

# For God so loved the world

A Journey through Lent  
exploring God's heart for our environment



Eight practical, reflective, Biblical studies  
through March and April 2019

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*Art work is 'Hands of God' by Tony Walter, Christchurch.*

## Introduction

Welcome to *'For God so loved the world'*, a journey through the weeks leading up to Easter. This has been written for Cashmere Presbyterian Church in Christchurch, NZ, as a gift for the wider church; please adapt anything which does not fit where you are.

This is a journey through the Bible, exploring what the Bible says about the natural world. There are readings for each day, some long, some short. Read them all or just some. I do encourage you to try different translations of the Bible. Buy a new Bible. Explore versions on BibleGateway.com online. The Holy Spirit opens the Bible for us; it helps when we understand what we are reading, and when we read slowly and over again.

This is also a journey of prayer in action. The studies invite you to see and to feel, to go places and try things.

And it is a journey inward. Each week has a guide for journalling and discussion, prayer and reflection.

My prayer is that this will be a journey of faith and hope for you.

This study gives expression to Jesus' words, in John 3:16-17:

*"For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life. Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him."*

Our relationships with our environment, with each other, and with God, are centred here, in God's great love for the world, and in God's action to save the world - not just people but all the world.

- Silvia Purdie

Minister, Cashmere Presbyterian Church, Christchurch NZ

## Resources

This study, and lots more resources, can be found online at [www.conversations.net.nz](http://www.conversations.net.nz) in the 'God' menu on the 'Creation' page and at the A Rocha Aotearoa New Zealand website: [www.arocha.co.nz](http://www.arocha.co.nz)

## For kids

*'For God so loved the world'* is for all ages. Activities, readings and topics for reflection may be adapted for use with children.

## Fasting in Lent

It's odd calling it a 'fast', as the whole point of 'fasting' is to slow down. Choosing to go without something shows us our 'go to' things we use to make us feel better. Being physically hungry confronts our eating habits and makes us more aware of the needs of our bodies. Letting ourselves actually feel hungry can lead us deeper into prayer, as we choose to bring our soul hungers to God instead of satisfying ourselves with food.

This Lent, through the *'For God so loved the world'* journey, you are challenged to fast in a range of ways. Choose a type of fast, and a period of time (e.g. half day, a whole day, or a week).

The thing is, our planet cannot sustain the way we live. We all know that we need to do things differently if we are to reduce carbon emissions and prevent much worse climate change. We know we need to cut back on petrol, red meat, chemicals and plastic. Over the 5 weeks of Lent, choose a couple of things to 'fast' from.

### I will go without:

### How? When? How long?

- Petrol
- Food, specifically ....
- Plastic  
(can you not buy any plastic for a whole week?)
- Red meat  
(try a week as a vegetarian)
- Chemicals  
(try enviro-friendly products for your house & hair)
- TV and the internet  
(less on-line time and more real-world time)

## **Study One: Each sparrow that falls**      *Lent 1, Sunday 10 March*

Our Lenten journey begins at home, with the little things. The Bible tells us that God loves each and every little thing, including you and me. Lent begins with Ash Wednesday, which in 2019 is 6 March. This is traditionally a time of remembering our own mortality; ‘ashes to ashes, dust to dust’. God made us from the earth, and to the earth we will return. We are creatures, like Adam formed from the stuff of creation. The Bible teaches that human beings are special, unique, with a special role to play in creation, but that we are not ourselves gods, lords of the universe. Lent confronts us with our own limitations and failings. Like every living thing, we are small in the big scheme of things, but we are also of value, we matter. As Psalm 90 (verse 12) puts it: *“teach us to count our days that we may gain a wise heart.”*

### Bible readings:

Genesis 2:4-9	Adam is formed from the dirt
Psalm 90	Human life and death
Isaiah 58	True fasting
Proverbs 6:6-11	Learn from the ant
Matthew 10:29-31	God sees even a sparrow who dies
Luke 4:1-13	The temptation of Jesus

### **Noticing prayer**

Walk around your house and garden slowly. Notice how the natural world enters your man-made world. A little dust or mould, a small spider or ant, a plant growing where you don't want it to. Notice the patterns of life and death, growth and decay, going on around you in your home.

### Prayer

**Lord God, I confess that I want to control my environment.**

**I want some plants but not others.**

**I want some animals but not others.**

**I don't want dirt or decay.**

**As I begin this time of preparing for Easter,**

**may I truly see your world as it is,**

**not as I want it to be.**

**Holy Spirit, open my eyes to see the world as you see it.**

**Open my heart to love your world as you love it. Amen.**

Attend an **Ash Wednesday** service.

