



HOPE FOR ALL CREATION

A theological response to
the environmental crises



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A teaching document from
the House of Bishops

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Foreword

by the Archbishops of Canterbury and York

From its earliest days, the Christian life has been understood as a journey. Pilgrimage puts this ancient insight into practice and has shaped our own spiritual lives and ministries. The roads and paths we have walked with fellow pilgrims have taken us past parks, gardens, window boxes and woodland, along rivers, through fields and to churches in green churchyards, and to people who live, work and find enjoyment in these places. The experience reminds us that to follow Jesus Christ is to be drawn into renewed relationship, with other people and with the rest of creation, as we are drawn more deeply into the life of God. Indeed, for many, these spaces, and the life that fills them, can be a place of encounter with the God who creates them.

It also reminds us that we inhabit a world groaning with the growing impact of the climate and environmental crises. Their scale is daunting, and the devastation and suffering they bring – to which more and more people are increasingly vulnerable, especially those in poverty – are growing in scale and intensity. We can feel powerless and overwhelmed in the face of these things and our fears for the future.

Yet pilgrimage is an act of trust and hope in God and in God's promises. *Hope for All Creation* shows that there are profound reasons for such hope and trust in God in our present situation.

It sets out the House of Bishops' understanding of that situation and of how the Church's faith speaks to it, unfolding just how deep and enduring is God's commitment to the whole creation, to sustain it, to renew and redeem it. Restoring our relationship to the rest of creation is part and parcel of God's saving work and of his coming kingdom. To care for creation in partnership with others, to show solidarity with the vulnerable, to be prophetic in speech and action on these issues – locally, nationally and globally – is to live out this faith and hope. It is an essential part of following Jesus and sharing the Gospel today.

We are very grateful to the Church of England's National Environment Working Group for initiating this work, and to the Faith and Order Commission for producing this book. In particular, we wish to thank the members of the Commission's Theology and Environment Working Group – Professor Nicholas Adams, Revd Dr Dave Bookless, Jo Chamberlain, Dr Guido de Graaff, Revd Margot Hodson, Dr Martin Hodson, Revd Dr Timothy Howles, Rt Revd Dr Anderson Jeremiah, Tash Jesson, Dr Hilary Marlow, Dr Anupama Ranawana and Dr Ruth Valerio; and its Chair, Dr Ben Fulford.

We commend *Hope for All Creation* to you, as a guide to faithful living in our time, as a resource for Christian ministry, and as a contribution from the Church of England to discerning how we exercise wise, responsible stewardship of the planet we share.

✠ **Sarah Cantuar:**

✠ **Stephen Ebor:**

5 June 2026

Introduction

‘We have been gifted a world of breath-taking beauty, astounding abundance and intricate interconnection. It is a world God declared good and loves.’¹

That world is now in crisis. The damage generated by human activity to the climate and ecosystems on which we depend is widespread and intensifying. Biodiversity loss is escalating. The impact on vulnerable human communities is increasingly severe, and the prospects for the future grow bleak. Meanwhile, the response of nations with the power and resources to limit and mitigate this damage is seeming to falter.

Yet God has not forsaken the Earth, the precious life it supports, nor the human beings who inhabit it. God continues to sustain the interconnected webs of life in which we have our being. God has acted, coming in Jesus Christ, to dwell in our creaturely home, and to reconcile us to our Creator and to our fellow creatures. In raising Christ from the dead, God has pledged the coming of his reign and the renewal and liberation of all creation. And in sending the Holy Spirit, the risen Christ accompanies, enables and guides the Church to live out this reconciliation and this hope, and goes ahead of it in the world over which he is Lord.

In this critical moment, Christians are called to respond to our current ecological situation in a profound conversion of our lives and imaginations, to repair our broken relationships with our fellow creatures, and to anticipate the joyful coming of God's kingdom on Earth. The crisis calls for action in the here-and-now. By responding to it, we can recover our humanity and purpose. Moreover, working alongside those of shared purpose and good will, we can embody the spiritual transformation our world needs, living in the hope that God alone can provide.

That calling and hope is the central message of this report, with a particular focus on the Church of England and its context.

Signs of the times

The signs of the times are evident to Anglicans across the world. Members of the Anglican Communion are raising their voices to bear witness to the impact of the environmental crises on the places where they minister and the people whom they serve, and especially on the poor. That witness can be heard in the 2015 statement of Anglican bishops, who heard stories from dioceses affected by:

[...] increasingly strong and more frequent extreme weather events; changes in seasonal weather patterns; rising levels of seawater; acidification of seawater and depleted fishing grounds; the devastating impacts of pollution; deforestation, and destructive mining and energy extraction and transportation practices.²

They lament the displacement of people due to the effects of climate change and environmental damage.

Similar impacts are attested in the *Letters for Creation* from Anglican primates to the Communion from 2018.³ The Archbishop of Cape Town related the impact of changing patterns of rainfall due to climate change, causing devastation in Mozambique and terrible drought in Namibia, Eswatini and South Africa. The Archbishop of Aotearoa, New Zealand and Polynesia described the threat to the very existence of Island nations in the Pacific, the relocation of villages due to rising sea levels and destruction of trees, homes and crops in Fiji by violent cyclones. The Archbishop of Melbourne testified to the impact of climate change in the increasing severity and number of extreme weather events in Australia and the declining condition of the Great Barrier Reef. More recently, the Bishop of the Amazon and primate of the Anglican Episcopal Church in Brazil has spoken out about the impacts of mining and deforestation on biodiversity, the climate and on indigenous peoples.⁴

Closer to home, the Bishop in Europe reports a series of recent extreme and destructive weather events, the severity and increased frequency of which are linked to the effects of climate change: extensive wildfires in Spain, Portugal, Greece and Turkey in 2025; extended drought in Sicily and Sardinia in 2024; extreme, sudden flooding from heavy rainfall in Germany, Belgium, Luxembourg and the Netherlands in 2021. Here in the UK, bishops have spoken of the crisis of biodiversity in the UK, as one of the most nature-depleted countries in the world, the impact of river pollution here, and the 'new normal' of more frequent heatwaves, droughts and heavy rainfall across the nation in recent years.⁵

As the bishops at the 2022 Lambeth Conference noted,

Member churches of the Anglican Communion are involved in every part of the environmental emergency.

We are the people facing devastation in disaster-stricken communities. We are all the polluters, especially in wealthy countries. We are people living in poverty and on the margins. We wield power and political influence. We are experiencing loss and damage of our land, homes and livelihoods. We are investors with financial capital. We are first-responders to disasters and those who accompany communities on the journey of recovery and resilience.⁶

Young Anglicans are among those voicing their concerns about climate and nature crises and their impact on poorer people and countries, and taking action. The participation of many young people from the Church of England, alongside those from other churches, in the Young Christians' Climate Relay in 2021 was a way of expressing these concerns to the UK government. Walkers joined in a 530-mile relay from the G7 meeting in Cornwall, England to the COP26 meeting in Glasgow, Scotland, in response to the call for climate justice and with the demand that governments 'rise to the moment'.

As the primates' *Letters for Creation* also indicate, Anglicans across the world celebrate God's creation in their worship and work to safeguard the integrity of creation in the places where they live. The Church of England is acting, too. At national and regional levels, not least through the ministry of its bishops, the Church is contributing to public discussion on environmental issues, including in debates in the House of Lords. At national, diocesan and parochial levels, the Church is caring for creation

by reducing carbon emissions across its church buildings and schools; by disinvesting from fossil fuel extraction; by promoting wildlife and biodiversity in its churchyards and glebe land; through the Eco Church scheme, which equips and recognises churches' care for creation; and through the Church Commissioners' management of their land and investments.

These initiatives build on a longer legacy of Anglican environmentalism and spirituality: naturalists and theologians like John Ray (1627–1706), The Revd Gilbert White (1720–1793), Charles Raven (1885–1964), Bishop Hugh Montefiore (1920–2005), John Stott (1921–2011) and former Archbishop of Canterbury Rowan Williams (1950–); animal welfare campaigners and organisers like The Revd Arthur Broom (1779–1837), who founded the RSPCA; open space campaigners like the evangelicals Thomas Fowell Buxton (1837–1915) and Edward North Buxton (1840–1924); the Christian Socialists Miranda (1836–1910) and Octavia Hill (1838–1912); Sir Robert Hunter (1844–1913) and Canon Hardwicke Rawnsley (1851–1920), co-founders, with Octavia Hill, of the National Trust; and poets and hymn-writers with a profound appreciation of nature and its spiritual significance, such as William Cowper (1731–1800), John Keble (1792–1866) and Frances Ridley Havergal (1836–1879).

The tradition of Anglican worship also provides inspiration and a context for creation care. The pattern of the church year, which we share with the worldwide church, forms us for this vocation: in Advent we express longing for cosmic renewal, in Epiphany we celebrate the revelation of Christ to the whole world, in Lent we practise restraint, fasting and simplicity, and in Easter we celebrate resurrection and the renewal of all creation. In our confessions we now find expressions of sorrow for our neglect, greed and abuse of nature; some provinces' prayer books now include laments for environmental destruction and injustice.

Via intercessory prayer we find expressions of thanksgiving for creation's beauty and abundance, and forms of petition around climate, biodiversity and global society.

In recent decades, many Anglicans have embraced the so-called Season of Creation, in the early autumn, as an opportunity to focus prayer and action. In addition, the Anglican Communion has been actively involved in a large ecumenical initiative towards establishing a major festival across the Western denominations, to be celebrated on the first Sunday of September. The Feast of Creation in Christ is being adopted by the Church of England and by other Anglican provinces, and is being considered by other major denominations including the Roman Catholic Church.⁷

An Anglican tradition of theological reflection on the environment

To guide its action and witness on the environmental crises, the Church of England can draw on several strands of Anglican reflection on the environment, alongside the rich theological resources of other churches and denominations, such as the writings of the Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew, and Pope Francis' encyclical *Laudato Si'*. In the UK, there is also the ecumenical report *Hope in God's Future*, produced by a joint working group convened by the Baptist Union of Great Britain, the Methodist Church and the United Reformed Church.

As early as 1941, bishops, clergy and laity, convened by the then-Archbishop of York, William Temple, met at Malvern to consider

how their faith might guide the post-war reconstruction of society. In their Manifesto, sent to Anglican churches across the world, they recommended the recovery of 'reverence for the earth and its resources ... as a storehouse of divine bounty on which we utterly depend.'⁸ The spirit of that recommendation is echoed in subsequent Anglican statements and reports.

The environment has also been a concern of successive gatherings of Anglican bishops at the Lambeth Conference. In 1968, the Conference urged all Christians 'to take all possible action to ensure man's responsible stewardship over nature; in particular in his relationship with animals, and with regard to the conservation of the soil, and the prevention of the pollution of air, soil, and oceans.'⁹ The 2022 Lambeth Conference called on Anglicans to recognise the interdependence of all life on Earth, repent of an extractive view of nature as something to be exploited and embrace one of relationship and stewardship, and make the safeguarding of creation and the sustaining and renewing of life on Earth central to our lives as a missional imperative.¹⁰ Over the last fifty years and more, a series of reports published by bodies within the Church of England have sought to articulate such a revolution of worldview and responsibility to inform responses to the salient environmental issues of the time.¹¹

In 1970, The Church's Board for Social Responsibility issued *Man in his Living Environment*, written by an ecumenical group.¹² It addressed ethical questions relating to animal welfare, the sustainability of population growth, the use of pesticides, air and water pollution, the unsustainable extraction of water and the exploitation of fishing and the seabed. The authors urged the importance of 'faith in a loving and purposeful Creator who vitalises and energises the cosmos', to whom human beings are accountable for their authority over nature, to motivate and

inform a vigilant, dynamic conservation of the world's natural resources.¹³ For both human and non-human creatures have worth to God and have a common hope in his glory, and the histories and sufferings of nature and human societies find their true meaning in Jesus Christ.

In 1975, a working group appointed by the Archbishop of Canterbury published *Man and Nature*, addressing a similar set of concerns about the transformation of the environment by industrial societies and an apprehension of planetary limits to growth.¹⁴ The solution to the extreme anthropocentrism and a purely instrumental view of nature they discerned behind these problems lay in a radical shift of attitudes, values and policies informed by a religious worldview in which humans and their fellow creatures belong to a common order. A doctrine of creation, in which all creatures are seen as part of an interconnected whole, valuable in themselves and as part of the whole, and humans are accountable to God for their stewardship of the world, would meet this need. Here God is continually at work as Creator and Redeemer. Humans are creatures called to co-create, yet pollute their environment by their distorted relationship to it. God's continuing creative work offers the possibility of redemption, including for humanity, to turn from seeing the world as something to use and exploit to partnering with God in the transformation of all things: a sacramental view of the world and our role in it, for which the Eucharist is the paradigm.

In 1986, the Board for Social Responsibility published *Our responsibility for the living environment* to provide theological reflection on the deterioration of the natural world due to the heavy impact of wealthy consumer societies and the development of poorer ones.¹⁵ To the challenges of sustainable development and conservation it offers an ethic of stewardship grounded in

God's valuing of creation for its own sake, God's activity in natural processes and the special responsibility of humans, at once animals and part of nature, yet distinguished by being created in God's image, to glorify God in ordering the rest of creation, trusting in God's sovereign care for creation.

Claire Foster's *Sharing God's Planet*, issued in 2005 on behalf of the Mission and Public Affairs Council, addressed a situation in which the cumulative impact of humans on their environment in the 20th century – global warming, air and water pollution, the deteriorating fertility of soils and biodiversity loss – 'may be triggering irreversible and catastrophic step changes in the environment of the earth'.¹⁶ Like the authors of earlier reports, Foster sees a radical shift of perceptions as the key to changing human treatment of the Earth. If humans can understand that they share a common origin in God, and are themselves subject to God, they might live and work harmoniously to safeguard the integrity of creation and sustain and renew the life of the Earth. *Sharing God's Planet* frames the connectedness of all things in terms of a covenantal relationship binding them to God and one another. This bond is renewed in Christ, whose redemptive work encompasses the whole creation. In this covenantal context, the role of humanity takes three forms. First, there is the form of prophetic witness rooted in the contemplation of creation's goodness and beauty. Second, there is a priestly transformation of things, in receiving them as God's gifts and offering them back to God, to realise their unique potential as vehicles of God's self-expression.¹⁷ Third, humans are called to a servant kingship of stewardship under God's lordship.

The purpose of this report

In this report, we seek to take forward this tradition of theological reflection to inform the Church of England's care for creation. We do so at a time when humanity's disruption of the Earth's processes and degradation of its life seems on the threshold of the catastrophes earlier reports warned of. At the same time, the transformation of worldview, attitudes and practice for which they called are not yet as widespread or effective as they hoped. As people grieve the damage to the natural world around them, suffer the degradation of their own environments and experience great anxiety for the future, fear, resignation and despair take their place alongside other forces impeding the spiritual and practical conversion we need, in the Church as much as without.

At this moment, this document seeks to build on previous reports by deepening the vision of creation and human responsibility they offer but also by articulating a fuller account of God's reconciliation of all creation in Christ and a more developed understanding of hope for the redemption and renewal of all creatures. Within the frame of this theological vision, it articulates the freedom and responsibility God offers us to live out a reconciled relationship with other creatures in light of this hope, as integral to Christian living and the mission of the Church, and imagines the shape of such a response, informed by initiatives and good practice already taking place.

