Kingdom of glory.

Or in Hans Kung's wonderful phrase: 'the Kingdom of God is creation healed'.

In John's Gospel, the phrase 'we saw his glory' is mostly a reference to the Passion, suffering, death and resurrection of Christ. It is through his entering into the depths of disintegration, even to death, that reintegration, new coherence, healing and resurrection are possible, and the vision becomes one of creation restored. And as John 17 indicates, 'The Church receives glory by its unity in faith with the death and resurrection of Jesus, and expresses it in obedience, humiliation, poverty and suffering.' The 'creation project' lives in eschatological hope.

I think much Christian theology has become virtually overtaken with the view that salvation is essentially something to do with our individual souls, and our journey to heaven. What has got lost is the idea of the redemption of all things in Christ, the Wisdom of God in whom all things hold together, in whom all things are reconciled to God, and in whom heaven and earth are joined. So in place of the assumption of unlimited consumption, we need to recover the Way of Wisdom, the way of Cross and Resurrection, love and service, sacrifice and restraint, and the corporate life of the Spirit, as the pathway to human flourishing, and the healing of all creation.

Climate change requires of us a reframing of all our human values and desires.

(5) Of his fullness have we all received grace.

Although the primary purpose John's Gospel was written, so it tells us, that you may believe that Jesus is the Messiah, and in believing may have life in his name, the subtext is that in Christ we see an authentic human being, fully alive – alive to God, to others and to the world.

The famous quote from Irenaeus is about Jesus: 'the glory of God is a human being fully alive.'

I take 'fullness' to mean blessing, the flourishing of all creation on which human flourishing depends; human well-being – a grace-filled life close to the Father's heart – lived out in terms of love and justice – being fully alive.

'Fullness' is captured by that wonderful word 'shalom', which must be in mind when the Risen Christ says to his disciples: 'Peace I leave with you, peace I give to you.'

'Of his fullness have we all received grace' – 'we all' is the Community of the Beloved Disciple, which stands for the Christian church, the body of the Risen Christ that points towards the fullness of the Kingdom in a healed creation. It is hope of resurrection, as St Paul says at the end of 1 Corinthians 15, that energises us, even in spite of impending future catastrophe, to transformative action in the present: 'your labour is not in vain in the Lord.' Hope, in this sense, is therefore not a blind optimism that everything will work out all right, or even the assumption that either God or technology will provide us with a new future to resource us to keep going just as we are. Hope is rather the trust that God in love holds on to us in all our uncertainties, and that in ways we do not know, God has a future for his 'creation project'.

Can climate change provoke us into transformative action – into a different way of living, not dependent on fossil fuels with unhealthy fumes, clogged roads, reduced health, and the mad scramble for ever more consumption in search of ever more economic growth but a way of living informed by God's Way of Wisdom? Can climate change be the trigger both for a rethinking of our desires and how to value them in the light of God's way of Wisdom, and for transformative action in the present in the light of God's call to live justly and love our neighbours throughout creation?

The practical side of God's Wisdom is often understood in terms of enabling people to live well in the world. Interestingly, most of the 'I Am' sayings later in the Gospel reflect references in the Wisdom literature: Bread, Light, Shepherd, Life, Vine, Way.

So I want to see what happens if we use the 'I Am' sayings of the Fourth Gospel as a pointer to what makes for human flourishing, for living in the way of Wisdom, for becoming more fully alive within God's world: I am the Bread – a sufficiency of food and water. One of the primary ill effects of unrestrained climate change will be a lack of food security.

I am the Light – this comes in the context of healing: health will also be affected by climate change, with the changed distribution of viruses, and the unpredictable spread of diseases.

I am the Gate speaks of security. One of the biggest political issues raised by climate change is the management of national securities. At a personal level in the light of the fears and anxieties raised by impending disaster, especially for our grandchildren, we need to know that there is a place of security within the love of God.

I am the Good Shepherd is about knowing and being known; about hearing a voice and having a voice, about the inclusion of other sheep – perhaps the welcome to climate refugees.

I am the True and Living Way: speaks of a sense of direction and purpose.

I am the Resurrection and Life: points back the promise of new birth, and the gift of new life.

I am the Vine focuses on community, belonging, indwelling, fellowship: 'I have called you friends'.

Many of these factors are not far from the parameters for human flourishing found in Tim Jackson's book *Prosperity without Growth*, or the Skidelskys' *How much is enough?*, or Michael Sandel's *What money cannot buy*. They are not far either, from the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals, reminding us again that environmental and developmental agendas belong together. Can climate change provoke us into a new vision of life in a low carbon economy; into transformative action to improve lives, reduce inequality, block harmful trade, reinvest in clean air, healthier living, greater security, less damage to the planet, more sense of corporate cohesion?

So the Gospel takes us to Incarnation, and the Gift of the Spirit. The Incarnation enables us to find again the coherence of the relational triangle: God, humanity and the Earth. It points to the project of God's kingdom as creation healed, towards which the Church is to be a pointer and enabler. Incarnation points us to the Cross and Resurrection. Discipleship asks of us self-denial, restraint, loving service.

Climate change urgently puts to us the costly need to reframe our values and desires in line with the vision of God's future kingdom. The psalmist prays 'Restore us again, O God of our salvation: will you be angry with us for ever?' and then looks to the Day when steadfast love and faithfulness will meet, justice and peace will embrace, and God's glory will dwell in our land. (Psalm 85). Only so will all creation be blessed, and humanity become more fully alive.

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