

A photograph of a savanna landscape at sunset. A large, dark tree stands in the foreground, silhouetted against the bright sun. The sun is low on the horizon, creating a warm, golden glow. The sky is filled with soft, wispy clouds. In the distance, there are rolling hills and another smaller tree on the left.

**Song of the prophets:  
a global theology  
of climate change**

November 2014

**Miriam Nzioka is a member of an environmental group in Kenya that has set up a tree nursery. The trees strengthen river banks and farmland, reducing the impact of flooding and drought.**



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Poverty is an outrage against humanity. It robs people of dignity, freedom and hope, of power over their own lives.

Christian Aid has a vision – an end to poverty – and we believe that vision can become a reality. We urge you to join us.

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Cover: In the dry landscape of Yabello, Ethiopia, food insecurity is exacerbated by rising temperatures and increasingly unpredictable weather.

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## Executive summary

This paper seeks to underpin theologically Christian Aid's work on the most pressing issue of our times – climate change.

It begins from the experience of Christian Aid's partners, many of whom already live with the most challenging realities of climate change. It affirms that climate change is being caused by and contributing to the injustices and inequalities of our world. It listens to theologians who speak from the global South, from the contexts where climate change is having its greatest impact. And it offers theological reflection that brings both challenge and hope to all of us.

The theological thread drawing these reflections together is the theme of prophecy. Prophets are those who offer the most trenchant and clear-sighted critique of and challenge to wider society. But most importantly, they also hold out a source of hope rooted in the God whose promises cannot fail. In the most difficult situations, when we can see no way forward, prophets are those who help us to reimagine the world, find faith again, and inspire us with the hope to keep on singing.

From the global South, we hear the very clearest insights into the urgent situation facing us all and a challenge to do something before it is too late. We are reminded that we need to press on for climate justice. And we are called to reframe our theologies of creation, and to live by them, in renewed faithfulness to the wisdom of Scripture.

As we return to Scripture and to the central traditions of our Christian faith, we find again sources of hope that we need now more than ever: hope that will carry us through tough times ahead, hope that will inspire us to change our lives and to campaign for global change, and hope that, ultimately, God's loving purposes will prevail.



This home in the Philippines was destroyed by Typhoon Haiyan in November 2013.

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I am grateful to those partners and theologians from the global South whose expertise, wisdom and passion give this report its most powerful testimony. In particular, thanks to Elias Abramides, Jesse N.K. Mugambi, Katalina Tahaafe Williams, Guillermo Kerber and Vincent Manoharan, who have written contributions for this paper. Please listen to them above all.

**Susan Durber**  
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## Introduction

Theology and modern climate science have had an uneasy relationship. In 1967, Lynn White Jr shocked many by arguing that a Western theology of 'dominion' had fuelled an ecological crisis.<sup>1</sup> Whether or not he was right in every respect, he showed the world that theology matters. He woke theologians up to what had been long neglected – the theology of creation. Though theology in the Eastern Orthodox Churches has a long tradition of theological reflection on creation, with a strong sense of humanity as part of creation sharing in creation's praise of God, Western theology has had other pre-occupations.

Many Christians now see the need to respond in a practical, theological way to the reality of climate change though there remains a small number of voices who say we should not worry about changes to the climate,

as they are simply welcome signs that Jesus will return soon. Some of these voices, suggesting that we should not concern ourselves with this physical world at all, are still influential in a number of church traditions. However, many more Christians now, all around the world, are urging us all that the 'signs' of climate change point to a very different truth.

There are more and more calls to reshape our understanding of creation and our place within it and to be more faithful to a scriptural vision of a humanity 'in communion' with creation, not dominating or exploiting it. Churches and Christian leaders are coming to consider climate change as something that demands a faith response. We need to understand what is happening and to find the meaning in it. And we need to find sources



Worshippers reading the Bible at church in Zimbabwe.

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of hope, so that we might be inspired to take action. Christian faith searches always for the 'good news', for the grace and love of God from which we can draw the faith to act for justice and for the future. It is restless, persistent in looking for the vision of a renewed world so that people might be inspired not only to repent, but also to hope.

### **What can theology do?**

Theology, at its best, will help us to see clearly and face up to our experiences, clearing away the mechanisms we all use to hide from the truths about ourselves and the world. It can help us to discern the meaning of an experience and find wise ways to respond that will bring life to others and be faithful to what we know of God. It returns us constantly and repeatedly to a sense of who we are before God and where our values come from.

We all need those who will help us to see the truth from which we might be tempted to turn, to face things we can hardly bear, and to find a source of hope that is real. We have often called the people who can do this for us 'prophets'. They help us to discern the truth and to act upon it. Prophets are sometimes unpopular, especially with those who have much to lose if things change. But they consistently, and without fear, speak out. Sometimes people think them mad. Sometimes they are indulged as though they are naïve. All this happened to the prophets in the Bible, and it happens still to truth-tellers in the world today.

But prophets are much more complex than their popular caricature. Their most dominant note is not actually doom-saying, for they bring most a joyful and hopeful vision of a new world. The Old Testament scholar Walter Brueggeman has taught us to celebrate the 'prophetic

imagination', and to look for those who offer us a vision of a renewed world, holding on fast to hope.<sup>2</sup> Prophets call people to behave differently, to keep the good laws they have been given, to do what is right. They help us all face up to the future we are walking towards and that we are creating for future generations.

*But*, even more than these things, they show us what a renewed humanity and a renewed earth, a different present and a different future, might really look like. They believe that these things could indeed come to be. They see a connection between injustice in human community and the ruin of the land. They know how hard we find it to see this, and how our own interests blind us. But they can also make vivid a hopeful vision of a different future, with a fertile, peaceful earth in which all may celebrate and share the gifts of life.

Those who show us the reality of climate change right now are in this tradition of the prophets. When they speak of uncomfortable realities we sometimes prefer to ignore them. They are often dismissed as 'prophets of doom' rather than listened to as those bearing a vision of a renewed world. Their ethical challenge is sometimes derided as guilt-making and the real attractiveness of their hope lies unexplored. Sometimes, in our denial or despair, we do not listen well to the prophets or catch their imaginative vision. But it is precisely these voices that we need to hear in the churches and in the wider world, and a theological approach to climate change must make this possible.

## Method and framework

In seeking truth and wisdom, Christians turn to God and to one another. We turn to the Scriptures, to the traditions of our faith, and to our own experiences in the world. At our best, we also listen to voices not our own, to the experiences of those who stand in another place, and particularly to those whose lives are being tested and challenged, those at the sharp end. This paper seeks to listen to those who can open up truth because of the kind of testimony they bear, as those most affected by climate change or as those with a particular expertise to bring.

The paper draws on the varied experiences of Christian Aid's partners, working among those for whom climate change is already a daily reality and threat. It amplifies theological voices from the global South. And it returns to listen to voices from Scripture and Christian tradition that, caught in the light of today's experiences of climate change, shine more brightly with warning, but also with astonishing hope.

