

Eco Church Study 4 Jesus: Saviour of the World

Extract from Chapter 4 ‘Planetwise’ by Dave Bookless

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Most people today would probably think that the life and work of Jesus had very little to do with the environment. However, perhaps this says more about how we read and are taught the bible than about what it really says about Jesus and creation. As I have re-read all that the bible says about Jesus, I have been astonished at how much there is of relevance to the earth – to our relationship with creation and God’s purposes for it.

Colossians 1.15-20 is a passage that puts the earthly life of Jesus into a perspective that is both cosmic and eternal. As you read these words, try and hold these words together with the man who walked through Galilee for 33 years and also with the Lord who Christians pray to today.

*“He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn over all creation.
For by him all things were created, things in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible,
whether thrones or powers or rulers or authorities;
all things were created by him and for him.
He is before all things, and in him all things hold together.
And he is the head of the body, the church,
he is the beginning and the firstborn from among the dead,
so that in everything he might have the supremacy.
For God was pleased to have all his fullness dwell in him,
and through him to reconcile to himself all things,
whether things on earth or things in heaven,
by making peace through his blood shed on the cross.”*

(Colossians 1.15-20)

The first thing that should strike us is the scope of who Jesus is. These words blow apart any cosy, comfortable pocket-size Jesus. Instead, Jesus is:

- The Source of Creation (v.16 “By him all things were created.”)
- The Sustainer of Creation (v.17 “In him all things hold together.”)
- The Saviour of Creation (v.20 He is the one through whom God is pleased “to reconcile to himself all things, whether things on earth or things in heaven, by making peace through his blood shed on the cross.”)

These are amazing claims, and the whole biblical drama that this book attempts to explain, hinges on these claims. For Christians, there is no hope amidst the environmental crises we face, apart from Jesus Christ. We will now examine these three key claims, in the light of Jesus' life, death, resurrection.

Jesus: Creation's Source

In Act 1, when God creates the heavens and the earth, he speaks creation into being through his powerful word. When God says "*Let there be light*", light appears at his command. At the start of John's Gospel (John 1:1-3), Jesus is called God's 'word'.

John wants us to know that the tiny, vulnerable, completely dependent baby born in Bethlehem is also Almighty God – the One through whom the whole universe was created. Jesus existed before the creation of the world. In Colossians 1:15, he is described as "*firstborn over all creation*". So, whilst it is right to talk and think of Jesus as a man, because he became a man – 100% human – we mustn't forget that he is also far more than that. He is *over all creation* – above it, superior to it, beyond it.

This makes the birth of Jesus as a tiny baby something quite amazing. God, the creative genius who has designed and dreamed up the whole universe, actually becomes part of creation. It's a bit like a playwright acting themselves in their own play, or an artist stepping into their own painting ... although even these images cannot contain how extraordinary this is.

Knowing that Jesus is the source of creation also helps us understand some of his actions. When Jesus heals the sick, he isn't simply a human being with a special magic touch. He isn't just a channel for God's power. He is actually God himself – the Creator - fixing something that has gone wrong with his creation. If a software designer friend creates a special piece of computer software for me, who should I turn to if it starts to malfunction? I could try to fix it myself, but I would only make it worse. I could take it along to a repair shop, but they would probably scratch their heads and say 'Sorry mate; never seen one of these before'. Of course the one who made it is the one who best knows how to fix it, and so I should take it to him or her.

It is not just human bodies that are sick in our world. As we've seen, it's the whole creation that is in need of healing. So, who's going to put things right? Surely, the One who made it? There are hints of this throughout the Gospels. Not only does Jesus heal human illnesses but he also shows himself to be Lord over the forces of nature. In Luke 8:22-25 we read about what happened when Jesus was caught up in a terrible storm on Lake Galilee. His followers, including experienced fishermen, were terrified and in fear of drowning. Jesus was asleep, and when they woke him, he wasn't fazed by the storm. He simply took control of the situation and quietly commanded the hurricane-force winds and the enormous waves to be still. And they obeyed him. No wonder the disciples were afraid after this. What power could possibly calm down the forces of nature? To the Jewish people, the sea represented all the forces of chaos in the whole created order, and nobody except God himself could control them. Jesus, the one who had spoken the very forces of nature into being, was and is uniquely able to do something about them.

