



Hope and the Environment

How should we think about hope in the context of the ecological crisis we are facing? Ruth Valerio explains how the biblical promises about the future of this planet can inspire us to live responsibly in the here and now. The Church must take a leading role if we are to live more lightly on this earth.



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'All hope abandon ye who enter here', writes Dante, over the supposed entrance to Hell in his *Divine Comedy*. I would like to suggest that these famous words would not be out of place inscribed over the doorways of our conservation and environmental charities. Why? Because they have lost hope. In my work with A Rocha UK I am constantly hearing that the main message coming from the secular organisations is that we are too late. All hope is gone.

I have just come back from a week's teaching on Isaiah at the beautiful Lee Abbey in North Devon. Entitled, 'Earth, Wind and Fire: Experiencing Creation Through Isaiah', the aim was to see what Isaiah's words have to teach us about God, ourselves and the wider creation.

One of the passages I looked at was Isaiah 24. It has some characteristically strong words: 'The earth will be completely laid waste and totally plundered. The LORD has spoken this word. The earth dries up and withers, the world languishes and withers, the exalted of the earth languish. The earth is defiled by its people; they have disobeyed the laws, violated the statutes and broken the everlasting covenant. Therefore a curse consumes the earth; its people must bear their guilt. Therefore earth's inhabitants are burned up, and very few left.' (Isa 24.3–6)

One of the things I am struck by as I read these words is the link between the state of the earth and human sin. The ecological devastation that Isaiah describes here comes about because the world is caught up in the divine judgement about to befall its inhabitants who have disobeyed God's laws and broken his covenant.

It is interesting to consider that some time after Isaiah was speaking these words (probably during the exile, when Isaiah 40–55 was most likely spoken), the opening chapters of Genesis were being committed to papyrus. During the time of Isaiah the prophet (whose words are generally thought to have been captured in the first 39 chapters of the book) the Genesis creation narratives may well have been circulating orally. The words of Isaiah in chapter 24 surely take us back to the 'everlasting covenant between God and all living creatures of every kind on the earth', including Noah and all his descendants (Gen 9.16, and also vv. 9–11, 12, 13, 15, 17). Although the covenant appears in Genesis 9 to be unilateral, on God's side only, yet the people here have still managed to break it, perhaps alluding to the earlier words of Genesis 9.5–6 to do with bloodshed. The leaders in Isaiah's day are clearly not treating their people as people made in the image of God (e.g. 1.15, 21)!

These words of Isaiah's also take us back to Genesis 3 and the curse that God places on Adam: 'the ground is cursed because of you' (v. 17). The earth/the '*adamah*', is cursed because of '*adam*'. This wordplay in the Hebrew text calls to mind Genesis 2.7 and the dependence of man upon the earth. We are so intricately connected with and woven into the fabric of God's wider creation – humans from the humus – that what we do impacts that creation deeply.

How do we view human sin? We often see it in terms of its human consequences, but seldom do we see it in this wider ecological way. Isaiah can teach us much about learning to read the Bible with interpretive glasses that extend beyond human beings to include the wider creation.

NOTES

1. R Bauckham, *Bible and Ecology: Rediscovering the Community of Creation* (London: Darton, Longman & Todd: 2010), p. 93.

2. B McKibben, *Eaarth: Making a Life on a Tough New Planet* (New York: St Martin's Griffin, 2010), pp. 2–3.

3. *Ibid.*, p. 16.

4. World Bank, *Turn Down the Heat: Why a 4 Degree Warmer World Must Be Avoided*. http://climatechange.worldbank.org/sites/default/files/Turn_Down_the_heat_Why_a_4_degree_centrigrade_warmer_world_must_be_avoided.pdf

5. International Energy Agency, *World Energy Outlook 2012*. <http://www.iea.org/Textbase/npsum/weo2012sum.pdf>

6. NT Wright, *The Resurrection of the Son of God* (London: SPCK, 2003), p. 258.

7. First expressed at a gathering organised by myself and Margot Hodson and subsequently made into a paper, available at: http://www.jri.org.uk/wp/wp-content/uploads/JRI_23_Hope_Bauckham.pdf. The quotes in the following paragraphs are taken from this online paper.

8. A helpful resource if you want to read further around this area is B White & J Moos, *Hope In an Age of Despair: The gospel and the future of life on earth* (Nottingham: Inter-Varsity Press, 2013). Do also see the very relevant articles in the latest edition of *Anvil*, available here: <http://www.degruyter.com/view/j/anv>

Isaiah is writing into his situation in Israel, using apocalyptic language to describe something that is actually quite localised. However, writing on the similar language of Hosea 4.1–3, Bauckham says, 'what can only seem grossly hyperbolic in its original context looks only too realistic in the context of our own situation of worldwide ecological catastrophe'.¹ In other words, suddenly Isaiah's words sound only too familiar.