The report undertakes these tasks in three parts:

Part One: See

The first part invites us to consider our contemporary environmental situation. It introduces the complex inter-

relatedness of the Earth's organisms, ecosystems and processes as a key characteristic of God's creation, and the growing human disruption of these relationships. Using the planetary boundaries framework, it surveys the ways in which human activity has breached safe limits for the Earth's system – potentially leading to irreversible risks for both nature and people.

Part Two: Reflect

The second part offers a theological interpretation of this situation and reasons in Christian faith for hope for all creation, drawing on the great story of Scripture and on Christian tradition. Here we offer a theology of God's creation as characterised by interconnectedness and interdependence, where God is intimately present, sustaining creatures through the Earth's processes and relationships. We also outline the place and responsibility of human beings, as belonging to this creaturely web of life and yet endowed with a distinctive responsibility under God for other creatures and the connections and conditions in which they flourish. The environmental crisis we face, then, is ultimately an expression of humanity's rejection of this responsibility and our defiance of our place in creation, which has ruptured our relationships with God and with nature, and disrupted the integrity of creation. The report then articulates grounds for hope in God's action to restore the integrity of creation in Jesus Christ, reconciling all creatures, including human beings, to himself, God's promise to renew creation and to indwell it, to whose full eschatological realisation Christians look forward. The section concludes by describing the freedom and responsibility God affords the Church, in the Spirit, to act in light of this faith and hope, in solidarity with the poor and marginalised, and with other creatures. In this task the Church – and the world – are not alone, and the future is not closed, for Christ accompanies them.

Part Three: Respond

The third part sets out a vision of that conversion of our lives in light of God's saving commitment to all creation and the hope of his kingdom, beginning with the question posed by those who were present on the first Pentecost morning, as the Spirit was poured out: 'What should we do?' (Acts 2.37). It traces the shape of faithful, hopeful action, locally, nationally and globally, in response to what God has done and has promised to do, embodying our faith in partnership with others.

You can find a digital version of this report, together with suggestions for additional materials and further reading at: **cofe.io/HopeForAllCreation**.

In this way, this report presents a theological vision by which members of the Church of England might think, reflect and act at this time, in accordance with our faith, and alongside Christians of other denominations and indeed all people of good will.

Our hope and prayer as we face this global ecological crisis is that Christians, as they must always do, will look to the Lord who 'gives power to the faint, and strengthens the powerless' (Isaiah 40.29).



PART ONE

SEE

Chapter 1

Earth – diverse, interconnected and in crisis

The Earth and all living things are God's creation. God continually sustains, orders and provides for them.

Life on the Earth is wonderfully rich, complex and interconnected. Living creatures play a vital part not only in their own ecological niches, but also in the larger, interconnected processes which support life and keep the planet in dynamic balance.

Through our choices and behaviours, humans are increasingly disturbing that balance.

Image: A kelp forest in the Rías Baixas, Galicia, Spain.



In the Christian faith, the Earth and all its life, together with the whole cosmos, is understood as being the triune God's beloved creation.

Many passages from the Bible describe how God is intimately involved in its ongoing processes. For example, the Psalmist says of God:

*You send the springs into the brooks,
which run among the hills.
They give drink to every beast of the field,
and the wild asses quench their thirst.
Beside them the birds of the air make their nests
and sing among the branches.
You water the hills from your dwelling on high;
the earth is filled with the fruit of your works.
You make grass to grow for the cattle
and plants to meet our needs,
Bringing forth food from the earth
and wine to gladden our hearts,
Oil to give us a cheerful countenance
and bread to strengthen our hearts.*

PSALM 104.11–17

Passages like these describe the world as wonderfully diverse and interdependent. This is the creation that God provides for, delights in and sees as good.

God's works are indeed 'wonderful', as the Psalmist exclaims (Psalm 139.14).

This sense of awe and wonder at our world and all the life that inhabits it is echoed widely in human cultures, from ancient

cave paintings to the nature documentaries of our own time.

As scientific inquiry has developed, it has offered us a deeper understanding of the rich diversity and connectedness of life in our world.¹⁸ The Earth is home to a huge variety of organisms – ranging from microscopic unicellular forms to the towering coast redwood tree, standing 116 metres tall, and the enormous blue whale, weighing up to 200 tons.

Each multicellular organism consists of a complex array of organs, tissues and cell types, all with their own functions, that interact to support the life of the whole organism. And each cell again is made up of many structures (organelles) with specific functions that work together so it can play its part.

Organisms of the same species, in turn, may organise themselves in a variety of ways, with different degrees of cooperation and complexity and for different lengths of time, for purposes such as nutrition, survival, migration, reproduction and the nurture of their young. Think, for example, of the flock behaviours of geese or starlings, the schooling behaviour of herring and the structured cooperation of extended family groups, like wolf packs or whale pods, and of complex insect societies, such as bee or termite colonies.

At another level, different organisms in particular places relate to one another and to the local climate and landscape to form interdependent webs of life, which we call ecosystems. They may vary in scale from a tidal pool or a single tree to a saltmarsh, an area of fenland, a woodland or a kelp forest. Organisms within an ecosystem relate to one another and their physical environment by transfers of energy and the cycling of nutrients between soil, plants, herbivores, carnivores

and detritivores (which feed on dead organic material).

In recent decades, scientists have also paid increasing attention to larger-scale processes taking place across the planet. Living organisms contribute to these, but these processes in turn sustain ecosystems and their populations. These larger processes have been found to interact with unexpected and wondrous complexity. The dynamic way in which these balance and regulate the flows of energy, water, nutrients and gases across the planet, generating a relative stability in which life can flourish, is sometimes described as the functioning of the Earth 'system'.

For example, liquid water, together with other materials in the Earth's crust and atmosphere and the energy from the Sun, provide the conditions, energy and material elements needed for life.¹⁹ The complex circulatory processes of water, the atmosphere, and rock combined with the photosynthesis, respiration and other activities of living organisms, are involved in recycling the water, oxygen, carbon, nitrogen, phosphorus and many other elements needed for life. These processes in turn influence, and are influenced by, the Earth's climate. The flows of these materials, and their concentration in the ocean, atmosphere, organisms, soil and rock, are regulated by feedback mechanisms which keep them and the Earth's climate fairly stable over long periods of time. And this is only part of much more complex processes involving other mechanisms such as plate tectonics.²⁰

Human beings are part of this interconnectedness. We have an exceptional capacity to shape our environment in multiple ways and to develop, and pass on knowledge about, the forms of social exchange, organisation, tools and techniques needed

to do so.²¹ Human populations have long been transforming their surroundings through hunting, the use of fire, agriculture, the redistribution of species and the building of towns and cities.

The transition to fossil fuel energy in the Industrial Revolution, and the huge expansion of food production, human population, material consumption and waste that followed, greatly increased that impact. The most significant acceleration of environmental change from human activity (known as the 'great acceleration') has taken place since the Second World War, due to developments in wealthy industrial societies. Nor should we forget the often catastrophically destructive environmental impacts of modern warfare. Human societies are now a planetary force, and the Earth's processes, ecosystems and organisms have been increasingly coopted into sustaining the lifestyles of consumer societies. Scientists have named the era we are now living in the Anthropocene, the period during which humanity is the dominant force acting on the climate and natural systems. These changes, and their various waste products, are disrupting the Earth's system in dangerous and unsustainable ways.

Chapter 2

Planetary boundaries

The Earth's connected processes risk crossing critical thresholds – potentially leading to irreversible risks for both nature and people.

The idea of planetary boundaries offers a helpful way of gauging the impacts of human activity on the Earth system and when they are so high as to threaten the conditions hospitable to human life and the wider biosphere.

On the most recent assessment of our impact, relative to the safe boundaries for life, we have exceeded seven out of nine of these boundaries, with devastating consequences around the globe.

Image: Salt marshes in Tollesbury, England.



Human impacts upon the Earth are disrupting the planetary conditions which have prevailed since the last Ice Age, conditions which have been hospitable to the ecosystems we now have and the wellbeing of the life they harbour, including human life.

This disruption threatens significant and unpredictable changes that will likely prove inhospitable to human society as we now understand it, along with a great variety of other species. So, if we care about the future of life on this planet, we need to know what limits to further disruption we must respect to ensure sustainable conditions for life far into the future. That means finding ways to identify the risks we pose to the integrity of the Earth's interconnections and to measure our impact on them.

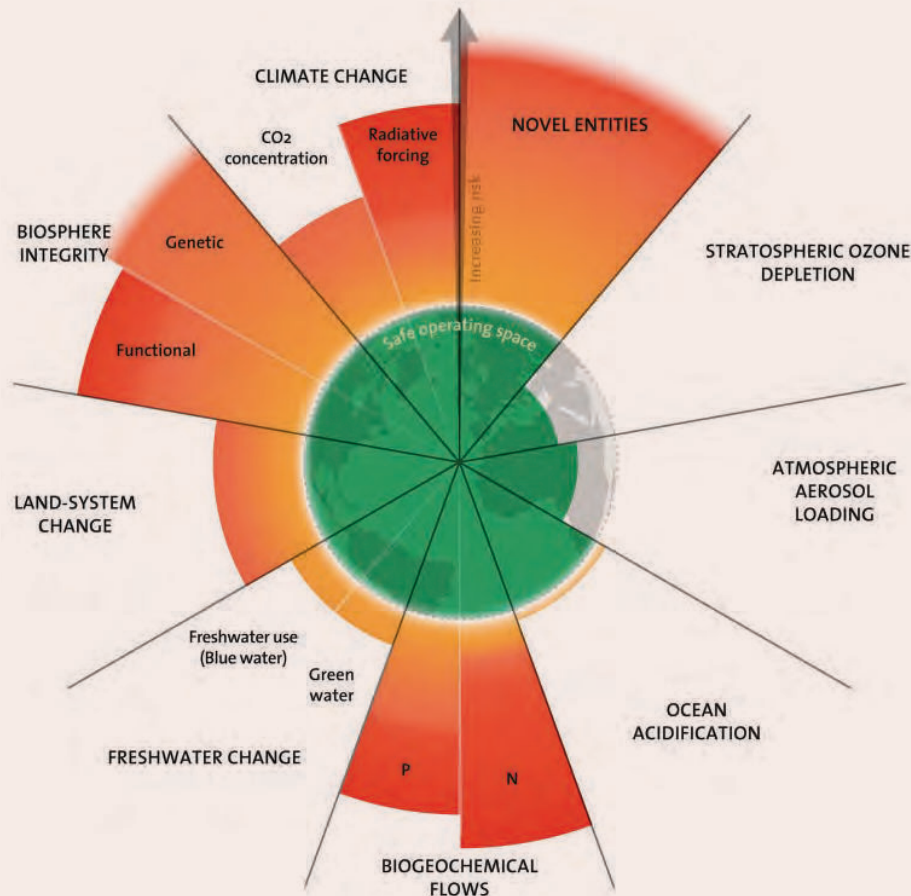
The best-known way of trying to gauge the extent of human impacts on the environment in relation to what the Earth system can sustain is the idea of planetary boundaries (see Figure 1). These were first suggested in 2009 by the environmental scientist Johan Rockström, alongside colleagues at the Stockholm Resilience Centre and the Potsdam Institute for Climate Impact Research, who wished to find 'a safe operating space for humanity with respect to the functioning of the Earth System'.²²

The boundaries concept identifies the risks generated by human activity for nine interdependent processes that are critical to the stability and resilience of the Earth system. The breaching of these boundaries involves a high risk of abrupt or irreversible global environmental change, with serious consequences for human societies and many other living beings. While the focus of this analysis centres on humanity, the risks it identifies apply to all ecosystems.

The Planetary Health Check published in September 2025 shows that seven of nine planetary boundaries have now been exceeded.²³ Humanity's activity remains within safe limits with respect to only two of the nine boundaries: stratospheric ozone depletion (which allows more dangerous UV radiation to reach the Earth's surface) and atmospheric aerosol loading (change in microscopic particles in the atmosphere, which affects the climate). Here we will look at seven areas described by the report where human activity has exceeded boundaries: climate change, biosphere integrity, land-system change, freshwater change, biogeochemical flows, ocean acidification and novel entities.²⁴ We will focus especially on the first two of these areas – climate change and biosphere integrity.

Figure 1. The 2025 update to the planetary boundaries.

Licensed under CC BY-NC-ND 3.0. Credit: 'Azote for Stockholm Resilience Centre, based on analysis in Sakschewski and Caesar and others, 2025'.

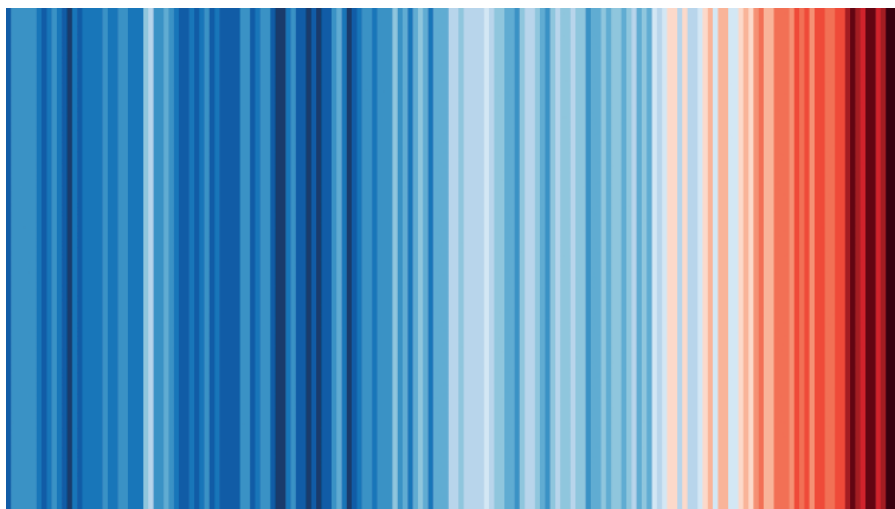


First boundary: climate change

Many scientists and environmentalists see climate change as an existential threat for humanity, and there are good reasons for thinking this might be the case.²⁵ The main problem is the accumulation of certain gases in the atmosphere, particularly carbon dioxide, methane and nitrous oxide, as a result of human activities. These so-called 'greenhouse gases' trap heat in the atmosphere. Most of the increase in carbon dioxide results from the burning of fossil fuels, with forest fires adding to the problem. Methane arises from a number of sources, including ruminant animals, rice paddies, oil and gas wells and landfill sites. The major source of nitrous oxide is nitrogen fertilisers. The concentrations of these gases have been increasing in the atmosphere (e.g., carbon dioxide has increased from a pre-industrial concentration of 280 ppm to 427 ppm in 2025). The boundary for climate change uses carbon dioxide concentrations and trapped energy in the atmosphere to gauge high risk to safe, stable operating conditions, and humanity has already transgressed it.

Figure 2. Climate Stripes for the Globe (1850–2024).

Graphics and lead scientist: Professor Ed Hawkins, National Centre for Atmospheric Science, University of Reading (CC-BY4.0 license) <https://showyourstripes.info/s/globe>.



The consequences of climate change are already with us and are severe. The increase in concentrations of greenhouse gases has led to a global rise in temperature of about 1.2°C above the pre-industrial temperature (by 2025). One way of visualising this increase in temperature is the Climate Stripes developed by Professor Ed Hawkins at Reading University. Figure 2 shows the stripes for the whole world between 1850 and 2024, in which the blue shades represent cooler temperatures and the red warmer temperatures. There is some evidence that the rate of increase is speeding up, and at the moment it looks quite likely that we will have a 3.0°C rise by the end of this century. Even with the present 1.2°C increase, we are seeing multiple impacts globally: increased numbers of heatwaves, forest fires, floods, and droughts; increased spread of diseases; increased intensity of tropical storms, including hurricanes; the melting of glaciers and

ice caps; and sea level rise. Many of these impacts affect human wellbeing and health, and increase the likelihood of migration away from the worst affected areas. Many people, including young people in the UK and especially in poorer countries, are experiencing distress about the impact on them of these changes and their perceptions of government inaction.²⁶ Many are also experiencing grief at the losses they observe in their ecosystems.

