

Jesus and the earth: the Gospel and the future of the environment.  
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## Jesus and the earth

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*“The Son of Man has authority on earth”*

When I was a student reading theology there was a popular joke:

Jesus said to Peter “Who do men say that I am?”

Peter said to Jesus “Thou art the eschatological manifestation of the ground of our being”

Jesus said to Peter “You what?”

It poked fun at how theological language and concepts can be so remote from people’s lives. Who on earth knows the meaning of eschatology? Well, it may not be widely understood, yet I suggest that the dominant theological concept that will push off the shelves all other ologies from ecclesiology to pneumatology will be eschatology. Why? Because it is the study of the end, a look into the future. To put it into popular speak “What on earth will happen to the earth?” or to give the question a theological slant “What in heaven’s name will become of the earth?”

The instability of the Middle East could have the same devastating consequences on the international body of nations as a burst appendix. Certainly since September 11th ordinary people have become more aware of their insecurity and of the fragility of the world. International terrorism, weapons of mass destruction, global market collapse, financial crises, epidemics of disease, disappearance of animal species, pollution of the seas and atmosphere, exploitation of national resources to the point of extinction present the ingenuity of the human family with the challenge of survival. You don’t have to be a pathological pessimist to begin to wonder where and how all this will end. The media have already begun to ask the question. Bryan Appleyard in the Sunday Times explored in a major feature the Top Ten Terrible Things that might happen to the world and a major TV Drama Series “The Second Coming” by the atheist Will Russell wondered how the Son of God might come again to the earth.

As society becomes more occupied with these doomsday scenarios the faith communities will engage in the debate and offer their own insights. Christian theologians have distinctive contributions to make. Paul Fiddes’ “The Promised End” and John Polkingthorne’s “The God of

Hope and the End of the World” take us gently yet resolutely to the edge to contemplate the future. I believe there will be a renewed popular interest in what different faiths have to say about our destiny both personal and global. Within Christianity there will be, indeed it has already started, a revisiting of the Bible to learn what the scriptures say about the end of the world.

In America popular novels about the end of the world have topped the best seller lists.

But these are not new questions. The Liverpool poet Gerard Manley Hopkins was facing them in his famous poem “God’s Grandeur”.

The world is charged with the grandeur of God.  
It will flame out, like shining from shook foil;  
It gathers to a greatness, like the ooze of oil  
Crushed. Why do men then now not reckon his rod?  
Generations have trod, have trod, have trod;  
And all are seared with trade; bleared, smeared with toil;  
And wears man’s smudge and shares man’s smell: the soil  
Is bare now, nor can foot feel, being shod.

And for all this, nature is never spent;  
There lives the dearest freshness deep down things;  
And though the last lights off the black West went  
Oh, morning, at the brown brink eastward, springs –  
Because the Holy Ghost over the bent  
World broods with warm breast and with ah! bright wings.

One wonders whether after the Johannesburg Summit Hopkins would have written so optimistically “Nature is never spent”.

It is the big ecological question: Have we passed the point of no return? Does the earth possess the power to heal itself? Does there still live “the dearest freshness deep down things”.

The purpose of this paper has a specific focus. It asks simply what was the attitude of Jesus to the earth. It is based on a conviction that to discern Christ’s attitude to the earth would be formative in shaping the outlook of those who learn from him under his authority.

When it comes to ethics of the environment or what could be called an earth-ethic Christians often turn to the pages of the Old Testament. I was recently asked to write the preface to a booklet on sustainable development by a leading evangelical charity. All the biblical references in this pamphlet came from the Old Testament, there were none from the Gospels.

In a conversation with the Chief Rabbi about Jewish environmental ethics when I quizzed him about Genesis he dismissed this (ever so graciously) as a typically Christian way of handling the Bible! In short, he went to the pages of Deuteronomy and to the law that forbade the invading forces to destroy any fruit-bearing tree as they lay siege to the cities of the Promised Land. On the nicety of this legal point did the Jew construct an ethic about the environment.

