

## Sabbath, Psalms and Eucharist

Christopher Southgate considers Christian perspectives on the climate emergency

In this brief article I want to explore what resources Christian thought might offer the climate emergency, and those challenged by the slowness with which the generation with the power (my own) are addressing the huge challenges that are ever more evidently unfolding on our planet.

I talked about these themes at Lee Abbey, a stunningly beautiful place of retreat on the North Devon coast, last summer. I expected an element of climate change scepticism, but I need not have worried. The temperature touched 40 degrees that week, and it was very evident to everyone that the profound change to global climate is not some fanciful projection of faceless modellers, but a present and ever more disturbing reality.

So what distinctive contribution might a Christian thinker, puzzling over the ever-deepening crisis, add to the discussion? And at once I encounter the thought that actually some factors hold Christian thought back from envisioning the new future, a future that colleagues of mine at Exeter sometimes call Gaia 2.0.

These include a distrust, such as we find in the Hebrew Bible, of anything that smacks of nature-worship; a preoccupation with human beings and their salvation, such as dominates the New Testament; a suspicion of “the world” in some sections of the Gospel and Letters of John; and the Church’s historic focus on the status of the soul and its destination in heaven. I suggest that the New Testament writers, with their tendency to portray the end of the old creation as imminent, offer scant vision for the medium-term sustainability of human society. As a result, much of the worship and preaching in our churches completely ignores the ecological dimension of existence.

This deficit in our tradition is beginning to be articulated within mainstream Christian thinking. But my initial question returns with ever greater force – what does Christian belief have to contribute?

Here are a few outline thoughts:

- 1) We share with Jewish thought the sense of being created *a sabbath-keeping animal*. There is a rhythm to human life which long working hours, ready-meals over Netflix, and over-anxious consumerism tend to blur out. But it is fundamental to our health and that of the planet. To make Sunday a true Sabbath day of rest is not necessarily easy, certainly not for those in ministry or a range of other types of work. But I have come to see Sabbath as whatever time there is in a week when one gets back in touch with the person one truly is, the creature one is in the world, and the soul one is before God. Many of us found that space in new ways over lockdown, and the challenge now is to retain those insights and practices and not let the “new normal” sweep them away.
- 2) We also share with our Jewish friends the precious gift of the Psalms, the hymnbook and prayer manual of the ancient people of God, alas in

decreasing use in most churches. My favourite psalm is Ps. 19 which begins: "The heavens are telling the glory of God..."

It is endlessly intriguing how the praise of the Torah in verse 7-14 – a hymn to that sabbath-infused lifestyle I mentioned above – came to be attached to the opening section on creation's praise of God. But it is verses 3 and 4 that are of such importance to us at present:

"There is no speech, nor are there words;  
their voice is not heard;  
yet their voice goes out through all the earth,  
and their words to the end of the world." (NRSV)

The chorus of praise floods the earth. Yet human beings cannot hear it. We are such linguistic beings, and so bombarded with our own words, that we cannot hear this song. But how vital it is that we learn to listen for it, and for the groans of lament that accompany it where the non-human world is prevented from being itself by our carelessness and greed.

Again the lockdown experience of hearing birdsong anew is a vital clue. More generally the practice of making time to be still, to recover a sense of being part of creation, and created to offer our own song of praise, seems to me of the greatest importance.

- 3) That leads me naturally to my third insight. Human beings are not just praising animals, but worshipping animals, called to gather up creation's praise and offer it to God as part of retelling the story of God's ways with the world, and celebrating both the physical food and the spiritual food that comes to us from God. In short, *we are eucharistic animals*. This central act (for most Christians) is charged with ecological symbolism in its celebration of all creation, and of the power of the Spirit to enter, bless and transform the taking of food and wine. Yet how we have tended to distort it by over-individualised and over-formalised spiritualities that attenuate the relationship between the liturgy and our practices of eating and sharing.

Had I more space in this article I would develop the theme of food production and consumption, a really difficult and polarising subject for Christians. That is for another time. I want to end by acknowledging how problematic this area of thinking is, not least because no-one, at least no-one in the developed world, is guiltless. We all have carbon footprints, and consume non-renewable resources. A wise quotation I often draw on is Wendell Berry's famous observation that:

To live, we must daily break the body and shed the blood of Creation. When we do this knowingly, lovingly, skillfully, reverently, it is a sacrament. When we do it ignorantly, greedily, clumsily, destructively, it is a desecration. In such desecration we condemn ourselves to spiritual and moral loneliness, and others to want.

That is our ongoing challenge. I hope these brief observations offer you some clues, some threads you can follow into a more authentically sacramental life.

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*Longing and The Groaning of Creation: God, Evolution and the Problem of Evil.* This article is based on a talk that Professor Southgate gave at Green Christian's Building Back Greener conference. The talk can be viewed on Green Christian's YouTube channel.