**Finding hope for the whole of creation**

**CELEBRATIONEARTH!’s study pack for churches**

[**www.celebrationEarth.org**](http://www.celebrationEarth.org)

**This study pack has been designed to help churches and church organisations to reflect on our place within the whole of God’s Creation and to celebrate the hope that comes from engaging deeply with our faiths and with the rest of Nature. It draws upon key documents from the Orthodox Church., from the Pope’s environmental encyclical Laudato Si, from World Council of Churches materials and from the personal experience of its writer who has worked with the major faiths and Christian traditions worldwide for over thirty years. Its heart is the Bible and Christian tradition down the centuries.**

1. **Christ as King of All Creation**
2. **The arrogance of humanity – The Fall**
3. **Restoration**
4. **Passion**
5. **The Dream of the Rood**
6. **Ecological conversion**
7. CHRIST AS KING OF ALL CREATION

One of the more astonishing stories in the New Testament about Christ is his calming of the storm on the sea of Galilee. Luke 8 v22 to 25.

This is a very important story which to understand we need to know the much older Jewish story which lies behind this.

I have often heard people say, based on their understanding of the Days of Creation in Genesis, that the world was perfect until humanity was created. They say God saw it was good everyday and then we came along with the Fall and basically ruined it.

But the Jewish tradition tells something profoundly different. It points to the fact that according to Genesis 1, on the second day God was at best agnostic about what had been created for there is no comment that God saw that it was good. At the end of the account of each day the Bible says “God saw that it was good. For example Day 3 Genesis 1 v 10 or Day 1 when God “saw that the light was good” Genesis 1 v 4. But nowhere in Genesis 1 v 6 to 8, the second day, does God make any comment at all.

Naturally the rabbis asked Why? On that Day God divides the Waters into those above and those below. According to the Talmud – the ancient Jewish commentary on the Torah, the first Five Books of what we call the Old Testament- this work of Creation was carried out by the angels. So the angels divided the Waters and were about to fly back to God when the Waters below asked somewhat peevishly, “Why are we down here and that lot up there?” and the Waters above in a rather overbearing superior voice said “Well obviously we are better than you lot down there!” And violent argument broke out in the newly created universe.

The angels fled back to God and reported on the chaos whereupon God ordered them to go back and sort it out. But this only made things worse and the tumult and anger, pride and foolishness of the raging Waters was close to destroying all that had been created and was to be created. So, back fly the distraught angels. And God’s response is to command, “It Will Be!” and upon hearing this Divine command the Waters subside and return to their appointed places. Though throughout the Old Testament the Waters are seen as dangerous and unpredictable and it is often stated that only God is able to control them. For example, Psalm 104 v 3-9.

So within this context, when Christ commands the Waters to be calm (Luke 8 v 22 – 25) or when as in Matthew 14 v 22 - 32 Christ walks upon the waters, his Jewish audience knew that this was only possible for God and therefore in Christ they encountered the power of God, who alone can control the waters.

Why is this story important to those of us struggling to protect our beautiful world?

It is easy to think this was a perfect world until we came and messed it up. But the Talmud story tells us that this was already a complex, troubled world long before we were created. And this is exactly what evolution tells us. Entire worlds of species have come and gone; entire continents disappeared; yet life has continued. And always, in the faith of believers, it has been God whose Love lay behind the ups and downs of life on earth that have gone on. Creation – evolution – call it what you want – is about the processes by which life evolves and contracts; struggles and overcomes; requires diversity to provide the seeds of change and development. But over it all is the Love of God which lovingly allows life to create and follow its own path but which also has on occasions Spoken to help us understand what is needed next.

What has shifted is that now we are playing god but without the love, compassion, vision and power to make a new world.

Questions:

If chaos entered the universe on the second Day, why does the Bible say is was all Good at the end of all the seven days (Genesis 1 v 31)?

Does this mean that disruption is actually part of the Divine Vision? If so what does this help us as Christians to understand about evolution and what does it mean for our understanding of our place within all Creation?