For various reasons both personal and theological (and, to be honest, it is difficult to disentangle the two) when it came to my study leave I wanted to see what the Gospels revealed of Jesus' attitude to the earth. My own spirituality has, since I was a boy, been heartily focused on Jesus. I read, translate and study the Gospels nearly every day. As I became more intensely aware of the critical issues facing the earth, not least through my encounters with young people, I found myself urgently enquiring whether this concern found any sympathy in the teaching and example of Jesus. **(Refer here to engagement with thousands of young people in Lent 2000)**. I am conscious of how much we read into texts and how we can obscure their meaning by the cultural baggage that we carry and, to change the metaphor, what we fail to see because of the smears that tint the lenses of our reading spectacles.

Up until my study leave if you had asked me what Jesus had to say about the earth and whether the Gospels had anything to give in formulating an environmental ethic I would have thought "precious little". All that has changed. I have read the Gospels again and again and am still reading. I am determined to read out of the text and not into it. Others will have to judge on that! I find myself unearthing things in the Gospels which persuade me that Jesus not only was earthed but also saw his mission as none other than the earthing of heaven. "Your will be done on earth as it is in heaven" was the logical sequitur of his prayer for the coming of the Good Father's Kingdom. This paper is a reflection on my search for evidence of the connectedness of Jesus to the earth and begins in the stormiest of waters and the furious debates over what Jesus meant when he called himself "The Son of Man". It is the only title that he ascribes to himself. Although, of course, he affirms acclamations that he is the Christ, the Son of God, Lord and God.

As I read through the Gospels I wrote down and marked in green all references to the earth (Those with CD Rom will find this not such a laborious task. By the way, there are 863 references to the earth in the whole Bible and 165 in the Gospels. Those interested in numerical detail will surely be impressed that this compares with 494 references to heaven and 537 references to love!

The number of references shows that the Bible is as interested in the earth as much as in the heaven!).

Again it was in that same conversation with the Chief Rabbi that he reminded me that in Hebrew the phrase “Son of Man” is Ben Adam, Son of Adam, and Adam is the one hewn from Adamah, the Hebrew for “earth”. This led me to write down and mark in red all references to the Son of Man and to see whether there are any occasions in the Gospels when Jesus refers to himself as Son of Man and in the same context talks about the earth.

There are at least six occasions when the green and red marks appear together, and maybe as many as ten depending on how you read the passages.

Every theologian I have talked to has urged me to be cautious about the significance of this and of assuming that Jesus would have been conscious of adam/adamah root to the designation “Son of Man”. What is clear is that this is the only title, if it is that, which he takes to himself. Is it, as Vermes argues, simply a circumlocution for the personal pronoun “I” or does it, as Walter Wink in his recently published “Human Being” argues, signify a title? And if it does and has its roots in Old Testament usage is it Daniel or Ezekiel or Genesis or the Psalms that are being evoked? However debatable that question is, what is indisputable is that Paul clearly saw a definitive relationship between Jesus and Adam (Romans 5 and 1 Corinthians 15). But was this ever in the mind of Jesus or even the writers of the Gospels?

Of the six passages in the Gospels where the Son of Man and the earth are explicitly mentioned together let us look at three from Luke, Matthew, and John.

The Lucan passage occurs in all these synoptic Gospels. It is the story of the forgiving and healing of a person paralysed and incapable of walking. Having absolved him Jesus says to him and his critics “The Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins”. Luke 5 v24.

Each synoptic Gospel account includes the reference to the earth. Why “on earth”? What is added to the meaning of his authority to forgive by stating explicitly that it was “on earth”? Many avenues of enquiry are opened up by this question. By suggesting one in particular I am

not suggesting the closing down of others. If, and I know the enormity of two-letter words however provisional they are in nature, if the title “Son of Man” had any allusion to Adam, to adamah and the earth, one avenue of enquiry would lead us to the opening chapters of Genesis. The context of this saying of Jesus is the forgiving of the paralysed man “Son, your sins are forgiven”. Once in Genesis the mention of sin takes us directly to the disobedience of the first Adam, the sin and its consequences. But is there any mention of the earth in the story of Adam’s falling into sin. There is of course. The result of their sin is that the earth is cursed.

