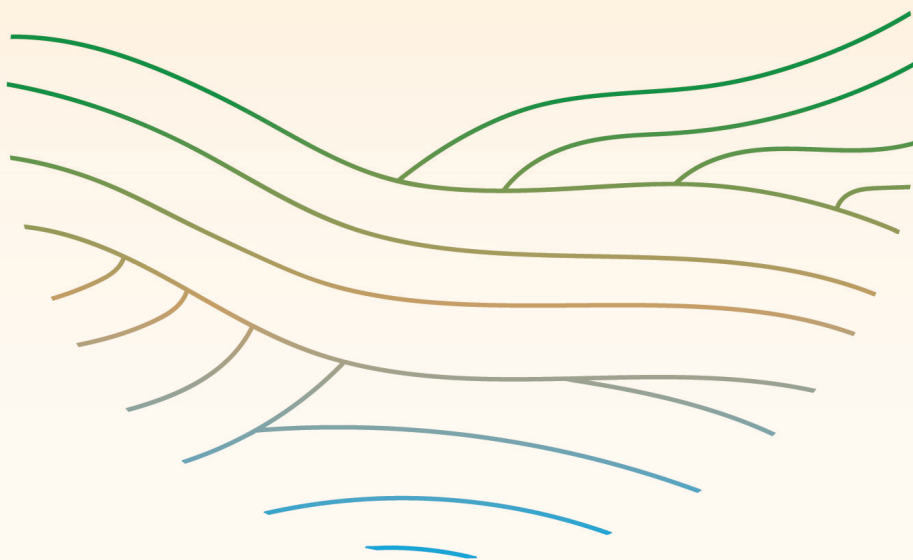


CCA 15th General Assembly

BIBLE STUDIES



**‘God, Renew Us in Your Spirit
and
Restore the Creation’**



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God, Renew Us in Your Spirit and Restore the Creation



Christian Conference of Asia

‘God, Renew Us in Your Spirit and Restore the Creation’

Bible Studies

© Christian Conference of Asia 2023
ISBN: 978-962-7439-76-9

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Design & Print : Vettathu Digital Printers, Thiruvalla, Kerala.
Tel : +91 9446912720

Printed in India

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Introduction

Bible study motivates us to grow in our faith, increases our knowledge of God's divine plans, and gives us wisdom and fresh understanding. It brings strength and guidance for life. The rich treasures in the Bible help us understand how God's desires and plans for humanity are shaped and reveal the most profound components of the mystery of God's salvific deeds. This revelation also illustrates the story of our separation from God by sin, God's unfailing faithfulness for the redemption of humanity, and God's provisions for the restoration of God's creation. The Bible's most important and timeless message, restoration, is universally and perpetually applicable to humanity. However, it is essential to better understand the fullness of biblical messages and comprehend in depth the relevance of the truth in the Scripture. We believe that the truth manifested in the Scripture is relevant to our lives. As we engage in meaningful Bible study, we open ourselves to transformation. As St. Paul says, "All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting, and training in righteousness, so that the servant of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work" (2 Timothy 3:16-17). However, the most significant aspect depends on how well we are cognizant of, and interpret, the Scripture contextually.

The topmost imperative of hermeneutics, the art and science of biblical interpretation, is to consider the context to determine relevance. This implies understanding how the Bible was meant for its original audience and how it applies to the contemporary context. It is precisely for this reason that we must understand what the text meant to its original context, and then we need to understand and interpret the significance of the chasm between then and now. In order to grow in our spiritual life, regular and meaningful Bible study is vital, and it will help us to be able to discern what is best.

Presented in this book are twelve Bible studies centred around the theme of the 15th General Assembly of the Christian Conference of Asia (CCA), "God, Renew Us in Your Spirit and Restore the Creation". It is our hope and prayer that these Bible studies will be helpful in facilitating meaningful reflections on the CCA Assembly theme and its three sub-themes.