### A real challenge to global justice

Climate change is happening. The impacts of conventional industrialisation and the burning of fossil fuels have meant an unprecedented rise in the amount of carbon dioxide in the air we breathe (now at its highest level for 800,000 years), and our planet is warming. This means that there are already more extreme climate events, rising sea levels, more floods in some places, droughts in others, and radical threats to life. This is happening because of human activity. This truth, though some still deny it or question it, is well evidenced, with more than a 95% degree of scientific certainty.<sup>3</sup> As Rowan Williams comments in Christian Aid's 2014 report on the impacts of climate change:

'...for millions of people around the world, living with this sense of fragility is nothing new. Far from being a vague threat in the distant future, a warming world is very much a present reality, with global temperatures already having risen by 0.8°C since before the industrial revolution.'<sup>4</sup>

Climate change is a global justice issue.<sup>5</sup> Although it does, or will, affect us all, those who will bear the brunt

of predicted changes are the poorest people in the world. They are the ones who are, even now, losing their land to the sea, whose low-lying islands are disappearing below the waves, whose crops are not growing well and who are more vulnerable to diseases like malaria.

It is in the low islands of the Pacific and in the coastal areas of Bangladesh that rising sea levels are becoming most evident and having impact already on people's lives. It is among the farmers of Malawi and Ethiopia that changing weather patterns are already having a huge impact on crop production and on the stability of communities. It is among the rural communities of Bolivia that the erosion of glaciers already causes dangerous water shortages, and among those living in poverty in the Philippines that a terrifying typhoon, the strongest recorded storm ever to fall on land, has already destroyed lives. The truth is that these are the people who are least responsible for these changes.

As Nazmul Chowdhury once put it, 'Forget about making poverty history. Climate change will make poverty permanent.'<sup>6</sup>

But it is also true that we can do something about this. We have only a short time, but it is possible. Around the globe, the drive to respond effectively to climate change is growing.<sup>7</sup> People are seeking to compensate for what is happening to the climate by off-setting future impacts, and finding ways to adapt to the changes that have already happened. But actions very much more fundamental than these are needed from across the community of nations if we are to avert what many have warned will be climate chaos.

We need to limit global temperature rises to well below 2°C above pre-industrial levels,<sup>8</sup> thus keeping within reach the call from the most vulnerable to limit warming to less than 1.5°C.<sup>9</sup> This means, for example, keeping more than two thirds of known fossil fuels in the ground, unburned.<sup>10</sup> If we keep going as we are, by burning fossil fuels and keeping emissions at current levels, temperatures will have risen by between 2.5°C and 5°C as soon as 2100,

which would have unprecedented and devastating impacts.<sup>11</sup>

But we could choose instead a low-carbon future, and set fair carbon reduction targets for all countries. We could prioritise improved energy efficiency and invest in renewable sources of energy. We could give much more support to those who are already suffering the impacts of change. And we could make sure that developed countries bear the weight of change while low-carbon and sustainable development can happen in the least industrialised countries.

This is all possible. We really are able to lift the poor out of poverty without increasing greenhouse gas emissions overall. Achieving this will require more ambition from governments and the private sector, more changes to individual lifestyles as well as a major shift in public opinion. It will take a vision powerful enough to inspire resolute action.

We can no longer hide from the realities of climate change and from the profound injustice of its impact on the world's poorest people. We need to hear the prophetic voices of hope, who encourage us to imagine a new, restored future and to commit ourselves, with the help of God, to making the vision a reality for all God's people.



**Banaba, in the Philippines, is a dangerous place to live as it's bound by two major rivers and next to a fault line. It's home to more than 20,000 informal settlers, the very poorest of whom live in makeshift structures under a bridge.**

## Christian Aid's front line experience

It is Christian Aid's place alongside those who live on the front line of climate change that gives us particular voices to hear and a particular authority to speak out. Our work with those for whom climate change is a present reality means that we have something to say to the world. As we bring these voices into conversation with Christian faith, so our theology is shaped and defined.

Our 2014 report, *Taken by Storm*, provides overwhelming evidence of how climate change is already having a severe impact on many communities around the globe. In Africa, Asia and Latin America, our partners witness increasing food insecurity, an increasing prevalence of diseases like malaria, and many incidents of drought, flood, storm surges and rising sea levels. Our partners' experience is that climate adaptation and disaster risk reduction is increasingly important in their work.

**In the Philippines**, climate change is a present reality, requiring action now. In the wake of Typhoon Haiyan, which in 2013 killed more than 6,000 people and displaced 4 million, our partners are working there to provide emergency relief and are using weather data collection to help communities to cope with future disasters.

**In Kenya**, as the climate becomes unpredictable and the weather is no longer reliable, our partner Anglican Development Services Mount Kenya East (ADSMKE) is enabling farmers to access scientific forecasting through mobile phones, so increasing their crop yields. When asked, what helps them persevere, people there say, 'The hope of tomorrow – today may be bad, but there is tomorrow to live...'<sup>12</sup>

**In Bolivia**, glaciers are shrinking and farmers who used to depend on them for drinking water and for irrigating crops have been forced to find alternative supplies. We've worked there with Agua Sustentable, who help to build reservoirs and to support those who are studying changes in the glaciers so that they can predict future water supplies.

**In Bangladesh**, groundwater as far as 100km inland has become salinated because of rising sea levels, and now farmers who used to produce rice are farming shrimps instead. The Christian Council for Development in Bangladesh (CCDB) provides training in cultivating floating gardens and has introduced a new breed of duck called the Campbell duck, which is useful for farmers because it is more resistant to sea water than local species and produces more eggs.

**In El Salvador**, a country with very low carbon emissions, climate change is marked and dangerous. Our partners there are helping people to prepare well for emergencies. Mauricio Cruz, a committee leader, says of climate change,

'Maybe people [in the developed world] don't believe it because you have everything you need – a guarantee that you'll have everything. But when you're poor, you see it happening. Poor people experience it more. We are already used to living with a high level of vulnerability, but that vulnerability is increasing.'<sup>13</sup>

Our partner UNES brings together 23 NGOs, environmental organisations and academic institutions in El Salvador to fight for the protection of the environment and the promotion of sustainable development. It is very evident, in countries like this one, that climate change is not an abstract issue, but a present concern for people in every part of the community.

These experiences and testimonies confirm that climate change is real and that its impact is experienced by those who are least responsible and most vulnerable. There are people, among them those with whom our partners work, who are doing their best to make all of us hear about an urgent injustice that many would prefer to ignore. Their voices need to shake up the world, before it is too late.