These dangers are projected to grow in the short term. With increasing warming, they will escalate further, and in more complex ways, with chaotic consequences to societies. Increased warming brings increasingly severe risks of species loss, to human health and to food production.²⁷ Undoubtedly, it is the poor that suffer most from climate change, whether they be in the global south or in more affluent countries like the United Kingdom or the United States.

Second boundary: biosphere integrity

The biosphere is a critical component of the way the Earth regulates itself, including its climate. The boundary for biosphere integrity is concerned with the conditions needed for the biosphere to perform this function. There needs to be sufficient genetic diversity among living organisms, and they need enough of the energy made by plants to reach them.²⁸ The species extinction rate far exceeds safe levels to maintain adequate biodiversity, and human harvesting of crops in agriculture and reduction of plant energy flows to organisms have been at a high risk level since the late 19th century.

The statistics on global biodiversity loss make sober reading. A 2019 review of historic reports of insect decline from across the globe found that a third of all insect species were threatened with extinction in the countries studied and almost half were in rapid

decline (not least in the UK).²⁹ In 2024, the World Wildlife Foundation (WWF) reported that the population sizes of vertebrates showed a massive decline of 73% between 1970 and 2020.³⁰ Wild species are now a tiny minority of mammals, making up only 4% of the global biomass of mammals, with humans making up 34% and our livestock and pets 62% (Figure 3).

For these reasons some scientists have categorised this as 'The sixth mass extinction event'.³¹ It is almost entirely down to human activities. The main problems are: habitat loss through human encroachment on land; hunting and overexploitation; invasive species; pollution; and climate change. Together, these have led to an enormous reduction in biodiversity, including species extinctions. In the UK, too, the impact has been extensive, with biodiversity reduced by about half since the Industrial Revolution and approaching one in six species facing possible extinction.

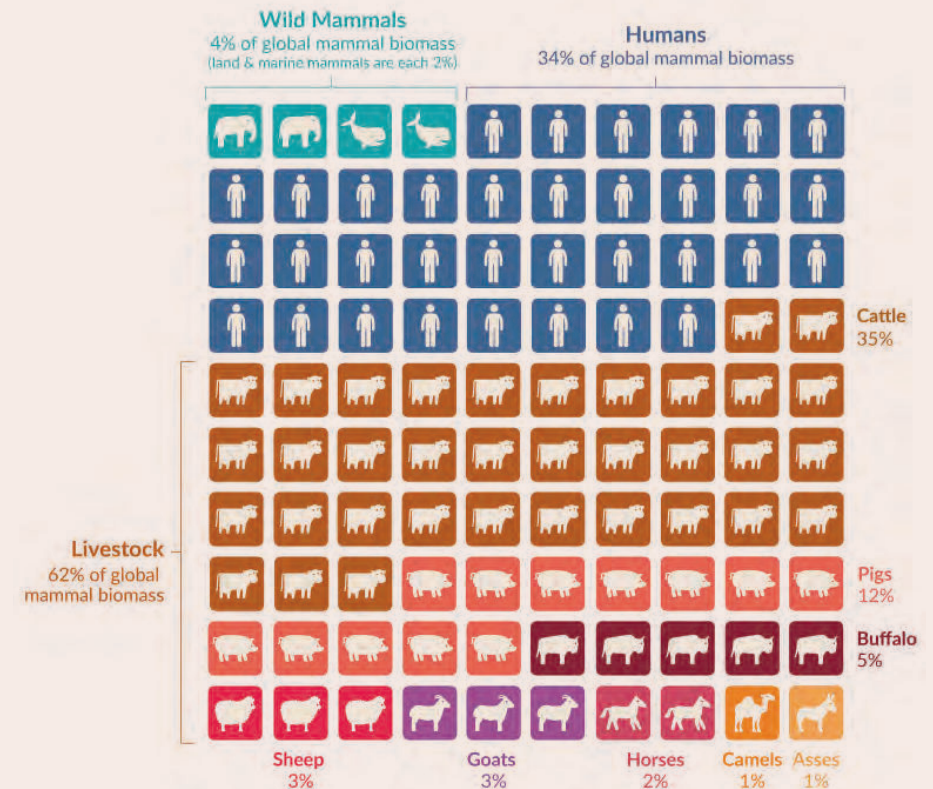
In any one ecosystem, all the organisms are interconnected. It is possible to lose one or a few species, and the system can remain intact. But the worry is that if we lose too many species, entire ecosystems will collapse.

Third boundary: land-system change

Land-system change is the human transformation of natural landscapes through urbanisation and deforestation, chiefly for agriculture. Such changes have an impact on biodiversity, the capacity of land to capture and store carbon and its functions in the water cycle and climate regulation. Thus, the impact of land-system change reaches well beyond the region where it takes place. A key example is the continuing deforestation of the Amazon, which means it is in decline as a carbon sink and in some parts has become a net carbon emitter.³²

Figure 3. Distribution of Mammals on Earth.

Our World in Data (licensed under CC-BY by the authors, Hannah Ritchie and Klara Auerbach).



Mammal biomass is measured in tonnes of carbon, and is shown for the year 2015. Each square corresponds to 1 per cent of global mammal biomass.

Fourth boundary: freshwater change

The Earth's water cycles are critical to the regulation of global temperature, nutrient cycles and other planetary feedback loops. The freshwater boundary gauges when human changes to the Earth's freshwater cycles pose a high risk to their role in the capture and storage of carbon, the regulation of the climate and in sustaining biodiversity. Changes such as the extraction of water from rivers, lakes and groundwater and land use change, such as deforestation and agriculture, affect the capacity of these freshwater cycles to perform these critical functions for our planet.

Fifth boundary: biogeochemical flows

At present, the biogeochemical flows boundary concerns the phosphorus and nitrogen cycles, although other elements may be added in the future. In both cases the main problem concerns the use of phosphorus and nitrogen fertilisers to increase plant growth and agricultural production. This practice has been highly successful for crop yields, but not all the phosphorus and nitrogen are taken up by the plants, and much is lost to the streams, lakes and rivers, eventually ending up in the sea. This excess of nutrients causes a process called eutrophication, stimulating the growth of algae which bloom, die and then rot. This rotting causes oxygen depletion, which leads to vast anoxic (oxygen-depleted), dead areas in the oceans. Freshwater environments can also be affected in this way, and Lake Windermere in England and Lough Neagh in Northern Ireland are well-known examples.

Sixth boundary: ocean acidification

Ocean acidification is the most recent of the boundaries to be exceeded (2025). It is caused by the increased absorption of atmospheric CO₂ in seawater, mainly produced as a result of the

burning of fossil fuels. This is a serious risk for many calcifying organisms such as corals and shellfish, and makes it difficult for damaged coral reefs, which are critical habitats for many species, to recover from the effects of marine heatwaves. The acidification and the resulting damage disrupt marine ecosystems and affect the ocean's efficiency to function as a carbon sink.

Seventh boundary: novel entities

The concept of 'novel entities' refers to new substances introduced to the Earth system by human beings, such as synthetic chemicals (including plastics), radioactive materials and genetically modified organisms. The statistics regarding novel entities are extremely concerning, and in many cases we have little idea what effects they are having in the environment. For example, a fiftyfold increase in the production of synthetic chemicals since 1950 has been reported, and this is projected to triple again by 2050. The total mass of plastics now exceeds the total mass of all living mammals, and plastic pollution is now found from the deepest oceans to the summit of Mount Everest. Plastic pollution is particularly problematic in the oceans. The deaths of sea mammals, turtles and birds from ingesting plastic debris which block their intestines is one of the striking instances of the dangers posed by novel entities.³³

Chapter 3

Turning to face creation

Our current environmental situation can be seen as a consequence of how many human societies have lived in defiance of the delicate balance of the Earth's interconnected processes and relationships.

The Christian faith offers resources and a hopeful vision to help us address this situation.



*Therefore the land mourns, and all who live in it languish;
together with the wild animals and the birds of the air,
even the fish of the sea are perishing.*

HOSEA 4.3

Thinking about the Earth as a system and applying a planetary boundaries lens, while helpful, has its limits.

It risks feeling 'abstract'. Perhaps it does not adequately express the intrinsic value of each part of creation, and its relationship to God and other parts of creation. Yet thinking about the Earth's connected processes helps us appreciate the interconnected nature of life on Earth. It also helps us understand the environmental problems we face and our responsibility for them. Christians can reflect on how our faith relates to these important insights.

We also need to reflect upon the human causes of this situation. The breaching of planetary boundaries has, in large part, been driven by intensive, industrial forms of agriculture, industrialisation, population growth and urbanisation. Of course, we should acknowledge the improvements in the quality of life that industrialisation has brought for many. Yet we should also recognise how these developments have been made possible by the extraction and burning of fossil fuels for energy and had an enormous and growing impact on the Earth. The emergence of 'consumer' societies, where buying material goods beyond basic needs becomes central to personal identity and social life, have fuelled excessive consumption of the Earth's resources. Underlying this is an economic ideology where the pursuit of profit and growth has become an end in itself. Another factor is the desire for an ever more comfortable lifestyle, which has become almost non-negotiable for many of us. The make-up of corporations and the legal and financial infrastructure that supports them has tended

to make those responsible for these harms unaccountable for the costs they impose on ecosystems (technically these harms are known as 'externalities' in economics). The structures of extraction, exploitation and distribution of wealth and pollution, often built by colonial powers (past and present), and extended by today's industrial economies, have meant that the benefits have tended to accrue to those least vulnerable to the effects, and the greatest risks to those furthest from those centres of power. The resulting profits and the benefits to consumers have incentivised corporations and nation-states to continue in these patterns of behaviour, even while the consequences have become ever more apparent and severe.

In this way, our current ecological situation is a consequence of how many human societies have lived in defiance of the delicate balance of the Earth's interconnected processes and relationships. We have ignored the deep connections between ourselves, other living beings and the Earth. Hosea's prophetic words echo down the centuries, and he could easily have written them today.

However, there is a lot we can do to mitigate the environmental crises, and we are not without hope.

Like many other cultural and spiritual traditions, the Christian faith offers resources to address this problem, offering ways of understanding our relationship with the Earth and helping to promote ways of life that are sustainable and responsible towards the world around us. Christian faith invites us to consider how humans have become disconnected from other living beings and the Earth. It frames this rupture within a wider story of our disconnection from God and his purposes for creation. But it also reveals God's plan to restore the Earth in its wholeness through Jesus Christ.



PART TWO

REFLECT

Chapter 4

An interconnected creation sustained by God

Throughout Scripture, we find deep reflection on the interconnectedness of creation and on God's involvement in maintaining creation in a continuous way.

All creatures and all elements of creation have a direct relationship to their Creator and matter to God in their own right. Human beings are part of this interdependent creation.

Image: Detail from The Creation of the Animals (c. 1550), Venetian 16th Century, after Raphael. National Gallery of Art, Washington.



A Christian understanding of our present situation begins with understanding the Earth and all its life as God's creation. Within this, we need to reflect on the special role of humanity within creation.

Christian reflection on our interconnected planet and humanity's place within it is informed by many sources, but above all by Scripture.³⁴ In this section, we turn to the creation stories of the Psalms and Wisdom literature of the Bible to guide our reflections on creation before turning, in the next section, to the distinct responsibility of humanity for the environment.

The Psalms and Wisdom literature depict our world and everything in it as God's creation, brought into being and sustained by divine craft and care. The world so understood 'is derived from and depends on' God.³⁵ Psalm 104 celebrates the breadth of God's creation: birds, wild animals, domestic animals, insects, trees, rocks, oceans, animals of the forest and sea creatures – all together are established by God and together render worship to him. Of course, humans are also included in this list. But the emphasis in this psalm is not on what makes humans exceptional, but on what defines us as fellow creatures. We are part of creation, depending on our environment, built of the same generic materials as other living creatures, plants and bacteria, part of the interdependence of all living things.³⁶

*O Lord, how manifold are your works!
In wisdom you have made them all;
the earth is full of your creatures.*

PSALM 104.26

According to such texts, God's wisdom is the source of the patterns and relationships that structure creaturely life. The book of Ecclesiastes reflects on the interconnected, even cyclical nature of creaturely existence, and what it means for humans to embrace the seasons and rhythms of life that God has set in place for all creatures (Ecclesiastes 1.3–11; 3.1–8; 11.3–5; 12.1–7).³⁷ The book of Proverbs reminds us that the various systems and processes that characterise our Earth, were established by God: 'The Lord by wisdom founded the earth; by understanding he established the heavens; by his knowledge the deeps broke open, and the clouds drop down the dew.' (Proverbs 3:19–20). We are also reminded that God ensures these systems and processes are upheld over time: 'The Lord has made everything for its purpose' (Proverbs 16.4). God's creation, then, 'comprise[s] an evolving, interdependent created order, in which everything is connected to everything else.'³⁸

Since the early centuries of the Church, Christian theologians have understood these creation stories (and those in Genesis) as pointing to the work of the triune God. Early theologians such as Athanasius of Alexandria understood references to God's creative word and God's creative wisdom as pointing to the divine Word or Reason of John's Prologue: the *Logos*, Jesus Christ, by whom all things were made (Psalm 33.6; Psalm 104.24; Proverbs 3.19–20; Proverbs 8.22–30; John 1.1–18).³⁹ They understood references to God's creative Spirit or breath (Psalm 33.6, Psalm 104.29–30, Psalm 147.18) as signifying the Holy Spirit, sent upon Jesus in his baptism, which he then breathed upon his disciples after his resurrection, and who now indwells, sanctifies and renews the Church (Matthew 3.16; John 20.22; Acts 1.4–5; Romans 8.11; 1 Corinthians 3.16–17, 6.11; Titus 3.4–7).⁴⁰

According to Athanasius, the Father creates all things through the Son (the 'Word' or *Logos*) and the Spirit.⁴¹ Their united creative activity attests their common and undivided full divinity.⁴² This thinking is reflected in the Nicene Creed that many Christians recite weekly: the Father is 'maker ... of all that is, seen and unseen'; the Son is 'of one Being with the Father', the one through whom 'all things were made'; and the Spirit is 'the giver of life' and is worshipped with them. According to early Christian theologians, the motive of the triune God for creating the cosmos in the beginning was the abundant love and generosity that is characteristic of God's nature.⁴³

Centuries later, the medieval Dominican theologian Thomas Aquinas would affirm that there is an order in the way the Father creates through the Word and the Holy Spirit, like the design and love of a craftsperson, that reflects the pattern in which the Father shares his divinity with them.⁴⁴ And there is a trace of the Trinity – an indirect representation (as smoke represents fire) of that ordered life and activity – in the way creatures each exist, have distinct forms, and are connected to one another.⁴⁵ The existence, diverse forms and interconnectedness of our world are marks of their source in the triune God.