Adam who was hewn from the earth and called to serve the earth (Genesis 2 v7,15) finds that his sin wreaks havoc on the earth: “cursed is the ground because of you”. (3 v17) (See the Septuagint where καταρα is used which is the word used in Luke).

The only way that the earth can be relieved of its curse is through the forgiveness, healing and restoration of Adam’s successors. It is not only Christian, Muslim and Jewish theologians who would concur with this view. Countless environmentalists, pressure groups and lobbyists would testify to the truth that the wholeness of the earth, the future of the planet, depends upon the repentance and restoration to wholeness of the human family. John McNeil’s “Something New under the Sun” shows how human folly and greed are responsible for disease of the earth. Lomborg in his book “The Sceptical Environmentalist” has sought to undermine these anxieties and received widespread publicity. However, his own scientific methods and conclusions have been dismissed as flawed by the Danish Committee on Scientific Dishonesty. You don’t have to believe in God to believe the biblical adage “You reap what you sow”. The earth bears the wounds of human sinfulness. “The whole creation has been groaning” says Paul clinging to the “hope that the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to decay”.

The future wholeness of the earth and the whole of creation according to Paul is bound up with the destiny of the children of God. A redeemed humanity is central to that vision. Key to that redemption is God’s forgiveness. In short, how can the earth be freed from the curse of human sinfulness? Only through God appointing and anointing a successor to Adam to have “authority on earth to forgive sins”. This is clearly how Luke saw Jesus. This Jesus who is “the Son of Man (who) has authority on earth to forgive sins” undoes the earth-damaging word of Adam. Luke is in no doubt that the person and work of Jesus are related to the first Adam. He may not articulate it with the eloquence of Paul in Romans 5 and 1 Corinthians 15. Yet two chapters earlier in the climax of his genealogy of Jesus Luke unequivocally states that this Son of Man who has authority on earth to forgive sins in Chapter 5 is not only “Son of God” but also “Son of Adam”, Ben Adam, Son of the One hewn from the earth. (Luke 3, v38).

Let us turn to Matthew for the second time that the Son of Man and the earth appear in the same context.

Forgiveness presupposes judgement. The authority of the Son of Man to forgive sins on earth assumes that the earth and its people are under some form of divine judgement. This is a theological idea which is out of fashion in many church circles although it is bedded in the imagination of popular attitude with the question “Well, if there is a God, why doesn’t he do something about the state of the world?”. There is an expectation that God will discern between good and bad, divide the people and act against those and that which is evil. Herein lies an aspiration for a God of justice to judge. I have often said that if we press the question and the hope for God to act in such a way, who, do we imagine, would be left? Such a longing for justice leaves us hoping for mercy. We look to God to be both Judge and Saviour. This notion that the earth and its people live under some experience of judgement is strongly felt by environmental lobbyists who daily point to the result of abusive human exploitation of the planet and to the ecological crisis now upon us. Crisis is the Greek word for judgement. When the media broadcast the headline “Environmental Crisis” they are declaring to the world a truth greater than we realise. We are reaping what we sow. This is the crisis, the judgement: “Do not be deceived” wrote Paul “God is not mocked, for you reap whatever you sow” (Galatians 5).

It is in the context of judgement that we come to our next passage in which we find Jesus speaking of himself as “Son of Man” and in the same breath talking about the earth. Matthew 12 40 ff:

“For just as Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of a sea monster, so for three days and three nights the Son of Man will be in the heart of the earth”. This reference to his death and burial yield many possible comparisons with Jonah’s experience. For the purpose of this paper I confine myself to the significance of laying the Son of Man, Son of Adam, (“hewn from the earth”) “in the heart of the earth” by simply posing the question “What happened to the earth when he died”. The earth quaked (Matthew 27 v51). What happened when God raised him from the earth? The earth quaked again (Matthew 28 v2). Prior to placing him in the earth and when raising him from the earth there were great earthquakes.