Dr Mathews George Chunakara
General Secretary, CCA

1

Stewardship of God's Creation

*Rev. Dr. Asigor P. Sitanggang**

Creation Narration (Genesis 1:1–2:25)

The Bible contains many stories about the relationship between the Creator and the humans He created, as well as that between humans and their non-human fellow creations. Therefore, it is necessary to study the relationship between the Creator and creation, before entering the main subject, namely, the relationship between creation (humans) and other fellow creations, a relationship that was intended to be one of stewardship. For this reason, it is necessary to study the narrative of creation in the Book of Genesis.

From the beginning, Genesis 1:1–3, the Bible testifies that the universe was created by God: “In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth. And the earth was waste and void, and darkness was upon the face of the deep: and the Spirit of God moved upon the face of the waters. And God said, “Let there be light: and there was light” (American Standard Version).

The narrative of Genesis 1 seems to be carefully structured around the seven days in which the eight acts of creation and the ten commandments are recorded. The number seven is not a random number. God “saw” and declared His creation “good” seven times; “earth” or “land” (with the same Hebrew term) occurs 21 times; “God” is repeated 35 times. The number 7 or multiples of it also appear in passages. Genesis 1:1 (in the Hebrew text) contains seven words; 1:2 contains fourteen words; Genesis 2:1–3 contains 35 words. Even the sum of the words used in 1:1–2:3 is 469 words in Hebrew (7x67) (Brown, p.37). Why is the number seven important? Apart from the fact that the number

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seven is a unique number, the number seven is understood as a symbol of fullness or completeness. Later it became a symbol of God. (Brown, p.37). The multiple uses of the number seven and its multiples in the creation narrative were clearly intentional to show the Hebrews that God's creation was full or complete.

Verse 1, “in the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth” can be understood more as the title of the creation narrative and not part of the creation narrative. The word ‘in the beginning’ (Hebrews אֶרֶבְתִּישׁ, *bereshit*) actually shows the beginning of all creation. This serves as the title for the creation narrative (1:2–2:3) (Arnold, p.25). In verse 2, the creation narrative begins with a pre-creation reality: there was an earth, not there was not yet earth, but it was formless and empty, which in Hebrew is וְהָיָה וְהָיָה, *tohu wa vohu*, which means unformed and disordered (or chaotic) (Brown, p.36). The state of the earth at that time was pitch black, and the great ocean indicated that water was everywhere. This reaffirms the chaos but also indicates that there was already water. Verse 3 is the first stage of creation that God did, and the first act was that of creating light.

The order of creation then becomes interesting, namely on the second day God separated waters from waters so that there was a firmament between them. On the third day, God created plants. On the fourth day, which is interesting, God created lights in the sky, namely the sun during the day and the moon and the stars at night. This is interesting because plants were created before the sun. While we know, from biology, that plants need the sun to live and grow (photosynthesis). On the fifth day, God created the animals. On the sixth day, God created humans. On the seventh day, God rested.

Creator-Creation (Human) Relations

Genesis 1:26–27 asserts that God created humans. Despite the view of evolutionists that the universe including humans came into existence as the product of billions of years of evolution, the Bible affirms that the universe including humans was created by God.

Genesis 1:26a states: “Let us make man in our image and likeness”. This confirms that on the one hand, like other creatures, humans are God's creations, but on the other hand, humans are the only

creatures created in the image (לְדִמְיוֹ *tselem*) and likeness (figure, *demuth*) of God.

This concept of *imago Dei* does not imply that God has human-like characteristics, but rather that he accords a special honour to humans. If we look at the assignment that God gave to humans (ay. 26b), humans, as bearers of the image and likeness of God (*Imago Dei*), are given the mandate to be God's co-workers in managing the universe. The word 'ruling' is a translation of טָרָה (*radah*) which means 'ruling, being king'. Seeing that this is a causal sub-sentence, where the main sentence refers to God, then the intended 'rule' or 'become a king' can be seen as having two meanings, namely first that his power does not come from himself but comes from God, and secondly that humans become kings by using the goodness that comes from God, or what we can call divine goodness.

The psalmist understands that humans are created almost equal to God in that humans are given glory and honour, which is seen in human dominion over the universe (Psalm 8:6–9). Apparently, the psalmist is referring to the creation narrative in Genesis 1–2.

