



Week Five

**CREATION GROANS
IN PAINFUL HOPE**

And it was good



CREATION GROANS IN PAINFUL HOPE

This week, as we approach the events of Holy Week and Jesus' passion, we are faced with the destructive power of creation which, according to one of our readings, is *groaning in labour pains*. According to Matthew's Gospel, creation itself responded to Jesus' crucifixion and resurrection, by darkness and earthquake (*Matthew 27.45, 51*).

How far can we talk about creation itself being redeemed, rescued from death and decay, through the ministry of Christ? Both of this week's passages raise particular questions in relation to the current ecological crisis – and the passage from 2 Peter in particular, in its attitude to creation, challenges us to reflect when we can and when we cannot use the Bible as a tool for moral and practical guidance.

Bible Exploration

Romans 8.12-27

St Paul presumably did not have the modern anxiety about 'global warming' in mind when he wrote these words to the Christians in Rome. But they strike a chord with our contemporary situation, reminding us once again of the interconnection between all living creatures, including humanity, and the natural world.

In verses 19-23 the language is vivid: earth is pictured in feminine imagery struggling with *labour pains* to give birth to the new creation, in which humans can properly be called the sons and daughters of God.

In Paul's view, the hope that faith in Jesus brings is not just for people, but for the whole of creation. In our day, it is becoming clear that the more we are set free from our enthrallment with consumerism, the better it will be for the earth and all life in it; the more we allow our status as children of God to critique our lifestyle, the less creation will groan under our oppression. [Lent 2011: Creation, The Church of Ireland, page 8]

This passage does indeed speak of pain, but pain suffered in hope. Paul's words are notable for the way they reveal the intimacy of relationship between our *Abba* father and God's human children: God's Spirit and our spirits in deep communion.

2 Peter 3.1-13

As in Romans 8, these verses offer us a picture of the world as we know it suffering pain, yet in hope. 2 Peter is such a fierce book that its place within the New Testament canon was disputed in a number of churches in the early Christian centuries.

It was common among Greek, Roman and Jewish writers of the New Testament era to reflect on the ending of the world by fire, or through a second *deluge* which would parallel the earlier deluge by water (2 Peter 3.6: cf Genesis 6-8). 2 Peter links this with ideas from Israel's prophets about the coming of *the day of the Lord* (cf Isaiah 13.6-9; Amos 5.18-20; Zephaniah 1.14-18; Joel 2.28-31, cited by Peter on the day of Pentecost). The last verses of our Old Testament speak of this *day* (Malachi 4.5-6), which is seen by the Gospel writers as fulfilled in the coming of Jesus. The first Christians then looked for it in the return of Christ, *the day of the Lord* full of hope, Paul can claim (cf 2 Corinthians 1.14) as well as calling us to account (cf 1 Thessalonians 5.1-11).

Yet this letter looks beyond destruction to the *new heavens and earth*, born out of the painful death of the old, death-filled order of things. It depicts, as it were, a reversal of Genesis: there, God's good creation descends into deepening evil and destruction – in Christ, all things are made new (as we saw in Week Two). Believers are called to live in the light of God's new creation, in disciplined hope. There is an analogy here with human existence: though we are made in God's image, left to our own devices we experience the law of sin, and cannot avoid the ending of our being through death. Even so, we live now in the light of the resurrection hope we have in Christ.

However, where 2 Peter presents a particular challenge is in the instructions it gives to Christians in relation to these events. We are to live lives of holiness, demonstrating this by *waiting for and hastening the coming of the day of God, because of which the heavens*

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will be set ablaze and dissolved, and the elements will melt with fire (verse 12). It is the force of the word *hastening* that is especially problematic. The letter could be read as encouraging readers to behave in such a way that the earth will heat up more quickly – though that could hardly be described as holiness. Yet some Christian fundamentalists argue that it is their duty to live so as to speed up climate change! Such a way of ‘using’ scripture has never been regarded as legitimate within the Anglican tradition.

Reading the Bible with Anglicans around the World

The year 2010 saw a number of cataclysmic events around the world, in which the earth really has seemed to be *groaning in labour pains*, especially in the Pacific region. There has been the wide-spread severe flooding in Pakistan, Thailand, Australia, particularly Queensland and Victoria; recurrent earthquakes in Christchurch, New Zealand and Turkey; rising sea levels in island nations such as Kiribati and Tuvalu; and there has been the earthquake, tsunami and nuclear tragedy in Japan.

How have Anglicans used and interpreted the Bible in relation to these events? At first sight the answer seems to be 'with considerable reticence'. Anglicans do not, 'officially' at least, seem to want to draw direct links between these natural disasters and biblical teaching about creation. In this Anglicans may differ from some other Christians who have linked the floods, the earthquakes and the tsunami to biblical prophecy or divine punishment (*a quick trawl around Google will give plenty of examples!*).

One way Anglicans are using the Bible in response to these events is in the context of worship. In Australia, New Zealand and Japan, for example, there have been dignified and powerful services in which people have expressed their pain and loss and pledged to work together with their fellow citizens to help repair the world. In Christchurch, the liturgy drew on Habakkuk 3 (*which speaks of the earth quaking*), Psalm 102 (*in which the psalmist calls upon God in the day of distress*), and the conclusion of Romans 8 with its assurance that nothing can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus. In services such as these the Bible is read and proclaimed without necessarily being 'explained' or 'interpreted'. What might this say to us about ways of 'Using the Bible in the Life of the Church'?