Journal:

When I am reminded that I am a creature, who will one day die, I feel ...

The little living things that share my home tell me that ...

Draw a picture of a small creature or dead thing.

Write a verse from your Bible reading that stood out for you.



## **Study Two: The Mountain Top!**

*Lent 2, Sunday 18 March*

Church buildings may be the official 'God space', but many of us feel closer to God in the natural world. We treasure moments of wonder, truly seeing and being blown away by the beauty of creation.

Climbing a mountain is a difficult thing to do. The track gets steep, the winds blow. The exhilaration of an incredible view is all the more for the effort required to get up there.

Jesus took his closest friends up a mountain, and when they were high up Jesus began to shine with an brilliant light. His friends didn't quite know how to cope with seeing God up close, and tried to get in control of the situation by building huts. Read the story of the Transfiguration: Luke 9:28-36. Imagine yourself as one of Jesus' friends and how you might have felt or reacted.

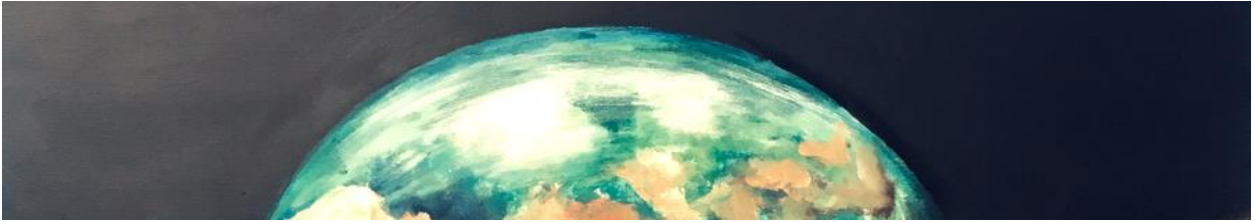
Sometimes the boundary between earth and heaven seems thin, especially when we are in nature. A sunset, or birdsong, a mountain view or a sparkling stream, can lead our souls into prayer and praise. The Bible speaks of all created things singing praise, giving worship.

### Bible readings:

Psalm 96	All creation praise!
Exodus 19	God on Mt Sinai in fire, thunder and smoke!
1 Kings 19	Elijah hears God up a mountain in the silence
Acts 9:1-22	Saul's hill-top meeting with the risen Jesus

### **In Christ and through Christ**

Read Colossians 1:15-20. Copy it out in your own hand-writing:



Learn it by heart. Reflect on it and pray with it.

All other encounters with God in the Bible are summed up in these magnificent verses. All the created universe and all the spiritual dimension of life are summed up, and brought into the mighty story of salvation through Jesus Christ.

**Praying the view:** Go up the hill (the early morning is best). Dress warm so you can sit and pray. Pray for the city, the farmers, the leaders, the children, all the life you can glimpse below you.

**Art:** Visit an art gallery to see landscape paintings. Painters and photographers train their eye to truly see the beauty that many of us take for granted. Art is a powerful tool for prayer because it focuses our eye and the eyes of our heart in one place. Look slowly at the art. Let your heart resonate with the painter's vision.

**Awesome!** Remember a time when you experienced **awe**.  
Where were you? Who were you with?  
What details have stayed with you?  
What do you remember feeling and thinking?  
Tell someone about it, or write about it ...

Remember it every now and then during the week.  
Ask yourself: What did God show me in that moment?

## **Study Three: Plants, flower & seed    *Lent 3, Sunday 24 March***

We love being outside, in the garden or a park. I love sitting under (or in!) a tree. We love growing plants that are beautiful or good to eat. We love being surrounded by trees. We depend on plants for our food, and for the very air that we breathe, for plants turn carbon dioxide into oxygen. This week as we focus on growing things, may we grow more aware of and grateful for God's gift of life. A theme through the Bible is that every created thing has its own relationship to God, who gives and sustains life, so that even trees and grasses and wild flowers sing their own quiet song of praise.

Jesus told lots of stories about plants. These stories are timeless, able to speak to every person in every language and culture, because plants are so basic to our survival, and so obvious in their beauty. Read again Jesus' famous story of the seeds. Read about the original Garden of Eden and the intimate picture of a private garden, and Jonah getting upset over a bush.