## Theological voices from the global South

Presenting a meaningful response to climate change is becoming a key task among theologians, both at the grass roots and in the academies, everywhere in the world. But it is not surprising that theologians from the global South have particular emphases. They bring deep notes of frustration, which echo the prophets we know well from the Scriptures. There is a note of urgency that is sometimes lacking among those for whom climate change seems to be only about the future. They challenge those in the global North to find the will to act on what we have no excuse for ignoring. They deliver calls to resist the consumerism that is so destructive and to embrace new ways of living in creation. And they help us to return to the traditions of the Christian faith, to find some sure ground on which to stand, at times when everything seems shaken and insecure.

### 1. An urgent call to repentance

In 2011, Anglican bishops meeting in Quito, the capital city of Ecuador, issued a statement that has been much quoted.<sup>14</sup> They refer to the 'mounting urgency' of the environmental crisis. Central to the message is the need for confession and repentance for our self-indulgent appetites and our pollution of God's creation, as well as our lack of concern for future generations. They challenge Christians to work for 'environmental justice' and to create more compassionate and sustainable economic systems that will support 'the well-being of all God's creation'. They spare no words in making clear what the world faces.

Elias Abramides was born, lives and works in Argentina. He is an Orthodox Christian, a graduate in Chemical Sciences and Ecumenical Officer for the Ecumenical Patriarchate. He writes with a clear sense of urgency about the threat to life that climate change poses and he too calls for repentance. Abramides acknowledges the need for political action and the importance of campaigning for this. But for him that must come in the context of the much deeper spiritual change needed to solve what is a spiritual problem:

'The climate change crisis affecting life on our planet Earth, our home, is basically a spiritual crisis that will not be solved only through economic and political measures. We need a profound change in our hearts and in our minds: a "metanoia" (repentance), followed by a truthful, sincere and permanent "metamorphosis" (transformation), which will allow the shift of the very much needed cultural and factual paradigm to become a reality. We still have time.

'Churches and faith communities and their leaders around the world, as well as the world nations' chiefs of state and chiefs of government should react and react now, with the needed urgency demanded by the continuity of life as we know it on our planet Earth.'

Though recognising the urgent challenges that we face, Abramides' call is at heart a hopeful one: 'We still have time.'

### 2. A challenge to find the will to act

Professor Jesse N.K. Mugambi, from the University of Nairobi, Kenya, has long been reflecting, writing and campaigning about climate change and calling the churches to action. He has been involved in key international meetings about climate change since the 1990s, including the significant United Nations Conferences of Parties. Widely acknowledged for his expertise on the science and politics of climate change, he speaks as a theologian with the authority of a prophet.

He writes:

'Since the early 1970s, despite calls from within the ecumenical movement (as contained in numerous documents and statements), policies issued and implemented from the centres of power remain substantially unchanged. It is more than 40 years since the first World Environment Conference at Stockholm in 1972, 20 years since the UN Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED) at Rio

de Janeiro in 1992, two years since the Rio+20 Conference in 2012 – punctuated by the World Summit on Sustainable Development (WSSD) at Johannesburg in 2002. During this long period the attitude of the global North towards the global South has remained one of *patronage and condescendence* rather than of *partnership and empathy*.

After studying all these ecumenical deliberations and recommendations, the inescapable conclusion is that the refusal to change this attitude of dehumanising patronage and condescendence is NOT because of ignorance about what ought to be done, but rather, because of the power relations that remain unchanged, resulting from the dominant political, economic and missionary history.

The universe and everything in it (including humans) belongs to God (Psalm 24:1). The earth (as far as we know) is the most habitable planet. We humans are a tiny component of God's creation, together with myriads of other living species. Despite the intelligence with which humans are endowed, some of us treat the earth as personal property – as a source of resources to exploit at the expense of those with little or no power to resist.

Much of the conflict in the world today has to do with power struggles: on the one hand, between and among those who wield the power and the means to exploit and commercialise the earth's resources in spite of people living wherever the resources are most accessible, and on the other the struggles of those who are dispossessed of their means of livelihood against those who dispossess them.'

Jesse Mugambi makes it clear that the problem is not that we are ignorant of the world's plight or that we have failed to develop a good theology of creation. The problem is one of ethics or of will, and is rooted in the very same power struggles that leave some poor and others rich.

Katalina Tahaafe Williams, a theologian writing from Australia and the Pacific islands, has a similar sense that the problem we face is not about ignorance, but about a lack of will. She knows from experience of the threat to many Pacific islands from rising sea levels; they are already affected by changes to food and water supplies and life will very soon become untenable. She writes:

'Only the willingly ignorant continue to deny the link between our consumerist lifestyles, climate change, and suffering in the developing world. Promoting economic growth as the answer to all our problems, and in particular global poverty, is irresponsible. We need to recognise that our current growth-oriented system is driven by powerful economic interests set on making profits however short term. Moreover, it is naïve to pretend that our human and economic activities do not have adverse impacts on our environment that are themselves part of the economic cost. And it is just plain wrong to ignore the suffering of the poorest and most vulnerable populations in the world especially when they are the least contributors to climate change.'

She urges that we must all have the courage to embrace simplicity and sufficiency in our lifestyles as alternatives to the consumerism that is 'drowning' the Pacific islands. From a place where communities and landscapes are already disappearing, Katalina's cry is about right now, and it is for all of us.

### 3. A question of justice

Guillermo Kerber, who comes from Uruguay, has also been working for some time on climate change, most recently coordinating the climate justice work of the World Council of Churches. He believes that climate change is an urgent question of justice and that it's about our relationship with God. He writes,

'When creation is threatened because of climate change, when there is "human induced" climate change, people, and especially Christians I would say,

need to react. This reaction should be seen as doing justice. The God of the Bible is a God of justice, who takes care and loves “the orphan, the widow, the stranger”, the vulnerable ones. Today victims of climate change are another face of the vulnerable ones...

In many countries, churches have had for centuries a special concern for the most vulnerable. The option for the poor is widely accepted by churches and church agencies. But, while doing so, sometimes an anthropocentric approach has minimised the relevance of the environment, of the creation as a whole. Together with the cry of the poor, people, and Christians in particular, should listen to the cry, the groaning, of the earth and respond effectively.

This response cannot be done by Christians alone. It should be ecumenical, interfaith, in cooperation with others (civil society, business) who might not share the religious values but are moved by a common earth ethic.'

Guillermo Kerber calls the Church to seek justice. His call for Christians to listen to the cry of the earth as well as the cry of poor reflects the healing of a divide that has sometimes opened up in Christian theology: some have believed that 'environmentalism' is in conflict with concern for justice among people, as though care for creation conflicts with human development needs. This divide should now be seen to be part of a flawed theology that fails to appreciate how human beings are part of creation, and that a suffering creation means a suffering humanity.

His words evoke a renewal of the ecumenical task, seeing the focus of Christian witness as being about renewal of the whole created earth, and not just the Church or even the human community alone. Recent years of theological work have seen the overcoming of old divides and fears as urgent voices have shown us that creation is not simply the scenery for human beings to play in or work in, let alone for human beings to exploit, but that the whole creation belongs to God and that we belong to it.