Reflection

Look together in silence for 5 minutes at these pictures of creation groaning. Following the silence reflect, as a group, on what that experience was like in the light of this week's session.



Reading the Bible with Anglicans around the World (continued)

At the time of the earlier Asian tsunami, in December 2004, Archbishop Rowan Williams reflected on what we can say about God, creation and humanity on such occasions. This is part of what he wrote:

In 1966, when the Aberfan disaster (a coal tip in Wales collapsed and buried a school in which many young children died) struck, I was a sixth former beginning to think about studying theology at university. I remember watching a television discussion about God and suffering that weekend – with disbelief and astonishment at the vacuous words pouring out about the nature of God’s power or control, or about the consolations of belief in an afterlife or whatever. The only words that made any sense came from the then Archbishop of Wales, in a broadcast on Welsh television. What he said was roughly this: ‘I can only dare to speak about this because I once lost a child. I have nothing to say that will make sense of this horror today. All I know is that the words in my Bible about God’s promise to be alongside us have never lost their meaning for me. And now we have to work in God’s name for the future.’

He was speaking from the experience of losing one child; but he was able to speak about a much greater tragedy simply because of that, not because of having a better explanatory theory.

‘Making sense’ of a great disaster will always be a challenge simply because those who are closest to the cost are the ones least likely to accept some sort of intellectual explanation, however polished. Why should they? Every single random, accidental death is something that should upset a faith bound up with comfort and ready answers. The question: ‘How can you believe in a God who permits suffering on this scale?’ is therefore very much around at the moment, and it would be surprising if it weren’t – indeed, it would be wrong if it weren’t. Effects follow causes in a way that we can chart, and so can make some attempt at coping with. So there is something odd about expecting that God will constantly step in if things are getting dangerous. How dangerous do they have to be? How many deaths would be acceptable?

So why do religious believers pray for God’s help or healing? They ask for God’s action to come in to a situation and change it, yes; but if they are honest, they don’t see prayer as a plea for magical solutions that will make the world totally safe for them and others.

All this is fair enough, perhaps true as far as it goes. But it doesn’t go very far in helping us, with the intolerable grief and devastation in front of us. If

some religious genius did come up with an explanation of exactly why all these deaths made sense, would we feel happier or safer or more confident in God? Wouldn't we feel something of a chill at the prospect of a God who deliberately plans a programme that involves a certain level of casualties?

The extraordinary fact is that belief has survived such tests again and again – not because it comforts or explains but because believers cannot deny what has been shown or given to them. They have learned to see the world and life in the world as a freely given gift; they have learned to be open to a calling or invitation from outside their own resources, a calling to accept God's mercy for themselves and make it real for others; learned that there is some reality to which they can only relate in amazement and silence. These convictions are terribly assaulted by all those other facts of human experience that seem to point to a completely arbitrary world, but people still feel bound to them, not for comfort or ease, but because they have imposed themselves on the shape of a life and the habits of a heart.

Most importantly in this connection, religious people have learned to look at other human faces with something of the amazement and silence that God himself draws out of them. They see the immeasurable value, the preciousness, of each life.

[Rowan Williams, www.archbishopofcanterbury.org/articles.php/649/the-asian-tsunami]

Questions for Discussion

1. How important for you is our faith that **nothing can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus** at times of catastrophe? In what ways does Paul's claim that the Spirit prays for us in our weakness offer you comfort and support?
2. How do you respond to the depiction of '**the day of the Lord**' in 2 Peter? What problems does it raise? What hope does it offer? What can we learn from 2 Peter about how we should or should not interpret scripture? What are the criteria and assumptions you use?
3. We have noticed the way that one way of using the scriptures is as key resources for worship (*without seeking to 'explain' them*). How far do you think it is appropriate to use the Bible in such ways – or is it avoiding the challenge?
4. Looking back over these five studies, how do you think creation might be **redeemed** (as *Romans 8.21 suggests*)? Consider how your responses may shape the way you approach Holy Week, and affect our lifestyles as Christian people.



Sharing our Insights

What do you want to share with fellow Anglicans as a result of your study and discussion?



Are there comments you wish to feed back into the Bible project? You may wish to do this directly via the feedback form on the Anglican Communion website or email them to the Bible project coordinator.

A feedback form can be found on the Anglican Communion website at: www.aco.org/ministry/theological/bible/lent.cfm

Closing Prayer

(Written at the time of the Asian Tsunami in 2004)

Where were you God?

*Where were you when the ocean
broke the shore?*

I was playing on the beach.

Fishing in my boat.

Eating breakfast with my family.

*Where were you when the sea
sucked lives away?*

I was holding on tight until I couldn't.

Afraid and running.

Caught in the swirling chaos.



Where were you when all those people died?

I was struggling to breathe.

Letting go.

Counting the lights entering eternity.

Where were you when the waters receded?

I was standing on the shore.

Weeping with grief.

Aching to hold my lost people.

Where were you in the days that followed?

I was searching and hoping.

Burying the dead.

Seeking shelter, food and comfort.

Where are you now God, where are you now?

I am where you are.

Always.

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