I have to confess that when preaching about the crucifixion I have seldom spoken of the earthquake preferring to concentrate on that other phenomenon, the tearing of the temple curtain from top to bottom. I have overlooked that in the passion narrative the Earth speaks as powerfully as the Curtain. As the Son of the One hewn from the Earth is laid in the heart of the Earth there is a seismic response from the Earth’s heart to his death and resurrection. Is this a voice in the chorus of the collective groaning of the whole of creation which Paul writes about in

Romans 8 v22? The Earth, God's creation, longing for liberation from the curse in Genesis and somehow knowing that its own freedom "from the bondage of decay" is extricably bound up with "the children of God" and "their redemption" and "their freedom" and that comes about through the death and resurrection of Christ Jesus "who has set us free" and in whom there is "now no condemnation" (Romans 8)

Staying with the motif of judgement it cannot escape consideration that Jonah's sojourn in the belly of a whale was a direct result of his disobedience and his determination "to flee from the presence of the Lord" (Jonah 1 v9). Like Adam with Eve who first "hid themselves from the presence of the Lord" (Genesis 3 v9) after the fateful act of disobedience when they ate off the tree in the middle of the Garden of Eden, so Jonah found himself under the judgement of God. The judgement on Adam was to "return to the earth, and to the dust you shall return" (Genesis 3 v19). When, therefore, Jesus says that the Son of Adam will like Jonah, judged in the belly of a whale, be laid in the heart of the earth are there echoes here of the judgement of the first Adam who was sentenced to return to the earth? The second Adam, the Son of Man, retraces the steps of the first Adam and tastes vicariously the wages of sin, not just death, exclusion from the presence of God, but the return to earth from whence the human family came. The question is therefore raised: As the Son of Man is laid in the heart of the earth after the manner of Adam and Jonah is there a nuance here of God's judgement being visited on Jesus vicariously as he takes upon him the sins of the cosmos that desecrate the earth?

Whatever construction is to be put on the story the truth is that the earth did not stay silent as it witnessed the Son of Man's death and resurrection. There are two other instances of earthquakes in the Gospel of Matthew. The first is in the catalogue of cataclysmic events that will preface "the birthpangs" of the end of the age (Matthew 24 v3,8).

"For nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom, and there will be famines and earthquakes in various places: all this is but the beginning of the birthpangs (Matthew 24 v 7,8)

The language of labour pains in the Gospel here is of a piece with the word and image that Paul used in Romans 8v22 of the whole of creation being in labour. The earth quakes as the whole of creation goes into labour to give birth to the reality of the New Earth and the New Heaven as prophesied in Isaiah 65. Central to these eschatological events on earth according to Jesus in the same chapter in Matthew is none other than "the Son of Man" (Matthew 24 v27-31).

Without at this stage attempting an exegesis of this apocalyptic passage the point to make is that Jesus, the Son of Man, seems especially conscious of his relationship with the earth and the earth seems vigorously vocal as the mission of the Son of Man unfolds. Indeed, in an earlier chapter

Matthew 19 v28 Jesus sees the “Son of Man” as central to “the renewal of all things”, the word is palingenesis – literally “the birth again of all things”. ‘Jesus said to them “Truly I tell you, at the renewal of all things, when the Son of Man is seated on the throne of Glory you who have followed me ..... will inherit eternal life”.

The fourth and first earthquake in Matthew’s Gospel is hidden from view by the way it is translated. It is in Matthew 8. Jesus, has spoken poignantly of how he the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head. The foxes have holes (in the earth) and the birds of Heaven their nests but he is pillowless. Getting into a boat on the Sea of Galilee he falls asleep. And the earth then quakes. The episode of Jesus stilling the storm (seismos) ends with the disciples asking the question “What sort of man is this?” The earth that gave birth to Adam now raises the question as to the identity of Jesus, the Son of Adam, at the outset of his mission.

And what is that mission? To do God’s will on earth as it is done in Heaven. His prayer and ours. His mission and ours. The earthing of Heaven. The Missio Dei. The Mission of God. No wonder the earth quakes as that mission unfolds through the unique ministry of the Son of Adam, the one hewn from the earth itself.

Turning to the Gospel of John we are arrested by the declaration: “All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being”.

This is a confessional statement about the Word who is Jesus. This is echoed through the primary chapters of Colossians, Ephesians and Hebrews. Colossians 1 v16 “For in him all things in heaven and on earth were created, things visible and invisible..... all things have been created through him and for him”. Never has so much theology hung on two such small prepositions.