Are we now playing God and if so, what can we learn from the Talmudic story and its notions of a God who listens and responds?

What elements of nature do we fear and why?

How much of what we do takes for granted aspects of creation when the Talmudic story makes clear how fragile this all is?

If only God can control the raging waters, how should we now understand the stories of Jesus and water?

1. The Arrogance of Humanity – The Fall

Have you ever noticed something rather strange about Christmas cards – or even more generally, about medieval and more recent – say 19th to 20th century – paintings of the birth of Christ?

In the medieval painting, Mary is surrounded by Nature. Not just the usual suspects – the ox and ass; lambs and sheep. There are often butterflies, bees, insects of different kinds, lizards and birds, flowers and planets. She is surrounded by nature and through the window at the back of the ruined building – a sign of the decay of human structures - you can see both domestic and wild creatures, hills and valleys, woods etc.

This is not surprising when one recalls that it was St. Francis who created the first nativity scene in a wood near the town of Greccio in 1223. Built secretly, he invited local people to come and see a life size model of the Nativity surrounded by nature. They were overcome with awe at seeing with their own eyes, what it might have been like on that first Christmas Eve.

Now look at the 19th century. Gone is anything else from nature other than us and the ox, ass, lambs and sheep – and quite often the animals have gone completely. What has happened to the rest of God’s Creation when the Son of God was born? We have removed everything expect ourselves and those animals, those aspects of nature that are useful to us!

And this illustrates perhaps the greatest conceptual shift ever in human thinking about ourselves. For the first time in known history, from roughly the 16th century onwards we believed we were apart from the rest of nature, apart from Creation itself, rather than a part of nature.

To do this we have had to ignore or rewrite parts of the Bible in order to make the Bible about humanity only, not about the whole of Nature.

For example, the Covenant that God makes with Noah is not the Covenant that God makes with Noah! Read Genesis 9 v 8 - 17

God makes the Covenant with “you, your descendants after you: with every living creature to be found with you, birds, cattle and every living wild beast with you: everything that came out of the ark.” Later in the same chapter God spells this out in shorthand:

“This is the sign of the Covenant I have established between myself and every living thing that is found on the earth.”

So the Covenant is actually with Noah and the whole of Creation! How strange that we have forgotten to mention that! Another worrying sign that we have put only us at the centre of God’s love.

Perhaps one of the most famous verses in the New Testament is John Chapter 3. Verse 16. The important word here is the Greek word for ‘world’ the “world” that God so loves. This word is Cosmos – namely the whole created order of the universe – or at least of the world. Heaven and earth; all that dwells therein and all that constitutes life on earth. So the Incarnation is a cosmic event not a purely human event. How strange that we seem to have largely forgotten that.

Finally let’s look at Colossians 1 verses 15 to 20. Here Paul is absolutely clear. Christ is “the first-born of all creation”. In him “were created all things in heaven and on earth.” Through Christ God reconciles all things to him, everything in heaven and everything on earth.”

Questions:

So how has this removal of the rest of Creation from our picture of God’s love and our place and meaning within that led us astray?

Is it possible to argue that the rest of creation is simply here for us?

 What have been the long-term consequences of thinking we are the Lords of Creation rather than God?

How can we retell the Christ story, or the story of God and Creation to overcome this separation that has happened between not just us and God but also us and the rest of Creation?

1. Restoration

The recovery of a more Biblical sense of our place in the compassion and love of God for all life is central to a return to four key relationships which have been broken by our pride, foolishness.

These four relationships are:

To be in right relationship with God;

To be in right relationship with the rest of God’s Creation;

To be in right relationship with our neighbours;

To be in right relationship with ourselves.

When any of these are out of kilter, we are out of kilter.

When we are in right relationship, the world becomes a much more wonderful, generous and creative place to be. And the difference also feeds directly into our understanding of why we are here and what the rest of Nature, Creation is all about.