From the African Faith Leaders Summit in Uganda, July 2014, many also spoke of their deep sense of injustice, as the richest countries of the world fail to fulfil their promises on climate change. They challenged the heavily industrialised countries to pay for their own sins, rather than making Africans pay instead. They are not afraid to use the language of sin, but also of hope as they declare:

'We are moved by the joy that God gives us to work for justice for all God's servants and preservation of His entire work of creation.'<sup>15</sup>

Archbishop Thabo Makgoba writes movingly about how justice looks from where he stands, in the Diocese of Mozambique, where honouring creation is such a profound part of faith that every confirmation candidate plants a tree. He says:

'The effects of climate change will be very negative for these vulnerable communities. As the poorest people in one of the world's poorest communities, their voice is almost inaudible in decision-making that impacts radically upon them. Yet they are the ones who grasp in tangible ways what it means to live in partnership with creation.'<sup>16</sup>

Jesse Mugambi points to the direct correlation between national CO<sub>2</sub> emissions per capita and indicators of development, when African nations are compared with the wealthiest and most influential nations in the world. He writes that:

'In the 2014 Human Development Index table only two continental African nations are among the top one hundred (Libya and Algeria).<sup>17</sup> These statistics are self-explanatory.'



**Teresa Mwakasungula from Malawi picks fruit from a tree in her herb garden, part of a project to help her grow enough food to eat and to sell. She says: 'The best thing is the diversity of this work. There is security. If the goat dies, I still have the pigs, if my crop fails at least I have the food from my herb garden.'**

He knows that actions speak louder than words.

'Africans have eyes to see the conduct of the rich and powerful nations (gross and per capita) in response to the current ecological crisis. They also have ears to hear the deliberations and arguments of diplomats in global forums. When trade is disguised as aid, the poor nations take note. When pity is disguised as Christian mission, the poor nations take note. Credibility cannot be demanded. It can only be earned. Respect cannot be commanded. It can only be achieved.'

Among theologians and Christian leaders from the global South, there is a profound sense of the grave and persistent injustice of what is happening.

#### 4. Belonging with creation

Dr Sathanathan Clarke is a theologian of the Episcopal Church of South India and is currently Bishop Sundo Kim Chair for World Christianity and Professor of Theology, Culture and Mission at Wesley Theological Seminary in Washington, D.C. His thinking has been shaped among Asian communities, particularly dalits, and he brings a sense of the closeness of the poor to the natural world. He writes that among some of the poorest communities in the world,

'.. the fervour required to attain and sustain human living is accompanied by a sense of kinship with the natural world. Mediation between the struggle for remaining alive and striving for self-preservation on the one hand, and knowing that this cannot be done without intimacy with the ecological world on the other is something that appears inherent in both the lifestyle and worldview of the poor...an organic worldview may arise from the lifestyle of the poor since they mostly live in close proximity to the ebb and flow of the natural world.

The adivasis and dalits in India, whose livelihoods depend on timely rains, moderate winds, and adequate sunshine, tend to relate with the forces of nature through a combination of fear and awe; and mutuality

and freedom. ... The adivasis in India are well-known for being rooted in and committed to such an organic and integrated worldview.<sup>18</sup>

He suggests that dalit peoples, rather than living as though they must domesticate nature and dominate it, are more likely to live in a way that is based on a sense of being in inter-relationship with nature, with human beings and with God.

He reflects that among the most fragile peoples of the world, a love for creation and a longing for justice and abundance come together in a way that is often muted in other communities, and a longing for the well-being of creation is not forgotten even when the need for a better human life is strong.

Vincent Manoharan is a Lutheran pastor and dalit theologian, chair of the National Federation of Dalit Land Rights Movements in India. He writes from the experiences of those most marginalised and disadvantaged in India, those who are the main victims of climate change. He believes that many decades of being 'anti-nature' have benefited the affluent and the dominant caste, but have brought 'not less than a death-knell for dalits, adivasis and the coastal communities.' He lists as many as 20 negative impacts of climate change on dalit communities, ranging from the loss of land fertility to deforestation, to the depletion of underground water supplies and forced migration. He urges that many church leaders (not dalits or adivasis) are 'environmentally illiterate' and fail to understand the importance of nature as God's gift for all living beings. He says:

'Both the destroyers of nature, mostly the affluent/ dominant castes and the preservers of nature, the dalits, adivasis and coastal community need to understand the will of God and God's purpose in sustaining the environment for the well-being of all creation.'

The Anglican bishops in Ecuador, are also unequivocal in linking human flourishing with the well-being of the whole of creation. They declare,

'If we cannot live in harmony with the earth, we will not live in harmony with one another.'<sup>19</sup>

They have trenchant words for the wealthier nations, whose industries have exploited the earth. These nations are the ones who have polluted the world's rivers and oceans, consumed the world's resources, destroyed species and poisoned the atmosphere. They call 'privileged Christians' to move from a culture of consumerism to one of sharing, and they call churches to have more honest debates about the crisis we face.

Jesse Mugambi writes:

'It is irresponsible for humans to take out of the earth's natural resources more than the necessities for basic survival. It is also irresponsible to emit more waste than nature can absorb within the limits of ecological balance... the dominant ethic in the world today is consuming more and more, without caring about the destructive consequences of the waste from this profligate consumption.

The sacred teachings of all religions (written and unwritten) emphasise reverence for creation and reliance on God's providence. In the words of Professor Charles Birch, "...the rich must live more simply, so that the poor might simply live."<sup>20</sup> The good news that Jesus proclaims is for "life in abundance" (John 10:10). But this life in abundance is NOT synonymous with the profligate consumption, which has resulted in the current ecological crisis.'

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Theological voices from the global South have a particular and sharp clarity on climate change. They are characterised by urgency, frustration at the slowness of change, and anger at the lack of moral will. They are like prophets, sometimes seeming to cry in the wilderness. They call for repentance, not only from individuals but also from rich and powerful nations, and they know that their cries often fall unheard by the powerful in the places

where decisions are made and where lives could be changed.

One reason why the powerful do not hear is that the very economic systems that keep some in the world rich while others are poor are implicated in causing climate change. Leonardo Boff saw this clearly as he wrote that:

'The logic that exploits classes and subject peoples to the interests of a few rich and powerful countries is the same as the logic that devastates the Earth and plunders its wealth, showing no solidarity with the rest of humankind and future generations.'<sup>21</sup>

Yet, that these voices continue to speak says much about their hope and their determination. How can we in the North who grow weary of political negotiations in conference rooms not gird our loins again, when those who daily persevere in places despoiled and damaged are still ready to carry on fighting for the sake of our present and of our children's future? As long as they keep speaking out, we cannot grow weary of standing with them.

