

Saving Planet Earth

by Colin Russell, published by Authentic Media 133 pages £7.99

Reviewed by David Thistlethwaite

‘Saving Planet Earth – a Christian response’ is one of those book titles so current in its scope and meaning that you hardly notice it. And yet, with its cover photo of the Earth from space, it is highly provocative. Who is looking down on Earth, and who is doing the saving? Is it us, with our cameras in space, sizing up the problem and devising a solution? The temptation is to think so. ‘Let’s get enough people together and solve the problem’, just as we are ‘solving’ the problems of poverty, of Aids, of Africa, of crime, terrorism and democracy. But is it so cynical to doubt that we can?

The arithmetic of planet-saving is very simple. We have one earth, substantially messed up by people. The problem is so bad that even rich, comfortable people are starting to feel inconvenienced. People caused the problem, so people must put it right. That seems to make sense. So what we need is 7 billion saviours of planet earth. Let us get as many people as possible, of all religions and persuasions, to sign up to a life of ecological virtue and solve the problem! Wrong! A man, maybe a few men, might well be found who could sit in warm socks and overcoat all winter, using no fuel; but this stops far short of saving the planet - especially if someone less virtuous comes and steals his socks! 7 billion people cannot save themselves, let alone the planet. What we need is one Saviour, and 7 billion disciples.

A properly Christian book on saving the planet will help us see what one disciple might do, but will place the majority of our hope in what Jesus will do. It will not attempt to ground our activities in any virtue of our own; but will light up our desires in response to Him. A properly Christian book will be infectious about serving ‘the Lord of all the earth’, not because we can guarantee results, but because we have caught the flavour of God’s purposes. A properly Christian book will also not be tedious!

Colin Russell’s book passes all these tests. I did have one nervous moment when an extended comparison between the first Good Friday and that on which the latest IPCC report was published threatened to get into deep water: ‘...The recent Good Friday offered a much more limited hope, but one that extended to the Earth as a whole’, since the types of hope offered are really very different, the first a gift of grace, the second conditional on political and moral will. But the book also firmly states that ‘Christ will take over the Earth, still ravaged and polluted as it may be’, and that this ‘will be a time of unspeakable joy for those of us who have agonized over the dereliction that our race has caused to the planet and now see it restored to its proper glory, the handiwork of its Creator’. It is the realism, sincerity and fervour of passages like this that give such immediacy and sparkle to the book as a whole.

I have read quite a few books on Christianity and the Environment: until I read *Saving Planet Earth* I had no idea it was possible to enjoy one! This is of no small importance when you are looking for a book to recommend or give away. Colin Russell has put himself in the shoes of an ‘ordinary Christian’ (that is to say, a non-professor) who is

willing to be convinced, does not want to be lectured at, does not feel heroic and above all who does not want to be told five pieces of information where one will do. I have seldom met an author with such a gift (a spiritual gift?) of knowing when to stop!

When Russell does tell you something, it is always interesting, and it's spoken from the heart. He is not afraid to be opinionated: 'It has often been pointed out that a church that has largely abandoned psalms in its worship is a good prey to paganism. It is also a good prey to environmental carelessness' (p 89). But he writes in such an engaging 'man-to-man' style that every such comment gains a hearing. As an 'ordinary Christian' one can be allowed strong views and the odd arguable assertion.

The meat of the book is to explain how the world works and what is wrong with it, with enough science, told with irresistible enthusiasm, to explain the story. Here is part of Russell on water: 'Hardly any other substance behaves like this... There is more. Water takes an awful lot of heat to raise its temperature and still more to bring it to the boil. Hence we don't have violent changes in earth's water as the days get hotter. Water, as people say, 'keeps its heat' a long time (which is why it is best to be careful when eating hot jam tarts!). So we don't have sudden rushes of temperature up and down as the air temperature changes – life would not tolerate that. The technical way of talking about these phenomena is that water has high heat capacity and high latent heat. No other common liquid even gets close to water's qualities' (p14). He recalls explaining the ingenuity of water in a lecture, and a student responding 'you almost make me believe in God'.

The book opens, with great wisdom, by tackling the question of why the environment is normally so low on our priorities. Having demolished, without much moralism, our excuses, Russell then goes on to look at the major areas of trouble, pollution, destruction, and climate change, but not without first causing us to wonder at the wonderful world we enjoy. The shift from science to more directly biblical discussion in the latter part of the book ('the Earth is the Lord's; Stewardship; Mission: care of the poor') is managed without self-consciousness because Russell is as much an enthusiast of the Bible as he is of his science; and mostly just as engaging. Here is a Christian who thinks for himself – as we are all meant to do – and does not make you feel he is regurgitating church sermons! There may be points where theologians would disagree, or even frown: but they should also find the book worth reading.

So, finally, is this a book you could give your vicar, your minister, your pastor? It certainly passes the test of being biblical, not just to prove its points, but from the inside out. It is certainly well-informed, and with the information of someone who cares, rather than someone who has had to look things up. And it is blessedly short. Nor does it attempt to lecture theologians in their own field. So I would judge that no friendships, even those with busy vicars, would be harmed by giving away this book. Winsomely humble, 'normal', and yet utterly Colin Russell, it could cross many barriers, and I would hope, also convince some hearts.