It is perhaps most powerfully expressed in the teachings and prayers of the Orthodox Church. It is important to stress here something about the notion of Original Sin. There are three great faiths which share the story of the Fall. Judaism, Christianity and Islam. Neither Judaism nor Islam have any teachings about Original Sin. Only Christianity. And within Christianity, none of the Orthodox Churches believe in Original Sin either!

Why is this important in our relationship as set out above? Because it leads to a completely different understanding of our potential roles.

For the Orthodox Church, which has never lost sight of the relationship with the rest of nature so vividly portrayed in the medieval nativities, this is how the Ecumenical Patriarch, First Amongst Equals of the Orthodox Patriarchs sets out our role. In using the imagery of the priest, the Ecumenical Patriarch has in mind the local person, chosen often by the community to be their priest, to be their channel of grace between the community and God:

“Just as the priest at the Eucharist offers the fullness of creation and receives it back as the blessing of Grace in the form of the consecrated bread and wine, to share with others, so we must be the channel through which God’s grace and deliverance is shared with all creation. The human being is simply yet gloriously the means for the expression of creation in its fullness and coming of God’s deliverance for all creation.”

In other words, humanity is there to be a channel for the blessing of God on all life.

We are so used to thinking of ourselves as a curse or at the very least a considerable nuisance to the rest of nature. It shapes our response, especially fused with the idea that the world was perfect until Day 6 when we came along.

Questions:

So try thinking differently. Try and think in what ways humanity has been a blessing to the rest of nature.

Try thinking of ways in which we now need to return to this vision of being a blessing.

What would it require of us and our lifestyles to become a blessing rather than a curse?

It will probably be more difficult than you think and that is exactly why we need this radical vision of our human potential from the Orthodox Church.

Plan how a year in your life, the life of the church and the life of your local communities would look if the underlying purpose was to be a blessing.

1. Passion

The heart of the Christian liturgical, symbolic life is Holy Communion, the Mass, the Lord’s Supper – call it what you will. And this is a vivid illustration of how through Christ and through self-giving we are able to restore our relationship with God, with each other and with nature.

Think of the common phrase used by so many different Christian traditions about the bread and wine of communion.

“Loving God,

through your goodness,

we have this bread and wine to offer,

Which earth has given

And human hands have made…” (Iona Abbey Worship Book)

Taking the gifts of nature and our gifts of creativity and invention we turn wheat and grape into bread and wine. Then Christ takes them, these mundane yet vital ingredients of the life we have made, and turns them. Turns them initially from symbols of life to symbols of death – the broken body, the spilt blood. This is so often how our descriptions of our relationship with the natural world ends in popular discourse. Fruits spoilt; lives ruined; nature destroyed. And it is often so.

But then Christ turns the wheel again. Christ, through his death and resurrection turns them from symbols of death to symbols of hope, of healing of a New Covenant which echoing that with Noah and all living beings is cosmic not just human. It is as if we have gone 360 degrees in one simple moment of symbolism. From gift to partnership to death to restoration through the Passion of the cycle of our place in God’s purpose and within God’s Creation.

What an amazing statement this simple dedication prayer offers. As the Ecumenical Patriarch has said: “When we partake of the body and blood of Christ, God meets us in the very substance of our relationship with creation and truly enters into the very being of our biological existence.”

This profound sense of being part of does not mean we don’t have a special role, a sacred place within God’s purpose. For many in the environmental world the Bible is seen as having given us licence to abuse of nature especially in the words of Genesis 1 v 28 – 31. This is based upon the understanding of the powers and authority that God gave humanity on the 6th Day. This has led to much study of the precise words used in Hebrew, especially those which are traditionally translated into English as “subdue” or “dominion” or “master”. There is no doubt that this has fed ideas of powers which have then been abused. But let’s go back again and see where this has come from.

If you read any ancient literature of the Ancient Middle East or of the great civilisations of Persia, Greece or Egypt, you will find human beings have little real meaning. We are but the playthings of the gods. For example, Achilles had no choice but to do what he did in the story of the Fall of Troy – the Iliad. Nor did Gilgamesh, king of Urik and Enkidu his challenger in the oldest complete story from the ancient Middle East, the Epic of Gilgamesh. They were simply puppets used in cosmic battles by feuding families of gods. There is no idea of free will in these great stories.