God, then, is not a distant creator who sets the world in motion and then simply leaves it to function, but one who actively upholds and sustains all things. We see this idea woven throughout biblical poetry and Wisdom literature (Psalm 104.10–14, Psalm 145.15–16, Proverbs 30.4). Significantly, such texts depict God's provision for creatures in relational terms: habitats, shelter, water and food are God's wise gifts for the flourishing of different species; trees receive abundant water; animals look to God for those gifts and gather them up, from storks in the fir trees to wild goats in the high mountains, young lions and the innumerable

creatures of the sea (Psalm 104.14–28). Pastures, hills, meadows and valleys respond with celebration, clothing themselves with their abundance and singing for joy (Psalm 65.12–13). The Psalmist invites us to recognise God's creative action working through the cycles and processes of the Earth to sustain creatures in their contexts, with creatures thanking and praising God in return (Psalms 145.10, 150.6). As the seraphs proclaim in Isaiah's vision, the whole Earth – its fullness, its varied, magnificent abundant life – is full of God's glory (Isaiah 6.3).⁴⁶

In theological language, this divine provision is sometimes called *creatio continua* (continuous creation).⁴⁷ This is the idea that creation (in its fullest sense) should be understood not merely as a one-time and finished event, but as an ongoing process in which God continually orders all things and gives them existence. Scripture speaks *both* of the entirely self-contained and even mechanistic functioning of the Earth's cycles and processes, *and* of the idea that all this is sustained, moment-to-moment, by God's providential action. Both ideas can be held together when we understand that God's creative action is not another component in these processes but underlies and enables them and all creaturely activity.⁴⁸

In these biblical texts, all creatures have a direct and ongoing relationship to their Creator, and matter to God in their own right.⁴⁹ Their worth and significance are not measured by their utility or aesthetic value to human beings. 'God values creation for its own sake and is still at work in the processes of nature.'⁵⁰

God's speeches at the end of the book of Job add to this idea a profound sense of the vastness and mysteriousness of this interconnected creation and what it means for creatures to relate to God in and through this context. When Job cries out in despair

at the circumstances of his life, which he believes to be unjust, God's response is to remind him of the scale of the universe:

*Where is the way to the dwelling of light?
and where is the place of darkness,
that you may take it to its territory
and that you may discern the paths to its home?*

JOB 38.19-20

When God cared for the new-born sea, making 'the clouds its garment, and thick darkness its swaddling band,' who contained its power, shutting it in with doors and setting boundaries to its waves, protecting other life (Job 38.8-11)? In Job's pain, it seems he may have forgotten this, having become (perhaps understandably) preoccupied with his own situation. Notably, in these speeches, God describes the ways of wild animals without reference to humanity. The procreation of the mountain goat and the deer, the free roaming of the wild ass and wild ox, the wild folly of the ostrich, the flight of the hawk and the might of the unequalled and terrifying armoured Leviathan, which makes the deep sea 'boil like a pot' and leaves a shining wake behind (Job 39.1-18, 26, 41), are all beyond human comprehension.⁵¹ God 'lingers lovingly' over every wild creature described in the speeches, like a proud and delighted mother, and allows them to develop their own qualities and the freedom to be themselves.⁵²

Chapter 5

Creation and the distinctive role of humanity

While human beings are part of creation, we also have a unique responsibility within it.

Christian reflection on our role within an interconnected planet begins with the creation accounts of the book of Genesis. Here, as well as being depicted as part of the wider creation, humans are also described as having a distinctive vocation, since we are created in the image of God.

Crucially, this suggests not the idea of selfish rule or domination, but of caring responsibility for living creatures and the planet.



The Bible begins with two complementary stories of the creation of the Earth (Genesis 1.1–2.4a and Genesis 2.4b–24).

In their different ways, like the Wisdom texts, both stories present to us a world made by God to be full of life, with its own processes and with its own productive agency. It is a world whose inhabitants and systems are deeply interconnected. Here, too, human beings are depicted as being part of this world and its connectedness.

And yet humans, who alone are described as being made in God's 'image' and 'likeness' (Genesis 1.26–27), also have particular responsibilities towards it.⁵³

The first creation story, found in Genesis 1.1–2.4a, describes the Earth and indeed the whole cosmos as being formed and arranged by God's action. God's Spirit, the source of life, is present and God orders the world by addressing it – 'let there be'. God supplies its structures and patterns, enabling them to interact productively and affirming them without regard for their utility or value for human beings alone. Surveying the order of the world coming into being, God repeatedly affirms it as 'good' (Genesis 1.10, 12, 18, 21, 25), and finally, when it is completed, as 'very good' (Genesis 1.31).

Different elements of the Earth begin to emerge in response to God's address. We see temporal patterns created by light and darkness and marked by heavenly bodies; divisions between bodies of water; a distinction between land and sea; the many kinds of plants of the Earth and their means of reproduction (their seed); the swarming creatures of sea and sky with their fruitfulness; the creeping creatures of the land, including wild animals; and finally humanity itself. All these emerge with their

own agency and generativity, becoming, by God's permission, agents within the creative process (Genesis 1.11–12; 20–21; 24).

There are distinct spheres here – the land, the waters, the sky – with multiple organised forms of life occupying each. But crucially, these are described as deeply connected and inter-dependent. The self-reproducing plant life of the Earth provides nourishment for the creeping animals and for humans. God thus provides for the world in and through the powers and agency of other creatures set in their contexts, and in their connections and interactions.

In just this context, humans are given a specific role and task by God towards their fellow creatures:

*God blessed them, and God said to them,
'Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it;
and have dominion over the fish of the sea
and over the birds of the air and over every living thing
that moves upon the earth.'*

GENESIS 1.28

God's blessing and command indicate a dynamic relationship between humanity and other creatures, developing over time. Sadly, this verse has sometimes been used to justify a dominion theology, which interprets humanity's role as having the right to control, manage or exploit the Earth and its creatures. However, as many readers have pointed out, this verse is better understood in its context as promoting human responsibility to nurture the world that God has already ordered and the life he has established within it.⁵⁴ Indeed, such responsibility may be the best way to understand the human situation in relation to our world.⁵⁵

Our role is framed by, and refers back to, our planetary context – the divinely-created order of things which precedes us and the conditions for flourishing that God has already established (Genesis 1.29–30). Part of this role includes setting apart and blessing a seventh day on which ‘rest’ is prescribed. We are to ‘rule’ our fellow creatures in a way that reflects how God has set up and ordered the world, and that is in tune with God’s own continuing care for creation. It is in this sense that men and women alike are created ‘in the image of God’ (Genesis 1.27). We are called to imitate God in exhibiting qualities of care, service and responsibility for other living beings, contemplating the wonder of how they are made and organised, and what it means for them to flourish.⁵⁶ These are the qualities of a good shepherd, not an exploitative owner.⁵⁷ Indeed, while it is given into the care of human beings (Psalm 115.16), ultimately the Earth and all its abundant life belong only to its Maker (Psalm 24.1, Psalm 50.12).⁵⁸ The idea of ‘subduing’ the Earth, as mentioned, means working the land so that it produces the crops and fruit that God gave to human beings for food (Genesis 1.29).⁵⁹ Careful cultivation and husbandry of the land, including the application of technology (which features in the primeval narratives of Genesis, as well as in the subsequent life and worship of ancient Israel) can be consistent with this vocation, but only if governed by its ethos. This nurturing understanding of the role of humans within creation is sometimes described as ‘stewardship’.

In our own time, when we understand the extent of human impacts on the planet, the idea that we have some kind of responsibility towards custodianship, caretaking and oversight of the Earth takes on a new and urgent meaning. At the very least, this must mean some contribution to maintaining the complex web of life in which we play a part. It cannot refer to exploitation or disruption of this balance.

The second creation story, found in Genesis 2.4b–25, focuses further on humanity. The proximity of human beings to the soil – the fertile *humus* – is made evident through wordplay. The human being (Hebrew *adam*) is formed from the ‘dust of the ground’ (Hebrew *adamah*), and given the breath of life, like other animals (Genesis 6.17; 7.15,23; Psalm 104.29–30). The woman is then formed from his side (Genesis 2.7). In this creation story, the human beings are made before any other life form, but on an Earth which already has a water cycle (Genesis 2.6) and a garden (Genesis 2.8). The natural world precedes their arrival, suggesting that it is humans who must find a way to live in synchronisation with its processes, and not the other way round. This is further reinforced by the idea that humans are called to serve as gardeners (Genesis 2.15) and later as farmers (Genesis 4.2). In both creation accounts there is an emphasis on human beings coming from and living in close dependence on the fertile soil, and on the plants and fruit it yields. Humans are not set apart from nature, but are set among a great variety of animals and birds – whom they know well enough to name (Genesis 2.19–20). Human beings are tasked with working with and for the Earth, observing its ways and respecting its limits. The Earth, in the form of the garden, in turn provides fruit for all living creatures to eat.

Chapter Six

Sin disrupts the inter- connectedness of creation

Sin is always understood in terms of a rupture between humanity and God. But it must also be understood in terms of a rupture between humanity and the Earth.

Through its narratives and teaching, the biblical storyline shows that sin is comprehensive in scope – affecting not just humans, but ecosystems, animals, climate and indeed our ‘planetary health’ as a whole.



On a Christian understanding of the environmental crises of our time, the human causes of those crises – and the resistance and inertia of so many nations, corporations, communities and individuals to mitigate them – must be seen, ultimately, as expressions of humanity’s attempt to break with God their Creator.

They express a defiance of our creaturely dependence on the Earth and other creatures and a rejection of any responsibility for them. The Bible calls this rebellion ‘sin’.

Throughout Scripture, sin in general is understood as constituting a rupture between humanity and God, the source of all life and harmony (Isaiah 59.1-2; Romans 5.10). But corresponding to this is a rupture between humans and nature, one which has a profound and pervasive impact.

In the early chapters of Genesis, the world God arranged is overshadowed by humans’ continual striving for independence from God. Augustine described this as ‘pride’ and linked it to the human desire to dominate others.⁶⁰ Later, Martin Luther captured this sense of radical self-centredness in disconnection from God and others in the image of the heart curved in on itself.⁶¹ This self-centred striving is seen in the first humans’ joint disobedience of God’s prohibition on eating from the tree of knowledge (Genesis 3) and in the later story of the building of the tower of Babel (Genesis 11.1-9). It is the manner of seeking wisdom, in rejecting obedience to God, that is the issue here, not the pursuit of knowledge or the production of culture or technology in themselves.⁶² Later in the New Testament, Paul describes this disobedience as the entrance of sin and death into the world (Romans 5.12).

But sin is also understood in Scripture as defiance of our creaturely connectedness and of our failure to exercise our responsibility for other living beings with care and wisdom for their flourishing.

The Genesis stories depict a ruptured relationship between humanity, the Earth and other creatures as a consequence of disobedience to God. The first humans are expelled from the fruitful garden to till the soil (Genesis 3.22-24). But their relationship to the fertile soil from which they were formed is also altered, as if nature itself has become adversarial towards them: ‘cursed is the ground because of you ... thorns and thistles it shall bring forth for you’ (Genesis 3.17-18). The harmonious relationship between humans and the Earth becomes one of struggle, toil and decay. There is also an implication that the Earth suffers from human sin, for after the murder of Abel by Cain God speaks of the Earth as testifying in protest at human sin: ‘What have you done? Listen; your brother’s blood is crying out to me from the ground!’ (Genesis 4.10).

As humans begin to fill the Earth, this disorder seems to intensify. By the time of Noah, we read that ‘the earth was corrupt in God’s sight, and ... filled with violence ... for all flesh had corrupted its ways upon the earth’ (Genesis 6.11-12). Fear and disorder are introduced into the relationship between humans and other animals. After the flood, animals begin to fear humans and humans are allowed to eat them (Genesis 9.2-3), suggesting a move from harmony to survival, and perhaps pointing to the idea of regulation of human violence more than an unlimited permission.⁶³ We should note that the permission to eat animals is granted with the proviso that no animal be eaten ‘with its life, that is, its blood’ (Genesis 9.4), which may be pointing to the respect that is owed even when a life is taken.⁶⁴

Many of the prophetic oracles of ancient Israel depict how great rivers and seas, on which whole civilisations depend, are vulnerable to the consequences of human sin (for example, the Nile in Isaiah 19.5–10, the Euphrates in Jeremiah 51.36–37 and the Mediterranean Sea in Ezekiel 26.12).⁶⁵ The prophet Hosea describes how, as a result of the people's rejection of God and their mistreatment of one another, 'the land mourns, and all who live in it languish; together with the wild animals and the birds of the air, even the fish of the sea are perishing' (Hosea 4.2–3; see also Isaiah 24.4–7; Jeremiah 4.11–28). Hosea's metaphor of sowing the wind and reaping the whirlwind (Hosea 8.7) suggests a recognition that harmful consequences may flow organically from sinful action (as the Apostle Paul also saw when using the same metaphor in Galatians 6.7–8).⁶⁶ Indeed, as the authors of *Man and Nature* argued, if human beings are part of the cosmos's intricate interconnected workings, then disorder in human beings must produce disorder in their environment.⁶⁷ As they note, this distorted relationship is one which we inherit, and has become entrenched in societies with a life and momentum of its own.

In light of the goodness of creation, the value of creatures to God, and their manifestation of the divine glory, the disruption of nature that follows from humanity's broken relationship with God amounts to an awful desecration of God's Earth. It is a terrible rejection of our responsibility to imitate God in our care for our fellow creatures and the interconnectedness of all creation. As some Church of England reports have argued, it is a manifestation of sin.⁶⁸ With the Roman Catholic bishops of the Amazon Synod, then, we can recognise ecological sins as 'transgressions against the principles of interdependence, [which] destroy networks of solidarity among creatures ... and violate the virtue of justice'.⁶⁹

This last statement echoes the connection the prophetic texts also make between harms to the Earth, the suffering of wild animals, birds and fish, and human injustice. We find this in Isaiah's condemnation of wealthy landowners in the book of Isaiah: those who 'join house to house, who add field to field, until there is room for no one but you...' (Isaiah 5.8). Not only will their houses be desolate, says the prophet, but their fields and vineyards unproductive (Isaiah 5.7–10, see also Amos 3.9–11, 4.7–9). This declaration reflects the condemnation in many biblical texts of the oppression of poor and marginalised people, especially vulnerable women and children, by the wealthy and powerful (for example, Isaiah 1.12–20; Amos 5.11–13, 8.4–14; Micah 2.1–9, 3.1–12).

Sinful defiance of God, and of our connections and responsibility to the Earth and other creatures, is therefore closely linked to unjust treatment of other human beings, especially the poor. It was for this reason that Pope Francis called us to heed both the 'cry of the earth' and the 'cry of the poor', highlighting how environmental sin is interconnected with global injustice (*Laudato Si'*, §49). Thus, for Pope Francis, 'we have to realize that a true ecological approach always becomes a social approach; it must integrate questions of justice in debates on the environment, so as to hear both the cry of the earth and the cry of the poor' (*Laudato Si'*, §49).

But ecological sin is also enabled and aggravated by social structures and by the subversion of social institutions. This alerts us to the significance of what theologians call 'structural sin'. Structural sin names systems which distribute most of the benefits, power and wealth in society (such as systems of justice, healthcare, education, land distribution) to certain groups and distribute most of the harms to others, in defiance of our interconnectedness and the dignity and worth of all human beings before God.⁷⁰ It is a societal expression of the heart curved in on itself. Structural

sin points to systemic realities – such as consumerism, industrial exploitation and economic inequality – that degrade or skew the original created order. Christians see these systems as contrary to God’s will for harmony between humans, other creatures and the Earth. A structural understanding of sin helps us understand why the impacts of environmental crises such as air, ground and water pollution, rising sea levels, extreme weather events and soil erosion tend to affect poorer neighbourhoods, communities and parts of the world disproportionately.⁷¹ Exposure to these harms is one of the cumulative effects of long-term structures of discrimination, exploitation and marginalisation, locally and globally, which affect where people live, their access to political power and institutions of justice, and how vulnerable the places they inhabit are to environmental degradation.