### Bible readings:

Genesis 1:11-12 and 2:8-9	God creates the plants
Psalms 104:14-17	You make grass grow
Isaiah 55:1-13	The trees will clap their hands
Song of Songs 4:12-16	Love as a private garden
Jonah 4	Jonah and the bush
Luke 12:22-31	"Consider the lilies"
Luke 13:6-9	Jesus and the fig tree
Luke 13:18-19	Parable of mustard seed

### **Wild things**

It is easy to appreciate beautiful flowers and carefully weeded gardens. As a prayer activity this week choose somewhere you would not normally go, perhaps somewhere less attractive. As you walk look for how plants grow even where they are not planted. Look for the beauty of growing things where you might not expect them. You might like to take photos of plants growing despite human effort. Reflect on what Jesus said about wild flowers, that no even King Solomon was dressed as fine, and that God will care for you even more than the weeds (Luke 12:22-31).



## **Sit still**

Put on a jacket, take a rug, and find somewhere beautiful to sit and pray. We might normally sit on a park bench for a few minutes; this time stay at least half an hour, more if you can (for children set a timer for 10 minutes). Don't read a book or the paper or chat on the phone. Just sit and do nothing at all. Just notice what is around you. Listen in to the silent prayer of the plants. You might like to take a blank notebook and draw or write down what you see.

A sitting still prayer (read slowly and repeat several times): *Psalm 96:12*

O God, you are good, so good to me.  
Thank you that you are here now,  
in this place, and in every place.  
I praise you for all that lives and grows.  
The fields rejoice with praise  
and the forest trees sing for joy.

## Journal:

If a tree could speak, what would it say?

Imagine you can hear a flower's prayer language.

## **Weeding**

What noxious weeds are growing in your garden? What lies have taken root into your mind? What bad habits work against how you want to be? Ask God to show you what needs to be pulled out of your life.

## **Seed prayer**

Gather up some autumn seeds. Put them in a bowl, and appreciate their hidden beauty. A seed is amazing potential folded away inside a protective layer. Draw a seed, or write about yourself as a seed. What potential has God placed in you that has yet to be seen?

## Study Four: The Animal Kingdom

Lent 4, Sunday 31 March

The Bible includes lots of animals, from ants to whales. There are even some that don't actually exist (in this world anyway!); you might enjoy trying to draw some of the Bible's visionary creatures (Revelations 4:6-9, Isaiah 6:2).

Jesus often told animal stories in which the animals represented people in some way, most famously our story for Sunday of the lost sheep. Jesus cast himself in the role of good shepherd, who knows his sheep and protects them.

Some animals in the Bible are scary, like the attack dogs in Psalm 59. Others are helpful, like Noah's dove (Genesis 8) or Elijah's ravens (1 Kings 17:6).

One even talks.

Read the story of Balaam and his donkey who saw the angel before Balaam did. This gem of a story speaks to me about how faithful our environment has been to human beings and how poorly we are treating it. The donkey seems to speak for all creation when he complains:

*"What have I done to you, that you keep hitting me?!  
Haven't you ridden me all your life?"* (Numbers 22:28-30).

### Bible readings:

Luke 15:1-7	Jesus' story of the lost sheep
Isaiah 11:1-10	Vision of peace
Genesis 1:20-25	Creation of animals
Daniel 6	in the lion's den
Numbers 22:21-35	Balaam's donkey

**Photos:** Go to National Geographic's Photo Ark website:

[www.nationalgeographic.org/projects/photo-ark](http://www.nationalgeographic.org/projects/photo-ark)

Slowly explore this astonishing collection of photographs of animals.

Look into their eyes. Imagine the feel of their fur or scales or feathers.

**Research:** Learn about an endangered animal, where it lives, what it eats, how it cares for its babies, and what threatens to kill it. Pray for this place and for those who are working to protect it. Write a letter of support, or donate.

The animal I am curious about is:



## **An outing with God**

Treat yourself to a trip to Orana Park (it's not just for kids you know!). Marvel at the diversity of how God has made the animals. As I watch them move, rest and relate together I can't help connect with them.

### Journal:

What emotions came up for you as you related with animals, either in photos or at the zoo? Write a prayer. Listen for what God may be saying to you.

Think about an animal that you have loved.  
What did you appreciate? What did this animal show you about God?

