

And it was good

Responding to God's Gift of Creation



And it was good provides an opportunity for Anglicans around the Communion to explore together two vital themes:

Our understanding of and responsibility for creation, taking seriously the commitment expressed in the Anglican Fifth Mark of Mission '***To strive to safeguard the integrity of creation, and sustain and renew the life of the earth.***

How Anglicans in different parts of the world use and interpret the Bible.

And it was good comes out of the ongoing work of **The Bible in the Life of the Church** project, it offers individuals and groups across the Anglican Communion an opportunity to join in the work of this international project, and to share their insights with others.

And it was good is a five-session course aiming to help us discover how key aspects of the life, ministry and death of Jesus Christ shed light on these two themes.



Each session contains these sections:

 **Bible Exploration** - two biblical passages related to aspects of creation. Brief notes are linked to each passage.

 **Reflection** on how our understanding of the biblical text and the theme can be enhanced by the different experiences of Anglican Christians throughout the world.

 **Reading the Bible with Anglicans around the world**, reflecting on what our exploration suggests to us about the ways that other Anglicans read the Bible.

 **Questions for discussion** linked to the theme of creation and to our use of the Bible.

 **Closing Prayer**





Session One:
The Hope of Something New



Session Two:
Our Place in the Created Order



Session Three:
Jesus: The Centre and Heart of All Creation



Session Four:
Creation Blesses the Lord



Session Five:
Creation Groans in Painful Hope

A close-up photograph of a pair of weathered, brown hands gently cupping a small, vibrant green seedling. The seedling has several leaves and a small stem, growing out of a mound of dark, rich soil. The background is a soft, out-of-focus grey, suggesting an outdoor setting. The lighting is warm and natural, highlighting the texture of the hands and the freshness of the plant.

Session One

**THE HOPE OF
SOMETHING NEW**



THE HOPE OF SOMETHING NEW

The life and ministry of Jesus Christ impacts on creation, and offers us a vision of 'new creation.'

Bible Exploration

Isaiah 11.1-9

Reading the Book of Isaiah immediately faces us with the dark history of the Middle East in the eighth to the sixth centuries BC. The story of God's people that it tells was forged amid the dominance of the 'world powers' of the day, the elephant-sized empires of Assyria and Babylonia, renowned for their brutality. The people of small nation states, such as Israel and Judah, were like ants, easily exploited or trodden down.

Many chapters in Isaiah reflect this darkness and the suffering of the people. Yet from time to time – as here in chapter 11 – we are given a glimmer of something very different, a vision of the world as God wants it to be. The harmony that this chapter speaks of is not simply a harmony between the warring parties of humanity, but extends to and transforms the entire creation, even those creatures traditionally most hostile to each other.

This work of transformation is linked to the 'branch' that will come 'out from the stump of Jesse', (*Isaiah 11.1*) the royal House of David which ruled in Jerusalem until the people were exiled in 587 BC. Christians have seen these words as reflecting the life and ministry of Jesus Christ, born of the family of David, Jesse's son. (*cf Matthew 1.6, Romans 1.3*).

One of the most powerful images and metaphors used in the Book of Isaiah to describe the situation of God's people throughout the Book of Isaiah is that of a 'tree'. Cut down to a stump it may be (*Isaiah 6.13; 11.1*) or burnt to a cinder (*Isaiah 11.1*) after a bushfire (*Isaiah 10*). Yet, like the olive trees of Israel/Palestine or Australian gums, which sprout new stems out of ancient roots, this tree

will grow again from **Jesse's stump** even more abundantly, so that eventually the whole people can be described as 'oaks of righteousness, the planting of the Lord.' (*Isaiah 61.3*)

Mark 1.9-15

These verses from the beginning of Mark's Gospel tell of Jesus' baptism and wilderness experience and are often read at the beginning of Lent. Yet we are so familiar with the account of Jesus' temptations in Matthew and Luke, that it is sometimes difficult to read Mark's account without trying to fill it out from the other gospels. But Mark's brief, sharp verses have an important message to share in their own right.

First the baptism of Jesus, in which water and the Spirit play prominent parts, recalls the story of creation through water and the Spirit told in Genesis 1. However, this '**new creation**' offered at the beginning of Jesus' ministry goes further. In Genesis, God's creative work proceeded by establishing a series of boundaries separating light and dark, sky and earth, sea and land, humankind and other creatures. By contrast Mark 1.10 tells us of heavens '**torn open**' to enable the Kingdom of God to '**come near**' (*Mark 1.15*). Also, Jesus' experience in the wilderness '**with the wild beasts**' which follows '**immediately**' after his baptism offers us a picture of what the Kingdom of God, this new creation, might mean.

Session One

Reflection

There is a painting by the artist Stanley Spencer called 'The Scorpion', one of a series, which were together called 'Christ in the Wilderness'. The paintings '*relocate moments from the teaching ministry of Jesus back into the desert, as though they had all flowed out of that formative wilderness experience.*

"The Scorpion" illustrates the symbolism of wild beasts, which represents a tension between blood lust and the harmony of paradise regained, and that tension Jesus alludes to as the struggle between the hiddenness of the Kingdom of God and the power and presence of its reality.

... Jesus sits on the ground, holding in cupped hands an angry scorpion. He looks at this little creature with compassion and acceptance, knowing that its nature is to inflict deadly pain when it is threatened.

Christ in the Wilderness; the scorpion
©The Estate of Stanley Spencer 2011. All rights reserved. DACS
"Part of the State Art Collection at the Art Gallery of Western Australia."



The scorpion is a sign of the destructive force of the natural world. But the holding of it by Jesus suggests something else. Divine love consumes this raging force and will bear its pain. Out of that bearing divine love will reveal the peace of the Kingdom of heaven that lies hidden within love's mysterious ways.' (Martin Warner)

Reading the Bible with Anglicans around the World

One of the parts of the Communion which has already engaged with **The Bible in the Life of the Church** project is the Episcopal Church of Sudan.

Sudan was a country torn by civil war over several decades (it has now become two independent states) and many of the Christians of South Sudan had to flee as refugees – taking shelter for weeks or months in the jungle. Their experiences of living as refugees have influenced how they read the Bible.

In a leadership seminar for Anglican clergy of Sudan held in July 2010, and linked to the project, a number of principles for reading the Bible were identified.

'A key one was that the Bible is read in contemporary context. The Bible is constantly related to many aspects of Sudanese life: social, economic, and political history (especially the recent experience of war), African Traditional Religion, the natural world and the rich relationship with it which has been characteristic of village life through the generations.

One of the important findings was the extent to which traditional practices are congruent with the values that the Bible upholds. For example, humans are meant to have a genuine relationship with animals (as inferred from Adam's naming of the animals in Genesis 2), a value that was much better honoured by non-Christians in the village than it is now by Christians in the city (where, for instance, donkeys are worked without sufficient care). People spoke with great sensitivity about the problem of disharmony between people and animals that Genesis represents as an effect of "the fall": How can we live in harmony with snakes, scorpions, and (especially) the Nile leopard?

Many participants knew stories of snakes allowing themselves to be used as pillows by people fleeing into the bush during the war, but they said that would no longer happen, that snakes are again fearful of people. Bishop Hilary of Malakal said that when they have a rat infestation in their house, the first thing they do is pray that they may see any disharmony in their immediate social world – and then they stop up the holes!