As Ivone Gerbara, a Brazilian nun who has given years of her life to theological reflection on creation says:

'We know that most of the waste is not produced by the poor. They are not the owners of polluting industries, of nuclear power plants, or of the military headquarters at which wars are planned; neither are they the principal consumers of canned and packaged goods.'<sup>22</sup>

She writes that,

'...prophetic voices have composed an alternative song, one that is being heard also in the South.'<sup>23</sup>

The whole world needs to hear these prophetic voices from the South. If Christian Aid can do anything in powerful places, in the Church, in places of learning or in governments, then it can amplify these voices until they are heard.



Gangai Sada lost all his possessions in the 2008 floods in India. So did 90% of his neighbours. 'We are still fearful when there are heavy rains', he says. Our partner CASA works with Gangai's community to help them adapt and prepare for climate-change related disasters.

## Searching the Scriptures for a vision for today

### Prophets of old

Voices from the global South on climate change find a deep echo in the voices of the prophets of Scripture. It was they who reminded the people of God about the moral choices they needed to make, about their obligations to the poor, and about the good path that God had set for them – and all this with a sense of righteous urgency. Scripture always has something to say to our present situation, and it can be tempting to listen only to that which reassures and affirms us in our comfort. But now is the time to hear the raging, urgent, desperate shout of the prophets, calling us out of sleep to a new awakening.

The prophets of the Bible brought change when it was urgently needed, and helped people to face the reality from which they were running. The prophetic narratives offer us stories of whole communities who responded to the call to repent. People began to act in radically different ways, and the world was changed. The prophet Jonah, for example, was astonished that, when he eventually went to Nineveh and spoke as a prophet, the people repented and turned away from their past way of life.

The testimony of Scripture is that redemption and change do happen. God is known in the kind of new life that emerges out of suffering and even death. As people of faith today discover this same prophetic, imaginative and hopeful faith, rooted in the God of life, it empowers us to face even painful truth and inspires us to be part of God's good future. Many have said that what we need today as we face up to the reality of climate change is not a new theology that we somehow haven't noticed yet, but a new moral climate so that we can really take hold of the truths we already know. We need a new imagination, strong enough to inspire hope. That is what prophets can bring: a new vision, a new morality and changed action.

Many of those speaking out on climate change from the global South echo the prophets who have come before

them. Jesse Mugambi, for example, looks to the prophet Micah as he writes:

'The poor have to rely on the means at their disposal, casting their faith and hope in God rather than on the rich and the powerful to patronise and sympathise with them. In the long term, the rich and powerful will do more justice to the poor and the powerless if they live up to the prophetic challenge of Micah 6:6-8, both at home and abroad, in all spheres of life, including ecological rehabilitation locally and globally.'

The Anglican bishops in Quito, Ecuador, also turn to the prophets as they quote Jeremiah 12:4:

'How long will the land mourn, and the grass of every field wither? For the wickedness of those who live in it, the animals and the birds are swept away, and because people said, "He is blind to our ways."<sup>24</sup>

The prophets of the Bible do not only call people to repentance and tell people what is required. They are also the poets who create for us an inspiring vision of what the world could be like, visions inspiring us to believe that repentance and change will really make a difference. They speak into our deepest fears with new forms of hope.

Walter Brueggemann writes

'Prophetic ministry consists of offering an alternative perception of reality and in letting people see their own history in the light of God's freedom and his will for justice...'<sup>25</sup>

He reflects that hope is often ridiculed in our times, but that the theological voice can never let go of hope. This is a gift of faith to the world. We should listen not only to the challenges of the prophets, but also to their poetic visions of a new and hopeful future. Even from the most incisive critic of the rich, the prophet Amos, comes this vision of a world restored:

'They shall plant vineyards and drink their wine,  
and they shall make gardens and eat their fruit.  
I will plant them upon their land,  
and they shall never again be plucked up,  
out of the land that I have given them, says the Lord  
your God.  
(Amos 9:14b-15)

Turning to the prophets does not only connect us to powerful critique and righteous anger, a model of 'speaking truth to power'. It also sets before our eyes a future worth changing for, a world far better, more just and more peaceful, more beautiful and more joyful, than the one we now know.

Contemporary theological voices from the global South can do this for the whole world. We all need to hear their anger and frustration, their determination to change the world. But even more so, we need to share the visions they offer of a world in which humankind and nature are living in a more gracious, joyful and just relationship; in which our own lives are lived with simplicity and sufficiency; where we are no longer simply consumers, but part of a renewed communion with creation.



Emergency boats at the Banaba Livelihood Evacuation Centre in the Philippines. The centre provides refuge for highly vulnerable families when disasters hit.

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## Creation poetry

There are extraordinary and hopeful visions also within those parts of Scripture that specifically explore our relationship with creation. These passages might also inspire us to change our understanding of our place within creation, leading to new ways of living and acting.

British theologian Richard Bauckham argues that we need to relearn, from the Scriptures, our true place in the created world.<sup>26</sup> We have, for too long, imagined the relationship between God, humankind ('only a little lower than the angels'[Psalm 8:5]) and the rest of creation as a vertical structure. We have seen ourselves as having 'dominion' over creation, a view that was so powerfully expressed in the Renaissance period that it became possible to see the rest of creation as being given to us for our use. Even when we have tried to take seriously the idea of ourselves as 'stewards', with a God-given responsibility to care for creation, we have sometimes thought too highly of ourselves, and so exploited creation without regard to other creatures or even to all other people.

What we need, Bauckham argues, is an understanding more rooted in the Scriptures. Although humanity has a particular vocation within creation, we are part of a horizontal set of relationships, with other creatures and with the earth itself. In the first account of creation in Genesis 1, people are not, for example, created on a separate day – we are among all the 'living creatures'. In the Genesis 2 account, the first people are named 'earth creatures', made from the earth, belonging to it, with the important task to 'till it and keep it', and when we die we return to it. We are part of the community of creation, rather than lords over it. We have often concentrated far more on our mission to steward the rest of creation, than on our own status as creatures.

In the Renaissance period, theologies of creation in the West made so much of the role of human beings as those who were called to dominate creation that the concept

of stewardship was elided with ruthless exploitation. The Genesis stories offer us a different vision of what it means to live in the world, different from the one that became the norm in much of the developed world. We need to return to that vision, and begin to live by it again. As Rowan Williams puts it, we need to regain a sense that our relationship to the earth is about 'communion not consumption'.<sup>27</sup>

Some have argued that we need to let go completely of the idea that humankind's purpose in creation is stewarding, because theology of stewardship has become so grievously warped. Rather than care for it in the way the word suggests, we have actually made a terribly damaging impact on the planet, from which some people benefit at others' expense.

But stepping down from our God-given vocation is not the answer. We also need to listen to those who are calling us to act in particular and very specific ways – to move to a low-carbon future, to reduce emissions, and to address the unjust impacts of existing climate change. This is the time to be prepared for a proper and biblical stewardship. Now is the moment to step up to our responsibility before God, not to abandon it. We are stewards who need to be roused to act justly, and to fulfil our true vocation before God for the creation of which we are a part. We are called to 'keep' the earth (Genesis 2:15) for the sake of all God's people, today and for future generations.