Finally, structural sin is shaped and maintained, among other things, by harmful cultural practices: those which subtly or not so subtly persuade and incentivise us to participate in this status quo and make it seem normal and acceptable. We might think of advertising campaigns or social media narratives. We are assailed every day by symbols, stories and ideologies that seek to justify or hide the injustice involved in these structures, or make them seem natural and right. For example, some theologians have diagnosed a close connection between perceptions and stereotypes used to legitimate the abuse and exploitation of women and similar attitudes to the more-than-human world.⁷² Both are rooted in a lack of respect, care and value for women and the natural world and a disregard for the interdependence of humans with the rest of nature. Delores Williams identifies the parallel abuse and exploitation of Black women’s bodies and the Earth, rationalised by white slaveowners’ belief in their right to own both, as manifestations of the sin of defilement, a destructive assault on creation.⁷³ This disregard is in evidence towards (for

example) indigenous peoples and the places they inhabit today, as they were in the processes of transatlantic slavery in the past.

Sin is personal, social, structural and comprehensive in scope. It brings physical as well as spiritual harm – affecting ecosystems, animals, climate, planetary health and the poor and vulnerable. The Earth labours under the weight of this sin:

We know that the whole creation has been groaning in labour pains until now’

ROMANS 8.22

Chapter 7

God's plan to restore the integrity of creation

God is committed to healing these broken relationships and restoring the integrity of creation.

We see this plan being enacted in God's interactions with the people of Israel, in the Law and in the Prophets.

Image: 'Tree of Life' window at St Mary's Melton Mowbray Church, designed and made by Derek Hunt in 2017 (Picture: Derek Hunt, reproduced here by kind permission of the artist and St Mary's Church).



Sin, however, is not the last word about the predicament of our planet and our own responsibility, nor are its effects determinative of the future of the Earth.

Scripture also tells us of God's commitment to the Earth, God's work to mend our broken relationships with him and other creatures, and of the liberation and transformation of creation. Even as Scripture describes the disconnections between human beings and the Earth, it also speaks of 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' (Romans 8.21). The relationship between God, humans and the Earth has been broken, and yet we have profound reasons for hope.

Throughout the biblical story, God is committed to healing these broken relationships and restoring the Earth in its wholeness. God's intention is always to reconnect that which has been detached and separated, restoring the relations between living beings and their environment that have been broken and lost through sin.

We see reminders of this intention throughout the narratives of the Old Testament. After the flood, in Genesis 9 God establishes a covenant not only with Noah and his human descendants, but also 'with every living creature that is with you, the birds, the domestic animals, and every animal of the earth with you, as many as came out of the ark' (Genesis 9.10). This act shows God's commitment to the entire ecosystem, highlighting that all creatures, not just humans, are recipients of God's own covenantal promise. The rainbow is the sign of this covenant, symbolising the hope that peace and interrelationship between God, humans, and other living entities might be realised once again (Genesis 9.14-19).

Implied in the idea of this covenant between God, humanity and all creatures is a bond between humanity and other creatures, an interrelatedness bound up with their relations to God and an obligation on the part of human beings to care for life on Earth.⁷⁴ Thus, as the bishops at the Lambeth Conference affirmed in 1998,

Creation is a web of inter-dependent relationships bound together in the Covenant which God, the Holy Trinity has established with the whole earth and every living being.⁷⁵

Later, the people of Israel are called to live in a way that recognises and dignifies this vision of an interrelated creation, reconciled to God, and that anticipates its ultimate restoration. A prime example is the Temple. Among its many meanings, the Jerusalem Temple – and the Tabernacle before it – symbolised the original connections between God, humanity and the rest of creation.⁷⁶

The Temple was set on Zion, God's holy mountain (Psalm 48.1-2), just as Eden was located on God's holy mountain, according to the prophet Ezekiel (Ezekiel 28.13-14, 16; 43.12). As a river flowed out of Eden to water the garden and the lands beyond (Genesis 2.10-14), so, according to the Psalmist, there was a river of delights, the fountain of life, in God's house (Psalm 36.8-9), which made glad the city where God dwells (Psalm 46.4). The entrance to the Tabernacle and Temple faced east, as did the entrance to Eden (Exodus 27.13; 2 Chronicles 29.4; Genesis 3.24).

Many of the Temple's furnishings recalled the flourishing garden of Eden, where God dwelt with humanity and other creatures among its plants and trees. The engravings of palm trees and open flowers on the walls and doors of Solomon's Temple (1 Kings

6.29, 31-35) symbolised the trees and flowers of the garden. The ten lampstands in its main hall (1 Kings 7.49) also represented the garden's blossoming trees, and possibly the trees of knowledge and life in particular. The sevenfold description of the Tabernacle in Exodus 25-31 and the institution of the Sabbath at its conclusion (Exodus 31.12-17) echo the first creation story in Genesis.⁷⁷ The Temple layout of inner sanctuary, with the wall dividing it from the main hall, that hall with its lampstands, and outer courtyard with the molten sea, is roughly aligned to the distinctions of the heavenly realm, the firmament, the visible heaven and its lights, and the habitable land and sea.

In this way, in the design of the Temple and by being present there, God provided a setting in which Israel might anticipate a restored relationship with God and with creation in their worship. The verbs used to describe the duties of the Levites in the Tabernacle (Numbers 3.7) match those used for humanity's tasks in the garden. They tend the sanctuary as Adam and Eve once tended Eden. Cherubim guard God's invisible throne at the heart of the Temple (1 Kings 6.23-28; 8.6-7), as they kept humanity out of Eden (Genesis 3.24). Yet the priests represented Israel and humanity in the Temple before God and God's people, purified from their sins, could enter its outer courts to worship and sacrifice, and feast in God's presence (Psalm 36.7-9).

Pilgrimage to the Temple 'was like visiting paradise and temporarily recapturing the primordial peaceful and enriching relationship with God.'⁷⁸ In this way, Israel embodied a hope for the whole of humanity. Isaiah, who saw the cosmos as the temple writ large (Isaiah 66.1), looked forward to the day when all the nations would come and worship on God's holy mountain Jerusalem, like the Israelites, and serve him as priests and Levites (Isaiah 66.18-23).

The institution of the Sabbath is another example. Sabbath rest was intended not merely for humans; it was also a reminder of the need to consider the wellbeing of the land, thus pointing to the dependence of humanity on the Earth and vice versa (Exodus 23.10-11). Similarly, the Year of Jubilee, occurring every fifty years, was (among other things) a corrective to the idea that humans can master their relationship with the Earth asymmetrically: the land was not something that could be permanently bought or sold – it was a sacred gift, from which no one was to be permanently alienated (Leviticus 25.23-24).

The books of Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers and Deuteronomy contain numerous laws that reflect a deep concern for the land, for animals, for fruiting trees, and for ecological balance (see for example Exodus 23.12; Deuteronomy 20.19-20; 22.6-7, 25.4).

Of course, these ancient texts are not using modern environmental language. It can sometimes be hard to see the relevance of their instructions to our ecological situation today. And yet, as some contemporary Jewish ethicists have argued, perhaps this is exactly the point: the minute attention Torah prescribes to the consequences of our actions, even where these are unintended or at second-hand, might be taken as mirroring a calling upon us all to consider how our choices and behaviours might impact those in other parts of the world who might feel effects at a distance, even though such people may be remote from us geographically. This may be a timely lesson in the context of our current planetary situation, where hidden supply chains mean that the impacts of our choices (what we buy, consume and throw away) are often hard to trace in terms of real consequences on real people. As Jewish bioethicist Laurie Zoloth puts it:

in the intimacy of the Jewish law, every gesture is a moral gesture, a position we can clearly understand when we consider global warming, where every action is laden with the ubiquity of its cost.⁷⁹

In the prophetic books, the role of non-human creation in the drama of salvation is another sign of the restoration of relationships between humans and other creatures in the story of ancient Israel. In Isaiah, for example, salvation is envisaged as involving the rejoicing of the more-than-human world and the restoration of desert and wilderness 'like Eden ... like the garden of the Lord' (Isaiah 49.13, 51.3). The people of Israel will return from exile to the sound of mountains and hills singing, the trees of the field clapping and the sight of cypress and myrtle flourishing in place of thorn and brier (Isaiah 55.12-13).

But alongside this we find something new: the prophets also look ahead to a future time of a still greater peace and unity for all of creation. In the famous vision of the prophet Isaiah, for example, the peaceable kingdom to come is pictured as one where

*The wolf shall live with the lamb,
the leopard shall lie down with the kid,
the calf and the lion and the fatling together,
and a little child shall lead them.*

ISAIAH 11.6

Likewise, through the prophet Hosea God promises a future day of covenanted peace for 'the wild animals, the birds of the air, and the creeping things of the the ground; and I will abolish the bow, the sword, and war from the land; and I will make you lie down in safety' (Hosea 2.18).

We can perhaps see this vision as culminating in Psalm 148, with its description of all creation – angels, sun, moon, stars, ocean, wind and weather, mountains and hills, sea creatures, wild animals, cattle and birds – functioning together as a kind of orchestra sharing in the worship of God (Psalm 148.13). In this way, we are permitted to glimpse the final chapter in God's plan to bring about a restoration of the relationships that have been broken by sin and a transformation of the whole creation.

The Hebrew prophets present a vision of a future transformed world in which all creatures will live together in harmony. Far from deflecting us from what we can do in the here-and-now, such visions underline the enduring character of the covenantal relationships between God, human beings and other creatures. They give an eschatological significance to the moral responsibilities for our fellow creatures that go with those relationships.

Chapter 8

Creation is redeemed and reconciled in Jesus Christ

God's commitment to healing broken relationships and restoring the Earth in its wholeness comes to its culmination in the person and work of Jesus Christ.

Jesus' life and mission was closely associated with the non-human world, including animals and nature. But more importantly, the fact of the Incarnation shows God's commitment to creation and to its restoration.

This commitment is revealed above all in the cross and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

Image: Baptism of Christ, Ethiopian Biblical Manuscript (20th Century).



God's commitment to healing broken relationships and restoring the wholeness of the Earth comes to its culmination in the person and work of Jesus Christ, as revealed in the New Testament. Here is the heart of our hope.

Jesus himself enacts and embodies humanity's reconciliation to other creatures. At various places in the Gospel narratives, we see a deep connection between Christ and creation. Jesus' life and ministry often placed him in a profound relationship with the non-human world. He is laid in a manger (Luke 2.7) and his birth is announced by a star (Matthew 2.1-12). He is baptised in the river Jordan, in the wilderness (Mark 1.1-11). At his baptism, the heavens are opened and, rather than the deluge of the flood, the Spirit is poured upon him, signifying the hope for the renewal of creation.⁸⁰

Impelled by the Spirit, he fasts and prays in the wilderness, among wild animals and attended by angels (Mark 1.13). He teaches using metaphors taken from nature, including seeds, birds, lilies, sheep, water, vines and trees. He preaches from a boat set out on the water (Luke 5.3). Some of his miracles use materials of the Earth: for example, in the healing of the man born blind Jesus uses mud and water (John 9.1-11), perhaps echoing Genesis 2.7, where God forms Adam from the dust of the ground and breathes life into him. Jesus rides on a donkey (Matthew 21.7) and is buried in a rock-hewn tomb (Luke 23.53). An eclipse overshadows his passion and earthquakes accompany his death and resurrection (Matthew 27.45-51; 28.2).

In all these ways, the non-human world serves not merely as a backdrop or stage for Jesus' actions. Rather, it can be seen as an active participant in his mission. Indeed, on his triumphal

entry into Jerusalem, when some in the crowd began to rebuke acclamations of his divine identity, Jesus replied: 'I tell you, if these were silent, the stones would shout out' (Luke 19.40).

We should not merely see Jesus' life as exemplifying a proximity to, or sympathy with, the natural world. For Christians believe that, in the person of Christ, God fully entered this world as a human being: it is none other than the Word, the One through whom 'all things came into being', who 'became flesh and lived among us' (John 1.3, 14). Right at the beginning of his treatise *On the Incarnation*, Athanasius of Alexandria focuses on exactly this point: 'We will begin, then, with the creation of the world and with God its Maker, for the first fact that you just grasp is this: the renewal of creation has been wrought by the Self-same Word Who made it in the beginning.'⁸¹ The Incarnation, then, shows the depth of the triune God's commitment to and solidarity with all creation and how far God is prepared to go to redeem it.⁸² Jesus Christ enters the community of all living beings, with its complex web of interdependencies, in order to participate in it and ultimately redeem it. As Pope Francis put it: 'By the mystery of the Incarnation, the Son of God has united himself in some fashion with every part of creation. [...] The very soil, water, mountains – everything – is now caught up in the mystery of redemption.'⁸³

In affirming that 'the Word became flesh' (John 1.14), Christians are affirming that God not only comes *to* creation, but also that he becomes a *part* of it. Jesus was born of a woman. He needed air to breathe and food to eat, and he lived embedded in the natural world of his time. As truly human, he inhabited the rhythms of the seasons and the meteorological patterns of the (agrarian) society in which he lived, and he was alert to the signs of nature all around him (Luke 12.54-56). He was aware of the Earth's profound dependence on God, who clothes the lilies of the field

and watches over the fate of sparrows (Matthew 6.28–30, 10.29–31). He was also subject to the dependences and necessities of created life: hunger and thirst, fatigue, suffering and death.

In response to these descriptions from the Gospels, we can therefore appreciate that the redemption brought about by Christ and described in the New Testament extends to all of creation, as the bishops at the Lambeth Conference affirmed in 1998 and as earlier reports from the Church of England have also affirmed.⁸⁴ For, as we saw earlier (Chapter 4), Christ is the one through whom all things came into being, in whom they were created, and through whom they exist (John 1.1–3; Colossians 1.15–16; Hebrews 1.1–3). Through Christ, God is bringing about a re-establishment of the intended harmony between creatures that was disrupted due to sin (Romans 8.19–22).

We have intimations of this purpose in the miracles performed by Jesus. In the episode of the calming of the storm, for example, we are reminded of the raw, chaotic and unpredictable power of nature: ‘a great gale arose, and the waves beat into the boat, so that the boat was already being swamped’ (Mark 4.37). As the story narrates, Jesus ‘woke up and rebuked the wind, and said to the sea, “Peace! Be still!”’ (Mark 4.39). His words enacted total authority over these forces: ‘Then the wind ceased, and there was a dead calm’ (Mark 4.39). We are to understand this not merely as a manifestation of Jesus’ power over nature, but rather as revealing the divine intention to hold back forces of disorder and violence that threaten to throw the world off balance. As the winds calm and the waves recede, the idea of chaos and danger is replaced with the idea of peace and equilibrium, *shalom* in the truest sense.

But God’s intention to reconcile all creation is supremely revealed in the cross and resurrection of Jesus Christ. The cosmic implications of this event are shown in the motifs of the ‘darkness’ that fell over the whole land (Matthew 27.45), and then in the earthquake and splitting of the rocks that occurred at the very moment of Jesus’ death (Matthew 27.51). It is as if the created order itself is responding to the death of its Creator.

In the New Testament writings, the cross is portrayed as the means by which cosmic harmony is restored – not only spiritual but material, ecological and relational. The Apostle Paul writes:

For 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.

