

MK Theology Forum and MK Christian Environment Group, 11 Nov 2014

## CHANGING THE CLIMATE IN THE CHURCH

How does faith respond to a world that our application of science has brought to meltdown?

Tonight is not about the detailed science.

Where the only thing that's chilling is the conclusions of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change after analysing what the increasingly sophisticated models predict.

By 2100 average surface temperature on earth is likely to be 2C above 1900, but varying regionally (9 degrees in some places) and from year to year. Contrast between wet and dry regions and seasons will increase almost everywhere. Sea levels will very likely rise more between now and the end of the century than the 20cm observed during the last hundred years.

The IPCC is unanimous in its considered view as to the cause and the 2013 report concludes by predicting **“a substantial multi-century climate change commitment created by past, present and future emissions of CO2.”**

And the primary reason why we now have over 400ppm of carbon dioxide in the atmosphere when it had been below 300ppm for at least half a million years prior to the 20C, not just the thousand years shown, is our use of fossil fuels,

Nor is tonight about how the world community as a whole might address the issue much more seriously than has happened so far in the quarter century since it became clear that “we have a problem”.

We have not heeded the warning implicit in the banking crisis that unlimited growth in a fixed-size world is unsustainable.

Indeed the rush to get back to business as usual, defined as economic growth, has been allowed to gradually undermine green commitments.

But I do believe that faith communities have a huge part to play both in mobilising local action and persuading government authorities to do the right thing.

We see *that* in relation to world development and poverty, trade rules and debt cancellation – as well as in the time-honoured areas of education and health and social care.

But the church only acts – and the same is true for other faiths – when its members are persuaded that their faith compels them to.

And not just their humanitarian sympathies.

That's what concerns us this evening.

Why does our faith require our engagement?

Christians display a range of responses to climate change.

Some side with other **sceptics** and deny the evidence.

Very likely because they read a newspaper article or watched a ratings-driven documentary where an expert said that climate change is unproven, or the earth can be trusted to deal with our pollution.

And they grabbed that straw as absolution for their own energy profligacy and lavish lifestyle (by average world standards).

Some take the view that ruining the earth forces God to **hasten the second coming**, and build a brand new world from scratch.

The most thorough-going literalists read judgement by fire imagery in the New Testament as consistent with intolerable global temperature rise.

A less extreme excuse for not bothering with the issue is the view that **saving us from our sin is God's business**.

What difference can little old me make anyway with a problem on this scale.

God is not bound by science. Surely God has a miracle just round the corner to sort it.

Those are three of the reasons for brushing the whole matter off.

Active responses come in two kinds.

There is a small number of Christians, as of other people, who are so concerned about the effect of our technological way of life on the poor of the world and the planet itself, that they spend time and money seeking to live in a sustainable, **carbon-neutral way**.

We might admire them.

And their witness surely has symbolic value.

But an individual response does not solve a problem of society as a whole.

So for a **typical Christian disciple** the response is likely to be a measured jumping on the bandwagon.

Changing any remaining high-energy light-bulbs,

Stopping using Standby on the TV,

walking and cycling more,

never accepting plastic carrier bags,

re-using and recycling, and so on.

Some may go further: become vegetarian,

Buy only seasonal and local food,

Give up a car and use public transport,

Campaign on environmental issues,

Fit solar roof panels etc.

All of it excellent, but is it enough that some Christians stand alongside other concerned people in such ways?

Why is the Church as a whole not in the vanguard of concern about climate change as it has been in the past in relation to other social issues?

And my answer is that we've ceased to value theology, and therefore don't do it very well.

Supporters of the Theology Forum are presumably committed to better theology; I'd like to assume the same for those from the Christian Environment Group! For I am certain that the best resource to change the perspective of the church, whatever the issue, is good theology.

Thinking people who are without faith make decisions about right and wrong on the basis of cost/benefit analysis.

Addressing climate change now will undoubtedly benefit human generations recently born and as yet unborn. Not to mention other creatures and ecosystems. But the cost will be an average reduction in what we call "standard of living" for all of us alive now.

Back in 2007 the Stern review calculated the cost of all necessary actions was then 1% of global GDP.