As well as showing Jesus' power over creation, the Gospels also show us Jesus' intimacy with creation. We often miss this, because we're not looking for it. But it should not surprise us – artists know their work better than anybody else! A sculptor who has worked a piece of wood, clay or bronze into shape has a deep knowledge and relationship with his or her creation, and in turn an artist's work can tell us a lot about them. So it is with Jesus and the earth.

Jesus taught by stories – parables – and his teaching shows him to be somebody who knew the details, the patterns and rhythms of creation inside-out. He taught about God by asking people to look at creation – God's book of works. His textbooks were sowers and harvests, birds and flowers, fig trees and vines, bread and wine. These weren't simply visual aids to reinforce spiritual points. Sadly we miss the parables' real power if we over-spiritualise them. Rather the elements of creation that Jesus talked about were things that - as the one by whom all things were made - he had created himself. They were, as all creation is, filled with the fingerprints of God.

It is clear that Jesus also expected us as his followers to be familiar with the natural world. When, in Matthew 6, he famously told people to "*consider the birds of the air*" and to "*look at the flowers of the field*", he was talking about learning from creation and not worrying. Yet, the words he used were forceful – 'Look and learn', 'earnestly consider', 'go and study' the birds and flowers. As somebody has quipped, Jesus was telling us all to become bird-watchers and botanists! It's actually not so far from the truth. Back in Genesis 2, God had sent the first humans into the garden to give names to all the creatures. Naming is about understanding, describing and knowing. It is actually the foundation of all the biological sciences – the discipline of taxonomy – separating creatures out into their species and families through careful study and observation. All through scripture, we find the prophets knew their wildlife well. For instance, in Jeremiah 8.7, we find the prophet looking at migrating storks and thrushes, which instinctively followed the same paths through the Holy Land each spring and autumn, and marvelling at them, asking why God's people couldn't follow him so well!

Jesus: Creation's Sustainer

Most people look after what belongs to them. If a building full of different people's possessions is on fire, most of us would grab our own items first. This isn't simply selfishness – it's because we value and protect what we know and are responsible for. According to Colossians 1.16, the whole of creation was not just created by Jesus – it was made for Jesus. That three-letter word - 'for' - is very encouraging, because, like us, Jesus cares for and protects what belongs to him. He is not only the Creator but the Sustainer of the world. God is not an absentee landlord, who has abandoned earth to be ruined by its inhabitants. Rather, Jesus is an active gardener, working through his Spirit to keep and preserve the earth, its systems, and its creatures. At a time when there is much talk about 'sustainability', and the fear that humanity is failing to look after the world in a sustainable way, we have the assurance that ultimately Jesus is the Sustainer. He is committed to his creation, and will not abandon it. As we will see later, this does not mean human beings can sit back and leave it all to Jesus. Instead, God has chosen to work in partnership with us. He may be the Sustainer, but we are to be his stewards, his fellow-workers in serving and preserving the earth.

That short word ‘for’ in Colossians 1.16 has another vital implication. Questions about the meaning of life, about the purpose of our existence, have troubled people throughout the centuries. What is the world for? Why are we here? The Bible’s radical and surprising claim is that Jesus is the purpose of creation. We have already noted that this earth and everything in it don’t belong to us, they belong to God – “*The earth is the Lord’s and everything in it, the world and all who live in it.*” (Psalm 24.1). The New Testament goes even further; it claims that the whole of creation was made for Jesus. In a real and profound sense, the whole of creation is God’s love-gift to his Son, Jesus Christ.

No wonder the universe is designed with such beauty and harmony. It is as an expression of the love in the heart of God. This is why, as we’ve seen, it shows so much of God’s character and goodness. When we look at a sunset and find our hearts lifted, or at a mountain-range, a spider’s web, a forest of autumn leaves ... or at a new-born baby, we are reacting to the love of God that is at the centre of creation. As humans, we are quite possibly the only species that can consciously ask the question ‘Why am I here?’ The answer is – we are here to worship God in Jesus, and to live in relationship with him within his amazing creation.