COLOSSIANS 1.19–20

Jesus’ sacrifice was intended not merely to save individual human beings, far less to take them (somehow) *out of* the world and into some fundamentally *other* place. Rather, its purpose was to re-establish relationships between God and all created beings *within* the world. In this sense, the cross can be seen as God’s answer to the ‘groaning’ of ‘the whole creation’ (Romans 8.22).

By his death, Jesus Christ overcomes all those forces that contribute to disconnection and disharmony in our world: ‘He disarmed the rulers and authorities and made a public example of them, triumphing over them in [the cross]’ (Colossians 2.15). These days, our interpretation of these forces can certainly include an ecological dimension, including the human behaviours, economic systems and technological developments that have

contributed to the current global crisis. The cross overcomes these, clearing the way for the reconciliation of creation as a whole. Ultimately, of course, this includes reconciliation with God, the one who is the source and sustainer of the created order:

But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ. For he is our peace; in his flesh he has made both groups into one ... '

EPHESIANS 2.13-14

The resurrection can be seen as the final and decisive sign of this plan for all creation. Jesus rose bodily, not as a spirit; this validates the material world, while also anticipating its ultimate transformation. For the Apostle Paul, the risen Christ can be seen as 'the first fruits' (1 Corinthians 15.20), implying that his resurrection is a glimpse or a foretaste of what is still to come for flesh and blood. And if all creation will share in the freedom of the glory of the children of God and the redemption of their bodies (Romans 8.21), then Christ's risen body is also a foretaste of the whole redeemed creation. God is not discarding creation, nor the complex and interlocking relationships he instituted between living beings. On the contrary, God is renewing the world from the inside out – with Jesus himself as the first fruits. Christians can truly say that 'in [Christ], all things hold together' (Colossians 1.17).

Chapter 9

The Christian faith has hope for the Earth and all life

The Christian faith is hopeful about the restoration of all things by God, including living beings and the harmony of all the Earth.

The Bible's storyline ends with a vision of creation restored. The ultimate destiny of humanity lies with other animals, plants and forms of life in a reconciled, renewed and liberated creation, saturated with God's presence and united in the praise of God.

*Image: Globe artwork 'Gaia' inside Durham Cathedral, Durham, England.
12th July 2023. Mark Green / Shutterstock.com.*



Hope for the coming of God's kingdom and the restoration of all things runs deep in the Christian faith.

This hope extends to all creation. Just as the Earth is encompassed by God's plan for the reconciliation of the world in Jesus Christ, so it is included in the full outworking of that reconciliation and the future realisation of God's reign.

The Lord's Prayer tells us that the reign of the Creator will come 'on earth as it is in heaven' (Matthew 6.10). As we have seen, Jesus' life and ministry point to what that means for creation, by signalling the reconciliation of human beings with the natural world and with other living creatures. These signs of the kingdom echo the visions in Isaiah of the restoration of God's people and the land, and of the new heavens and Earth in which the wild, natural world is reconciled with the human world of cultivation, domestic animals and children (Isaiah 11.1-9; 32.9-20; 35.1-10; 65.17-25). They also resonate with the depiction of restored human connections with land, plants and other animals in the Song of Songs.⁸⁵

The Apostle Paul also looked forward to the liberation of creation, when it would be 'set free from its bondage to decay and ... obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God' (Romans 8.21). At this time God will be 'all in all' (1 Corinthians 15.28) and all things in heaven and on earth will be gathered up in Christ, their head (Ephesians 1.10, 22-23; see also Colossians 3.11).

The Bible's storyline ends with this vision of creation liberated and reunited. In the book of Revelation we see the final and complete reversal of cosmic disconnection. The seer of Revelation envisaged 'every creature in heaven and on earth and under the earth and in the sea, and all that is in them,' worshipping God

and Jesus Christ (Revelation 5.13; see also Philippians 2.10-11). The reconciliation brought about for God's people here is envisaged as multi-ethnic, healing divisions between social groups caused by racism, war, pride and greed, and uniting diverse human cultures in praise and worship of God (Revelation 7.9). But this inclusivity extends not just to relationships between human groups, but to all creation: God's plan is 'for the fullness of time, to gather up all things in [Christ], things in heaven and things on earth' (Ephesians 1.10). The ultimate destiny of humanity lies with the whole created order in a reconciled, renewed and liberated creation, saturated with God's presence and united in the praise of God.

What, though, of those passages which seem to foretell the destruction of the heavens and the Earth and their replacement with a new creation (2 Peter 3.4-13; Revelation 20.11, 21.1)?

Peter's second letter speaks of the coming day of the Lord in which the heavens will pass away and be set ablaze, the elements will be dissolved by and melt with fire and the Earth and all done on it will be disclosed, while the author and his readers await a new heavens and a new Earth, in which dwells righteousness (2 Peter 3.10-13). The interpretation of this passage in its historical context is much debated, but it seems that the author, using violent apocalyptic imagery to make his point, points to an event of divine judgment which exposes human sin and purges the world with destruction. Such language signals significant discontinuity between this world and the new cosmic home for righteousness of which the author writes.

At the same time, however, the author draws a parallel with the story of the flood, where massive destruction purifies the Earth. This parallel indicates an underlying and equally significant

continuity of the cosmos, rather than its total annihilation. Some read the passage as announcing a radical transformation of the cosmos; others as a dissolution which is part of a process of renewal.⁸⁶ In either case, the new heavens and new Earth seem to be 'in continuity with what has gone before'.⁸⁷

In Revelation, likewise, the passing away of the heavens and Earth is for the sake of the renewal, restoration and indeed fulfilment of creation (Revelation 21.1–5). The final vision of Revelation completes the book's depiction of the restoration of creation to the rule of God and the orientation of all creatures to the worship of God.⁸⁸ The passing away of the first heaven and first Earth, which had fled from God's presence, and the absence of the sea, show God's commitment to destroying the forces of evil and death, the forces which destroy the Earth (Revelation 11.18). This commitment suggests the author does not envisage the annihilation of the Earth. Instead, it signifies the judgment and end of an order of things, a cosmos, centred upon the pretensions, wealth and power of imperial Rome, symbolised by the city of Babylon, and its replacement with another, the New Jerusalem: the transformation from the kingdom of the world to the reign of God and his Messiah (Revelation 11.15).⁸⁹

In this sense, then, God announces that he is 'making all things new' (Revelation 21.5). The descent of the new Jerusalem from heaven to Earth points to the unification of those realms and the implementation of God's reign on Earth as in heaven, for God's throne is set in the city. Some features of the city – the river, the tree of life producing fruit each month, whose leaves are for the healing of the nations (Revelation 22.1–2; see also Ezekiel 47.1–12) – echo the description of the garden in Genesis 2 and suggest that the new heavens and Earth fulfil God's original purposes for creation.⁹⁰

In response to this hope of radical liberation, restoration and transformation, the writer of 2 Peter summons his readers, not to passivity, and far less to destructive ecological practices – the idea we can use up the Earth because it is going to be replaced anyway – but rather to 'peace' (2 Peter 3.14). This word indicates an eschatological order which embraces reconciliation with God, with other human beings and with the wider creation.⁹¹ One of the ways in which Christians can embody this peace today, and bear witness to their hope for all creation, is in their efforts to care for the Earth and its creatures in the present. In light of passages like the ones we have been exploring, they can do so with a restless sense that the present state of our world is not natural or permanent, and that the future renewal of creation has drawn close to us in Jesus Christ.

Chapter 10

Christians are to live in light of the coming renewal of all creation

It can be hard to hold onto our hope in the present time as we wait for the restoration of all things.

As we pray for the coming of God's reign on Earth, we should seek to live in a way that reflects God's healing purposes for all things and the petition that God's 'will be done'. In particular, Christians are called to care for the Earth in all its wholeness, to model the coming restoration of creation in our relationships with each other, and to pay attention to the poorest and most vulnerable in our world.

As we seek to live out this vision, we will need to draw upon the grace of God offered in word and sacrament.

Image: Residents navigate inundated streets as floodwaters submerge neighborhoods following the impact of Cyclone Ditwah on December 1, 2025 in Colombo, Sri Lanka. Ct Lens/Alamy Live News.



As we look around at our world, we certainly do not see creation's relationships restored or creatures living in perfect harmony.

In our present time, the experience of the Church is one of longing and anticipation, waiting for our redemption as we experience the first fruits of the Holy Spirit. We do so along with creation itself, which yearns to share in that redemption (Romans 8.18–27).

But this does not imply that Christians have nothing to say or to do in the present context – far from it! Christians have the deepest motives for solidarity with other creatures in their suffering and vulnerability. Liberated in Christ from the power of sin and death, and enlivened and led by his indwelling Spirit, as God's adopted children (Romans 8.1–17), Christians are free to live and work in a way that reflects God's healing purposes for all things, and carry out the 'ministry of reconciliation' (2 Corinthians 5.18) that has been entrusted to us. 'Jesus calls his disciples to follow in the Way of reconciliation with all creation and, through the Holy Spirit, we are empowered to do so.'⁹² This responsibility includes the vocation to bear witness that the Earth and all its habitats and forms of life are God's good creation and the object of God's redeeming love. We are also called to an active restraint of our drive to consume – which will be addressed in more detail in Part Three.

It is important to note at the outset that this care for creation also entails responsibility for each other. For human beings, like other creatures, are implicated in the suffering of creation at large. Christians are called to live in harmony (Romans 15.5; 1 Corinthians 1.10; Ephesians 4.1–6; Philippians 2.1–4), and to be reconciled with one another (Matthew 5.17–26, 6.14–15, 18.21–35; 2 Corinthians 13.11). These actions are anticipations of the harmony that is to come. God's reconciling action in Christ has overcome

divisions between humanity (Galatians 3.25–28; Colossians 3.11), and the story of this good news should shape the way we live with our fellow humans.

Here, we have a special responsibility to the poorest and most vulnerable among us. The current ecological crisis disproportionately affects these groups, who face greater risks and have fewer resources to adapt. Our current situation is a threat-multiplier for many in our world and threatens to exacerbate existing inequalities wherever they are found. The message of the gospel is that God brings down the powerful, lifts up the lowly and feeds the hungry (Luke 1.52–3, echoing 1 Samuel 2.8). Christ came to bring good news to the poor and free the oppressed (Luke 4.16–21, 6.20–21). This message is in keeping with the testimonies of the Old Testament that God delivers the poor and needy and gives them justice (Psalms 12.5, 14.6, 72.12–13; 140.12; Isaiah 41.17–18). In the context of the injustices and inequalities attending the causes and consequences of ecological disaster, these truths lend particular focus to biblical injunctions to love our neighbour as ourselves (Leviticus 19.18; Luke 10.25–37; Romans 13.8–10); to not oppress the poor (Proverbs 21.13, 22.16, 22) but be generous towards them (Leviticus 23.22; Proverbs 19.17) and defend their rights (Proverbs 31.8–9); and to 'loose the bonds of injustice ... to let the oppressed go free, and to break every yoke' (Isaiah 58.6–7).⁹³ As we have already seen (in Chapter 7), this responsibility to seek justice extends to other creatures and indeed the land.

The New Testament's teaching on how we should treat our fellow humans can also guide us in our action towards other creatures. The writers of the New Testament wrote for communities with internal divisions, working out their relationship to the stories and expectations of Jewish faith and to the structures, religions and

morals of gentile societies, while also facing the external threat of persecution. New Testament writers, like the Apostle Paul, urged that love be shown to the most vulnerable members of society, putting the needs of weaker sisters and brothers above the stronger's legitimate liberties, even at the expense of their own entitlements (1 Corinthians 8.1–9.23). He urged them to show restraint to avoid injury to another of weaker conscience and so as to build them up (Romans 14.1–15.6) and to give generously (2 Corinthians 8–9) on the pattern of Christ's costly self-giving (Philippians 2.1–13; 2 Corinthians 8.9). The Apostle Paul also begins to argue for the extension of such love beyond the circle of Christian communities in urging his readers to do good and show love for one's neighbour (Romans 13.9; Galatians 5.14), hospitality to strangers (Romans 12.13) and gentleness to all (Philippians 4.5); to do good to all, even in repayment for evil (1 Thessalonians 5.15), and to love one's enemies (Romans 12.19–21). In light of the reality of the reconciliation of all creation in Christ and Christian hope for its redemption and renewal, this pattern and these practices may be extended beyond the human community, in pursuit of penultimate forms of reconciliation with the non-human creation.⁹⁴

Similarly, the New Testament ethos of the church as the diversely gifted, interconnected, interdependent body of the baptised, ordered by love, mutual empathy, care and regard for its weaker members (1 Corinthians 12.12–14.1), offers a pattern for living at this time of ecological threat. Christians are called to live in reconciling interdependence and reconnection with God's creation, made vulnerable by ecological crises, in recognition that all things are reconciled through Christ's blood shed on the cross and that redeemed humans are the body of Christ (Colossians 1.19–20).⁹⁵

For this reason, the Church of England, as part of the Anglican Communion, recognises that the Fifth Mark of Mission is 'to strive to safeguard the integrity of creation, and sustain and renew the life of the earth'. This recognises that our calling to creation care is closely linked to our proclamation of the good news (the First Mark of Mission) and our teaching and nurturing of new believers (the Second Mark of Mission). Via creation care, we can respond to human needs, both locally and in places distant from us (the Third Mark of Mission). And because the causes of ecological devastation lie in structures that encourage greed and cause injustice, safeguarding creation and renewing the Earth are closely linked to transforming unjust social structures and pursuing peace and reconciliation (the Fourth Mark of Mission).

In the sacraments, Christians receive embodied signs of God's grace working through material creation. In celebrating them, the Church not only recalls the creation of the world and the salvation of all things in Christ. Sacraments are a foretaste of God's transformation of all creation. In them, humans partake in that transformation, as God uses created things and the products of human labour to bring about God's blessing and presence amongst us.

The sacrament of baptism uses the primal element of water. The baptismal waters recall the waters of creation (Genesis 1.2), the flood (Genesis 6–9), and the parting of the Red Sea (Exodus 14) – moments when God renews and liberates creation. In baptism, God uses the same element of water to cleanse, refresh and renew an individual human being; it becomes a sign of re-creation.

Similarly, in the Eucharist, we find creation taken up, blessed and transfigured. Bread (from grain) and wine (from grapes) are fruits

of the Earth and the work of human hands. But they become for us the body and blood of Christ – not by abolishing their created nature, but by fulfilling it. The Eucharist narrates the participation of humanity with all creation in God’s redemptive action and reveals God’s intention to restore the whole material world, not just human beings. In it we look forward to the redemption of all creation, through gifts of bread and wine, gathered from the fields and hills: a sign of the ultimate reconciliation that is to come for all things.⁹⁶

So Christians are called to work in the present time to care for the Earth in its wholeness, to model the coming restoration of the integrity of creation in our relationships with each other, and to pay attention to the poorest and most vulnerable in our world. We are to live in the spirit of the Lord’s Prayer that God’s kingdom should come, and God’s will be done, on Earth as in heaven. We are supported in this work by the Holy Spirit, whose function is always to ‘renew the face of the earth’ (Psalm 104.30).

The church is not alone as it seeks to live out its mission in the Spirit and in partnership with all people of good will. For Christ who sends his disciples out into the world also promises to accompany them always (Matthew 28.19–20). The letter to the Ephesians describes how

God put this power to work Christ when he raised him from the dead and seated him at his right hand in the heavenly places, far above all rule and authority and power and dominion, and above every name that is named ... And he has put all things under his feet and has made him the head over all things for the church, which is his body, the fullness of him who fills all in all.