Across the world, theologians are reflecting on scriptural passages with new eyes. The Anglican bishops in Ecuador, struck that, according to Genesis, God declared the creation 'good', reaffirm the goodness of creation and reject any theology that sees it as anything less. They also note the vision of new creation in the book of Revelation, and express their hope that God will restore the goodness and completeness of creation.

Passages such as Leviticus 25 – which legislates for the use of the land, imposing limits on human action through a weekly Sabbath, a sabbatical year and a 50-year jubilee –

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now seem astonishingly wise in a world where too much land has been exploited ruthlessly, with no proper sense of limit.

The final chapters of Job, which convey with such beauty a sense of the wonder of creation, remind us that there is so much that we do not know, cannot control and before which we should simply stand in awe.

Creation hymns such as Psalms 104 and 148 catch us up in the praise that creation offers to God, and so include us within a shared community of praise, looking to the God who is the source of life for the whole creation.

Ancient stories like the one of Noah and of God's covenant and promise, remind us that the relationship of God is not only with humankind, but with the whole creation.

Psalms 24, with its affirmation that 'The earth is the Lord's and everything in it' assures us that creation is God's gift to us and to future generations. It is not our entitlement, or ours to abuse. It is in such a re-orientation of our imaginations and our lives that we shall find again sources of hope. Prophetic warnings need to be heard, but so also do those poetic voices that are weaving hope from the remains of our failings and our sinfulness: hope for renewal, hope for life.

### **Jesus, first of a new humankind**

Jesus stands in this great prophetic tradition. He had pointed warnings for those who needed to hear them, but he came to bring good news, the gospel of life, a year of the Lord's favour (Luke 4:18-19). Jesus lived with an understanding that all of life is a gift from God. When he asks us to 'Consider the lilies of the field' (Matthew 6:28), he is not telling us to forget all our worries, but to gain a renewed appreciation for how we are essentially dependent on God's gifts. It is our own ability to 'toil' and 'spin' (and their modern equivalents) that deceives us into thinking that we have more dominion over our lives than we actually do. We are creatures too and life is best lived in a spirit of thankfulness for grace and gift than in a spirit of entitlement.

Living a simple life himself, Jesus did not accumulate possessions. The early community of his followers was shaped by fellowship and sharing rather than by accumulation and consumption (Acts 2:44-46). He taught that the 'the meek will inherit the earth' (Matthew 5:5), subverting the current order where it is the powerful who seem to be inheriting the earth, while the poor reap the whirlwind.

But even more profoundly than his teaching, the Christian understanding of Jesus as God incarnate is a doctrine that declares creation as holy and that God is liberating all creation. He is buried in earth, descends to the dead, is raised to life and ascends into heaven, as the first of a renewed creation. Such a salvation story reveals a God who is, out of love, recreating and not destroying humanity. We are not being lifted out into a spiritual realm to escape the earthiness of creation, but being remade for a renewed earth.

Jesus offers us the clearest vision we have of a new humanity in a new relationship with earth. The Gospels reveal one who is at peace with the animals in the wilderness, before whom the storms are stilled, and in whom justice comes as the poor inherit the earth. This is what it could be like to live a human life in all its fullness. Here is a vision of human life restored and one filled with hope, inspiration and possibility.

Many theologians exploring climate change and creation have turned first to the creation stories of the Old Testament or to the creation theology of St Paul, and these are rich resources. But there are deep seams in the Gospel stories about Jesus himself as one who both exemplified and embodied a creaturely, and yet also a divine, life - as one in communion with creation. A theological response to climate change is not marginal or supplementary to the gospel of Jesus. It turns out to be at its heart. Jesus too was asking, 'Who will inherit the earth?', and Jesus promised it to the poor.

A photograph showing a woman in a green long-sleeved shirt with the words "RESILIENT COMMUNITIES" printed in white on the back. She is seen from behind, facing an elderly woman who is holding a young child. The elderly woman is wearing a blue floral top and pink floral pants. The child is wearing a white floral tank top and red shorts. They are standing outdoors near a tree trunk. In the background, there is a crowd of people and some structures, suggesting a community gathering or event.

RESILIENT  
COMMUNITIES

The Centre for Disaster Preparedness in the Philippines helps communities to manage disaster risks. They provide training to local communities, and also advocate for policies that protect the environment.



**In Malawi mobile phones are used for gathering climate data and for sending out weather forecasts to those who need them. In a country where weather patterns are increasingly unpredictable, this has a huge impact.**

## The radical witness of the Christian tradition

The Christian tradition has continued to produce and to listen to prophetic voices that have offered a new, and hopeful, imagination for human life. One much loved example is St Francis of Assisi. The theologian Leonardo Boff describes Francis as having:

'...a distinct way of being in the world, not over things, but together with them, like brothers and sisters of the same family.'<sup>28</sup>

Francis was living at a time when storms, droughts, crop failures, famines and hard winters had led to despair, a time rather like our own. But he was part of a change in imagination, a moral revolution in thinking about justice and poverty, as well as about the created world. Francis was no naïve romantic. He knew about suffering, asceticism and self-denial. He knew about a world frightened for its future. But he re-imagined the world as one in which the deepest joy and hope could be found in living as a brother or sister of creation, rather than its master. His voice is being heard again in times in which we need a vision as clear and simple, as beautiful and as filled with hope. The present Pope's adoption of the name of Francis signals his own will to shape a Church that is of the poor, but also of creation rather than somehow over it.

St Francis of Assisi stands out from much of Western Christianity because of his way of being at home with and in creation. As the world stood on the brink of a Renaissance that gave rise to a kind of science that was (in hindsight) radically exploitative of the natural world and anthropocentric in its understanding of what creation was for, Francis' voice was quite different. He is a stepping-stone back to the witness of Jesus and the Scriptures, and onwards to a vision of creation that belongs to God and of which we are a part.

Eastern Orthodox Christianity has had a better history of understanding that humankind belongs within a larger creation. It views creation as absorbed in the praise of God and as redeemed through the incarnation, death and resurrection of Christ. Guillermo Kerber comments that

Christ's saving work has sometimes been reduced to that of saving only humanity, and we have often ignored the scriptural theology that says that Christ reconciles the whole creation to God (Colossians 1:20). Jesus' resurrection is but the beginning of the restoration not only of humanity, but of all things.

Orthodox theologians have been faithful to this biblical tradition and the Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew I of Constantinople has been the most outspoken church leader of our times on climate change. Now many Christian thinkers around the world recognise that a theological understanding of creation matters. We may rightly have feared 'new age' or pantheistic theologies, but such fears have led us to a different kind of heresy in neglecting to honour and care for the creation which is God's gift to us. Twentieth-century literary critic Northrop Frye commented that we really do need to steer a course between a gnostic contempt for nature and a pagan adoration of it.<sup>29</sup> More recently, Michael Northcott has written that,

'At the heart of the pathology of ecological crisis is the refusal of modern humans to see themselves as creatures, contingently embedded in networks of relationships with other creatures, and with the Creator. This refusal is the quintessential root of what theologians call sin.'<sup>30</sup>

If Christian theology, particularly of the Western Churches, has played any part in what is happening to our earth, then we have indeed colluded in sin, and we need to nourish goodness, hope and virtue instead. We need to find again a sense of thankfulness for creation, a sense of all that we receive from what belongs to God as blessing and gift.