And that failure to address climate change would lead in due course to the loss of at least 20% of GDP annually for ever.

But unredeemed humans will always prefer to have it all now rather than a better future for those who come after us.

Both the debt crisis and the carbon crisis are examples of borrowing from the future to live it up now.

Christian theology, I would say "supremely" offers a different way to choose right. In general terms the complete self-sacrifice of Christ is the focus of everything.

But tonight I want to consider three doctrines which in more specific terms are relevant to our topic...

1. The doctrine of creation
2. Eschatology, the doctrine of the End
3. The doctrine of the Trinity.

But I think any strictly systematic approach to theology has limitations so in focussing on these I may stray into other theological zones.

## THE DOCTRINE OF CREATION

is the one the Bible makes easiest for us because it starts out, **In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth,** followed by a carefully constructed account of the stages by which that came about.

In the second chapter is a further account entitled: **These are the generations of the heaven and earth when they were created.**

It is the first of ten "**these are the generations of**" in Genesis. The others list generations of human descendants.

In this first case we have instead different offspring of heaven and earth...

- Water – springs, rain and rivers
- A garden of trees and plants
- Human beings
- Animals of every kind

You are familiar with both Genesis accounts I expect, but how much theology of creation have you imbibed?  
And for tonight the crucial issue is the relationship God intends between humans and other creatures when creating both.

### ***Display Gen 1:28-31***

First, note this: Each created thing God saw to be good, and after making humans God looked at everything as a whole and observed it to be **very good**.

It is not humans in themselves that are declared very good – with the adjective elevating them above the merely “good” things.

The statement is kept until after God has described the role of humans – which I’m coming to – so the implication is that when it all works together it is very good.

Secondly, the role of plants is stated clearly.

Green plants are food for the land animals, birds and insects.

Fruiting plants and trees are human food.

Before the fall all creatures are vegetarian.

It is only after the Fall and the Flood that God says to Noah and his descendants

**Every living thing shall be food for you.**

Thirdly, the relationship between humans and the rest of creation is defined in chapter 1 by the words:

**Fill the earth and subdue it; and have dominion over the fish, the birds and every living thing that moves.**

The specific reference to dominion over animals follows a statement about subduing the whole earth system.

Fortunately we don’t need to argue about the precise meaning of individual words because the contexts define meaning.

We’ve already noted that “having dominion” over the animals did not include a right to kill and eat them.

Chapter 2 v15 tells us that God **put the human in the garden to till and keep it.**

Tilling and keeping, or cultivating and guarding, are the responsibilities implied in **subduing the earth.**

In fact earlier in the chapter (v5) we are told **no plant of the field was yet in the earth and no herb** (probably meaning food crop) **had yet sprung up because it hadn’t rained, and there was no-one to till the ground.**

The author is saying that the plant kingdom can’t fulfil its purpose in the eyes of God till humans take on their management task

Finally, later in chapter 2, but before the issue of our need for human companionship is addressed,

God leads the animals one by one to the human to be named.

This is about a positive relationship between us and the animals – of the kind we still nurture in the case of pets.

V18 tells us God is in the process of **looking for a helper as partner** for the human.

The project in terms of relationship with other animals fails to meet the human's deepest needs, but it does surely illustrate a positive non-exploitative intention in our relationship with other animals.

Overall these creation stories give no basis for suggesting that the non-human creation is simply an environment for us.

Rather God has created an ecosystem of mutual dependence, where the human role is one of responsible caring.

Because these are theological stories not historical accounts, we can be the more sure that the truths they enshrine were the ones held dear by the community of Israel that formulated them, handed them down, and eventually produced them in written form.

There would be little reason in doing that if the intention was merely to say, This is how it was in the beginning when all was perfect, but it no longer works in a fallen world.

The real world with the fact of sin, does make a difference.

My own sense of the theological reason as to why God made creatures – including ourselves – carnivorous,

was so that there would be a constant reminder of our sinful state in the ambiguity of our relationship with animals.

The similar effect of the Fall on agriculture is expressed in the immediate response of God to sin in Genesis 3...