*Prayer of Basil of Caesarea, written about 470*

**O God:**

**Enlarge within us the sense of fellowship with all living things,  
our brothers and sisters the animals,  
to whom in common with us  
you have given this earth as home.**

**We remember with shame  
that in the past we have exercised the high dominion of man  
with ruthless cruelty  
so that the voice of the earth,  
which should have risen to you in song,  
has turned into a groan of travail.**

**May we realize that all these creatures  
also live for themselves and for you, not for us alone.  
They too have the goodness of life as we do,  
and serve you better in their way,  
than we do in living our way.**

## Study Five: Living Water

Lent 5, Sunday 7 April

This study is taken from 'Water' a study in the *Rich Living series*, written by Andrew Shepherd, for A Rocha NZ. The full study can be downloaded here: [www.arocha.org.nz/resources/rich-living-series](http://www.arocha.org.nz/resources/rich-living-series)

### Bible readings:

Deuteronomy 8:7	God's promise of watered land
Isaiah 12:1-6	Wells of salvation
Psalms 23	Resting by still water
Psalms 126	Streams in the desert
Psalms 104:10-13	God sends water on the earth
Ezekiel 47:1-12	a vision of water flowing from God's sanctuary
John 4	Jesus & the Samaritan woman.
John 7:38	rivers of living water will flow from within them.
Revelation 21:5-7	the spring of the water of life

### **Living Water and Jesus**

The biblical writer John conceives of water as having its source, its essence and its fullness and ending in Jesus.

What do you think this means?

Faith in Jesus – the spring of true life-giving water – should result in life-giving water flowing out from us. What might we expect this life-giving water to mean for how we think and act with regard to water?

**Praised be You, my Lord,  
through Sister Water  
who is so useful, humble,  
precious, and pure.**  
*(from 'The Canticle of the Sun',  
by St Francis of Assisi)*

### **Poem: Grounded in the Water**

*(by Raymond A. Foss, 2006)*

*All of life's problems bleed away  
When I get grounded in the water.  
Grounded in the love of God  
the neverending wellspring of life  
poured out for all who would drink  
draw in the energy,  
the love, the grace  
of God's gifts, freely given  
like the woman at the well  
we ask for the cup to be filled  
for our thirst to be quenched,  
without having to walk to the well  
thirsty and tired, hot and tired  
wanting, needing that water  
grounding our faith  
strengthening our spirits  
to do his work.*

### **Water in Creation**

That we are composed of water, surrounded by water, and dependent on water for our existence is a theme that occurs throughout the Biblical narrative. We usually read Genesis 1 & 2 focussed on the creation of land and creatures (particularly humans). But have you ever noticed the significance of water in these passages? Read Genesis 1:1 – 2:14 *(If possible, do this beside a waterway or body of freshwater).*

Become aware of the place/role of water in these creation accounts.  
What images are brought to your mind by the phrase '*darkness covered the face of the deep, while a wind from God swept over the face of the waters*'; and '*a stream... [to] water the whole face of the ground.*' [1:2; 2:6]?  
What is the significance of the waters and the ground being given a face?

### **Freshwater – Diminishing & Deteriorating**

While water seems abundant, the reality is that it is an increasingly threatened resource – both globally and in Aotearoa New Zealand. Three factors threaten the availability of water to human and non-human communities which depend on them for their survival:

- Our unsustainable use of water. We are withdrawing too much water from the water cycle and not giving sufficient time for the sources of water (streams, lakes, aquifers) to be replenished.
- Our patterns of living. Modern agricultural methods and our modern industrial and urban way of living is polluting and contaminating freshwater sources.
- Anthropogenic climate change. Climate change, exacerbated by human activity over the last two centuries, is leading to significant changes in rainfall distribution, frequency and volume.

### **Research: Local water supply**

This week trace the journey of the water that flows through your taps at home. Illustrate this journey through a drawing or a process chart and bring to share with others next time.

- How is your water gathered?
- What infrastructure went into gathering this water for you?  
(Dams? Reservoirs? Pipes? Canals? Water tanks?)
- Who ensures that this water reaches you safely?
- What other species depend upon water from this watershed for their life?

### **Wellbeing**

- How does water play a part in your mental and emotional restoration and wellbeing? (A bath/shower? Swimming? Surfing? Fishing?)
- Share how these experiences of water restore and refresh you?
- If, due to scarcity and/or deterioration of water you couldn't engage in these activities how would this impact your wellbeing – physical, emotional, mental?

## **Study Six: 6: Rocks and stones**     *Lent 6, Palm Sunday, 14 April*

When I was 12 we had a school picnic to a beautiful river swimming hole. While my friend and I were swimming some of the boys started teasing us. Then they picked up stones and threw them at us. It was a terrifying experience. A community of people stoning one of their own to death is one of the worst things recorded in the Bible. This happened to Stephen (Acts 7). Jesus prevented it happening to a woman caught in adultery (John 8:1-12). Jesus himself was threatened with stoning several times but managed to slip away from the angry crowd (John 8:59 & 10:31).