In fact, Colossians goes even further than claiming that all things are made by and for Jesus. In the following verse, we read that “*in him all things hold together*” (Colossians 1.17). Jesus, who made himself nothing by being born as a tiny baby, is the one who is at the heart of the whole universe. It holds, or hangs, together in him. Some years ago I was given a wooden toy which formed a sphere, but was made up of about eight very differently shaped wooden pieces. When all the bits were separate, I found it almost impossible to put it back together again. However, eventually I discovered that there was one key piece that I had to start with. As long as I built all the other pieces around this central piece, in the correct order, I could eventually rebuild the wooden sphere.

Jesus is the ‘key piece’ in the puzzle of creation. He is the one who is at the heart of all things. They were made by him, they exist for him, and he sustains them by his power. Without Jesus at the centre of creation, all the forces that hold back chaos would be removed. Scientists are discovering that this planet is incredibly finely balanced in having exactly the right conditions for life. Without trees, there wouldn’t be enough oxygen, without animals not enough carbon dioxide. The water-cycle, the temperature, the ocean currents, the thickness of the upper atmosphere are all exactly right for life. What is even more amazing is that, despite major changes in climatic conditions during the earth’s existence, this fragile balance has been preserved.

Look again at Colossians 1.17. The earth behaves like this, not because it is looking after itself, but because Jesus – in whom all things hold together – is looking after it. The earth cannot sustain itself, but it is being sustained by the One for whom it was made. God’s Holy Spirit is active within creation today – sustaining and renewing the earth, providing for animals, overseeing the rhythms and patterns of the seasons, of night and day.

At a time when so much is going wrong with planet earth, we can take some comfort from this truth. God in Jesus has not abandoned planet earth. Amidst worrying predictions about climate change, we need not despair, because Jesus is holding everything together. However, Colossians 1.17 also holds a hidden warning. If all things hold together in Jesus, then the converse is also implied: without Jesus, all things fall apart. God has entrusted human beings with creation's care. When we fail to put Jesus at the centre of our thought and behaviour, is it any wonder that the environment is falling apart? If we treat the earth's resources - oil, gas, wildlife, clean air, good soil and water – as if they exist just for us, and forget they were made for Jesus, should we be surprised if things are going wrong?

Today, in our culture and sadly even in our behaviour as Christians, we have removed Jesus from his position at the heart of creation. We need to recover a sense that creation is infused with God's presence and love, and needs to be treated with care and reverence – because it is made for Jesus. As I've reflected on this, I now try to put it into practice in the detail of everyday life. The way I use the world's resources should reflect my worship of Jesus, so I can no longer throw away rubbish without sorting it through and recycling what I can. God made a world where nothing is wasted, and it dishonours him if I am careless with what he has made. In terms of the food I eat, I cannot in good conscience eat meat from animals that have suffered cruelty simply to give me cheap meat. These are creatures that were made for Jesus, that God declared 'good' and asked human beings to rule over in a gentle and godly way. How can we say we are worshipping Jesus, if we deliberately or carelessly cause unnecessary cruelty to his creatures? In terms of how I travel, I now walk, cycle and use public transport more than ever before – finding not only that I am causing less pollution, but that I actually have more time to spend with God as I travel, enjoying Jesus' companionship as I take in the human and natural world around me.

Jesus: Creation's Saviour

This next section is critical to the argument of this whole book. Let me sum it up in a sentence, before explaining it. The world was created good, has been spoilt by sin, and yet through Jesus there is the hope of salvation both for people and the whole of creation. For many years I didn't understand this. I was taught and believed that Jesus came to bring salvation for people, as long as they put their trust in him, and that was the end of it. The world, ultimately, didn't matter because Jesus would rescue us from it. Now, as I've re-read the bible, I've come to see that this is only half the story. God is much bigger than I'd realised, and his purposes in Jesus are also much more far-reaching than I'd ever dreamed.