## A call to respond

The practical actions that need to be taken have been well rehearsed.

- We need to work together to limit global warming to as far below 2°C as possible.
- We need to support affected communities to adapt to the adverse effects of climate change that they already face.
- We need post-2015 sustainable development goals that will build climate resilience and limit disaster, and we need a specific and ambitious climate change goal to be among them.
- We need an internationally-agreed approach to managing disaster risk reduction, to protect the lives and livelihoods of people everywhere, and particularly the most vulnerable communities on the frontline of climate change.
- We need to plan and prepare for the future adverse impacts of climate change (and it is vital to do this in a fair and ambitious way with those countries that bear most responsibility for climate change and greatest capacity to respond taking greatest responsibility).<sup>31</sup>

All countries need to contribute to this global effort, since all share responsibility for the climate, even if they have contributed to the problem to different degrees and have different capacities to deal with it. The world's governments have agreed to reach a global agreement that would cover all countries by 2015. This agreement needs to include ambitious national plans to cut greenhouse gas emissions as well as commitments to a low-carbon development path.

If we are to avoid climate chaos, with growing food insecurity, climate migration, increasing levels of diseases like malaria and perilous extreme climate events, our lives will need to change. We will need to do this co-operatively, as a global community, while supporting the right of those in poverty to have a better life. As George Monbiot has said:

'...it is hard to see how anyone could justify the assertion that the need to drive a car which can accelerate from 0-60 in 4-5 seconds overrides the Ethiopians' need to avoid recurrent famines...'<sup>32</sup>

But we need more than even these specific and ambitious measures. We also need a change of heart and a new imagination. In this, Christian theology and practice have a very significant part to play. Jesse Mugambi offers this challenge:

'Christianity, throughout most of the two millennia of its history, is implicated as a factor that has contributed to the current ecological crisis. Will Christianity be a constructive factor in shaping reconstructive ecology in the next civilization? ...This question is the main challenge... for the current generation of Christian theologians, priests and educators concerned with working towards reconstructive change of practices, attitudes, norms, principles, values, ethos and worldview – locally, nationally, regionally, and internationally.'

Katalina Tahaafe Williams stresses that:

'The prophetic role of the Christian Church provides hope-filled possibilities for action to reduce the impact of climate change. The church's prophetic voice challenges human excessive lifestyles and the wasteful use of energy. It courageously challenges vested interests for the sake of the whole wounded creation, the poor and future generations. Its prophetic mission involves calling the world to live the gospel in sustainable and renewable ways. It reminds people that the earth does not have limitless resources, and God's justice requires that we live in ways that respect and protect the rights of future generations and other parts of creation to have a healthy and stable environment.'

She urges us to imagine the huge impact that Christians and churches could make if we were really to work together and to focus our mission priorities on meeting the challenge of climate change.

The Anglican bishops at the Quito meeting in Ecuador echo this challenge for Christians and churches to act. They call the churches to continue to pray for the whole creation, and in the liturgical words familiar to many: 'for the peace of the whole world, for seasonable weather and an abundance of the fruits of the earth, for a just sharing of resources, and for the safety of all who suffer.' Prayer, they urge, should include the animals and the whole of creation, so that our prayer might shape the way we see the world. They call Christians to repentance and to reconnect with practices like fasting and Sabbath-keeping, habits of life that help us to restore a sense of honour for creation. Their own prayer is this:

'May God give us the grace to heed the warnings of Jeremiah and to accept the gracious invitation of the incarnate Word to live in, with and through him, a life of grace for the whole world, that thereby all the earth may be restored and humanity be filled with hope.'<sup>33</sup>



In the aftermath of Typhoon Haiyan, Christian Aid partner CODE distributed supplies to people left with nothing, including clean drinking water, rice, tinned corned beef and sardines, cooking oil, soap and detergent.

## Conclusion: prophetic hope

Before we can conclude, we have to face the question of why it has proved so difficult for the churches, and indeed for humankind, to rise to the challenge of addressing climate change. Even when we know what should be done, why is change so slow to come, and why do so many cries seem to fall on deaf ears?

Leonardo Boff asks:

'How are we to... inspire new behaviour, nourish new dreams, and bolster a new kindness toward the Earth?'<sup>34</sup>

Many campaigners on climate change have recognised that there is huge capacity in the human community for both denial and despair. We sometimes do not act because the challenge just seems too great, and sometimes it is easier to delude ourselves that the challenge does not exist. There are voices that 'reassure' us by saying that climate change is not really happening. Or they say, if it is, it is not caused by us and so there's nothing to be done except to adjust to its impact where we can.

Sometimes the reality of what is happening *is* accepted, but the scale of the challenge and the constant refusals of governments to act prove demoralising and demotivating. The action of individuals to change our own lifestyles can seem like whistling in the wind. Simply telling people to 'repent' and change their ways, with no positive vision of what a changed world might be, often has little impact. The temptation, even for the most generous-hearted people, is to close our ears because it seems hopeless. If we are to resist the denial and despair that keep us from changing anything, then above all, we need hope. It is hope that inspires change, and hope that makes even sacrifice a joyful and willing act.

For Christian theology, hope is foundational. It is hard to sustain a hope that people will simply become less selfish, or that humankind will simply become better. Since we have lived through the 20th century, we know

that humankind is very far from naturally progressing in a positive direction. We know that it will be hard to persuade all industries, governments and economies to work for a low-carbon future. But, there are sources of hope, which could lead to change, and it is these that theology can unfold.

The most profound challenge now for theologians in thinking about the impact of climate change is not to find a more faithful theology of creation, as much work in this area has been done, but to understand why it is so hard for us to hear prophetic voices and to act in response to them. Faith should be a place in which we really can look forward honestly to the prospect of repentance, changing of hearts and changing of lives. And most of all, faith should be the sphere where imagination can be so remade so that this kind of real change, rooted in hope, is possible.

In a world where many think that change will not come, Christian theology speaks boldly of salvation and redemption. In a world where hope is little talked about, faith can bear witness to the blossoming of hope even in the profoundest despair. The central message of the Christian faith is, after all, of resurrection from death. It believes that even if the worst we can imagine happens, God can yet bring life. It has confidence in the sovereignty of God the Creator, who has promised always to be with us.