Jesus later confirmed this (Mark 10:6). The New Testament adds that in creation, the Son of God is involved in creation. The Gospel of John confirms that all things were created in Jesus (John 1:3). This was also later emphasised by Paul. In Colossians, Paul stated that the Son of God created all things. He even stated it twice in one verse (Colossians 1:16a and 16b). But then people turned away from Him by choosing to follow the devil's appeal. In ancient Jewish culture and surrounding communities, snakes are understood as representations of the Devil. The fall of man is the act of man moving away from God. As a result, according to the meaning of *imago Dei* above, first, humans stay away from *imago Dei* and then start to see power as coming from themselves, from their own strength. Second, human beings do not use divine virtues, but use their own values, and are even controlled by evil. This is seen in Genesis 1–11, which still refers to all nations. God created life, but humanity shunned Him (Prior, *The Bible*, 232)

Relations Among Creation (Humans and Other Creatures)

The placement of human creation on the sixth day is often understood and interpreted as creation centred on humans.



Humans are part of creation; not to mention when seeing Genesis 1:26–28. V.28 asserts: “Be fruitful, and multiply, and replenish the earth, and subdue it, and have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the birds of the heavens, and over every living thing that moveth upon the earth.” The words ‘fill the earth and subdue it’, and ‘have dominion over the fish...’ from the very beginning were understood as an affirmation that man’s place is above all creation and that the human is understood as the crown of all creation, and therefore since then humankind has dominated and exploited the universe.

However, this model of interpretation can be replaced by another model of interpretation, namely that the placement of human creation at the end of creation shows the vulnerability of humankind. His creation of humans on the sixth day shows that humans cannot live without support or even sustenance from all other creations of God that were created from the first day to the fifth day. In this sense, humans are precisely the weakest creatures among all existing creations.

When God created the universe, for each of His creations, God said that His creation was “good” (vv.4, 10, 12, 18, 21, 25) and overall was good (v.31). “Good” here is often interpreted, because before the fall, as ethically good. But this goodness can also be seen as good aesthetically (Moberly, p. 43).

Thus, God pins goodness on every creation, and not just on humans. All of God’s creations are good, and man is one of all the good creations that God created. God’s goodness is in every creation, and not only in humans.

The psalmist reflects on the condition of humans compared to the universe which emphasises that humans are very small compared to all of God’s creation, especially when compared to the heavenly bodies, the sun, the moon, and the stars (Psalm 8:4,5). Apart from referring to the narrative of creation, it seems that the psalmist is using experience as well as an empirical approach to conclude that humans are very small creatures.

Image and Appearance of God or *Imago Dei*

According to the text of Genesis, the image and likeness of God (*imago Dei*) is present so that humans have dominion over all

other creations of God. The fall of man into sin is also understood as *imago Dei* being damaged. Man loses the divine virtues, though not entirely. The creation narrative in the Book of Genesis was then misinterpreted negatively as justifying the conquest and exploitation of the universe.

The era of Western (Europe) colonialism allied with Western Christianity (Europe) made the West (Europe) expand and even colonise the Eastern world. Their famous motto in their expansion was *gold, glory, and gospel* (sometimes also called *Gold, God, and Glory* with the same meaning) (Lockard, *Gold, God, and Glory*). The Western industrial revolution in the 18th century started in England and then spread to other parts of Europe and resulted in industrial factories, making the exploitation of natural resources even greater. Exploitation then was no longer confined to Europe but also entered the East or the Third World.

Colonialism came to an end following World War II but now neocolonialism has emerged. Neocolonialism is actually colonialism with a new face. If colonialism meant that a country (which is developed) colonises a certain area (less developed, developed, poor) outside its territorial area, then neocolonialism is colonisation in a new form of exploitation through indirect means such as the economy, politics, culture, etc. where the developed country does not control other countries or regions (less developed, developed, poor), but controls the economy, politics, culture of other countries, and usually exerts this control through giant companies (Halperin, *Neocolonialism*). Neocolonialism can be seen easily in a country, where many of the nation's assets and resources are controlled by foreign companies. Idries de Vries suggests, with the data he has, that Indonesia's natural resources are generally controlled by giant foreign companies (de Vries, *Neo-Colonialism*).