Another principle agreed by participants in the seminar is that the Bible is the best commentary on itself, and biblical scholarship should be read critically and selectively, according to how far it accords with the basic pre-suppositions of biblical faith. For example, commentators who exclude the possibility of miracles a priori should not be trusted...'(Ellen Davis)

Questions for Discussion

1. What do you understand by 'new creation'? How do you understand the hope expressed in Isaiah for the harmony of all creatures? How far does your understanding about 'new creation' link to the way you read the Bible? In what ways does the experience of Christians in the Sudan inform your understanding?
2. In what ways do you think that the hope for a 'new creation' is linked to the life and ministry of Jesus Christ (*cf 2 Corinthians 5: 14-17*)? What does this suggest about the relationship between the Old Testament and the New?
3. What does it mean for you to read these biblical passages as Anglicans in your contemporary context?
4. What do you think about the comment made by Anglicans in Sudan – that biblical commentators who exclude the possibility of miracles should not be trusted?



Closing Prayer

Let us encourage our hearts in the hope of God
Who once breathed the breath of life into the human body.
God's ears are open to prayers;
The Creator of humankind is watching;
The Lord reigns from his high place, seeing the souls of those who die.
Turn your ears to us: upon whom else can we call?
Is it not you alone, O God? Let us be branches of your Son.

*(Mary Alueel Garang,
Episcopalian Christian of the Diocese of Bor, Sudan)*





Session Two

**OUR PLACE IN THE
CREATED ORDER**



OUR PLACE IN THE CREATED ORDER

This session digs down into our 'earthy' grounding, as 'earthlings' shaped by God's creative work – and how we as human beings have taken God's 'good' work and used it for our own ends. Getting the relationship between humanity and the rest of creation wrong might lead to 'uncreation!'

Bible Exploration

Genesis 1.1-2.25

The Bible begins with creation. Its whole story of the relationship between God and humanity is framed by the proclamation that God is the creator of heaven and earth. And this creation is '**good**'. God takes pleasure in creation. That is affirmed over and over again in Genesis 1. It is that repeated phrase **And God saw that it was good** which we have drawn on as the title of this course.

But what is Genesis 1 seeking to tell us? Exactly **how** the world came into being? It is set out as a poem of praise celebrating truths about God's love for the earth and for humanity. Perhaps the key message is not '**what actually happened**' but telling us of a God who creates order out of chaos, and offers human beings partnership in the sustaining of creation. The rhythm of the six '**and it was good**', culminating in the Sabbath, reinforces this sense of ordered calm.

Genesis 1.1-2.4a is very different in feel and language to Genesis 2.4b-25. In the first account, human beings are made as the pinnacle of creation, **in the image of God** (Genesis 1.26-27). In the other, the human being is **formed** of the dust of the earth (Genesis 2.7) and before the plants and animals. But both passages – in their different ways – make clear the responsibility that God has given to human beings in relation to the rest of creation.

This is often talked about as human beings having ‘stewardship’ over creation. In Genesis 1.26-28 God blesses humankind, male and female together, with an instruction to *subdue* and *have dominion* over other living creatures. Some see this is a rather harsh and dangerous way of thinking about the relationship between human beings and creation, one of the factors that has led to creation being damaged. However in Genesis 2.15 God puts the human being in the Garden of Eden to *till* the garden (*literally to ‘serve’ it*). This relationship is reinforced by a pun: the Hebrew word for a human being (*‘adam*) is very similar to the word for ‘ground’ (*‘adamah*), which suggests that the well being of humanity and of the earth belong together. Can (*and should*) human beings both subdue and serve creation? Have we often done one – but not the other?

Jeremiah 4.11-28

The prophet Jeremiah was writing in some of the darkest days of Old Testament history – shortly before much of Jerusalem and Judah was destroyed by an invading Babylonian army and many people were killed or exiled. In this passage the future destruction is pictured as an ecological disaster which suggests there is an intrinsic connection between the earth and its creatures, the health of the land and the spiritual and moral condition of humankind, especially God’s people. Creation seems to suffer because of the sin of humanity. Verses 23-27 are particularly powerful: they remind us strongly of the creation account in Genesis 1.

But now creation is being undone! Jeremiah is predicting ‘uncreation’! Notice particularly the expression *waste and void* in 4.23 (in Hebrew *tohu wa-bohu*). This is the same expression as is used in Genesis 1.2 to describe the earth before God’s creative work commenced. It is very rare in the Bible, so readers are meant to make the connection between Jeremiah and Genesis. When one Bible passage alludes to another in this way, the effect is very powerful. The following modern poem also uses the background of Genesis 1 to speak strikingly about the relationship between human beings and creation:

Reflection

In the beginning

was the earth.

And it was beautiful.

And human beings lived upon the earth. And they said:

'Let us build skyscrapers and expressways.'

And they covered the earth with steel and concrete.

And they said, 'It is good.'

On the second day,

humanity looked upon the clear blue waters of the earth.

*And said, 'Let us dump our sewage
and wastes into the waters.' And they did.*

The waters became dark and murky.

And they said 'It is good.'

On the third day,

humanity gazed at the forests on the earth.

They were tall and green. And the human beings said:

'Let us cut the trees and build things for ourselves.'

And they did. And the forests grew thin.

And they said 'It is good.'

On the fourth day,

humanity saw the animals leaping in the fields

*and playing in the sun. And they said: 'Let us trap
the animals for money and shoot them for sport.'*

And they did. And the animals became scarce.

And they said 'It is good.'



On the fifth day,

*humanity felt the cool breeze in their nostrils.
And they said: 'Let us burn our refuse
and let the wind blow away the smoke and debris.'
And they did.
And the air became dense with smoke and carbon.
And they said 'It is good.'*

On the sixth day,

*humanity saw the many kinds of people on the earth –
different in race, colour and creed.
And they feared and said: 'Let us make bombs
and missiles in case misunderstandings arise.'
And they did. And missile sites and bomb dumps
chequered the landscape.
And they said 'It is good.'*

On the seventh day,

*humanity rested.
And the earth was quiet and deathly still.
For humanity was no more.
And it was good!*

(Anon)



Of course neither Jeremiah, nor this poem, are the end of the story as far as the Bible is concerned. It is significant that the Bible ends (*Revelation 21 22*) with a picture of **new creation**, which also uses vivid language and images drawn from the Book of Genesis.

Reading the Bible with Anglicans around the World

In Hebrew, the same word *'eret* can be used to describe both a particular land or country and the whole earth. It reminds us that the wellbeing of specific countries or regions of the world, and the wellbeing of the whole earth cannot ultimately be separated. Nor – according to the biblical passages we have explored – can the wellbeing of the land and the actions of human beings. What does this mean for Anglicans who read the Bible in parts of the world where the issue of the ownership and use of land is a deeply pressing question? Where the relationship between human beings and the land is undermined so people are denied the right to be **stewards**? Where all too often land issues and injustice go hand in hand?