**Cursed is the ground because of you; in toil you shall eat of it all the days of your life; thorns and thistles it shall bring forth for you.**

Farmers and gardeners do still find joy in their task, but not always.

I've concentrated on Genesis in considering this theme of humans in relation to the rest of creation because of the obvious intention of those chapters.

But if there were time I would show how the rest of the bible is consistent with a high view of the non-human creation.

For example just stop and think how often Jesus used the world of plants as parables of the kingdom,

and remember the water, grain and grape in the sacraments.

Ask me later if you will why I think Christianity from the Enlightenment onwards started to devalue the rest of creation.

But traditional theology in Scripture, in the Church fathers, in the medieval mystics, and indeed in significant leaders right through the period of Reformation and beyond, was earth-affirmative.

St Francis was no odd-ball in regarding all creatures as brothers and sisters.

Let's turn from the beginning intention to...

**THE END-PLAN**

I think it is a basic human failing that we try to explain things with reference to the past (which is a matter – at least to some extent – of record) rather than the future (which must be a matter of conjecture, extrapolation or of faith).

It is sad indeed if we can only answer the question “What does my life mean?” with reference to family history or an evolutionary hypothesis of cause and effect showing how I got from being stardust to being who I am today – which I’ll not try and define in a word!

Always a major function of religious Faiths that claim revelation is that they offer us a future and a hope.

If we are wrongly committed to a non-biblical dualistic view of creation then inevitably the material world has no ultimate value.

Only the spiritual counts, and we may find ourselves emotionally committed to debating whether dogs or cats have a spiritual aspect to their nature which will enable them to go to heaven.

By and large church people (and many others) call the life to come “heaven” and think of it as a place somewhere else...

With people in it, especially those they’ve known on earth, but the rest is very hazy. The way they expect to go to heaven is that the spiritual part of them will be taken out of their body.

In this popular theology the world we currently live in is a rehearsal set or a practice court for the real thing.

Now of course there is a logical problem with the suggestion that God has placed us in a material world to train us for life in a non-material heaven.

That makes no sense as a training strategy.

But it’s Scripture rather than reason we rely on, and in passing we may note that the NT has no truck with disembodied life in the world to come.

1 Corinthians 15 is one of Paul’s most focussed pieces of theological writing, regarding what kind of body we’ll have.

The variety of animal bodies and of astronomical bodies is the basis of his claim that we shall have suitable bodies for resurrected life.

But our interest today is: Will the non-human creation have a resurrected life too? All stars and planets have a shelf-life albeit unimaginably long in human life-spans. In biblical days when that wasn’t known the destruction of the present earth and heavens was nevertheless anticipated in both Jewish and Christian eschatology.

We are most familiar with – and possibly therefore least thoughtful about – Rev 21. **Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth; for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away.**

“Heaven and earth” here can only mean the created universe. The current one will be replaced with another,

Which is subsequently described as having rivers and trees, though no sea and no sun.

As in Genesis the reasons for the differences are theological and I don't propose addressing them now

The general truth is that there is both continuity and discontinuity between this universe and the eternal universe to come.

But the key point is, that if we as human beings incorporated in Christ are promised a place, how can we make a judgement that any particular aspect of our created universe, and planet earth for which we have a direct responsibility, is not?

Genesis 3 teaches that the non-human creation has been dragged with us into sharing the consequences of sin.

The earth makes us suffer through what we call "natural" disasters, and we make the earth suffer through poor ecological management.

Because we are all in it together, Paul in his great treatise on salvation which forms the first 8 chapters of Romans, addresses this as he reaches his conclusion.

He is effectively developing the Old Testament prophecies that foresee a day when the animals will be at peace with one another and with humans, but the scope is broader.

He writes:

**For *the creation* waits with eager longing for the revealing of the *children of God*;**

**for the creation was subjected to futility, not of its own will but by the will of the one who subjected it,**

**in hope that the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to decay and will obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God.**

**We know that the *whole creation* has been groaning *in labour pains* until now; and not only the creation but we ourselves, who have the first fruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly while we wait for adoption, the redemption of our bodies.**

**For in this hope we were saved...**

God is actively working out a purpose for the whole creation, which involved God ordaining for a time the frustration of the intention God had for it, until with us, the children of God it achieves the birth of God's true purpose for it.