The Bible is ambivalent about stones. Stone is the core stuff of creation, the earth itself, solid and strong. Yet it can also be used by people for the worst violence and idolatry. On one hand stone is practical and important for building (build your life on solid rock, taught Jesus: Luke 6:46-49). On the other hand God often threatens to pull down the stones of their buildings, because people value their security more than their faith (Malachi 1:1-5). On one hand stones are beautiful and treasured for their colour and shine (e.g. Exodus 28:6-21). On the other hand God warns them again and again to not carve idols from stone, and not place too much value in shiny rocks (Leviticus 26:1).

This ambivalence comes to a head when Jesus walks through the stunningly beautiful Temple. While everyone else 'oo-ed and aah-ed' about the gorgeous stone work, Jesus pictured the pillars crashing down. This became a metaphor for his own violent death (Luke 21:5-6). Jesus also prophesied that he would rebuild the temple in 3 days, but not with stone (Mark 14:58).

On Palm Sunday the crowd welcomed Jesus into Jerusalem with loud shouts and song. When the leaders complained about the noise Jesus replied, *"if they keep quiet, even the stones would cry out!"* (Luke 19:40). Read the story of Palm Sunday in Luke 19:28-46. Picture the rough stones on the path and the smooth building stones of city and temple. Jesus is claiming that even the foundations of creation are part of God's work of salvation. The earth is not just the setting for the gospel drama, it is a central character, albeit a silent one.



## **Reflection**

Walk on the hills until you find some exposed rock. Sit or lean on it for a while. Our rocks in Cashmere are young, sprightly rocks, not long ago flowing hot and liquid, and even more recently leaping into the air. Let the rock tell its own story. How does rock pray?

Hold a precious stone in your hand (you probably have a jewel, pounamu, or polished stone in your home). Remember how it was formed under intense pressure in the depths of the earth. Pray with your memories of being formed under pressure. How has God polished you through your life?

Our Cashmere church is built with at least 3 different types of stone. How are we building now for our future? What are the building blocks that we need?

God is often named (especially in Psalms) as our Rock and Refuge. Write a prayer starting with the line (from Psalm 31:3)  
*O God, you are my rock ...*

## Study Seven: Death to Life

*Good Friday, 19 April  
Easter Day, Sunday 21 April*

It is Holy Week, when Christians all over the world remember the death and resurrection of our Lord, Jesus Christ. At Cashmere we have three very different church services: the gentle reflective 'Tenebrae' service on Thursday evening honouring Jesus' last evening with his disciples, Good Friday morning full of grief and drama, and Easter Day celebration of new life in Christ.

This year we are reading Luke's account, so you are encouraged to read right through the last 3 chapters of Luke (22-24). It is a powerful story; indeed it is the greatest event in human history, written with great skill.

The death of Jesus was not just a local human tragedy. The Gospels describe how the created universe shared in Christ's pain, with the sky going black (Luke 22:44) and the earth shaking (Matthew 27:51).

Prayerfully read Jesus' words from the cross in Luke 23:28-31.

Imagine Jesus speaking these words to us today. We in Christchurch have experienced exactly what Jesus described, of the hills falling and crushing. And as our climate warms we will come to know all too well the trees becoming dry.

*What memories, fears and emotions come to you as you read these words of Jesus as he hung on the cross?*

Alongside Luke's gospel, can I also ask you to read **Romans chapter 8**.

This also ranks among the greatest pieces of writing of all time. Especially relevant to our exploration of God and the created world are verses 19-22.

In this Paul claims that all the universe is groaning, longing for God's salvation to be revealed. We in our times can hear the groaning of the earth as it comes more and more under pressure from exploitation and pollution.

### **Hope in dark times**

*(from 'Creation and Hope: Reflections on Ecological Anticipation and Action from Aotearoa New Zealand', by Nicola Hoggard Creegan)*

We can only trust that even the end of the world hides a new beginning if we trust the God who calls into being the things that are not, and out of death creates new life. ... In view of the deadly dangers threatening the world, Christian remembrance makes ever present the death of Christ in its



apocalyptic dimensions, in order to draw forth from his resurrection from the dead, hope for “the life of the world to come,” and from his rebirth to eternal life hope for the rebirth of the cosmos. ...

Life out of this hope then means already acting here and today in accordance with that world of justice and righteousness and peace, contrary to appearances, and contrary to all historical chances of success. In an age of seeming despair, facing an uncertain ecological future, the Christian belief in the power of the resurrection provides the grounding for actions of hope. ...