Jesus as *Imago Dei*

In Philippians 2:6, Paul affirms that Jesus has the likeness of God (μορφή Θεοῦ, *Morfe Theou*, form, essence, substance). The Greek term used is different from the term used for the word 'likeness' in the LXX (Septuagint, Greek Old Testament), namely ὁμοίωσις (*homoiosis*, similar). It seems that what is meant is that



Jesus is of the same essence, one form or one substance with God.

In 2 Corinthians 4:4, Paul states clearly that Christ is the image of God (εἰκὼν τοῦ Θεοῦ, *eikon tou Theou*). It is this term εἰκὼν that is used in Genesis 1:26 LXX version. So, it is clear that by using the term εἰκὼν τοῦ Θεοῦ Paul is referring to the creation narrative. Just as Adam was created in the image of God, so Jesus is the image of God. Yet Jesus, unlike Adam after the Fall, is the perfect image of God.

In Colossians 1:15, Paul reaffirms that Jesus is the image of God with the same Greek term, εἰκὼν τοῦ Θεοῦ. There is an additional word, 'invisible' (τοῦ ἀοράτου, *tou aoratou*) in the phrase, namely εἰκὼν τοῦ Θεοῦ τοῦ ἀοράτου, the image of the invisible God. This shows that the invisible God is shown through Jesus Christ. So, the function of the statement that Jesus is the image of God is to reveal the invisible God through and in Jesus Christ. Humans can know or see God through Jesus, His image. Hebrews 1:3 states that Jesus is the image of God's being. Interestingly, this text does not use the term εἰκὼν τοῦ Θεοῦ but χαρακτηρ τῆς ὑποστάσεως (*character tes hupostaseos*, [similar] carvings of [God's] form). This sentence states that Jesus is a similar image of God.

Christ the Image of God—Imitation of Christ—Image of Christ

The creation narrative asserts that in the beginning, humans were created in the image and likeness of God (*imago Dei*). But the Fall made *imago Dei* damaged, although not completely lost. Humans have an element of divine goodness. As explained above, the New Testament affirms that Christ is *imago Dei*. Therefore, for Christians to return to being *imago Dei*, made possible through the work of the cross of Christ, they are encouraged to imitate Christ (*the imitation of Christ*). By imitating Christ, Christians then become conformed to the image of Jesus Christ, the Son of God (εἰκόνας τοῦ υἱοῦ αὐτοῦ, *eikonas tou huiou autou*, the image of His Son). Therefore, Christians are called to be the image of Christ, just as was the case when Adam was created in the image of God (*imago Dei*).

New Creation

In Galatians 6:15, Paul emphasised the fact that whether one was circumcised or not was meaningless. The point is to become a new creation (καινή κτίσις, *kaine ktisis*, new creation). Then, in 2 Corinthians 5:17, Paul states that anyone who believes in Jesus has become a new creation. Paul uses the same Greek term (καινή κτίσις) to denote this. Here he seems to speak of the re-creation of man referring to the creation of man who fell away from God. This idea parallels the idea in John's Gospel about rebirth (John 3:3, γεννηθῆ ἄνωθεν, *gennethe anothēn*, born from above). This understanding of the new creation shows that those who believe in Christ become new creations (at the same time, Paul describes the new human profile in Ephesians 4:17–32 and Colossians 3:1–17).

Managing the Universe

Thus, the discourse on a new creation or a new human being brings us back to the narrative of creation, especially in relation to God's plan to create humans, namely to become co-workers with God in managing the universe that God created. Related to that, the prophet Isaiah's prophecy about the New Heavens and the New Earth gives an enticing picture because it explains the relationship between fellow animals and the relationship between humans and animals: "The wolf and the lamb shall feed together, and the lion shall eat straw like the ox, and dust shall be the serpent's food. They shall not hurt nor destroy all my holy mountain, saith Jehovah" (Isaiah 65:25). But what is interesting, in the prophecy about the coming of the Messiah, which the New Testament understands as referring to Jesus, meaning that it is not referring to life in heaven. Isaiah says: "And the wolf shall dwell with the lamb, and the leopard shall lie down with the kid; and the calf and the young lion and the fatling together; and a little child shall lead them. And the cow and the bear shall feed; their young ones shall lie down together; and the lion shall eat straw like the ox. And the sucking child shall play on the hole of the asp, and the weaned child shall put his hand on the adder's den." (Isaiah 11:6–8, ASV).