EPHESIANS 1.20-23

There is an assurance here that Christ is working through the Church and mysteriously in the world in preparation for his gathering all creation up in himself. This reassures us that the world’s future is not determined by any fixed trajectory or by worldly forces that seem so dominant, but that God is working in and through all things. This includes our efforts, however small and insignificant they may seem to be.

In the third and final part, we will examine in more practical detail what this work looks like.



PART THREE

RESPOND

Chapter 11

What should we do?

The work of review and theological reflection in Parts One and Two prompts an important practical question: how are we to respond to the damage humanity has done to God's creation?

The story of Pentecost (Acts 2) suggests that our response should be rooted in the repentance and hope that marks Christian discipleship: repentance and lament for our destructive ways of inhabiting creation, and hope based on God's work of redeeming it.

Such penitent and hopeful discipleship will take many forms, involving us both collectively and individually – at local, national and global levels.

Image: Children in the churchyard of St Mary's Solihull taking part in the annual Churches Count on Nature event organised in partnership with Caring for God's Acre. (Picture: Caring for God's Acre)



Having surveyed the extent of human damage to the planet (Part One) and having reflected on how God is working to redeem creation despite our destructive alienation from it (Part Two), we now face an important practical question: how are we as the Church of England to respond to all this, both corporately and as local church communities? At this time of unprecedented levels of human-made impact on and damage to this planet, what is required of us – as disciples of Christ? As many are driven to despair, or even to denial, by the sheer scale of the planetary crisis we're facing, what does it mean to respond to the news that God has reconciled all things in Christ?

This question echoes the question the crowd put to Peter and his fellow apostles on that eventful Pentecost morning in Jerusalem. Having listened to Peter's speech, explaining the miraculous events they had just witnessed, they ask: 'What should we do?' (Acts 2.37). The question voices the awful realisation that by crucifying Jesus – God's Messiah – their leaders had made a terrible mistake. Yet their question also speaks of a dawning realisation that, by raising Jesus up from the dead, God has turned the death-dealing ways of sinful humanity into a life-giving event. In asking the question, then, the crowd acknowledge that they are implicated in wrongdoing. But in asking what they should *do*, the crowd also grasps somehow that Jesus' resurrection is in fact God's invitation to a new beginning, to new life. Peter calls on them to repent, but also to

'be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ so that your sins may be forgiven; and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit.'

ACTS 2.38

Their question, then, while still tinged with anxiety, already dares speak of hope, based on the good news of the risen Christ; the hope that gives them confidence and freedom to repent in the first place.

As we face the planetary crisis today, asking anxiously what we should do, we may hear in our questions echoes of that basic question voiced on Pentecost. We may recognise in the human damage to this planet the same powers of sin and evil at work which took Jesus to the cross. And we may recognise that the good news of God's victory over those powers is also the basis for our faith today that God will not forsake his suffering creation. In that sense, we may find ourselves standing alongside those first disciples, asking what we are to do in response to the gospel.

Hence, Peter's words are an invitation to us, too, to *repent*: to confess, lament and turn away from the ways in which we have collectively inhabited and used God's creation, and to re-orient ourselves to God's unwavering faithfulness to it. Repentance is an acknowledgement of our own fragility and a welcoming of the good news that God will not forsake what God has made (cf. Psalm 138.8). On that basis, repentance leads to conversion: to 'turn around', away from our old ways and towards God and God's kingdom. And here we might follow Pope Francis in saying that what is required here is an 'ecological conversion': a turning towards creation and fellow creatures, responding to 'the cry of the earth and the cry of the poor', shaped by our encounter with Jesus Christ.⁹⁷

This conversion will also keep us from the urge to 'fix' our impact on the planet while ignoring its spiritual roots, forgetting that this planet is and remains God's creation. Such an attitude is prone to repeating the mistakes that have led us to where we

are – for example, by trusting in the power of (future) science and technology alone to save us from planetary catastrophe. To repent, by contrast, involves careful examination of our attitudes and motivations as we commit ourselves to the work of healing our relations with fellow creatures. Indeed, in the Christian life repentance is not just a one-off event but a daily practice, in recognition of the fact that old habits die hard.

As we learn to repent and lament, we will need to stay focused on God's redemption. This is important because, in view of the scale of the planetary crisis (as surveyed in Part One), we can easily feel overwhelmed, in despair or paralysed. Some may ask if the challenges facing us are simply too complex to be solved, or wonder if the destruction has progressed so far that our common home is now beyond repair. Questions like these, while entirely understandable, easily lead to a sense of hopelessness and resigned inaction. Yet Peter's speech in Acts 2 reminds us that God really can bring new life out of our death-dealing ways. We may have hope because this broken planet is and remains God's creation. On that basis we may have confidence to take responsibility and act – in ways that speak of our awe, wonder and gratitude for God's work in creation and redemption.

Converted and sustained by God's grace, then, we are called to tread gently and hopefully on this Earth as disciples of Christ, invited to join in with God's work of redeeming creation. This task takes many forms, and we don't have to face each on our own. At Pentecost, each member of the crowd had to make a personal decision about how to react to Peter's speech; yet those who responded in faith acknowledged that they were part of a collective: 'What should we do?' Their repentance and baptism marked the beginning of a new missional community.

They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers ... [they] were together and had all things in common; they would sell their possessions and goods and distribute the proceeds to all, as any had need.

ACTS 2.42, 44–45

Furthermore, as they hailed from the Jewish diaspora across the then-known world (Acts 2.9–11), it is no great surprise to learn, further on in Acts, that this new movement quickly spread throughout the Roman Empire.

This movement marked the beginning of the Church: the body of Christ on Earth, of which the Church of England is part. Inspired and encouraged by the story of Pentecost, we should renew our discipleship in response to the planetary crises we are facing, together as a Church, as well as individually – at local, national and international levels. What does it mean to follow Christ amid these crises in our households, parishes and local communities, our dioceses, the national Church, and as part of the worldwide church, including the Anglican Communion?

Chapter 12

Responding locally

As the Church of England, we are called to make creation care integral to everything we say and do.

Though we are each individually called to respond to the environmental crisis, we do not face this responsibility in isolation from others: the local communities and contexts in which we are placed, and in particular the churches where we join in the practices of discipleship.

Parishes and local churches offer many opportunities for hopeful environmental action. And there are many ways in which we can each extend such action into our personal circumstances and contexts.

Image: Installing solar panels and air source heat pumps in 2025 allowed St Margaret's Portsmouth to act as a warm space for its community and enabled a range of other outreach activities. (Picture: Clare Kendall)



What would it look like if we as the Church of England made a concern for God's creation integral to our worship, to everything we say in communicating our faith, and to how we live out our faith in hopeful practice?

A faithful and hopeful response to the planetary crisis is bound to be multi-faceted. There is a lot to be done, including many long-established patterns that need to be changed or refrained from altogether. It is hard to achieve, given that the global economy depends on continuous consumption and offers to meet every need with instant availability – whether via streaming of content, online shopping or fast food. Yet we can draw on centuries of wisdom about the transformation of our desires and the reordering of our loves. The work to be done, then, will require deep reflection as well as concrete action, critical examination as well as radical changes in behaviour.

The task involves every one of us, each according to their personal gifts and circumstances. But before unpacking this in further detail, it is important to emphasise that we do not face this task in isolation from the communities and contexts in which we are situated.

The reason for highlighting these communities and contexts is twofold. First, our main question in this document is how we *as the Church of England* are to respond to the planetary crisis. For we are called to respond and act corporately, *as the community of Christ's disciples* – the community which, as we saw (in Chapter 11), goes all the way back to Pentecost. This is a community where our fellowship is shaped by the good news of God's redemption in Christ, marked by repentance and hope. What would it look like if our church communities made a concern for God's creation

integral to all we say and do, including our efforts to nurture the faith of new believers? What opportunities could the Church of England's unique parish structure and its commitment to place afford us?

The second reason for highlighting the corporate dimension of our response relates to the complex, structural and systemic nature of the challenges we face. Individual lifestyle changes are essential to changing our impact on the planet, especially when we consider the aggregate effect of countless individuals, households and businesses making similar positive changes. Yet personal choices must also be seen within a wider picture. Changing our habits of consumption is so difficult because these habits, and the patterns of production and marketing that shape them, are part of an overarching economic and financial model. We cannot therefore ignore the systemic dimension of the challenge, which requires political solutions beyond the scope of our individual influence and power. We need political interventions to enable the flourishing of an alternative economy on a national and global scale.

Yet local organisations and communities can play an important preparatory role here, by testing and demonstrating how such an alternative economy might work and look like. Here, as people help each other in changing habits and patterns, we can 'taste and see' that a sustainable lifestyle is possible – and can indeed be cheaper, healthier, tastier and more fulfilling.

Worship

For us as the Church of England to play our role in this process of economic transformation, we need changes in practice that are rooted in the renewal of faith and formation, mentioned earlier. That means our efforts will have to begin with our worship. Where churches are ambivalent in their attention to God's creation, it is often reflected in a lack of relevant preaching and teaching. Creation may frequently feature in children's songs and worship but is less well represented in adult hymns and worship songs. In fact, the Book of Common Prayer points us in the right direction here: several of its prayers and canticles include a strong focus on the whole of creation, especially the Benedicite in the Order for Morning Prayer.

A more recent resource is *A Time for Creation*,⁹⁸ published as a supplement to Common Worship to help churches include creation and environment in their worship. In addition to using such resources we should also remember the key role that elements and gifts of creation play in the Christian sacraments: water and oil, bread and wine (see Chapter 10).

Many churches have already adopted the practice of focusing on creation in the autumn, during the Season of Creation, often culminating in the commemoration of St Francis of Assisi (who is widely considered to be the 'patron saint' of creation care). The celebration of the new Feast of Creation in Christ, on the first Sunday of September, will be another powerful way of integrating creation care into our worship. Yet such special events should not distract us from treating creation as a continuous thread woven through the whole of the church year. Every church service, including every Eucharist, reminds us that creation is redeemed and renewed in Christ. The liturgical calendar trains the Church to see all creation within God's saving work.

Christian spiritual traditions

Becoming more attentive to God's creation also requires learning from the traditions of Christian spirituality. Particularly relevant here are spiritual practices involving prayer, contemplation or self-examination. These not only train us to become more aware of God, our neighbour and the world around us; they also prompt us to interrogate the desires, dispositions and habits that shape the way we relate to the world, including the consumption patterns we have grown accustomed to. A walk in nature or a day of gardening are relevant practices here too. In view of the holistic focus of Christian spirituality, it is perhaps no surprise that people are rediscovering its wisdom as they seek to respond to the planetary crisis. Indeed, a key discipline for learning to care for creation can be simply to observe and learn about the wildlife and landscapes around us, and perhaps get involved in protecting and restoring them.

Participation in regular communal worship and other spiritual practices, renewed in these ways, is crucial, as it can help us increasingly to inhabit the story of creation, salvation and redemption narrated in Part Two. In our services of word and sacrament, we are reminded that we are liberated from the powers of sin and death, and set free to obey God and live in the Spirit instead (Romans 5.1-6.23, 8.1-17; Galatians 5.1). Here we also receive a foretaste of the Spirit's promise of our future glory, with its implications for the whole creation (Romans 8.14-25) – a source of joy, peace and hope (Romans 15.13). As we gather around God's word, we are also instructed to seek first God's kingdom and his justice (Matthew 6.19-33) and to love our neighbour (Galatians 5.13-14). And as we gather, including in smaller groups, we encourage each other to 'walk in newness of life' (Romans 6.4) and sustain loving action in the face of disaster, suffering,

injustice and disappointment. In all of this, we receive the deep nourishment we need to live the life of Christian discipleship, and practise creation care as an integral dimension of it.

Some congregations have taken this to a next level by meeting in the outdoors, with settings including urban parks as well as rural woodlands. To gather and worship in nature is a powerful practice, a reminder that we cannot seek reconciliation with our Creator while ignoring the rest of creation, and that our worship joins in with the praises of all creation (see Chapter 4).

Church buildings

Meanwhile, there is much that can and is being done to mitigate the environmental impact of church buildings. Since the launch of Eco Church by A Rocha UK in 2016, an ever-growing number of churches have started to reduce their dependence on fossil fuels through structural changes, such as improved insulation and the harnessing of renewable energy from heat pumps and solar panels. Within the Church of England, the Net Zero Carbon Programme has added significant further momentum and financial support in this area (more on this in Chapter 13). Food and transport are two further areas where we can play an important role. Sharing food is often at the heart of church life, which means that we can showcase how the responsible sourcing of ingredients need not compromise the quality and enjoyability of the food. Similarly, we can encourage each other to travel in more environmentally friendly ways, where possible, flying less and reducing car usage in favour of public transport, cycling and walking.

Local communities

As Church of England congregations we are not alone, of course, in facing these challenges and opportunities. We should join forces with local communities such as schools, clubs and charities – and especially churches and congregations from other denominations, as they respond to the call to make creation care integral to their mission. Similarly, we should aim to work with the synagogues, mosques, temples and other religious communities in our areas. As with other major social and ethical questions, we will find there is much common ground with other religions on this issue. After all, embedded in all major religious traditions is a vision of life and existence as somehow ‘sacred’, as being of more than just instrumental value.

Parochial structure

The parochial structure of the Church of England, meanwhile, means that we are especially well-placed to practise and encourage care for the whole of creation. Parish clergy are given a share in the ‘cure of souls’, a responsibility that applies to an entire local community. Indeed, we may consider this care as extending to all creatures within a parish: not just our human neighbours but also the animals in our neighbourhood, including pets, farmed animals and wildlife, the trees that give us shade, the land we inhabit and the water we depend upon. Furthermore, parishes and dioceses are often responsible for the care of churchyards and other land holdings (e.g., glebe), which means they are in a position to model better ways of stewarding the Earth – and much is already happening in this area. Parish churches can and increasingly do play an important role in climate adaptation: many old church buildings are perfect for providing a cool space during a heatwave, or positioned on higher ground so they can provide shelter during a flood.

Developing sustainable and resilient communities can thus lead to developing thriving local communities: the more people do locally, the less they travel elsewhere; the more relationships are made and nurtured, the more caring and supportive a community becomes; the more local nature is protected and fossil-fuel pollution is reduced, the greater the wellbeing of local residents and other creatures.

Individual households

Our responsibility as disciples to care for God's creation, however, extends beyond the places and moments of our gathering. We also face this responsibility as individuals and individual households. It is true, as noted earlier, that we must not focus on the personal in isolation from the communities in which we are placed, in particular our common identity and calling in Christ. Yet what we do when we meet, worship, learn and do outreach as church communities should also inform how we each live throughout the week. And there are still plenty of personal choices left to be made: what we buy, use and consume, and how and where we invest our money, at home, at work, at school, when shopping or travelling. Much hangs on these choices, because when added up these have an enormous impact.

Again, changing these patterns is difficult and counter-cultural. This is partly because of the nature of sin, which has structural as well as personal dimensions. For those who live in consumer societies, it is difficult to change patterns of consumption because they have become entrenched and have formed us. Nor does the global supply chain we inhabit make it easy for us to understand how what we are buying or using is impacting the places and people who produced it for us. And the pull of self-interest is powerful. There is great strength of resistance to any way of life governed by the kind of vision we have been exploring.