At the conclusion of his recent encyclical Pope Francis writes:

*“Let us sing as we go. May our struggles and our concern for this planet never take away the joy of our hope.”*

The relationship between joy and hope that Francis points to is, I believe, essential as we move into potentially dark and troubling decades ahead.

As you reflect on the death of Jesus, bring to God your fears for our “uncertain ecological future”, as Nicola puts it.

Do creatures becoming extinct share in the crucifixion?

In your journal draw a cross and write around it your concerns for our world.



As you reflect on the resurrection of Jesus, bring to God your hopes for our world. Pray for places where natural beauty is being restored and for people with passion and vision for care for creation.

#### Kids and Easter:

**Read the story** of the death and resurrection of Jesus from a children’s Bible, such as the Jesus Storybook Bible.

Stick some pieces of paper together end-to-end and lay it down your dining table. Create a time line of the events of Easter. Together with the children draw the stories.

**Fears:** Earthquakes, violence and death are terrible and terrifying. How do you as a family deal with the scary things in life? What do you want to teach your children about how to respond to their fears?

Make a **Courage Kit**. Help each person in your family name what they are afraid of, and write these each on bits of paper (or card or post-it notes).

And find words or objects that help us feel brave.

Write up big (in your own words):

Romans 8:15 *“we have not been given a spirit of fear”*,

8:28 *“all things work for good for those who love God”*,

8:38 *“nothing can cut us off from the love of God in Jesus”*.

## Study Eight: Wind and air

*towards Pentecost*

### **Spirit breath, Spirit wind**

Before he died, Jesus promised his friends that they would receive power from God, power which would be like Jesus was breathing on them and in them. On the day of Pentecost the Holy Spirit rushed in like a wind.

#### Read:

Acts 2:1-8

Pentecost

John 3:8

Jesus talks with Nicodemus about new life in the Spirit

John 20:19-23

The Spirit as the breath of the risen Christ

**Lord, Holy Spirit,  
You blow like the wind in a thousand paddocks,  
Inside and outside the fences,  
You blow where you wish to blow.  
(From 'Song to the Holy Spirit' by James K. Baxter)**

How have you experienced the Holy Spirit?

Do you have a favourite prayer or poem or verse that speaks of this?

### **The wind**

Spend some time exploring the Windy website: [www.windy.com](http://www.windy.com)

Isn't it amazing how the winds swirl around the earth, move around land and sea! On this website you can see movement and temperature at various heights, all over the world.

Get creative: get out some colour (pens, fabric, paint?) and a big piece of paper, and express the energy and life of the air, the wind, and God's Spirit.

### **Climate Change**

We live in times when the very air, the winds, the atmosphere are changing, and this has the potential to be enormously destructive to much that we currently enjoy and rely on for survival.

Download the Climate Change study from the A Rocha NZ website:  
[www.arocha.org.nz/rich-living-booklets](http://www.arocha.org.nz/rich-living-booklets)

This begins with a quote from Sallie McFague:

“Climate change, quite simply, is the issue of the twenty-first century. It is not one issue among many, but, like the canary in the mine, it is warning us that the way we are living on our planet is causing us to head for disaster. We must change. All of the other issues we care about – social justice, peace, prosperity, freedom – cannot occur unless our planet is healthy. It is the unifying issue of our time.” *A New Climate for Theology: God, the World, and Global Warming* (Fortress Press, 2008)

Read about Climate Change, in this booklet and in other places.

Reflect and discuss:

What do you know about how our world’s temperatures are changing and what affects this could have?

How do you feel about this?

What do you already notice?

What are your fears for the future?

**Concluding ...** Reflect:

When you deliberately fasted, or went without something, how did this feel? How did this confront or help you?

Pray:

Thank God for the things you have learnt during these studies. Ask for the resurrection power of God’s Spirit to energise you, your family, and us as a community as we seek to live richer and more sustainable lives into the future.

## **A Theology of Creation Care**

*From 'Caring for Creation', a PCANZ booklet*

[www.presbyterian.org.nz/publications/social-issues-booklets](http://www.presbyterian.org.nz/publications/social-issues-booklets)

Some Christians have not always thought it was their duty to care for the environment. Part of the problem lies with poor theology regarding the origins and destiny of the created order and humans' place within it. The Bible presents firm evidence however that caring for Creation is essential to the mission and ministry of God's people.

