

Where have all the prophets gone, long time passing?

Chris Walton asks 'When will we ever learn?'

At least the 'oldies' amongst us will remember Pete Seeger's lyrics sung also by Peter Paul and Mary, 'Where have all the flowers gone' in the 1960s. It has prompted me to ask 'Where have all the prophets gone, long time passing?'

Emasculated theology

In my first editorial (*GC52 Summer 2003*) I wrote 'God the Creator is using the crisis we have caused in his creation to draw his creatures back to the virtues and values of his Kingdom'. Now 12 years and 26 issues of *Green Christian* later while I believe those words with the same passion I have become more frustrated and more grieved that so many local Churches have not taken up this opportunity. In my view it is because of the spurious theology resounding in many local Churches. It is often an emasculated theology spawning a private faith and a passionless discipleship. On the one end of the spectrum, a doctrinaire evangelistic theology and proudly called *evangelical* by those who espouse it, which produces a faith about heavenly joy and detachment from the earth, and on the other an objective, discursive theology which clutches a progressive model of human development which it hides up its sleeve.

If only this caricature was just that. But over these last 12 years on behalf of *Green Christian* I have preached and spoken at many of both manifestations of Church where eco-theology is heard (or at least presented) as an after-thought or a one season, one Sunday event.

Of course there are exceptions and I must beware of hyperbole. But my experience is that even ecocongregations struggle to be characterised by an in-depth green theology.

Where have all the local prophets gone?

Green Christian (formerly known as *Christian Ecology Link*) has been at the fore front of the call to address the

environmental crisis in the UK. Operation Noah was being launched back in 2004, now a charity and movement in its own right; campaigns like LOAF and *ecocell* and now Joy in Enough continue to inspire and lead and provide resources. Over the years we have engaged with many other organisations and movements but, where have all the *local* prophets gone? Recently we have a much more cooperative and open relationship with A Rocha who it could be said reaches more deeply into the evangelical churches, while Green Christian (CEL) reaches more of the more liberal Churches. But what about the week by week, day by day preaching and teaching in the Churches?

We belong to the earth

Does it take the Buddhists to do the job, 'Significant change can happen when each of us decided to act for the greater good, when we have a shared sense of the world we inhabit'¹ or the occupational scientists, 'the process of collective change can begin with understanding how doing has the potential to connect to a sense of belonging'² or a child with autism, '...nature is always there at hand to wrap us up, gently, glowing, swaying, bubbling, rustling. Human beings are a part of the animal Kingdom too, and perhaps us people with autism still have some left-over awareness of this, buried somewhere deep down'³.

It is not that I do not gain inspiration from these people, but where are the Christian prophets/preachers passionately espousing that sense of belonging; being a part of creation, belonging to creation and so responsible for it. After all it is the Judeo-Christian tradition that affirms that God created all things; it is the Christian faith which robustly claims that Jesus, the Christ was with the creator at the beginning of all things.

A robust Christology

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things came into being through him,



Chris preaching at a wedding!

and without him not one thing came into being. What has come into being in him was life, and the life was the light of all people. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it. (The Gospel According to John, 1:1-5, NRSV).

Christology surely is key for Christian disciples. Our faith is surely defined by our following the Christ, to be transformed into his likeness, to be and to do what he did and does.

In your minds you must be the same as Jesus Christ:
His state was divine,
yet he did not cling
to his equality with God
but emptied himself
to assume the condition of a slave,
and became as men are; and being
as all men are, he was humbler yet,
even to accepting death,
death on a cross.
(*Philippians 2.6-8, Jerusalem Bible*).

This puts a different take on the words of Jesus in John 14 v.12: 'Seriously, I'm telling you, those who believe in me will do as I do, and greater works, because I now go to the Father' (paraphrase, CW).

This isn't a promise of the possession of special miraculous gifts, but rather an indication of what radical discipleship really means: living and dying even, for others. That is, all others, people, plants, animals the whole teeming planet.

The downward way

The 'self-emptying' of the One who was in the beginning is known as the

'kenosis' of God, and is the key part of my understanding of a Christology which has motivated me to explore the disconnections of our society with the natural world (the creation) and understand Christian salvation as the means of reconnection.

The 'downward way' is a journey of passion. It is a journey of love and so a journey of suffering. In Christian terms Christ's passion (described in the Philippians passage above), that is the way of the cross, is the demonstration of God's love towards his world.