Okay, confession time. Now comes the bit I am least looking forward to writing. It's the bit where I tell you what is going wrong in the world. You probably know it already and are bored of hearing it. But I want to ask you to stick with me and take the time to be reminded. In global terms most of us reading this live comfortable lives. Not many of us are daily facing the realities of a world going wrong. The symptoms feel far away and, as a result, they slip down our list of priorities. For most of us, because environmental problems are not close to home, doing something about them becomes something to be considered once the other, more pressing, issues of church and family life have been dealt with. So let us pause for a moment to think about what is happening ecologically, and what looks set to happen, in our world today.

Please read this paragraph slowly and reflect on what each item looks like. Pollution. Climate change. Deforestation. Species extinction. Rising sea water levels. Drought. Floods. Erratic weather systems. Glacial melt. Eutrophication. Invasive species. Coral bleaching. Desertification. Soil erosion. Algal blooms. Giant islands of marine debris. Overgrazing. Peak oil. Endocrine disruption. Bioaccumulation. Smog. Acid rain. Phosphorus depletion.

We could continue this list for a while yet, but the picture we are painting is obvious: wherever we look in our world there are problems. The extent of this is so vast that the veteran environmental writer and campaigner, Bill McKibben (who also happens to be a Christian), called his latest book *Eaarth*.

The point he is trying to make is that our most recent human activities have so fundamentally altered the world we live on that we cannot call it 'earth' anymore: 'it's a different place. A different planet. It needs a new name'.² And his opinion, whatever we do, is that we are not 'going to get back the planet we used to have, the one on which our civilization developed'. Even if we were to stop all our harmful activities overnight, we would still be, he says, 'like the guy who smoked for forty years and then he had a stroke. He doesn't smoke anymore, but the left side of his body doesn't work either'.³

There is a constant stream of reports coming out from the scientific, conservation and development worlds documenting our changing environment and the negative impacts that are occurring. Two are particularly worth highlighting. They both came out in November of last year. The first, from the World Bank, looked at what the world is likely to experience if warmed by four degrees centigrade (on pre-industrial levels); something that scientists are virtually unanimous in predicting will happen if there is no serious policy change (and some scenarios are suggesting it may be even warmer).⁴

As expected, the consequences will be disastrous. Sea levels are already rising by 3.2 cm a decade and that will increase. Bear in mind that 100 million people live within 1 metre of sea-level rise around the world, not to mention the other species that live in these areas, and picture the impact that will have. Coral reefs will stop growing at a carbon dioxide concentration of about 450ppm (we're currently at 391ppm), which we're well on the way to hitting within the next few decades. It is thought that they will actually start dissolving by around 2050. Food production will drop considerably; drought will increase, as will other extreme weather systems, and species extinction will intensify. With 25 per cent of mammals, 33 per cent of amphibians, and 12 per cent of birds currently at risk of extinction, this is truly awful.

The second report came out in the same month and made terrifying reading when held hand-in-hand with what the World Bank was saying about the need for *serious* emissions cuts. The International Energy Agency's annual 'World Energy Outlook' painted a bleak picture of the future.⁵ It stated that no more than a third of already proven reserves of fossil fuels can be burned by 2050 if we are to prevent global warming exceeding two degrees, let alone four degrees. And yet, global energy demand is set to grow by more than a third till 2035 and fossil fuel subsidies are up almost 30 per cent on 2010: six times more than for renewables.

In other words, we're in serious trouble.

And yet ...

And yet, all of us reading this are people who profess a hope in Jesus Christ, by whom, for whom and in whom all things were created. And it is through this same Jesus Christ – through his blood, shed on the cross – that *all things* will be reconciled to God (Col 1.16–20).

As followers of Jesus we are people of hope and people of promise. As I read through the story of God and his creation that unfolds in the Bible I see two key promises that seem particularly pertinent for our current situation.

The first is that God's plans for salvation and for the future include all that he has made, not humans alone. God is intensely interested in, and loves, people, but his care and compassion extend beyond us to all living things, as the many creation psalms testify (e.g. Ps 65). Each aspect of his creation is good, but it is only when God reviews the achievements of all six days of creation that God concludes, 'it is very good' (Gen 1.31).

It hardly makes sense, therefore, for God to abandon that which he loves. Indeed, the Bible's vision of the future is a very earthy one, at which all creation will be present. We see this in the book of Isaiah, from 11.6–9 right through to 65.25. God is speaking his promise to his people in whatever situation they find themselves. Whether pre-exilic (as in the case of chapter 11) or post-exilic (as in chapter 65) Israel was not living in the fullness of God's plans for them and Isaiah's words encourage them to look forward to a time when there will be peace: peace between people, peace between

themselves and God, peace between domestic and wild animals, and peace between people and wild animals.

Isaiah's words, of course, are taken up into the climax of the Johannine revelation in chapters 21 – 22. Again, written/seen in a context of suffering and seeming hopelessness, John's vision calls him to lift his view above the situation in which he and the Church find themselves in and take a 'God's-eye' view instead. What he sees is a future in which God is fully present, and suffering and death are no more. This is located in what is often described as a garden-city, with a river and healing trees.