The radical thing about the Biblical Creation story is that it took a well know ancient story pf the Days of Creation which has human beings as playthings of the gods and turns it on its head. Instead of puppets we are offered the chance of being partners with God. Instead of being just one creature amongst others we are offered a position of responsibility within Creation. To be able to make this huge conceptual leap from slaves of fate to free will and real partnership, the Bible emphasises how we are different from the rest of Creation and uses language to stress that we cannot pretend we do not have these powers. We are shown a mirror in Genesis 1: 28 -31. The mirror shows us for the creative and destructive force within nature that we are. And we need to be honest about this. We are the most powerful element of Creation and pretending that we are just another species doesn’t deal with the moral issues of free will and our ultimate responsibility. As far back as the time of the writing of the Psalms Judaism was struggling with this. Psalm 8 spells this out clearly in a few verses and poses the question, so what are we and why are we here?

Sometimes elements of the environmental movement want to pretend we don’t have this power. This responsibility. But we do as Pope Francis spells out in his Encyclical on the environment, Laudato Si: “…[being part of nature]….does not put all living beings on the same level nor [does it] deprive human beings of their unique worth and the tremendous responsibility it entails.” (Pg 53). We now know that wherever human beings have emerged throughout the last thirty to fifty thousand years, within a few thousand years all the mega fauna have been hunted to extinction. Everywhere. The Bible asks us to look at our real power and asks us to decide how we use such power.

Orthodoxy captures the ‘tremendous responsibility” the Pope speaks about:

“We must attempt to return to a proper relationship with the Creator AND the creation. This may well mean that just as a shepherd will in times of greatest hazard lay down his life for his flock, so human beings may need to forego part of their wants and needs in order that the survival of the natural world can be assured. This is a new situation – a new challenge. It calls for humanity to bear some of the pain of creation as well as enjoy and celebrate it.”

In other words, we need to follow Christ through the passion of taking bread and wine and making it symbolise pain and death in order to then come through and understand what it means to be responsible before God for life on earth.

Questions

How do we make the cycle of the symbols of wheat and grape to blood and wine actually mean something profound about our relationship to God and creation?

What does the Bible show us of the true nature of human beings and our power – or the way we have taken power over other creatures?

Can we see anything that shows we know we need a Passion of Humanity if creation is to survive?

What pains should we be consciously taking up for the sake of life on earth?

Moving on from the Blessing idea, what are we now called to sacrifice in order to be a blessing?

1. The Dream of the Rood.

Sometime around the 7th to 8th century AD the most extraordinary poem was created in Old English. Its name is the Dream of the Rood from the Anglo-Saxon word for tree – and in this context specifically the tree of the crucifixion. The oldest surviving text is carved in runes on the huge and magnificent 8th century stone cross housed in the church of the town of Ruthwell, Dumfries and Galloway in Scotland.

This unique poem – for nothing even close to this is found in any other literature, tells the story of the crucifixion of Christ from the stand point of – the Tree.

It opens with the tree describing how it was cut down in the forest, trimmed and then hauled off to the city. Then we encounter Christ. Remember, it is the tree talking:

“Men bore me on their shoulders and set me on a hill. Many enemies held me fast there. I saw the Lord of All coming swiftly and with such courage to climb upon me. I did not dare to bend or break then when I saw the surface of the earth tremble, for it was against my Lord’s desire. Tumbling I could have felled all my enemies, but I stood firm and true. Then the young warrior, God Almighty Himself, stripped, and stood firm and without flinching, bravely before the multitude He climbed upon the cross to save the world. I shivered when the hero clung to me, but I dared not bend to the ground, for fall to the earth. I had to stand firm. I was a rod raised up, I bore on high the mighty King, the Lord of Heaven. I dare not stoop. They drove nails into me – see these terrible injuries, the open wounds of malice. I dared not injure the enemies. They insulted us both and I was soaked in the blood that ran from the Man’s side after He set his spirit free. On that hill I saw and endured much. I saw the God of Hosts stretched on the rack. I saw darkness covering the lifeless body of the Ruler with clouds.