One of the regional groups working on **The Bible in the Life of the Church** project is based in South Africa. Members of the group were involved in the production of a Report of the **Southern African Anglican Theological Commission, 1995** entitled, **'The Land and its Use in South Africa'**. The report gives important insights into how Anglicans in South Africa read the Biblical passages relating to land. It says:

'Fundamental to the Old Testament view of land is the belief that the earth is the Lord's and the fullness thereof (Psalm 24. 1). Land cannot be owned in an ultimate sense by human beings, but only derivatively and conditionally. The earth is created by God and for God's glory. As God's creation the land is fundamentally good. The land and all that is in it belongs to him and is in his care (Psalm 50.9-1 1; 104.10-30). While there is the theme in the creation story of God's command to human beings fill the earth and subdue it, this is subordinated to the theme of Sabbath rest, of blessing, in praise of God's work.

There are limits placed on the dominion of humanity, as symbolized by the forbidden fruit. There are consequences to overstepping the limits, as symbolized by the expulsion from the garden. The same process is at work in the story of Noah: human sinfulness results in natural disaster and human loss. God makes a covenant with Noah, guaranteed by the sign of the rainbow.

Blessing and fertility of the land are dependent on right relationships between God and human beings. The theology of covenant underpins the understanding of land as promise and gift. Intertwined with the stories of the conquest of the land of promise, which have had very harmful



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consequences in Southern African history, as legitimization of white conquest of African land, is the underlying principle of the land as gift. It is God who apportions the land, and even then conditionally. This is the fundamental principle, and not expulsion or conquest or sacred war. Land is held in covenant with God, and ownership is conditional on the preservation of right relationships between God and human beings.

Because the land is gift, it is held as a sacred trust. The land cannot simply be bought and sold, as if it is property like shoes and grain. As the story of Naboth's Vineyard shows, the links of family and blood to the land cannot be set aside by an act of the king, even by offers of just compensation. Indeed, attempting to subvert the gift of land by changing the boundaries is an offence against God (Deuteronomy 27.17: Proverbs 23. 10). The ties between family and land are so important that special marriage laws (Levirate) exist to preserve the family's rights to continue on the land when someone dies without an heir.

The Old Testament laws recognize the propensity of the land to become alienated from its owners under the pressure of drought and debt. Provision is made for the restoration of the land to those families who had lost it, every seventy years in the Jubilee Year. Whether or not this law was ever successfully implemented is not the important question, but it upholds the principle that land cannot be permanently alienated from the poor and powerless, but must be periodically redistributed to prevent unjust accumulation of resources in the hands of a few.

The land is not unreservedly at the disposal of its human tenants, but has rights of its own. In this regard, the land must be left fallow on the seventh year, its own sabbath rest. During this period of recovery of the fruitfulness of the cultivated land, its fruit is available to the poor and to the wild animals and birds. The land is for sustenance and enjoyment not for the few but for all.

The mark of blessing is that every person shall sit under her/his own vine and fig tree (Micah 4.4). All of these basic principles with regard to the land seem to have originated in the period before the emergence of a strong central monarchy in Israel/Judah. The adoption of the Canaanite model of kingship legitimated by a central temple led to the emergence of an aristocracy and to the accumulation of land in the royal domain. On the one hand, the origin of the Davidic kingship is in the popular election of a king to deal with foreign invasions.

On the other, the Davidic monarchy developed a theory of special election of the family of David in perpetuity. A conflict between the claims of the monarchy for land, labour and tribute and the older land traditions of the tribes was the background to the attacks of the prophets on injustice and

exploitation and the impoverishment of the ordinary people by the monarchy and temple.

The history of the people of Israel in the Promised Land is a continuous story of disobedience and punishment, restoration and hope. God continues to honour his covenant with his people despite their failure to honour their side of the agreement. It is this constancy and goodness of God which holds out the promise of restoration to the land, even in times of exile or catastrophe. The hope grew of a new covenant which would establish God's people in a renewed land in renewed blessing, peace and security (e.g. Isaiah 32.15-17; Micah 4.3-4).'

The full report can be read at:
<http://churchland.org.za/publications/Bulletin53page275.pdf>

There is a church-based organisation in South Africa **The Church Land Programme** whose website [http://churchland.org.za/publications.php# Bible](http://churchland.org.za/publications.php#Bible) offers many useful resources for exploring the theme of Bible and land from the South African context.

Questions for Discussion

1. What does the fact that the Bible begins with creation suggest to you about the nature and purpose of the Bible?
2. How far do you take the pictures of the relationship between human beings and creation given in Genesis 1 and 2 as normative for us today? To what extent is your view affected by whether or not you think creation '**happened**' exactly as described in these chapters?
3. The notes on Jeremiah say that the prophet suggests '**there is an intrinsic connection between the earth, the creatures, the health of the land and the spiritual and moral condition of people, especially God's people**'. Do you think this is true? How comfortable are you in reading the parts of the prophetic books in the Bible that link disaster and human behaviour?
4. The reflection from South Africa commented on the difficulty of relating to the parts of the Bible, such as Deuteronomy and Joshua, which focus on land in terms of conquest. In what other parts of the world might a similar difficulty be felt? How do we interpret such '**difficult**' parts of scripture?

Closing Prayer

Holy God, Creator and Lover of all that is,
we confess to you that we have sinned.
We have failed in our care for the land and its creatures,
we have been greedy, destructive, and wasteful
of the resources you entrusted to us.

Polluted air and water,
eroded soil and salty earth,
birds and animals deprived of habitat,
and neighbours left hungry and thirsty by our selfishness:
all these cry out against us.
We do not know how to restore what we have damaged,
and we repent in sorrow and distress.

Forgive us, we pray, and have mercy.
Give us grace to change our ways,
to make amends,
and to work together for the healing of the world,
through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

The priest pronounces this Absolution:

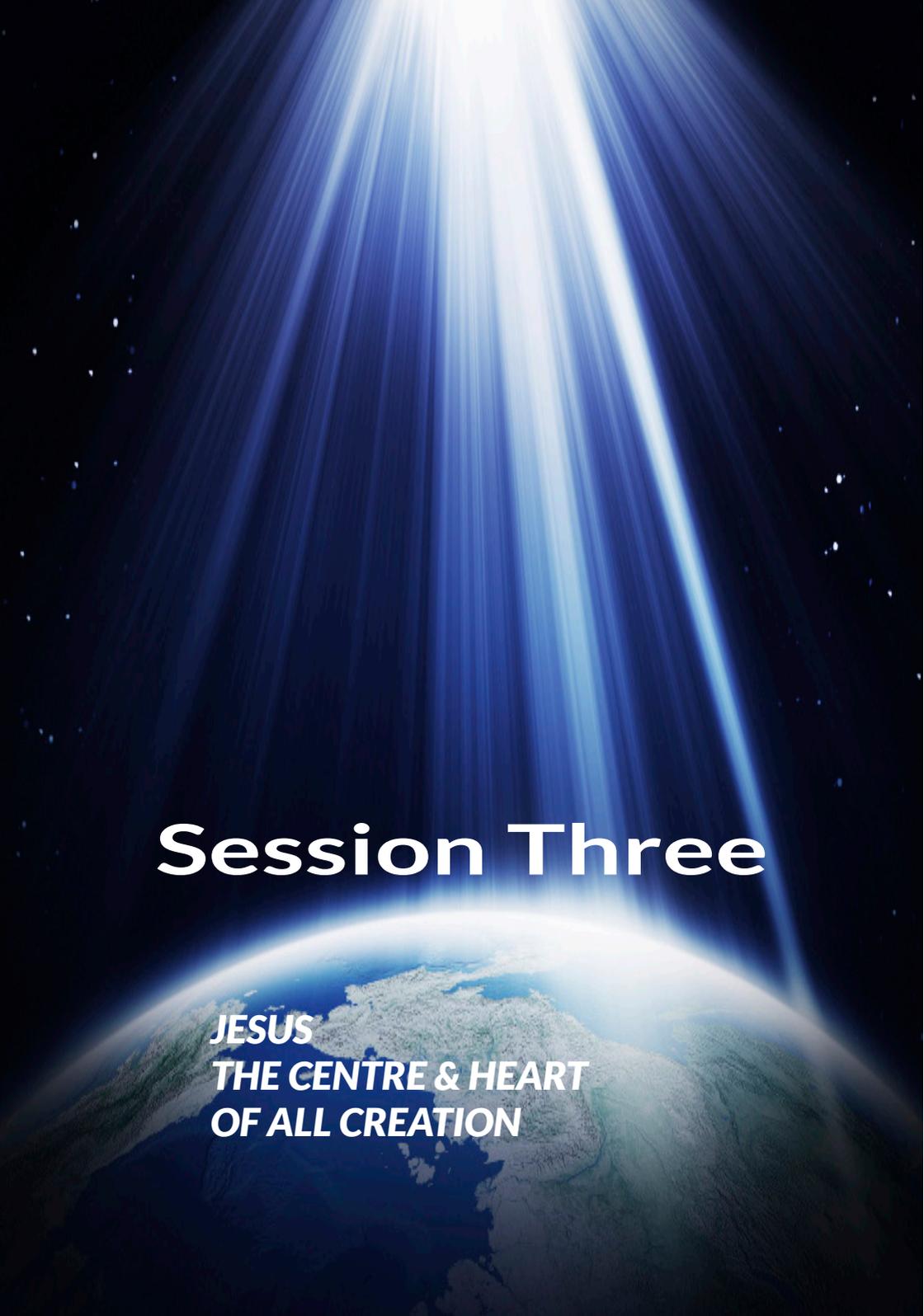
Our Saviour died and rose again
so that for all who live in him
there is a new creation.
Therefore I declare to you:
your sins are forgiven,
through Jesus Christ our Lord.

Amen. Send out your Spirit, O Lord.

Renew the hearts of your people.

Renew the face of the earth.



The image features a view of Earth from space, showing the curvature of the planet and the dark void of space with scattered stars. A powerful, bright blue beam of light descends from the top center of the frame, illuminating the Earth below. The text is overlaid on this scene.

Session Three

**JESUS
THE CENTRE & HEART
OF ALL CREATION**

Session Three



JESUS - THE CENTRE & HEART OF ALL CREATION

This session we ask how 'creation' as experienced in different parts of our world, can offer us new insights into these central mysteries of our faith.

Bible Exploration

Colossians 1.9-29

At the heart of this passage (1.15-20) is a lyrical hymn of praise in honour of Jesus Christ who is the heart of creation. The words and phrases used deliberately remind us of the beginning of the Book of Genesis. There is a 'play' on the Hebrew word **Reshith** with which Genesis begins. (*It is translated in Genesis 1.1 as 'beginning'.*) The word **Reshith** itself is closely related to the Hebrew word **Rosh** – which means **head**.

So in verse 18 the writer of Colossians seeks to exploit and list all the possible meanings of **Rosh/Reshith: head, beginning, firstborn, first place** (NRSV translation). It was a way of saying that Jesus Christ summed up every possible aspect of Genesis 1.1!

To explore the meaning of words in this way is a traditional Jewish way of interpreting scripture. Many of the writers of the New Testament were well versed in Jewish traditions of biblical interpretation. But it is clear from the following verses that the focus on Christ at the centre and head also has implications for all of us – if Christ is the **head** then we too are part of the **body**. And just as today we see creation suffering, so Paul saw himself as sharing in that, as a member of the **body** (verses 23-24). The Christ we proclaim to everyone (verse 26) is the **one through whom God was pleased to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, by making peace through the blood of his cross** (verse 20).

Mark 4.30-41

The importance of creation is a motif which runs through Mark 4. The processes of growth which form part of the natural cycle

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of creation are repeatedly used as a symbol of God's kingdom. So we hear of a sower sowing seed – and the varied results that spring from that. We hear of seed scattered and growing without any attention, and finally of the marvellous mustard seed – so tiny yet becoming big enough to offer shade and blessing to other parts of God's creation.

In telling these parables, Jesus does not focus upon himself (*although he probably alludes to himself when he speaks of the work of the sower, Mark 4.3*). Instead, his focus is on the kingdom or reign of God. But who Jesus is, and his role in relation to creation, lies at the heart of the story which follows, describing what happens when Jesus and his disciples cross the Sea of Galilee in a storm (4.35-41). The terrified disciples call upon Jesus to calm the storm – but when he does they are awe-struck. For the Old Testament (*especially the book of Exodus*) had taught them that God alone can control the sea. So the chapter ends with a question *Who then is this, that even the wind and the sea obey him?* (4.41) Mark does not answer this question – at least not straight away. It can, however, be discovered as we read on in this Gospel and are prompted to make our own response to Jesus.

What is it that makes a bridge between these two very different parts of Mark 4 – the stories of seed and then the calming of the storm? At a recent international meeting in Jamaica, a preacher from the Caribbean (*West Indies*) drew out a fascinating and challenging link. The end of the parable of the mustard seed speaks of the way God's kingdom bears fruit – and is immediately followed by Jesus' encouragement to his disciples *Let us go over to the other side* (4.35). This means the other side of the Sea of Galilee, a Gentile region, culturally and religiously different to Jesus' Jewish homeland near Capernaum. The preacher in Jamaica suggested that this contains an important message – if the Kingdom is to fully flourish it cannot remain static. Disciples of Jesus then and now are called to '*cross over to the other side*', to encounter difference and to move outside their comfort zones. And in doing so, they will find the power of Christ travelling with them in perhaps surprising ways.

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Reflection

The picture by Sarah Prentice is a marvellous portrayal of the 'mustard seed' parable.

But at the same time she makes clear the interconnection of all creation.



Reading the Bible with Anglicans around the World

The story of the ministry and death of Jesus Christ is our central focus. Yet if Jesus is at the heart of creation, as our biblical readings this session suggest, how is our faith affected when we remember events in the life of Jesus at very different times of the year. Historical movements have led to the pattern of the European northern hemisphere's seasons shaping the way that the Church has thought of the spiritual 'seasons' of the Christian year. For example many Christmas carols link the birth of Christ to 'the bleak midwinter'.

In fact the word **Lent** actually comes from an Anglo-Saxon word that means **spring**. There is a traditional Lenten hymn that explicitly proclaims:

*Lent comes in the spring,
And spring is pied with brightness;
The sweetest flowers,
Keen winds, and sun, and showers
Their health do bring
To make Lent's chastened whiteness.*

But it is interesting to 'cross over' and discover how the different seasons in other parts of the world can affect and enrich our understanding of Lent.