It is these credal statements that lead to a high view of creation. It is the gift of Christ. Respect for and reverence of the earth follows as it does for the whole of the created order contained in that small “all”. This distinctively Christian insight ought to shape and form a Christian’s attitude to the environment. Creation does not exist for the human family but for Christ. The earth is here for us to delight in, to manage, to serve but its centre is inhabited by Christ alone and not us. It is a blasphemy to usurp Christ’s place. When critics of Christian attitudes to the environment such as Lyn White have lambasted us for elevating ourselves over the rest of creation and exploiting it by our own devices for our own desires they have been right to challenge such anthropocentrism. The Bible dethrones such ambitions and affirms the centrality of Christ not just to salvation but also to creation.

In John 12 we read “And I, when I am lifted up from the earth will draw all people/all things to myself. He said this to indicate the kind of death he was to die. The crowd answered .....  
“How can you say the Son of Man must be lifted up?”

Here again the Son of Man is found in the same context as the earth and is cast again in the role of the one who will draw all to himself. Echoes again of Colossians: “And through him God was pleased to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven by making peace through the blood of his cross”. The Son of Man’s mission is one of connectedness with the earth. Jesus self consciously sees himself on a mission through which he should lose nothing of what has been given to him. “I have come down from heaven (to earth?) not to do my own will, but the will of him who sent me. And this is the will of him who sent me, that I should lose nothing of all that he has given me” (John 6 v39). Jesus has the whole cosmos in his sights, not just individual souls who want to escape earth and bag a place elsewhere. The earth is within the cosmos.

Jesus had a high view of the earth even though he fully recognised that it was blighted by the curse of human sinfulness. In Matthew 5 he tells his followers “But I say to you, do not swear at all, either by heaven, for it is the throne of God, or by the earth, for it is his footstool”. The latter image might suggest something demeaning, a picture of God Atlas-like with fist-on-forehead, knee-bent and trampling earth beneath his foot. Nothing could be further from the truth. “Footstool” was far from a demeaning image. It was the word used to describe the Ark of the Covenant (1 Chronicles 28 v2) “I had planned to build a house of rest for the Ark of the Covenant of the Lord, for the footstool of our God”.

The footstool is God’s touching place, where his presence is found. Isaiah says:

“Heaven is my throne  
and the earth is my footstool .....  
..... all these things my hand has made  
And so all these things are mine (Isaiah 66 v1,2)

Herein lies the sacredness of the earth and the theological truth upon which Christians form an ethic about the earth. The reason we respect, cherish and revere the earth is precisely because it is God’s footstool, his resting place. This comes through in Jesus understanding in Matthew 10.

“Are not two sparrows sold for a penny?  
Yet not one of them falls to the earth  
Apart from your Father”

This verse shows the universal care of God. In many translations “knowledge” “knowing or “will” are added to “Father”. But in the original it is simply “without your Father”. Jesus shows God connected with the earth, Emmanuel, God with us.

Even though the earth is cursed by human sinfulness and bears all the wounds of exploitation and abuse it is nevertheless originally good and graced by the presence of God. So what is the future of the earth?

The New Testament uses ambiguous language when painting pictures of the earth’s future, language of continuity and discontinuity. For a full debate Tom Wright’s new book on the Resurrection and John Polkinghorne’s “The God of Hope and the End of the World” give a full guide.

I side with those who believe that there will be a continuity between the earth as we now know it “and the New Heaven and the New Earth” featured in Isaiah 65 and Revelation. The vivid language used to describe the future and in particular the Return of Christ suggest for the future a time of crisis as the earth gives birth to a new and transformed earth.

The connectedness of Jesus to the earth throws new light on the Lord’s Prayer for his “will to be done on earth as it is in heaven”.

The implications of the prayer are personal, parochial and political.

The petition of the doing of God’s will on earth as it is done in heaven which parallels the prayer for the coming of the Kingdom provides us with a phrase for the mission of God: the earthing of Heaven. World mission is the earthing of heaven globally; local mission is the earthing of Heaven locally.

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