All creation wept, weeping and mourning for the death of the King. For Christ was on the cross.”

The poem goes on to tell the story through to the resurrection.

What an astonishing way to tell of the Passion and death of Christ! From the standpoint of another species. And European Christianity is full of stories about how Creation reacted to humanity’s killing of the Christ. Why does the donkey have the mark of a cross on its back? From carrying Christ into Jerusalem on Palm Sunday. How did the robin get its red breast? From trying to pull the crown of thorns from Christ’s head which resulted in a thorn piercing its breast. How did the crossbill get its crossed beak? From trying to pull the nails out of the hands and feet of Christ.

These stories are not important to ornithologists. We know that evolution as the instrument of God’s creative love created the robin’s red breast and the crossbill’s beak for reasons other those given above. But these stories have been told by storytellers wanting to find some way of expressing what they knew: that all of creation wept because Christ was on the Cross.

We used to dismiss these as just old fashioned folk fables. But as we have learnt over the last hundred years or so, such stories contain profound wisdom and insights. These stories have kept alive the understanding that Christ’s Passion was a cosmic event – for all life not just us. And that at its heart is how we rebuild our relationship with the rest of Nature, which saw and understood the betrayal of God that humanity committed not just through the killing of Christ but through so much of our relationship with the rest of God’s Creation.

The Dream of the Rood challenges our anthropocentric view of not just the Passion of Christ, but frankly of our overall worldview. Some find it almost blasphemous to see the Crucifixion through the eyes and feelings of a tree. Yet those of the Anglo-Saxon tribes who first converted to Christianity saw it as utterly natural in the truest sense. This wonderful poem and insight has been largely forgotten until very recently. Perhaps it has re-emerged just when we needed its insights again.

According to Matthew 27: 51 and Mark 15: 38, at the moment of Christ’s death, “the veil of the Sanctuary was torn in two from top to bottom.” The Sanctuary of course was the most sacred part of the Temple in Jerusalem. What we tend to forget is what that veil, which hid from sight the Holy of Holies depicted. It was the Six Days of Creation.

Questions:

How does the Dream of the Rood make you feel?

Does it make you see the Crucifixion differently and if so how?

Try taking another species – the robin, the donkey, the darkening sky and lowering clouds – and retell the story from that point of view.

Why do you think that Matthew and Mark tell the story of the veil of the Sanctuary being torn in two?

When you have read the Dream of the Rood and the story of the veil being torn in two, what do you think Paul means in Colossians 1 verses 15 to 20?

1. Ecological Conversion

In the most significant document the Catholic Church has ever produced on the environment, Pope Francis in the Encyclical Laudato Si published in 2015 calls for a radical response to the crises of our planet - human and natural. He asks us to “hear the cry of the Poor and the cry of Nature.”

He asks for an “ecological conversion” which he sees also as a “community conversion.”

“This conversion calls for a number of attitudes which together foster a spirit of generous care, full of tenderness. First, it entails gratitude and gratuitousness, a recognition that the world is God’s loving gift, and that we are called quietly to imitate his generosity in self-sacrifice and good works: “Do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing… and your Father who sees in secret will reward you” (*Mt* 6:3-4). It also entails a loving awareness that we are not disconnected from the rest of creatures, but joined in a splendid universal communion. As believers, we do not look at the world from without but from within, conscious of the bonds with which the Father has linked us to all beings. By developing our individual, God-given capacities, an ecological conversion can inspire us to greater creativity and enthusiasm in resolving the world’s problems and in offering ourselves to God “as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable” (*Rom*12:1). We do not understand our superiority as a reason for personal glory or irresponsible dominion, but rather as a different capacity which, in its turn, entails a serious responsibility stemming from our faith.” (Page 120 op.cit)

Questions and action:

What does an “ecological conversion” look like?