I've come to realise that I (along with millions of others) had been reading the bible through tinted spectacles. Anything to do with the non-human creation has been filtered out and ignored. Let me illustrate this using what is generally accepted as the best known verse in the bible:

"God so loved the world, that he sent his one and only Son, So that whoever believes in him would not die but would have eternal life." (John 3.16)

I always read it as “God so loved the people”, and it was only when I studied New Testament Greek at bible college that it dawned on me that it actually says “God so loved the *kosmos*”. ‘*Kosmos*’ is of course the word from which we get ‘cosmos’ and ‘cosmic’ and its usual meaning is ‘the whole universe’. I want to be cautious here, because bible scholars are uncertain as to whether in this particular passage *kosmos* could mean the ‘world of fallen humanity’ rather than the whole material creation. So, let’s not put too much weight on this one verse, but let it illustrate this point: we often read the Bible and miss what’s right in front of our eyes. Our human-centred culture makes us overlook a mass of important material about God’s relationship with, and saving care for the whole of creation. The words on the page may say ‘world’ but we only see ‘people’. However, God’s perspective is much bigger than ours. He really does care about the whole of creation, and the saving work of Jesus has implications that are quite literally cosmic.

We need to see who Jesus really is in relation to creation. He is not only Creator and Sustainer, but also the Saviour of the earth. See Colossians 1.19-20.

When Jesus died on the cross, he died to restore all the relationships that had been broken by the fall. You may remember the image of a triangle of relationships – between God, people and creation – where each side of the triangle is broken apart by human sin and disobedience. Just as all these relationships that God created so good have been shattered, so through the work of Jesus each of these relationships can be restored. In Colossians St. Paul is clear that it is ‘all things’ that are reconciled – or brought back into relationship – with God through the cross. The Greek word for ‘all things’ - *panta* - is completely inclusive. This includes things both in heaven and also here on earth – the same earth that was cursed in Genesis 3 after Adam’s sin, and has been groaning in agony ever since.

Romans 8.19-22 talks about this ‘groaning’ within the whole creation, and compares it with the labour pains of a pregnant woman. Creation is in agony, writhing about as a result of humanity’s disobedience. Yet, like a woman’s labour, it is a hopeful suffering, looking forward eagerly to the new life that is about to be delivered. In the midst of environmental disaster and despair, there is still hope for the natural world. St. Paul describes it as creation’s ‘eager expectation’ (v.19), infused with the “hope that the creation itself will be liberated from its bondage to decay and brought into the glorious freedom of the children of God” (20-21). Just as Jesus’ death and resurrection offer hope for human beings and we can become God’s children, so there is the sure hope that the natural environment – the whole created order – can be set free.

All of this is possible only because of the cross and resurrection of Jesus. In his book ‘Jesus and the Earth’, Bishop James Jones has pointed out how the Gospel writers record creation’s reaction to Jesus’ suffering. When he died, there was an eclipse as the skies remained dark throughout his crucifixion, and at the moment of death there was an earthquake, as tombs flew open and the great curtain in the Jewish Temple was torn from top to bottom. These signs show us how the earth itself reacted to the death of the One in whom all things hold together. Then again, at Jesus’ resurrection, the great stone was rolled away by another earthquake, as creation responded in celebration to the beginnings of a new creation in Jesus’ risen body.

Ultimately it is that resurrection body of Jesus that is our guarantee of hope for the material universe. The risen Jesus was neither a ghost nor an illusion. He was and is physically alive again. The tomb was empty and there was no dead body, because it had been transformed into a new resurrection body. The risen Christ is the deposit, the guarantee, not only that those people who trust in him will also be raised, but that the whole created order can also be transformed and renewed.

Questions:

1. In what ways has this chapter affected your understanding of who Jesus is? How could this influence your devotional life and your lifestyle?
2. The cross and resurrection of Jesus are the centre of Christian faith. How do they give us hope, for ourselves and for the planet?
3. Turn to Colossians 1:15-20. In what way does he use us/the church to save creation?
4. How does the hope Jesus gives us motivate us to change things?