The following reflection by Bosco Peters, an Anglican priest in New Zealand, describes how it feels to experience Lent in the non-tropical parts of the southern hemisphere.

'Lent in this (southern) hemisphere heralds the autumn. Nature pares down to her essentials. She carries with her the seeds of the future. She concentrates her energies on the one thing necessary, that life may be renewed when the globe turns once more towards the sun. Gardeners do their essential tidying and preparation. We plant our bulbs, hoping for new life in the future.'

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We, the church, also pare down in Lent. Lent focuses on the essentials: the new life in the death and resurrection of Jesus and our participation in this through our faith and baptism. After the busyness of the summer there is a time to learn to pause. We Christians can plant some bulbs together, praying that through our celebration of Lent new life may spring up in our community and throughout the world.

In modern liturgy the penitential flavour is now more concentrated on Ash Wednesday. Creation all around us is beginning to die. Nature seems to echo the ancient words addressed to each person at the imposition of ashes which marks the beginning of Lent: Remember you are dust, and to dust you shall return.

These forty days, approximately a tenth of the year, are our tithe of the year. Our personal Lenten disciplines, however, are not just another self-improvement course. They are to prepare us for a party, the party of Easter ...

The stark simplicity of Lenten worship can provide a striking contrast with the joyful celebration of Easter ... To grow closer to Christ we need to take time to reflect and pray. The danger of Lent is that it tends to be the church's busiest time as we add extra services and study on top of our full parish programme. In the gospel of the first Sunday of Lent we go with Jesus into his forty days in the desert. Our times at church and the Lenten programmes can be oases in the desert, encouraging us on to that intimacy with God and a realistic examination of ourselves which the desert promises.'

Questions for Discussion

1. What do the links between Colossians 1 and the beginning of Genesis suggest to us about the relationship between the Old Testament and the New?
2. In our study of Mark's Gospel we noticed that by linking two different episodes together we can discover something new. How far is it important, when reading the Bible, to look at a passage in its context – noting what comes before and afterwards?
3. How much is our celebration of the church's year and our reading of the Bible influenced by the seasons where we live?
4. What does the Sarah Prentice picture say to you about creation?

Closing Prayers

Gloria

Glorious are you, Mystery of Life,
essence of all creation.

You are the symphony of stars and planets.

You are the music of the atoms within us.

You are the dawn on mountain peaks,

the moonlight on evening seas.

Forest and farm, the rush of the city,

everything is embraced in your love.

We rejoice as we sing our gratitude.

Glorious are you, O Jesus Christ,
Cosmic love in human flesh.

You graced the smallness of time and place
to teach us to dance to the music.

You walk on our seas and heal in our streets.

You make your home in our lives,
revealing that cross and resurrection
are one on the road to freedom.

We rejoice as we sing our gratitude.

Glorious are you, O Spirit of Truth,
wisdom and breath of our being.

You are the wind that sweeps our senses.

You are the fire that burns in our hearts.

You are the needle of the inner compass,

always pointing to true North,

guiding us on the sacred dance

into the Mystery of Life.

We rejoice as we sing our gratitude.

(© Joy Cowley, New Zealand, used by kind permission)



Session Three

All-embracing God,

We thank you that your good news – that life conquers death
And faith overcomes fear –
Is for the whole creation,
And not for humankind alone.

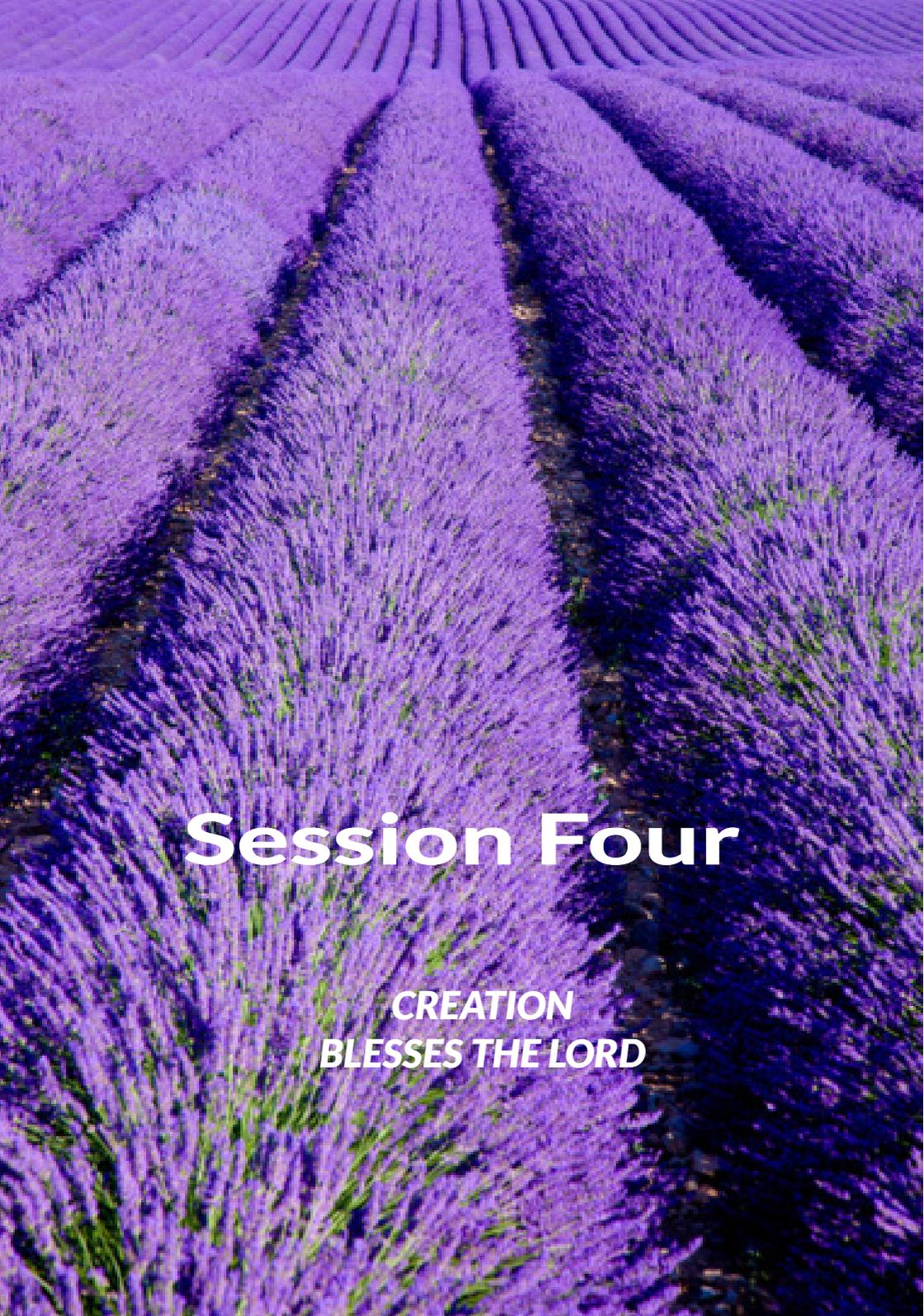
We thank you that the universe itself –
Suffering now as if in the pangs of childbirth –
Waits with us, in eager expectation of deliverance,
And looks forward to a new freedom
From pain and frustration,
Torture and abuse.