It looks like an audit! How much energy does your church; your parish hall; your church school or club or vicarage/manse consume? How can you reduce it? The Church of England has just announced that its 40,000 buildings will be carbon neutral by 2045. How can you join this and what do you need to do? Start by visiting eco-congregation [www.eco-congretation.org](http://www.eco-congretation.org)

What foods do you as a community purchase? How many are organic and local; free range and fair trade? Audit them and see how you can increase your consumer power!

What about investments? Where does your church bank and what shares does it, the diocese or any Church organisation you belong to have and with whom? There is now a major movement to shift faith investment into pro-actively environmental and sustainable investing. For long we have known what faiths were against – gambling or alcohol, or armaments and so forth. Now the question is how can you disinvest from toxic shares such as fossil fuels and where do you then put that money? Are there other investments that ned to be changed? The new organisation driving this is FaithInvest which simply asks, “We know what you are against. What are you for?” [www.faithinvest.org](http://www.faithinvest.org)

Does your church have a travel policy? What might that look like?

And don’t just do this for the church! Look at the budgets you personally have control or influence over: personal – where is your pension money? What is your fuel consumption and how could you improve it? What work; school; club; social network budgets do you have some influence over? Ask for an audit of where that money goes and where it is invested.

All this we can do and it is worthy and important and will gradually make a difference as other imitate you.

But the most important gifts we people of faith bring is are very simple ones.

Ones we take so much for granted we don’t realise their huge power.

In a world where apocalyptic preaching is no longer in the churches but in the media and environmental organisation we bring Thankfulness and Celebration.

Recently colleagues in East Africa produced a “A Faith based Education for Sustainable Development toolkit for use in schools across East Africa. The Education for Sustainable Development (ESD) is an international education programme under the wing of the United Nations and active in over a hundred countries. This was the first ever Faith based version and created huge interest – and not a little suspicion. My colleagues who was directing the project, Sister Mary, was challenged at an international ESD meeting as to what the difference was between the secular ESD and the Faith based one. “It is very simple” she said. “You start by saying what is wrong. We start by saying ‘Thank You.’”

That is the first radical insight we bring.

The second is this. When Prince Philip as International President of WWF suggested that the 25th anniversary of WWF should bring the major religions together with the major environmental organisations and he planned this to be at Assisi, Italy in late 1986 he asked me to design the event with him. We decided to announce that this would be a Celebration of the potential partnerships between the faiths and the environmental movement. This created outrage from many in the environmental world. “How on earth can you celebrate when things are so bad?” was the basic criticism. To which we replied, “If it isn’t worth celebrating then why would you bother to save it?” That meeting in 1986 lead to the creation of literally hundreds of thousands of faith based environmental programmes around the world. The UN has described the faith-based environmental movements as “the largest civil society movement on climate change in the world”. In fact it is far greater than just climate change and like the Pope’s Encyclical, it takes climate change seriously but also pollution; water; loss of biodiversity; social collapse and poverty.

Something worth celebrating perhaps?

And in the end, as we have explored, the real crises facing us are not those listed above. They are the old crises of stupidity, pride, jealousy, greed, anger, envy and violence. We have delved into our faith’s responses to some of these over the six sessions. Now it is time to bring them – to the party!

Which is why we are now launching a five year special programme called CelebrationEarth! Of which this is one fruit. [www.celebrationearth.org](http://www.celebrationearth.org)

Invitation:

So, we invite you to plan a local, or regional – city or town Celebration in the period of Creationtide which runs from St. Giles’ Day 1st September to St. Francis’ Day Oct 4th and is the newest liturgical season in the Churches’ calendar.

Visit CelebrationEarth to find ideas, resources and links with many, many different groups from the worlds of different faiths, the Arts, Science, environmental organisations (WWF and RSPB for example as well as Frog Life and the Butterfly Conservation Trust), youth groups and Education.

And maybe come and join us for the national Celebration of our Earth which will take place in the City and around the cathedral of St. Albans in the midst of Creationtide and at the Equinox – 18th to 20th September of this year.

Final Question:

What would you want to highlight in any such Celebration – and why – and how?