The two texts with different contexts actually have the same emphasis; namely, it occurs when humans abandon evil, including crimes against nature, animals, and even the universe. Humans are called to return to the original divine mandate, namely to become co-workers with God in managing the universe.

Bringing the Good News to All Creations

We tend to quote the Great Commission from Matthew 28:16–20, “make disciples of all the nations” (v. 19a) in many missiological discourses along with the Gold, Glory and Gospel brought by the European colonials. We should look more to Mark 16:15 where Jesus commands: “Go ye into all the world, and preach the gospel to the whole creation.” The term “the whole creation” is a correct translation of *πάσῃ τῇ κτίσει* where *κτίσει* (3rd singular, dative of *κτίσις*, meaning ‘creation’). This means that Jesus sees all of the creation as a whole. The good news should be delivered not just to humankind, but to all creation, comprising living and non-living things, as a unity. In understanding this, we need to realise that preaching the good news to the whole creation is not merely conducted by verbal activities. While we obviously cannot preach to the trees, water, air, land and sand, or even to animals using language, and while we certainly cannot ‘Christianise’ them, we are called to bring the good news to all creatures by nurturing nature as a whole, of which humankind is only a part. This is the Great Commission for all of us.

Questions for Reflection

1. *How does the concept of the imago Dei shape our stewardship roles and responsibilities towards the environment? In what way does it impact our actions and choices in everyday life?*
2. *Reflect on the idea of imitating Christ as a means to restore the image of God within us. How does imitating Christ transform us and shape our interactions with the creation?*

2

Healing Creation through the Power of the Holy Spirit

*Fr. Gilbert Aranha**

Pope John XXIII prayed to God for the success of Vatican II with these words, “Renew Your wonders in this our day, as by a new Pentecost”. The Holy Spirit answered by bringing a profound renewal in the Catholic Church. At the dawn of the post-COVID-19 era, as the world is preparing to leave behind the sad memories of the COVID-19 pandemic, the CCA is holding its 15th General Assembly with an apt theme: “God, Renew Us in Your Spirit and Restore the Creation”. We have realised that human greed and selfishness have hurt the environment as well. The world is not the same anymore. Gripped by the fear of uncertainty and faced with challenges too big to overcome, this theme is our earnest prayer. Personal renewal and the restoration of the whole creation through the Holy Spirit are the need of the hour; both are hurt as never before in recent human memory.

We Must Celebrate the Present Creation

The theme of our study expresses the nostalgic yearning of every living being. It is a yearning for the condition that preceded Genesis 3. Many times, our theology begins only with Genesis 3, i.e. the ‘Fall’, instead of Genesis 1–2. As a result, we do not celebrate the basic goodness of God’s creation. When God looks at creation, He says, “It is good.” Often, we complain about what is wrong but forget to celebrate the creation which is good. We have in Psalm 104:24–35 a celebration of the goodness of God’s creation: “How many are your works, Lord! In wisdom you made

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them all; the earth is full of your creatures” (v.24). It also proclaims the work of the Holy Spirit, “When you send your Spirit, they are created, and you renew the face of the ground” (v.30) alluding to His life-giving presence at the creation (Genesis 1:2). St Francis of Assisi celebrates this goodness of God’s creation in his canticle ‘Brother Sun and Sister Moon’.