We thank you that your promise to reconcile
The whole cosmos to yourself
Began to be realised in the self-giving of Christ,
Whose cross stretches from earth to heaven,
Gathering up the wounds of the universe
And offering them as harbingers of the resurrection.

We thank you for the shining dream
Of a new heaven and a new earth,
Where you will be seen at last
As undergirding, permeating and transforming all things.
In the light of that vision, may we live together now
With hospitality and gentleness, longing and love.

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Session Four

**CREATION
BLESSES THE LORD**



CREATION BLESSES THE LORD

So far these studies have explored scripture passages that form part of the story of God's people, and relate to Jesus Christ directly. But what of the many passages which are not tied directly to the story of God's people? This study picks up two of these, one from the Psalms and the other being a song from the Apocrypha.

Bible Exploration

Psalm 104

Both the passages suggested for this week were probably written to be part of worship – which is certainly how we generally use them today. In this worshipping spirit they offer us a sense of joy and wonder in the Lord's creation. Psalm 104 expresses with vivid detail God's intimate care for and delight in every aspect of creation – grass grows for cattle, high mountains form a habitat for wild goats, the dark gives opportunity for night creatures to feed – and all things look to the Lord for their nourishment.

The psalm also stresses the importance of times and seasons in the rhythm of creation, and that animal and human alike need to live according to the patterns imposed by the sun and the moon, and the cycle of life. This is all part of the **wisdom** (verse 24) that God shows in the divine work of creation. Further, and this is only remarkable to modernist urban westerners, in this psalm humans are not singled out from other animals: their life is interwoven with nature as a whole. Everything depends on God – it is God's **spirit or breath** (verse 30) that brings creation into being.

Verses 6-9 describe the earth in the terms of traditional concepts that understood it to float on a large abyss of salt water, waters which are hostile to God, whose divine power is shown in being able to control them. The reference to **Leviathan** (verse 26) is striking evidence of this. Leviathan is a figure from Canaanite mythology, depicted as a fearsome sea-monster. The psalm borrows from the Canaanite imagery – and transforms it: now Leviathan is no longer fearsome but domesticated. We could almost suggest that it is depicted as God's great bath-toy!

Christians and Jews have for centuries found inspiration in using this psalm in praise of God. It calls us to humility, to acknowledge that we are but one aspect of the immense inter-connectedness of nature, all of which depends on the powerful, life-giving breath of God. Psalm 104 is a good antidote to any dominating attitude we may have towards creation.

The Song of the Three Young Men / Prayer of Azariah

[The text is printed at the end of this week's study notes]

This song is not in the Aramaic text of Daniel, on which our Bibles are based, but was inserted between Daniel 3.23 and 3.24 in the Greek version, which early Christians used as their scriptures.

Anglicans throughout the world may know this text as the '**Benedicite**' (i.e. *the command, in the plural, that we Bless God*). It is under that name that it appears in the Book of Common Prayer, as an alternative canticle at Morning Prayer. It is not part of the canonical Old Testament, but is included within the '**Apocrypha**'. Which provokes the interesting question – how should Anglicans use and interpret the Apocrypha, particularly this text, which appears in our foundational Prayer Book? What authority does it have for us?

As with Psalm 104, human beings are not treated here as unique: they are summoned, along with the angels, animals, plants, landscape features and natural phenomena like frost, stars and heat to **bless the Lord**. The whole of creation is called upon to sing God's praise. What is even more remarkable is to consider the context in which this song is set: it is sung by three young men being punished for being faithful to God by being thrown into a burning fiery furnace. Their offence was to refuse to bow down to an idol of the king. The song therefore is a powerful response to the charge laid on them. Instead of worshipping a created object, they are inviting all creation to sing up and bless its divine Creator.

If Psalm 104 calls us to celebrate God's delight in creation when we feel all is going well, the **Song of the Three Young Men** challenges us to do so when things look bleak, especially for our faith in God. Whatever our situation in life, we are to regard all creatures as those who can be summoned to bless God – which might change our attitude towards how we live with them.

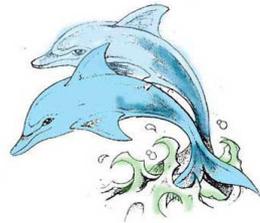
Reflection

These two prayers take their starting point from the 'Benedicite' – and then adapt it to the author's specific cultural and geographical situation.

What would you include if you wrote a 'Benedicite' linked to your country?

*O give thanks to our God who is good:
whose love endures forever.
You sun and moon, you stars of the southern sky:
give to our God your thanks and praise.
Sunrise and sunset, night and day:
give to our God your thanks and praise.
All mountains and valleys, grassland and scree,
glacier, avalanche, mist and snow:
give to our God your thanks and praise.
You kauri and pine, rata and kowhai, mosses and ferns:
give to our God your thanks and praise.
Dolphins and kahawai, sealion and crab,
coral, anemone, pipi and shrimp:
give to our God your thanks and praise.
Rabbits and cattle, moths and dogs
kiwi and sparrow and tui and hawk:
give to our God your thanks and praise.
You Maori and Pakeha, women and men,
all who inhabit the long white cloud:
give to our God your thanks and praise.
All you saints and martyrs of the South Pacific:
give to our God your thanks and praise.*

From A New Zealand Prayer Book/He Karakia Mihinare o Aotearoa page 457



An African Benedicite (extract)

*All you big things, bless the Lord
Mount Kilimanjaro and Lake Victoria
The Rift Valley and the Serengeti Plain
Fat baobabs and shady mango trees
All eucalyptus and tamarind trees
Bless the Lord
Praise and extol Him for ever and ever*

*All you tiny things, bless the Lord.
Busy black ants and hopping fleas,
Wriggling tadpoles and mosquito larvae
Flying locusts and water drops,
Pollen dust and tsetse flies,
Millet seeds and dried dagaa,
Bless the Lord.
Praise and extol Him for ever and ever*



Reading the Bible with Anglicans around the World

Psalm 104 in particular reminds us that even within the Old Testament the traces of an earlier world-view can be discovered. Two of the groups who took part in the Bible in the Life of the Church project reflected on the importance of engaging seriously with an indigenous world-view – which may at times challenge us to explore our Christian faith in a new way. What can we learn from the respect given to creation in many indigenous cultures to assist us in reading the Bible?

Listen to what the East African regional group reported:

The East African Anglican community as well as the entire worldwide Anglican Communion should borrow from primal societies in order to make the Fifth Mark of Mission achievable... Insights from East African

Session Four

primal religion and worldview were instrumental in the understanding and interpretation of the texts read during the contextual bible study.

The point that came out very strongly was that in primal societies, creation was approached and treated with awe and reverence, devoid of exploitation. Before cutting a tree, the spirits of a tree had to be appeased lest they could get angry and revenge. The same applied to hunting and fishing expeditions. The implication is that if one cuts a tree then there is need to plant more. If human beings eat animals, birds or fish, they must not put their existence to jeopardy since the future generation equally needs them.

This idea is widely held in other primal societies outside East Africa... It is critical that we begin to dialogue with primal religion and worldview, which has untapped resources that are radically helpful in engaging the Fifth Mark of Mission.'