This does not mean that we need not worry anymore about what the prophets are saying. On the contrary, it means that it is worth listening to them, and worth giving our lives to the actions to which they point us. An imagination shaped by the Christian understanding of God's ways with the world can never say, 'We are all doomed!' and neither could it say, 'Let's eat and drink and be merry!' Our hope is like the hope of Amos who both called the people to repent and who also told them that God says, 'I will restore the fortunes of my people...' (Amos 9:14) It is this kind of prophetic imagination and hope that we need in a time like ours.

Guillermo Kerber reflects that Christian theology understands what it means to 'hope against hope' (Romans 4:18) and that we believe in God who makes all things new (2 Corinthians 5:17 and Revelation 21:5), the God who renews a covenant with us from generation to generation. He urges Christians to pray, fast, meditate, and to set aside a part of each year as 'Creation Time' (from September 1 to October 4)<sup>35</sup> and so 'feed our faith and hope', deepening our sense of being part of creation and praising God for its beauty.

Katalina Tahaafe Williams believes that the churches do possess resources of hope, and that they can inspire new action through symbolism, rich liturgical traditions, and sacramental practices that offer a new kind of harmony with and respect for God's creation.

Elias Abramides draws hope for the future of the world from:

'the glorious Resurrection of Jesus Christ, our God and Saviour. His resurrection is the key that validates our Christian faith, and our faith in him is the path that gently drives us to have hope, hope for the future, and hope for the future of the world in particular.'

But how do we hold on to this kind of hope while all the time all around us so much threatens to undermine it? And how can this kind of hope resource us to act for justice in the world now?

Many theologians draw a helpful distinction between 'hope' and 'optimism'. Optimism simply expects things to get better and refuses to face the tragic, the painful and the dangerous. Hope, by contrast, is the kind of looking forward that refuses to be beaten no matter what the future might bring, because it is rooted in something outside the scope of 'what might happen'. To have such a hope means that whatever the forecasts, whatever the odds, someone would still give themselves, even give their life, to what is right and good for the sake of all.

Richard Bauckham contrasts 'proximate' and 'ultimate' hope.<sup>36</sup> He says that, in Christian theology, our ultimate hope can never lie in temporal developments such as economic growth or human improvement, but only in the promises of God, the one who will, in the fullness of eternity, restore creation (Romans 8:18-25). Our 'proximate' hopes, our hopes for a temporal future, should be rooted in this ultimate hope. But that does not mean that both are the same. Our ultimate hope in God inspires us, at our best, to live hopefully and to trust that all our labours for justice and in the service of others will not be in vain.

Christian hope does not eliminate the need to act, but actually requires and inspires us to act. It enables us to live in the world as it is, but with our faces turned towards the world as it might be, the world that we trust that God is ultimately renewing.

N.T. Wright encourages Christians to claim a source of hope that will help us to live in the world in a new way. He rejects the kind of theology that is looking always only to the 'next' world. He argues that, at the heart of the gospel, is the news that God is going to renew the life of this present creation, just as God renewed the life of Jesus in the resurrection. He writes,

'The New Testament, true to its Old Testament roots, regularly insists that the major, central, framing question is that of God's purpose of rescue and re-creation for the whole world, the entire cosmos.'<sup>37</sup>

It is tempting, in reflecting theologically on climate change, to return again and again to urging people to do what is right, to repent and to change their ways. But prophets are also poets, those who inspire and invite their hearers to imagine a different future. Prophets are the ones who can reveal that 'it doesn't have to be like this,'<sup>38</sup> and that the purposes of God will prevail. Prophets never relax into despairing conformity, but urge upon us a transformed imagination. In the words of Walter Brueggeman,

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the prophet has ‘...only the hope that the ache of God could penetrate the numbness of history.’<sup>39</sup>

A hope like this can be profoundly subversive. We know what we face. We know what needs to be done. Only a kind of subversive hope will give us the courage to do it and to believe in the possibility of a new earth.

Ivone Gerbara, from Brazil, says to theology:

‘There is a connection – one that is not always visible – between certain religious doctrines and the destruction of the ecosystem. And because this is so, to change these doctrines is to open a path toward resurrection, toward social and ecological justice.’<sup>40</sup>

Prophetic voices, whether from the Scriptures, from climate science, or from people living in poverty today, sing a powerful song. We must set aside our fear and listen. We need to hear the challenging voices and the calls to repent and change, for the sake of those who are suffering now and for the sake of future generations. But we also need to imagine a redeemed and restored world, a world marked by justice and hope and built on new foundations, for such a vision will overcome our fears and give us strength to change. It takes courage to listen to voices that go against our immediate and pressing self-interest, but if we shut down in the face of the challenge to ‘repent!’ we shall also shut down the possibility of receiving the gift of hope for a renewed earth. It is this gift that we need above all, a gift that faith can offer, in humility, to the world.

Leonardo Boff once wrote that ‘...human beings are finding their way back to their shared home, the great good and bountiful Earth.’<sup>41</sup>

May it be so.



Beauty Nambeye works in an organic garden run by Christian Aid partner CHAZ in Zambia. She is part of a nutrition programme that teaches patients living with HIV/AIDS to grow organic fruit and vegetables and provides them with seeds and equipment. This means they have a good diet, and can sell their produce at local market to help them make a living.

## Endnotes

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20. Charles Birch, *Life and Work: Challenging economic man*, UNSW Press, 2003.
21. Leonardo Boff, *Cry of the Earth, Cry of the Poor*, (English translation) Orbis Books, 1997, pxi.
22. Ivone Gerbara, *Longing for Running Water: Ecofeminism and liberation*, Fortress Press, 1999, p3.
23. *ibid*, pvii.
24. See note 14.
25. See note 2, pp116-117
26. See Richard Bauckham, *Living with Other Creatures*, Paternoster, 2012.
27. Rowan Williams, 'Changing the Myths we Live by' in *Faith in the Public Square*, Bloomsbury, 2012.
28. Leonardo Boff, *St Francis: A Model for Human Liberation*, SCM Press, 1982, p35.
29. Northrop Frye, *The Great Code: The Bible and Literature*, Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1982, pp112-113.
30. Michael Northcott, *A Moral Climate: The Ethics of Global Warming*, Darton, Longman and Todd, 2007, p16.
31. There are some effects that now cannot simply be reversed. For example, some places that were carbon 'sinks' have now become net sources of carbon.
32. George Monbiot, *Heat: How we can stop the planet burning*, Penguin, 2006, p154.
33. See note 14.
34. See note 21, p119.
35. The World Council of Churches supports and encourages the growing practice across the churches of keeping this period (which was inaugurated by Orthodox Christians and ends with the feast of St Francis – as marked by the Roman Catholic Church) as a time to remember and celebrate creation.
36. See his article 'Ecological Hope in Crisis', in *Anvil*, vol 29 (1), September 2013, pp43-54.
37. N.T. Wright, *Surprised by Hope*, SPCK, 2007, p197.
38. Words used by Rowan Williams to encourage Christian Aid staff at the beginning of Christian Aid Week, 2014.
39. See note 2, p55.
40. See note 22, p6.
41. See note 21, p107.



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