The other side of the celebration of God’s creation is its protection. We are called to celebrate the ‘creation’ and at the same time, we are called to ‘protect’ it. In Genesis 1:28 we are given power over the creation to ‘rule’ over it. The Hebrew word *radah* which is translated as “dominion” or “rule” is a royal word. The same word is used in Psalm 72, (originally a coronation Psalm for Solomon), in v.8 “May he have dominion [*radah*] from sea to sea...” which is explained in v.12–14 “For he will deliver the needy who cry out, the afflicted who have no one to help. He will take pity on the weak and the needy and save the needy from death. He will rescue them from oppression and violence, for precious is their blood in his sight,” (NIV). The opposite is given in Ezekiel 34:4. The dominion that God desires is one that protects the defenceless and gives justice to the oppressed. Applying this to the dominion over creation, the rule over creation is a call to protect it. It is a call to guard natural beauty, preserve endangered species of God’s creatures, and even restore the places which we have too often ruled ‘with force and harshness’.¹

The Effect of Human Rebellion on Creation

The first parents, by disobeying God, refused to accept Him to be the standard of right and wrong. They claimed autonomy: ‘we are a law unto ourselves’. Thus, we read in the book of Judges, ‘everyone did what is right in his own eyes’ (Judges 21:25). When Adam and Eve decided to eat from the Tree, they were not just disobeying God, but were proclaiming a ‘Cosmic Rebellion’ against God. This rebellion destroyed the ‘goodness of God’s creation’, consequently affecting the harmonious relationship within the creation at different levels. First of all, a man/woman was not able to accept himself/herself as he/she is. Secondly, they were not able to accept each other. Thus, an individual’s relationship with one’s own self and with the other person got broken. This manifests the genius behind the second commandment in

Leviticus 19:18, 'Love your neighbour as yourself'—only when you rightly relate to yourself can you relate to your neighbour.

At the third level, this cosmic rebellion brings a sense of 'guilt'. When God comes calling, Adam and Eve have guilt and fear. They hide themselves because they know that they have done something that they should not have done.

At the fourth level, by rebelling against God, Adam and Eve dragged the creation down along with them. This is because they were given 'charge' over the creation. Thus, in Genesis 3:16–17 we see our relationship with nature is broken. The woman will find childbearing as painful (Genesis 3:16), 'work' which at original creation was intended by God as a form of creativity under or alongside God's own creativity² (Genesis 2:15)³, man will find this as 'toil' (Genesis 3:17)⁴ after the rebellion (Genesis 3: 17–19).

Finally, the effect of the rebellion at the fifth level is found in Romans 8:19–27, "For the creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the sons of God. For the creation was subjected to frustration not by its own choice but by the will of the one who subjected it..."

The answer could be understood in two ways: 'by the will of God who is sovereign over all creation' but also by the will of the first human pair to whom the charge over the creation was given. Therefore, when we rebelled against God, we dragged creation down along with us. Today, climate change, global warming and so on are human contributions subjecting the creation to suffering.

Paul describes the state of the present creation as one of groaning similar to the woman's groaning at childbirth (Romans 8:22–27). This takes us back to Genesis 3. Our disobedience has made creation groan. When we see natural calamities like a tsunami or an earthquake which cannot be explained, it is because of man's excessive interference with God's creation. It is not surprising, therefore, that the signs of warnings of the second coming of Christ have to do with natural disasters. Again, it is creation groaning, waiting for the children of God to be revealed. That means when we are liberated, that is, when we are resurrected,



creation will also be resurrected. Paul expresses this hope that creation itself will be liberated from death and decay and brought to the glorious kingdom of the children of God.

God Renews Creation Through His Spirit

The Holy Spirit who was operating in the present creation also operates in the new creation. The psalmist declares: “When you send your Spirit, they are created, and you renew the face of the ground”, (Psalm 104:30). The new creation began with the annunciation by the angel Gabriel to the Virgin Mary that she would conceive a Son by the power of the ‘Holy Spirit’ to be called ‘Jesus’ (Luke 1:26–38). Thus, through the Virgin Mary, the Spirit of God enters the creation. Being born of the Virgin Mary, conceived through the Holy Spirit, Lord Jesus also becomes part of creation, the ‘first born’ (Colossians 1:15). The Holy Spirit anointed Jesus for his mission (Luke 4:18). So, the renewal and the restoration of creation is begun by the Holy Spirit through the life of Jesus.