In North America, the insights of Native American cultures were referred to, not only in relation to attitudes to creation, but also to our engagement with the Bible. One member of the group commented:

It is important to understand the common approach and attitude of indigenous peoples: in the Navajo conception, for example, Truth is seen as a mountain with multiple angles and perspectives; you can only see it properly from a minimum of four sides. Sacred truth—that is, about the universe and about God's relation to creation—needs all four directions. It has a necessary complexity that implies an interpretive humility.

This approach to truth is also applied to Scripture. There is a truth inherent in these sacred words, but you can't speak about it or engage with it respectfully and adequately without all four directions. Hence, if and when First Nations people engage in these conversations, they are careful not to respond too quickly. When it comes to scripture, many communities practice this in the structure of their gatherings.

They begin by reading the text three times and, with each reading a question is asked:

- (1) *what stands out for you,*
- (2) *what do you hear God saying,*
- (3) *what is God calling us to do?*

Questions for Discussion

1. In what ways do we need to learn to live more in harmony with 'times and seasons' than is the case in the Western world at the moment? What might this mean for our life-styles?
2. How far can or should we learn from indigenous, pre-biblical cultures in our attitude to creation? Does the fact that Psalm 104 draws on non-Israelite mythology offer an example for us?
3. Does the fact that the '*Benedicite*' comes from the Apocrypha mean that we read it differently to texts that come from the Old and New Testaments? Does the fact that we can find it in the Book of Common Prayer make any difference to how we use it?
4. '*Sacred truth—that is, about the universe and about God's relation to creation—needs all four directions. It has a necessary complexity that implies an interpretive humility. This approach to truth is also applied to Scripture!*' How far do you agree with this comment about the need for an '*interpretive humility*' in relation to scripture?



Closing Prayer - A hymn from Australia

*Where wide sky rolls down and touches red sand,
where sun turns to gold the grass of the land,
let spinifex, mulga and waterhole tell
their joy in the One who made everything well.*

*Where rain-forest calm meets reef, tide and storm,
where green things grow lush and oceans are warm,
let every sea-creature and tropical bird
exult in the light of the life-giving Word.*

*Where red gum and creek cross hillside and plain,
where cool tree-ferns rise to welcome the rain,
let bushland, farm, mountain-top, all of their days
delight in the Spirit who formed them for praise.*

*Now, people of faith, come gather around
with songs to be shared, for blessings abound!
Australians, whatever your culture or race,
come, lift up your hearts to the Giver of grace.*

May be sung to PADERBORN
© Elizabeth J. Smith 1956-



The Song of the Three Young Men / Prayer of Azariah

Bless the Lord all you works of the Lord: • sing his praise and exalt him for ever.

Bless the Lord you heavens: • sing his praise and exalt him for ever.

Bless the Lord you angels of the Lord: • bless the Lord all you his hosts; bless the Lord you waters above the heavens: • sing his praise and exalt him for ever.

Bless the Lord sun and moon: • bless the Lord you stars of heaven; bless the Lord all rain and dew: • sing his praise and exalt him for ever.

Bless the Lord all winds that blow: • bless the Lord you fire and heat; bless the Lord scorching wind and bitter cold: • sing his praise and exalt him for ever.

Bless the Lord dews and falling snows: • bless the Lord you nights and days; bless the Lord light and darkness: • sing his praise and exalt him for ever.

Bless the Lord frost and cold: • bless the Lord you ice and snow; bless the Lord lightnings and clouds: • sing his praise and exalt him for ever.

O let the earth bless the Lord: • bless the Lord you mountains and hills; bless the Lord all that grows in the ground: • sing his praise and exalt him for ever.

Bless the Lord you springs: • bless the Lord you seas and rivers; bless the Lord you whales and all that swim in the waters: • sing his praise and exalt him for ever.

Bless the Lord all birds of the air: • bless the Lord you beasts and cattle; bless the Lord all people on earth: • sing his praise and exalt him for ever.

O people of God bless the Lord: • bless the Lord you priests of the Lord; bless the Lord you servants of the Lord: • sing his praise and exalt him for ever.

Bless the Lord all you of upright spirit: • bless the Lord you that are holy and humble in heart.

Bless the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit: • sing his praise and exalt him for ever.

*Common Worship: Services and Prayers for the Church of England (2000)
(including the Psalter as published with Common Worship)*



Session Five

**CREATION GROANS
IN PAINFUL HOPE**

Session Five



CREATION GROANS IN PAINFUL HOPE

This session, remembering the passion of Jesus, we are faced with the destructive power of creation which, according to one of our readings, is ***groaning in labour pains***.

According to Matthew's Gospel, creation itself responded to Jesus' crucifixion and resurrection, by darkness and earthquake (*Matthew 27.45, 51*).

How far can we talk about creation itself being redeemed, rescued from death and decay, through the ministry of Christ? Both of this week's passages raise particular questions in relation to the current ecological crisis – and the passage from 2 Peter in particular, in its attitude to creation, challenges us to reflect when we can and when we cannot use the Bible as a tool for moral and practical guidance.

Bible Exploration

Romans 8.12-27

St Paul presumably did not have the modern anxiety about 'global warming' in mind when he wrote these words to the Christians in Rome. But they strike a chord with our contemporary situation, reminding us once again of the interconnection between all living creatures, including humanity, and the natural world.

In verses 19-23 the language is vivid: earth is pictured in feminine imagery struggling with ***labour pains*** to give birth to the new creation, in which humans can properly be called the sons and daughters of God.

In Paul's view, the hope that faith in Jesus brings is not just for people, but for the whole of creation. In our day, it is becoming clear that the more we are set free from our enthrallment with consumerism, the better it will be for the earth and all life in it; the more we allow our status as children of God to critique our lifestyle, the less creation will groan under our oppression. [Lent 2011: Creation, The Church of Ireland, page 8]

This passage does indeed speak of pain, but pain suffered in hope. Paul's words are notable for the way they reveal the intimacy of relationship between our *Abba* father and God's human children: God's Spirit and our spirits in deep communion.

2 Peter 3.1-13

As in Romans 8, these verses offer us a picture of the world as we know it suffering pain, yet in hope. 2 Peter is such a fierce book that its place within the New Testament canon was disputed in a number of churches in the early Christian centuries.

It was common among Greek, Roman and Jewish writers of the New Testament era to reflect on the ending of the world by fire, or through a second *deluge* which would parallel the earlier deluge by water (2 Peter 3.6: cf Genesis 6-8). 2 Peter links this with ideas from Israel's prophets about the coming of *the day of the Lord* (cf Isaiah 13.6-9; Amos 5.18-20; Zephaniah 1.14-18; Joel 2.28-31, cited by Peter on the day of Pentecost). The last verses of our Old Testament speak of this *day* (Malachi 4.5-6), which is seen by the Gospel writers as fulfilled in the coming of Jesus. The first Christians then looked for it in the return of Christ, *the day of the Lord* full of hope. Paul can claim (cf 2 Corinthians 1.14) as well as calling us to account (cf 1 Thessalonians 5.1-11).