It is now the way for his disciples who, like him, suffer with and for others – compassion asks us to go where it hurts, to enter places of pain, to share in brokenness, fear, confusion and anguish.

For the Christian disciple this desire is demonstrated in the passion of Christ, 'God so loved the cosmos that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him may have eternal life' (John 3:16). Or putting it another way: God so loved the world he

became material, that is, embodied in all life. Here is an empathetic God who in an act of self-emptying, demonstrates his grieving heart and facilitates a way for all his creatures to belong again.

The 'downward way' goes even further than the *kenosis* of God in Christ.

'To be the very power of God yet to wait in frustration and hope until the whole be brought to fulfilment, might be called the kenosis, or self-emptying, of the Holy Spirit. For him it has been so from the beginning. If now we are caught up into his being, we must share his humiliation as well as his power'⁴.

So we live in the Spirit, suffering with the Spirit. *Kenosis* is the soul's journey as Berry describes:

'We must invent, or reinvent, a sustainable human culture by a descent into our pre-rational, our instinctive resources ... What is needed is not "transcendence" but "inscendence"'. This descent, this "inscendence", is the

journey of soul discovery, which can be engaged only by those who have moved beyond the early adolescence in which our society has stalled'⁵.

'We know that the whole creation has been groaning in travail together until now: and not only the creation, but we ourselves, who have the first fruits of the Spirit, grown inwardly as we await for adoption as children, the redemption of our bodies' (Romans 8:22-23).

We are disciples of the servant Lord

The posture of the 'downward way' of the incarnate God is a presence that is able to respond because it has listened to and for the 'other'; 'To see in this way is to grasp the invisible kinship and hidden solidarity among things, so see that matter is haunted by spirit and that spirit belongs to matter'⁶ (Romanyshyn, 2002, p.167). This means that we, emptying ourselves, will experience the same oneness with all things. Conversion is to be understood as a series of *metanoias* (that word often translated as 'repentance' means a complete turn around, now going in a new direction).

The discipleship journey is a turn around, again and again, from living life as an upward flight to happiness full of

riches, whether they be heavenly or earthly, to a downward journey towards the vocation of servanthip (Philippians uses the word 'slave') to the cosmos, the whole inhabited earth, the human and the more than human community. Or is it true that we have become hostage to our culture; so that we model our faith in the clothes of consumerism and militarism, instead of modelling a subversive culture on the sacred principle of love: the first shall be last and the last first. Properly interpreted that must mean if you are the crown of creation, then intentionally, you give up your life to be a servant to all including, the least of the least.

There should be no need for a separate ecotheology. Christian theology includes a theology of creation, just as it includes a theology of social justice and a theology of monetary justice. If the local prophets were doing their job they would be proclaiming a Christology which is

voiced in terms of a 'sacred cosmology where soul finds its home again in the order of creation'⁷.

The God-given opportunity

Am I deceiving myself to believe that if this robust proclamation of the gospel was being heard week by week in cathedrals, churches, chapels and house groups and in all the new expressions of Christian church, then we would no longer need to persuade, cajole and badger Christians into some sort of begrudging lip service to a green lifestyle. Instead faith in Christ would be immediately understood to be subversive of a culture which causes environmental mayhem. Such faith *sees* the destruction and *weeps* with Christ, then *acts* to follow a lifestyle which, disregarding upward mobility, serves and nurtures the whole inhabited earth. That would be a *storm of hope*.

Maybe an essential campaign for Green Christian (CEL) is to challenge the theological colleges to focus on strategies, not to make Church more modern and easily accessible but rather on a pedagogy which encourages and inspires the emergence of courageous local prophets to proclaim the Lord of the downward way.

Perhaps I was too optimistic in 2003. Perhaps my conviction should be rephrased: God the Creator is giving us the opportunity through the environmental crisis to lay down our lives, following the servant Lord, for all of his creation. But will we take that opportunity?

Where have all the local prophets gone, long time passing?
Oh when will we ever learn? ■

Chris is the retiring editor of *Green Christian*, the magazine. He was ordained in 1971 and after nearly 30 years in the Baptist ministry has spent the last 15 years with his wife Ross leading the Ringsfield EcoActivity and Retreat Centre known to many Green Christian (CEL) members.

References

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