### **God's work is good**

From the opening verses of Genesis, the Bible affirms that Creation is "good" in God's eyes. God loves what he has made unconditionally; he delights in it regardless of its usefulness to him. He is still actively involved with Creation, continuing to sustain and provide for it (Psalm 104:13, 16, 27-30; Luke 12:24, 28; Colossians 1:17; Genesis 3:8; Job 39:1-2). In response, Creation is full of life and praise, reflecting God's glory and inspiring worship. As Psalm 19 says, The heavens declare the glory of God; the skies proclaim the work of his hands. Day after day they pour forth speech, and night after night they display knowledge. Like the rest of Creation, human beings are to worship God by being and doing all that he has made us to be and do. If we claim to love God, we will care for the things he cares for – including Creation.

### **Our interconnection with Creation**

Genesis 2:5-7 tells us that man (*adam*) was made "*from the dust of the ground*" (*adamah*) because there was "*no one to till the ground*". The Hebrew pun emphasises humanity's interconnection with the rest of Creation; we are mutually dependent on each other and on God for life itself. Caring for Creation is one of the reasons for our very existence and because we are creatures too, we care for ourselves when we care for the Earth and all it contains. The original harmony between humans and the Earth was disrupted by an act of disobedience and idolatry (Genesis 3). As a result, humanity and Creation were mutually "*cursed*". The Earth became difficult to till and tend; sustenance was extracted by sweat and toil instead of with joy. The New Testament confirms this profound disharmony. Romans 8 talks of Creation "*in bondage to decay*" and "*groaning in labour pains*" (vs 20-22). We suffer the pain of Creation's distress, which we ourselves have caused.

### **Humans as rulers and servants**

God created humans "*in his image and likeness*" (Genesis 1:26), setting them apart from the rest of Creation in a unique relationship with himself. Humans were given the mandate to *fill the earth and subdue it; and have dominion (rule) over...every living thing* (Genesis 1:28). This has often been taken as an excuse to exploit and abuse the Earth, but if we are made like God, we should exercise our authority as he does i.e. with justice, care and love. God

designed us as his agents to bring blessing, not misery to Creation. In the Old Testament, the prophets continually called the people of God back to this original covenant relationship, or face the consequences of desolation of the Earth itself (Jeremiah 9:10, 12:4; Hosea 4:1-3). As humans acknowledge their Creator in faithfulness and obedience, blessings flow, not just for humans but for the rest of Creation as well. Harmony is restored (Leviticus 26:3-5).

### **Christ reconciles all things**

The incarnation of God in the flesh and blood human form of Jesus Christ affirms the value of the physical Creation to God. Indeed, the New Testament states that Christ himself was the One for whom and by whom all things are created and sustained (Colossians 1:15-20). Through his death and physical resurrection, he began a new Creation, reversing the curses of the first, and reconciling all things under the sovereignty of God the Creator (2 Corinthians 5:17-19). Christ's saving act extends to the whole universe. In Greek, John 3:16 reads: *"For God so loved the cosmos that he gave his only Son..."*

### **Hope for the future**

Some Christians believe that this world will ultimately be destroyed in favour of a more "spiritual" heavenly realm. 2 Peter 3: 7-10 seems to support this view: *But the day of the Lord will come like a thief, and then the heavens will pass away with a loud noise, and the elements will be dissolved with fire, and the earth and everything that is done on it will be disclosed* (some translations say *"burned up"*). Elsewhere in the Bible, however, fire is used as a metaphor for the judgement and purification wrought by Almighty God. Destruction is reserved for those who destroy the earth (Revelation 11:17-18), not the Earth itself. Other Old and New Testament passages describe a future of abundance, productivity, harmony and blessing for all Creation (Isaiah 11:6-9; Isaiah 55:12-13; Ezekiel 47:9,11-12; Revelation 22:1-2). Ultimately, our Christian hope lies in the promise that Heaven will come to Earth and God will live with us in a renewed, liberated and transformed Creation (Revelation 21:3-5).

### **How then to live?**

The vision of the Kingdom of God given in the Bible is one of wholeness and harmony of all relationships, based on the love and justice of God. In Christ, we have been given a *"ministry of reconciliation"* (2 Corinthians 5:18-19) to be his co-workers and agents for the redemption of all things. Caring for Creation and caring for the poor are interconnected because if we love others, we will be as concerned for their physical circumstances as the state of their souls. In practical terms, this may mean that we re-examine our priorities: does our level of consumption disadvantage others? What happens to the things we throw away? What kind of world will we leave for future generations? Together we need to formulate strategies that balance care for

our neighbour with care for the non-human Creation. Above all, the Gospel is a message of hope. It's easy to feel that environmental issues are too overwhelming and complex for ready solutions. But as believers, we should be neither anxious nor complacent. Our faith motivates us to act with others for the good of the whole Earth, fully expecting that God the Creator, Redeemer and Sustainer of all things will be faithful to his promises.