Earth's salvation is bound up with ours.

Other creatures, like ourselves, experience both futility and redemption.

Science demonstrates beyond reasonable doubt that bad things happened before humans were around to be blamed...

the extinction of the dinosaurs for example.

But all because God ordained that the rest of creation could not be what he intended for it without us.

So its futility since the beginning has been a futility of hope and a suffering of hope. Like our own.

You cannot read this passage and take the view that God's purpose for creation, apart from saved humans, is for it to pass away.

Yes, the present form of the world is passing – but that's consistent with the two-stage purpose Paul expounds here... first futility, then transformation into glory.

And that future hope has a physicality to it.

It is linked to the **redemption of our bodies**.

And the image used of **the whole creation groaning in labour pains**, would be totally inappropriate if what emerges from that labour were not the offspring of the current universe, sharing the DNA if you like.

The future of what we wrongly call “the environment” is bound up with *our* future and, like our own, involves a material continuity of some kind.

In the words of Ephesians 1:10:

**God’s plan for the fullness of time is to gather up all things in Christ, things in heaven and things on earth,**

And the Colossians parallel:

**Through Christ God was pleased to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven by making peace through the blood of his cross.**

And finally let’s give just a little thought to what is logically first, but hardest for us humans to grasp...

## **THE NATURE OF GOD**

On the evidence of Scripture the church has always believed (a) that God can be known,

And (b) that God is both one and three, so we may speak of God as Father, Son and Spirit using traditional language,

Alternatives all having both advantages and drawbacks.

But we do not thereby divide God.

It’s a limited but time-honoured analogy but I am the same person whether I’m at a particular time being addressed as or acting the role of a father, a son or a brother.

Hence the otherwise enigmatic language, used particularly by Jesus in John’s gospel, of the kind that says.

**If you have seen me you have seen the Father, and I and the Father are one.**

The scripture itself does not formulate a doctrine of the Trinity.

That was a task of the early church, but it undertook it against the background of the Roman Empire whose chain of command operated in every sphere of life.

So it is not surprising that a notion of hierarchy became expressed in the creedal doctrine.

Particularly since Jesus spoke of the **Father sending the Spirit in his name**.

So the Nicene creed says the **Spirit proceeds from the Father**, and the western church added **and from the Son**.

The creed also assigns particular functions primarily to particular aspects of the Trinity – the Father creates, the Son redeems, the Spirit inspires life.

Revival of interest in thinking about the Trinity in recent decades has focussed not on God as three persons, but on the relationships that hold the three together,

as a community, where there is no need to speak of hierarchy or precedence because there can be no disagreement in God – God is a unity.

Again in John's gospel Jesus says such things as **The Son never does anything on his own but only what he sees the Father doing.**

Now whether we think of the Trinity of God in terms of difference or of relationship affects how we see ourselves in relation to the rest of creation.

Because a hierarchical model places the Creator God at the greatest remove from the creation. "**Almighty**" is the additional adjective applied to the first person of the Trinity in the Creed. "...Almighty, Creator of heaven and earth...", we say. Once you think of the aspect of God which has to do with creation in that supremely transcendent way, then it is a natural corollary that the Creator is thought of as an absent owner with us as agents or stewards.

But if instead we see the Spirit whom we think of as the immanent God, the dimension of God best-known to us because we are infilled with the Spirit, as equally the creating one, the picture is different.

The proper translation of Gen 1:2 is very likely that the **Spirit of God was moving over** the formless matter from which the universe sprang.

And once we have the understanding that God is very much in the creation and not apart from it – save for an occasional intervention – then we start to think differently about its value.

If, as Christians who don't bother overmuch with theology we have nevertheless learned to respect Christ in everyone, to believe the Spirit is at work in each human, it does change the way we relate to them.

The same would be true in regard to the presence of God in every creature.

We would look on all things made not as something God once created, but also as something God now inspires.

Because I know that there is a tendency still in the church for people to decide that they don't need to think about the trinity, I don't know whether I'm making sense. But I'm going stop so that we can begin a conversation either there or elsewhere.