

Ordinand goes green

Dan Ross shares the theological reasons why you'll find him washing cloth nappies and cycling in the rain



I've found myself recently having some very bizarre conversations, conversations I could never have imagined having when I moved to the UK from New Zealand five years ago. I've been talking to friends and family about the re-useable nappies my wife and I have bought in anticipation of our first child. Re-useable nappies? Isn't that a bit odd, and old fashioned? Then again, at least it has diverted attention away from the constant questions we receive about our vegetarian diet. Fair enough, we're red-blooded Kiwis who love our meat so it's a reasonable

question, but it does get tiresome after a while.

These two snippets of information about my life: vegetarianism and a commitment to green parenting, whilst seemingly insignificant in themselves, are representative of the journey I've been on in recent years: becoming an environmentally-aware Christian. It's a journey that has surprised me more than anybody. When I look back on my childhood and adolescence there was nothing to indicate that I had any particular interest in the environment

(beyond what any normal Kiwi kid had) nor any special theological insight or desire to develop a broader understanding of God and Creation and the relationship between the two. I had a general openness to learning more about God but I wouldn't say that this was anything special and it certainly wasn't going to lean towards environmental theology in the evangelical circles which I inhabited.

In fact I was moving in the opposite direction as I pursued my first degree in Economics with relish. I can

remember, when trying to decide on final year papers amidst all the options, scanning down and seeing the relatively recent “economics of the environment” and thinking “well that’s at least one I can easily cross off.” I thought it totally uninteresting and unimportant. My journey towards identifying as a “green Christian” is a classic case of process-conversion (otherwise known as “I guess I just fell into it”). Amongst my friends, there are people for whom caring for the environment has always been an important part of their faith, and friends who have had Damascus Road moments of realisation that their attitudes towards Creation were unbecoming of a Christian. Mine is a journey of many years which I never even expected to embark upon.

As is common in most process-conversions the biggest influence on my journey has been a relationship; specifically, the influence of my wife. She has been passionate about caring for the environment for a long as she can remember and she has often claimed that this was the inevitable result of having grown up in the most beautiful country in the world. Well, it didn’t work for me, but then I suppose I could be an outlier. Anyway, being married, it was naturally hard for me to ignore this passion of hers and the loving thing to do seemed to be to interact with it for her benefit. At the start of our marriage both of us spent two years living and studying at a Bible college which focussed on training Christians to live in cross-cultural contexts. It was a rich two years in terms of theological and personal development, but also crucial for giving my wife the tools to challenge me theologically on my view (or lack of it) on God’s love for Creation. Moreover, as we spent time reading theologians from the majority world context we were inevitably confronted with the negative impacts of climate change on some of the world’s poorest and the challenge theologians from these contexts presented to us Western readers – to me! - about our lifestyles and response.

By the time we had finished our degrees at Bible college I realised that I had experienced a paradigm-shift. I can’t be certain when this happened, but when I started college I was a Christian, and when I finished I was, however immature, a ‘green’ Christian. I had rejected the not uncommon belief in some evangelical circles that the material world was irrelevant and destined for destruction; as well as that other not uncommon belief that care and concern for God’s Creation is not as important as saving souls. I had embraced the belief in a Creator who loves His Creation and longs for it to be restored to its full grandeur. I embraced frameworks in which care for Creation sits as the mark of a missional lifestyle just as much as feeding the poor and preaching the Gospel. I began to integrate my new beliefs into an integrated and holistic worldview and theology. And, because I’m a practical sort of chap, I now needed to express my new attitudes with some practical actions. Hence the vegetarianism.

I very quickly realised, both through observation and our own zealotry, that the world of ‘eco-ness’ can be just as guilt-inducing and preachy as any other aspect of Christianity or for that matter any do-gooding movement in general. I wanted to think about how my wife and I could motivate both ourselves, and hopefully others, to grow in both our awareness and care for Creation and in our love for Creation and Creator. We wanted to live lives that were, if not enjoyable, then worthwhile in their greenness.

Coming to see a green lifestyle as a form of worship has been helpful in this. For example, I understand that, in the scheme of things, reducing my meat intake is insignificant. In fact, even if the whole of the UK reduced its meat intake it would still potentially be insignificant on a global scale. But I still think it’s important. I believe in a God who is able to transform small actions to have significant effects, and in a Kingdom where small is beautiful, significant, and valued. This enhances my small actions and lifestyle changes to ones that I can consider worshipful.

This also puts a different perspective on all those little (and some big) actions that I could consider inconvenient or unnecessary, such as opting for re-useable nappies when disposables are so much easier or choosing to cycle through wintry and rainy days instead of using a car. Viewing these as worship allows me to enjoy them (usually), rather than suffer them (sometimes). It also means freedom from guilt as I commit to doing what I can and leave to God the role of deciding how to respond.

And beauty. I’ve discovered that learning to care for God’s Creation means learning to look at it in new ways. It means learning to look at the God-createdness and God-sustainedness of Creation and wonder at the beauty in things that previously I would have missed. I frequently go jogging along the River Cam and I’ve learned to look, to appreciate, and routinely to be moved by the beauty of my surroundings, by the graceful stillness of a grey heron on the riverbank, or by the fascinating cloud formations in the huge Cambridgeshire skies. My wife and I also lived in Bradford before moving to Cambridge, a city thought by few to be conventionally attractive. But there I was frequently dazzled by the stunning sunsets that would often frame the city.

So as I reflect on an unexpected journey to becoming a green Christian, I’m grateful for the ways in which, however inconvenient or challenging it may be, it has enriched my life and faith and given me a bigger vision of God as Creator than I could have imagined. And as my wife and I embark on our next phase – green parenting – I’m assured that the above values will be put to the test like never before. So then, the journey continues. Who knows what conversations I’ll be having five years from now! ■

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