### **Prayer**

Dear Lord our God,  
you are Creator of the heavens and the earth.  
You form us in your image.  
You have entrusted us with the care of your  
good Creation.  
We praise you for the wonder, mystery and  
awe that we see and feel  
in the beauty of the world around us.

In the midst of our own fears,  
and conscious of those things within  
and around us that damage and destroy,  
we pray for your guidance.

Come among us again  
as the Spirit which brings forth new life.  
Open our hearts and minds to your wisdom  
as we seek to act in ways which honour,  
celebrate and care for the world you so love.  
In Christ's name we pray.  
Amen.

*Write your own prayer here:*



## Creation Care in Christian History

Written by Rev Selwyn Yeoman, Dunedin; in 'Caring for Creation', PCANZ

It is a widely held perception that Christian faith has from the outset cultivated a negative attitude towards Creation. Actual encounter with Christian thinking and practice, however, reveals a very different story. The Apostle Paul wrote to the Colossians (1:15-20) that all things have been created through and for Christ, in him all things hold together, and in him all things in heaven and on Earth will be reconciled to God. There is much more in a similar vein throughout the New Testament. What Christians did take a negative attitude towards were "the world and the flesh." These speak neither of Creation nor of our humanity, but of all those things within ourselves and our institutions that have fallen and now orientate us away from the character and purposes of God, and alienate us from a right relationship with Creation.<sup>[1]</sup> In Christ this alienation can begin to be overcome. So Christ-likeness was recognised in people who were able to live peaceably with animals, even wild ones. Biblical examples include Daniel, who survived unharmed by the lions, and Paul, who survived the snake bite.<sup>[2]</sup>

Francis of Assisi became famous for his conversations with animals, and for encouraging a deep sense of connectedness between humans and all the other creatures of God.

Benedict recognised that in the work of gardening we could cooperate with God's providential care, discern the sustaining presence of God, and both offer and receive the gifts of the Earth in praise and thanksgiving. Some historians suggest that the loving and prayerful work of the monastic movements actually healed large tracts of Europe and the Mediterranean from the rapacious exploitation of the great estates of the Roman Empire. John Calvin encouraged farmers to see themselves not as owners but as stewards of God's estate and to ensure that they left it in a better state than they received it. Calvin and the other Reformers constantly warned against covetousness and finding one's identity in abundance of possessions, motivations which drive the environmentally destructive juggernaut of modern consumerism.

Only after the "Enlightenment," with God banished to become a distant onlooker at a mechanistic universe inhabited by allegedly free people, does a dominating and plundering attitude to nature appear in the culture of post-Christian Europe. But radical Christian communities - the Amish and Mennonites come to mind - have always cultivated a caring and careful attitude towards the Earth, and the same can be said of many alternative experiments that developed during the 20th Century. The World Council of Churches, and the *Evangelical Declaration on The Care of Creation*, all bear witness that Creation care is close to the heart of Christ and not the preserve of radicals or nutters. Today, all over the world, churches bear witness to hope by local initiatives of environmental care.

## A prayer of confession

*by Phil Jump, in 'Climate Change',  
Rich Living study guide, A Rocha NZ.  
[www.arocha.org.nz/rich-living-booklets](http://www.arocha.org.nz/rich-living-booklets)*

God of all creation,  
You have filled the earth with good things:  
food, fuel, seedtime and harvest;  
land, property and prosperity,  
placed at our disposal through your goodness.

We confess our capacity to make good things bad  
through taking and using more than we need  
through placing profit and gain  
above the principles of care and sustainability.  
Many are left without  
while others use the earth's resources for their  
personal gain.

Your world is speaking;  
ravaged by storm and flood.  
melting ice and rising seas  
declare afresh the message of their creator.  
This earth is not ours to exploit  
but yours, entrusted to our care.

Forgive us when we fail to listen.  
Forgive us for when we hear  
but find the challenge too much for us.

Give us the resolve to act differently,  
the wisdom to be faithful stewards of your creation,  
the courage to work for change,  
and the contentment to be satisfied  
only with what this earth can afford to give.  
So may we be part of your new creation  
in every aspect of our living and being  
through Christ our Lord, Amen