And yet, we know that current Western consumption patterns are simply unsustainable: whether in terms of the fuel burnt for leisure trips across the globe, the destruction of the rainforests in the interests of the meat industry, or the ecological costs of the production and disposal of vast quantities of cheap consumer goods. These are complex and global challenges, to be sure, involving millions and billions of consumers, which none of us can solve individually. In order to respond to these challenges wisely, we need to be reminded time and again of the underlying forces of sin and evil, and to believe in God's power of liberating us and creation as a whole from these forces. This is why we need each other, gathering for worship, teaching and celebrating the sacraments. It is these communal church practices which give us the right perspective on our lives. If we thus allow ourselves to be equipped for how we live through the week, we may be surprised by the scale of the impact that we can have together.

Much exciting progress has been made in recent years in renewable energy technologies, not least here in the United Kingdom with its availability of wind power. Renewable energy is not only increasingly widely available, but the costs of producing it are coming down. This means we have real opportunities to put our faith into action: many of us can switch to green energy providers and improve the insulation of our homes, and many are in a position to use alternative energy sources such as solar panels and heat pumps. Phasing out fossil fuels requires more, of course, than making changes to our homes: it also involves making choices about what we buy and consume, how we travel (and how often), where we invest our money (if we have disposable wealth), and so on. The list of issues and choices can be overwhelming. Yet useful resources are available, such as carbon literacy courses, to help us keep sight of the bigger picture and how and where we can each be part of it.

Finally, in focusing on our individual responsibility and agency, it would be wrong to ignore the significant differences in wealth and power, both within our church communities and within society more broadly. We do not all have the same levels of economic choice in what we consume, where it is sourced or how it is produced. And we live in a society and economic system where often, sadly, the products that are most damaging to our planet are also the cheapest. Conversely, many of the mitigation measures that we know are necessary, such as changing the ways we heat our homes, are beyond what poorer households can afford – certainly without support from the wider community. It is the relatively wealthy, moreover, who tend to have a much larger ecological footprint. The same pattern can be seen at a global level: it is the wealthiest nations who benefit from high levels of current and historical carbon emissions, while it is the poorest parts of the world who contribute least yet suffer most from the consequence. All of this means that the burden of responsibility weighs much more heavily on those who, economically speaking, have broader shoulders. The transition we need, then, towards a decarbonised and environmentally sustainable way of living must be a just transition. And while this is needed at a global level, seeking that justice starts at home.

We need to campaign, in other words, for the resources to be made available so that all of us can decarbonise and have access to sustainable products, regardless of income level. Churches and other local communities play an important role here, as outlined earlier. Nevertheless, a just transition cannot be fully realised without political intervention, at national and international levels. Which takes us to the role that the Church of England can play beyond the local parish and diocese.

Chapter 13

Responding nationally

Speaking and acting publicly into the environmental crisis is integral to the Church of England communicating the gospel afresh in our time.

An important aspect of this work is engaging with the political dimension of the environmental crisis. For Christians, political engagement involves prophetic speech and action.

As the established church, the Church of England has unique opportunities for mission and evangelism in this area, given the various constitutional and financial means it has at its disposal for shaping public policy and modelling alternative ways of stewarding resources.

Image: Interior view of the Action Zone inside the OVO Hydro stadium at CO26 venue in Glasgow. 9th November 2021. Iain Masterton/Alamy Live News.



Sharing and enacting our hope in God's redemptive commitment to the Earth are integral to how the Church of England communicates the gospel to the nation today.

While the Church is made up of many dioceses and parishes, it is also a national institution. Just as parishes and church members engage with community life and its local politics, so the Church as a whole is involved in the public discourse that shapes national politics. And political processes are vitally important, as noted earlier, to the need to mitigate and adapt to climate and environmental breakdown. Meeting these challenges requires public policy, legislation and wise government as much as the sort of local initiatives of individual choices addressed in the previous chapter. For the latter can only flourish and become embedded when supported by the necessary legal and regulatory frameworks, both at national and international levels.

Prayer

How should we as the Church of England take part and contribute to these national and indeed political processes? The first thing to mention here is prayer: we are to pray for the scientists researching the environmental crisis in all its complexity, and informing the public and public policy accordingly; for the engineers developing new technologies needed for a transition to a more sustainable economy; and for the politicians tasked with creating the policy and legislative frameworks necessary for effective environmental transformation, including the wise use of new technologies.

Prophetic ministry

In addition to a duty of prayer, we also have a prophetic ministry in this area: to speak the truth about the planetary crisis and challenge the various forms of injustice that are involved, both near and far. As long as it is rooted in honesty and humility, our prophetic ministry may be one of reminding our fellow-citizens of the urgency of the crisis, supporting those already persuaded and challenging those in power – political, economic or financial – to choose justice rather than expedience and self-interest. Prophetic ministry is not about condemning others from the sidelines: following the example of the prophets in the Old Testament, and indeed of Jesus himself, our speaking truth to power is to be motivated by love for and solidarity with the community of which we are part. Only then can our prophetic speech and action have genuine, Christ-like authority.

As the Church of England, we have many opportunities for such prophetic speech and action. As residents and citizens, we have a range of ways in which we can participate in public discourse and political processes, including voting during elections and joining a political party. We can also support and join the many charities devoted to creation care and climate justice, including Christian and interfaith organisations. And we may practise our prophetic ministry via other means, including social media, journalism, art, creative witness and lawful protest.

Public policy

Furthermore, just as local parishes should join forces with other churches, faith communities and organisations in their areas, so should the Church of England work with these and similar communities at a national level. In fact, as the established Church in England, it has a unique contribution to make here, being able

to draw on historical resources and privileges that allow the Church to shape public policy – for example, through the work of the bishops in the House of Lords. Meanwhile, its management of historical assets, through the Church Commissioners, allow it to model good practice and thus shape policy indirectly. The Church can use these privileges to speak and act on important issues affecting the life of the nation, and indeed often does so on behalf of other churches and faith communities as well. For as long as these means continue to be granted to the Church of England, it should use them to ensure that the main crisis of our time remains at the top of the political agenda, and to create space for other communities and organisations to bring their concerns and solutions to the table.

Resources

Far from being a distraction from its ministry, such use of the Church's resources is essential to its mission and evangelism. Increasingly, whether or not people are attracted to the gospel depends on their ability to recognise it as good news for the planet. This is especially true for younger people, many of whom are particularly distressed by climate change and related crises. Many seem to be searching for sources of wisdom and guidance that can offer them renewed hope and purpose in a seemingly doomed world. It is essential, therefore, that in sharing the gospel today, the Church of England communicates, in both word and deed, the profound hope for our planet which, as we have seen, is integral to the good news of Christ.

It is therefore vital that the Church of England uses its institutional voice and spending power well: to remind politicians of the urgency to take action; to call out denial and disinformation; to adopt and model better ways of investing and managing

resources; and so to encourage corporations and investors likewise to move away from harmful industries.

We know this is possible because, in fact, we are already doing it. Back in 2020, the General Synod voted for the Church to aim to reach Net Zero Carbon by 2030.⁹⁹ To support this ambition, the Church Commissioners have made available significant resources to help local churches and other church institutions make the necessary and appropriate changes to their buildings and systems. The Church's commitment has also inspired other denominations and organisations in the United Kingdom and beyond to take similar initiatives. Translating this ambitious goal into real and effective change on the ground is challenging, but we are starting to make real progress. Numerous communities across the country are working to deliver warmth and welcome in innovative and sustainable ways – work which will no doubt continue beyond 2030. We will also need to consider how we reduce our overall impact as we gain a better understanding of our total carbon emissions.

The Church Commissioners have acted in other areas as well. In 2023, they decided to exclude oil and gas companies from their investments due to their failure to work towards climate goals, following extensive engagement with the sector. This move coincided with the Church of England Pensions Board's decision to disinvest from oil and gas holdings, again following extensive engagement with the sector. The Pensions Board also established the Global Investor Commission on Mining 2030, which has set out a bold vision and recommendations to drive the long-term change required to support a responsible mining sector.¹⁰⁰ Furthermore, in line with the General Synod's adoption of the Land and Nature motion in 2024, the Church Commissioners are working to model sustainability and land conservation in the

ways they manage their rural assets.¹⁰¹ One more example of the Church using its influence to support a low carbon economy is the Transition Pathway Initiative, initiated by the Church of England's National Investment Bodies and the Environment Agency Pension Fund.¹⁰²

The Church's Net Zero target has also been adopted by the National Society for Education, which supports around 4,700 Church of England schools.¹⁰³ Through the work of the National Society, the Church is uniquely positioned to help shape not only the way schools use resources and energy, but also how children and young people learn about and care for God's creation.

This final example aptly illustrates the considerable reach the Church of England has within our society. It is important to be aware of this reach, because it gives us such valuable opportunities and means for putting our faith into collective action for the benefit and welfare of the nation.

Chapter Fourteen

Responding globally

The global nature of the environmental crisis is the strongest reminder to the Church of England today that it is part of a worldwide Church, connected with and affecting the lives of communities across the globe.

Through participation in the Anglican Communion and other international church networks, the Church of England can learn about how other parts of the world are affected by the environmental crises, and play its part in working for international climate justice.

In all these ways, the Church of England is adding its voice to the ecumenical call to 'ecological conversion'.

Image: Bishops, their spouses and invited guests pray during the symbolic tree planting ceremony the Environmental and Sustainable Development day at Lambeth Palace during the 2022 Lambeth Conference in the United Kingdom. Photo: Ian Walton for The Lambeth Conference.



The Church of Christ is 'catholic', uniting communities of disciples from across the world. This worldwide Church is therefore well-placed to recognise and respond to the global dimension of the environmental and climate crises. For us as the Church of England, this means being aware that the effects of our collective way of life do not stop at national or continental borders; moreover, as mentioned before, it is often those parts of the world that contribute least to these crises which are suffering most from them.

Christian charities

We can learn from the way international Christian charities, such as A Rocha International, Christian Aid and Tearfund, have listened to and worked with local grassroots partners. Together with them, these charities have often led the way in recognising how the planetary crisis is integral to the humanitarian causes they pursue. They have also played a vital role in global environmental and justice-related campaigns.

The Anglican Communion

An important way in which the Church of England can follow their example, and contribute to international collaboration on climate justice, is through its participation in the Anglican Communion. The Communion, the fellowship of Anglican churches across the world, has been supporting and coordinating environmental action for many years now. The Anglican Communion Environmental Network (ACEN) was established following the 1998 Lambeth Conference to give greater visibility and better coordination for environmental action across the Anglican Communion.¹⁰⁴ ACEN has been influential in establishing the Season of Creation across the Communion, provides valuable resources for preaching and has been significantly involved in advocacy and establishing

groups such as Green Anglicans. Following the 2008 Lambeth Conference the Anglican Alliance was established to 'connect, equip and inspire the worldwide Anglican family to work for a world free of poverty and injustice and to safeguard creation'.¹⁰⁵ The Anglican Alliance has been addressing the combined impacts of the environmental and global poverty crisis and has established The Communion Forest as a joint project with ACEN. The 2022 Lambeth Conference issued the 'Lambeth Call on the Environment and Sustainable Development',¹⁰⁶ which drew on existing wisdom and work being undertaken across the Communion.

Thus, by participating in projects such as The Communion Forest,¹⁰⁷ the Church of England can be part of the Communion's worldwide efforts to work together for climate justice and creation care. In addition, the Communion's Companion Links network enables individual Anglican dioceses across the world to support each other directly through prayer, mutual visits, the sharing of expertise and resources and much else.¹⁰⁸ These links have proved invaluable for direct collaboration and solidarity in the area of climate justice. They allow dioceses in poorer parts of the world, often most directly affected by climate change and related crises, to receive support from their partner dioceses. But perhaps more importantly, these links allow dioceses in wealthier and less affected parts of the world, like England, to experience first-hand how climate change and related crises are affecting daily life and ministry in their partner dioceses, and indeed learn from how they respond to these challenges in creative ways.

The World Council of Churches

Another key international forum is the **World Council of Churches** (WCC), of which the Church of England – alongside its Anglican sister churches – is a key member. Like the Anglican Communion,

the World Council of Churches has its own programmes of addressing the climate crisis and ecological justice at a global level.¹⁰⁹

International church leaders

Within this worldwide ecumenical context, key international church leaders have led the way. Speaking at a World Council of Churches gathering in 2023, the Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew I of Constantinople emphasised the importance of working together, given the challenges posed by climate change, including the growing refugee crisis: 'The threats that our world is currently facing can only be addressed and overcome in collaboration ... this is where the dialogue and partnership of religious communities proves to be essential and vital.'¹¹⁰

Pope Francis, too, has spoken powerfully into the planetary crisis – chiefly through his 2015 encyclical *Laudato Si'*, mentioned earlier, and his 2013 apostolic exhortation *Laudate Deum*.¹¹¹ *Laudato Si'* in particular has drawn widespread attention for the way it connects the ecological crisis with the plight of the global poor, and its analysis of economic structures as causes of ecological destruction, drawing on experience and wisdom from Roman Catholic dioceses across the world. Pope Francis's message has been strongly endorsed by his successor, Pope Leo XIV, who has observed that '[t]he challenges identified in *Laudato Si'* are in fact even more relevant today than they were 10 years ago,' adding that these challenges 'are of a social and political nature, but first and foremost of a spiritual nature: they call for a conversion.'¹¹²

This call for conversion sums up the core message of the Anglican tradition of environmental theology, and of this report.

Conclusion

Day by day, as they spent much time together in the temple, they broke bread at home and ate their food with glad and generous hearts, praising God and having the goodwill of all the people. And day by day the Lord added to their number those who were being saved.

ACTS 2.46-47

Responding to Peter's sermon on that Pentecost morning, the community of first disciples learned to live simply, share together and pray sincerely. By these means they would go on to change the world as those around them began to experience the quality of their faith and lives. As Christians, we should not underestimate the evangelistic, missional, social and political impact we can have as we respond to God's call to act at this time of climate and ecological crisis.

The journey we face will bring us closer together, strengthen our relationships with the global Church and deepen our solidarity with communities throughout the world. Participating in the flourishing of nature will deepen our appreciation of God's creation and our spiritual lives.

As we respond to the call of the poorest in the world and to the cry of creation, we remember that 'God was pleased to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, by making peace through the blood of his cross' (Colossians 1.20).

Notes

Introduction

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- 11 Promoting such a change of our view of ourselves was also an important theme of the environmental public theology of Rowan Williams as Archbishop of Canterbury. See the lectures in Part 3 of his *Faith in the Public Square* (Bloomsbury, 2012), pp. 175-208.
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- 17 Rowan Williams develops a similar account of environmental responsibility in his lecture 'Renewing the face of the earth: human responsibility and the environment' in *Faith in the Public Square*, pp. 185–195.

Part One: See

Chapter 1

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Part Two

Chapter 4

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- 35 Montefiore (ed.), *Man and Nature*, p. 21.
- 36 Ibid., pp. 28, 44; Foster, *Sharing God's Planet*, pp. 18–19.
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- 44 Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae* 1a 45, 6.
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- 56 See also Montefiore (ed.), *Man and Nature*, p. 32. On this note of contemplation in Genesis 1, see Ellen F. Davies, *Scripture, Culture and Agriculture. An Agrarian Reading of the Bible* (Cambridge University Press, 2008), pp. 46–47. Drawing on the biblical story of the flood, Rowan Williams has argued that the distinctive significance of humanity, as part of the ‘interdependence of all living things’, is their responsibility for the non-human world. That is how we express and enact our being made in God’s image, so that to respect human dignity is bound up with respect for all life, with which we are involved. See Williams, ‘The Climate Crisis: Fashioning a Christian Response’, in his *Faith in the Public Square*, p. 198.
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Chapter 11

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