Yet this letter looks beyond destruction to the *new heavens and earth*, born out of the painful death of the old, death-filled order of things. It depicts, as it were, a reversal of Genesis: there, God's good creation descends into deepening evil and destruction – in Christ, all things are made new (as we saw in Week Two). Believers are called to live in the light of God's new creation, in disciplined hope. There is an analogy here with human existence: though we are made in God's image, left to our own devices we experience the law of sin, and cannot avoid the ending of our being through death. Even so, we live now in the light of the resurrection hope we have in Christ.

However, where 2 Peter presents a particular challenge is in the instructions it gives to Christians in relation to these events. We are to live lives of holiness, demonstrating this by *waiting for and hastening the coming of the day of God, because of which the heavens will be set ablaze and dissolved, and the elements will melt*

with fire (verse 12). It is the force of the word *hastening* that is especially problematic. The letter could be read as encouraging readers to behave in such a way that the earth will heat up more quickly – though that could hardly be described as holiness. Yet some Christian fundamentalists argue that it is their duty to live so as to speed up climate change! Such a way of '*using*' scripture has never been regarded as legitimate within the Anglican tradition.

Reading the Bible with Anglicans around the World

The year 2010 saw a number of cataclysmic events around the world, in which the earth really has seemed to be *groaning in labour pains*, especially in the Pacific region. There has been the wide-spread severe flooding in Pakistan, Thailand, Australia, particularly Queensland and Victoria; recurrent earthquakes in Christchurch, New Zealand and Turkey; rising sea levels in island nations such as Kiribati and Tuvalu; and there has been the earthquake, tsunami and nuclear tragedy in Japan.

How have Anglicans used and interpreted the Bible in relation to these events? At first sight the answer seems to be 'with considerable reticence'. Anglicans do not, 'officially' at least, seem to want to draw direct links between these natural disasters and biblical teaching about creation. In this Anglicans may differ from some other Christians who have linked the floods, the earthquakes and the tsunami to biblical prophecy or divine punishment (*a quick trawl around Google will give plenty of examples!*).

One way Anglicans are using the Bible in response to these events is in the context of worship. In Australia, New Zealand and Japan, for example, there have been dignified and powerful services in which people have expressed their pain and loss and pledged to work together with their fellow citizens to help repair the world. In Christchurch, the liturgy drew on Habakkuk 3 (*which speaks of the earth quaking*), Psalm 102 (*in which the psalmist calls upon God in the day of distress*), and the conclusion of Romans 8 with its assurance that nothing can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus. In services such as these the Bible is read and proclaimed without necessarily being 'explained' or 'interpreted'. What might this say to us about ways of '*Using the Bible in the Life of the Church?*'

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Reflection

Look together in silence for 5 minutes at these pictures of creation groaning. Following the silence reflect, as a group, on what that experience was like in the light of this week's session.



Reading the Bible with Anglicans around the World (continued)

At the time of the earlier Asian tsunami, in December 2004, Archbishop Rowan Williams reflected on what we can say about God, creation and humanity on such occasions. This is part of what he wrote:

In 1966, when the Aberfan disaster (a coal tip in Wales collapsed and buried a school in which many young children died) struck, I was a sixth former beginning to think about studying theology at university. I remember watching a television discussion about God and suffering that weekend – with disbelief and astonishment at the vacuous words pouring out about the nature of God’s power or control, or about the consolations of belief in an afterlife or whatever. The only words that made any sense came from the then Archbishop of Wales, in a broadcast on Welsh television. What he said was roughly this: ‘I can only dare to speak about this because I once lost a child. I have nothing to say that will make sense of this horror today. All I know is that the words in my Bible about God’s promise to be alongside us have never lost their meaning for me. And now we have to work in God’s name for the future.’

He was speaking from the experience of losing one child; but he was able to speak about a much greater tragedy simply because of that, not because of having a better explanatory theory.

‘Making sense’ of a great disaster will always be a challenge simply because those who are closest to the cost are the ones least likely to accept some sort of intellectual explanation, however polished. Why should they? Every single random, accidental death is something that should upset a faith bound up with comfort and ready answers. The question: ‘How can you believe in a God who permits suffering on this scale?’ is therefore very much around at the moment, and it would be surprising if it weren’t – indeed, it would be wrong if it weren’t. Effects follow causes in a way that we can chart, and so can make some attempt at coping with. So there is something odd about expecting that God will constantly step in if things are getting dangerous. How dangerous do they have to be? How many deaths would be acceptable?

So why do religious believers pray for God’s help or healing? They ask for God’s action to come in to a situation and change it, yes; but if they are honest, they don’t see prayer as a plea for magical solutions that will make the world totally safe for them and others.

All this is fair enough, perhaps true as far as it goes. But it doesn’t go very far in helping us, with the intolerable grief and devastation in front of us.

Session Five

If some religious genius did come up with an explanation of exactly why all these deaths made sense, would we feel happier or safer or more confident in God? Wouldn't we feel something of a chill at the prospect of a God who deliberately plans a programme that involves a certain level of casualties?

The extraordinary fact is that belief has survived such tests again and again – not because it comforts or explains but because believers cannot deny what has been shown or given to them. They have learned to see the world and life in the world as a freely given gift; they have learned to be open to a calling or invitation from outside their own resources, a calling to accept God's mercy for themselves and make it real for others; learned that there is some reality to which they can only relate in amazement and silence. These convictions are terribly assaulted by all those other facts of human experience that seem to point to a completely arbitrary world, but people still feel bound to them, not for comfort or ease, but because they have imposed themselves on the shape of a life and the habits of a heart.

Most importantly in this connection, religious people have learned to look at other human faces with something of the amazement and silence that God himself draws out of them. They see the immeasurable value, the preciousness, of each life.

[Rowan Williams, www.archbishopofcanterbury.org/articles.php/649/the-asian-tsunami]

Session Five

Questions for Discussion

1. How important for you is our faith that **nothing can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus** at times of catastrophe? In what ways does Paul's claim that the Spirit prays for us in our weakness offer you comfort and support?
2. How do you respond to the depiction of '**the day of the Lord**' in 2 Peter? What problems does it raise? What hope does it offer? What can we learn from 2 Peter about how we should or should not interpret scripture? What are the criteria and assumptions you use?
3. We have noticed the way that one way of using the scriptures is as key resources for worship (*without seeking to 'explain' them*). How far do you think it is appropriate to use the Bible in such ways – or is it avoiding the challenge?
4. Looking back over these five studies, how do you think creation might be **redeemed** (as Romans 8.21 suggests)? Consider how your responses may affect our lifestyles as Christian people.

Closing Prayer

(Written at the time of the Asian Tsunami in 2004)

Where were you God?

*Where were you when the ocean
broke the shore?*

I was playing on the beach.

Fishing in my boat.

Eating breakfast with my family.

*Where were you when the sea
sucked lives away?*

I was holding on tight until I couldn't.

Afraid and running.

Caught in the swirling chaos.

*Where were you when all those
people died?*

I was struggling to breathe.

Letting go.

Counting the lights entering eternity.

*Where were you when the waters
receded?*

I was standing on the shore.

Weeping with grief.

Aching to hold my lost people.

*Where were you in the days that
followed?*

I was searching and hoping.

Burying the dead.

Seeking shelter, food and comfort.

*Where are you now God, where are
you now?*

I am where you are.

Always.



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