Romans 8.19–21 provides a further angle. Our future freedom is set within the context of the whole created order. We will not be separated off from it, like escaping from a sinking ship (to use DL Moody's infamous imagery): rather we will be set free to rule over the wider creation in the peaceful and loving way that was always intended.⁶

Whatever happens to this earth within ours and our descendants' lifetimes, we know that God has a future for it. That much is promised.

The second promise is that there will be radical transformation. We are now well trained to see the language of 'new heavens and new earth' as meaning not the total destruction of the present heavens and earth and their replacement with a totally new heavens and earth, but the renewal or transformation of the current order. One day, Jesus will return to this earth and God will act decisively to bring about an end to the current order of death, decay and evil: all that is bad will be gone; all that is good will be carried forward (surely the best understanding of 2 Pet 3.10).

We have hope that the present situation of ecological devastation will not last forever.

And yet ...

And yet, I find I struggle to reconcile the biblical promises with the reality with which I am confronted every day. What good is it to believe in a future hope, when all I see around me points to further suffering and collapse, for all areas of creation? Can I simply say, 'well, it'll all be alright in the end'?

I have found Bauckham's distinction between 'ultimate' and 'proximate' hope to be most helpful.⁷ Ultimate hope is that just described above: 'the unconditional hope that rests on God's faithfulness to his creation and the promise made in the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead'. Proximate hopes, rather, 'are all the hopes we have for the temporal future ... Our proximate hopes are for what we can desire and envisage that reflects, within this world, the ultimate hope of new creation'. Ultimate hope is unconditional, but proximate hopes depend partly on what we humans do. As such, they can be frustrated and disappointed.

Bauckham's point is that it is important to get the relationship right between these two types of hope, avoiding the extremes of being too other-worldly or working for utopia. Ultimate hope, in Bauckham's words,

'can fund proximate hopes': 'it enables us to work in the direction of God's purpose, knowing that we are working with God's purpose, working with the grain of the universe. But distinguishing ultimate hope and proximate hopes enables us to be appropriately modest and realistic about what we can hope for here and now in particular contexts.'⁸

So the biblical promises of the future inspire me to work and live in particular ways in the present. And 1 Corinthians 15.58 assures me that the things I do now – whether they seem to lead to tangible results or not – will not be wasted: they anticipate and will lead to the future inheritance.⁹

And this is the point of the apocalyptic literature of Isaiah, Revelation and elsewhere: 'the challenge for the apocalyptic writers was to encourage responsible action now.'¹⁰ What might such responsible, hopeful action look like today?

I would like to make a strong invitation to you to find ways to integrate this whole area into your church life. I mentioned on Facebook that I was writing this article and asked what I should be saying to you as church leaders. One person, a minister himself, responded, 'that if we don't take leadership both locally and internationally on this issue then we are failing in our responsibilities'.

Is this topic a regular part of your preaching programme, your discipleship courses and your children's and youth work?¹¹ Does part of your church giving go to supporting Christian environmental work, alongside the more traditional missionary activities? Are you thinking through how your church might help its community be moving towards a more localised, less carbon-intensive future? Are you as a church involved with, and learning from, your local Transition group?¹² Is your church a signed up member of Eco-Congregation?

Are you using your voice as a church to speak out on the national and global issues that impact our world (the recent 'If' Campaign has been a great example of that, and Friends of the Earth run very good campaigns)? Are you regularly helping the members of your church think about how they can live more lightly on this earth?¹³ Are you involved in practical projects in your area: little demonstrations of love for the place you inhabit?¹⁴

A few years ago, the Environment Agency brought out a list of 'the fifty things that will save the planet'.¹⁵ Some people were surprised that the second most important thing they highlighted was, 'religious leaders need to make the planet their priority'. You – we – are part of one of the biggest global networks that exists. Think what a difference we will make when we act together!

When we pray, 'may your kingdom come and your will be done on earth as it is in heaven,' we commit ourselves to trust and we commit ourselves to action. May you help your churches to do the same.

9. Wright, *Resurrection*, p. 223.

10. C Deane-Drummond, *Eco-Theology* (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 2008), p. 177.

11. My, *Environment Bible Study* (Farnham: CWR, 2008) is a good place to start, and both the A Rocha UK and Christian Ecology Link websites have lots of helpful resources.

12. See www.transitionnetwork.org.

13. My, *L is for Lifestyle* is full of useful suggestions as well as information and biblical teaching, and <http://arochalivinglightly.org.uk> is a good website with lots of tips.

14. There are some good examples here: <http://ew.ecocongregation.org/node/1094>.

15. See <http://image.guardian.co.uk/sys-files/Environment/documents/2007/10/31/50top.pdf?gclid=Article:in%20body%20link>.