The first evidence of the renewal of creation is the resurrection of Christ. In Romans 1:4, Paul makes it clear that the Lord Jesus was raised from the dead through the Holy Spirit. So, the Holy Spirit as the agent of renewal of creation begins His work in the resurrection of Jesus. Jesus’ resurrected body is the beginning of the new creation.

It is important to note that at his resurrection Jesus did not ‘come back to life’, but rather ‘passed on to a higher level of physical existence’. This higher dimension let the body of Jesus go through the clothes, go through the stone at the mouth of the grave and come through the walls of the upper room where the disciples were hiding. This is the glory that awaits our own bodies and with us the entire creation. Paul has this in mind when he says that our groaning inwardly and waiting eagerly is for ‘the redemption of our bodies’ (Romans 8:22–23). The renewal by the Holy Spirit is to lift our present creation to a new and higher physical level.

How the Church Could Be Engaged in the Renewal of Creation

The entire creation which suffered man’s ‘cosmic rebellion’, is further harmed by our human greed, as Pope Francis in his

encyclical *Laudato Si'* says, "Never have we so hurt and mistreated our common home as we have in the last two hundred years".⁵ Wounded by our sin the creation continues to groan⁶ and awaits redemption that will be completed when Jesus returns. We Christians do not have to wait until the Lord's return to begin the task of renewing the creation but must engage in the renewal that has already begun. In Romans 8:27 the Holy Spirit groaning in us with wordless groans is a reference to the Church that is praying through the groaning of the Holy Spirit in the present creation.

Pope Francis exhorts everyone to be actively involved in the renewal of the entire creation. He states that the natural catastrophes that manifest so often these days are the result of our own misuse of the creation⁷ for which we have to assume responsibility. A fragile world, entrusted by God to human care, challenges us to devise intelligent ways of directing, developing, and limiting our power.⁸ The entire material universe speaks of God's love, his boundless affection for us. Soil, water, mountains—everything is, as it were, a caress of God.⁹ All of us are linked by unseen bonds and together form a kind of universal family, a sublime communion which fills us with a sacred, affectionate and humble respect.¹⁰ Everything is related, and we human beings are united as brothers and sisters on a wonderful pilgrimage, woven together by the love God has for each of his creatures and this also unites us in fond affection with brother sun, sister moon, brother river and mother earth.¹¹

Humanity still has the ability to work together in building our common home.¹² A great cultural, spiritual and educational challenge stands before us, and it will demand that we set out on the long path of renewal.¹³

Conclusion

The theme of the General Assembly is to implore God's intervention and restore hope and optimism to each and every one. We are looking for God's new creation (Revelation 21,22) where we will be in a city where the spirits of the righteous will be made perfect (Hebrews 12:22–24). The Holy Spirit who was closely involved in the creation by granting life to what God created (John 6:63) will be operating in the new creation where He is represented as the River of the Water of Life flowing from the throne of God and



of the Lamb (Revelation 22:1,2).¹⁴ Here in the present creation, God's will is not always done, and many have been blinded to the Gospel (2 Corinthians 4:4). Our hope is that the Spirit will redeem ecology in the new creation. The resurrection of Jesus Christ is proleptic, not only of our resurrection but of the liberation of creation itself from its bondage to decay. We await the coming of God and the transformation of all things in God's kingdom of glory. We await the overcoming of futility and the redemption of the universe.¹⁵

Questions for Reflection

1. *How can we cultivate a deeper appreciation and celebration of God's creation in our theology and daily lives, recognising its inherent goodness and beauty?*
2. *In what practical ways can the Church actively engage in the renewal and restoration of creation, addressing the environmental challenges caused by human greed and selfishness?*

¹ See <https://christopherbrown.wordpress.com/2009/01/03/genesis-128-to-subdue-and-have-dominion-over-creation/>.

² See, Bible Commentary by Theology of Work (TOW) Project at <https://www.theologyofwork.org/old-testament/psalms-and-work/book-4-psalms-90106/human-creativity-with-god-psalm-104>.

³ לַעֲבֹד = le'a-ve-dah = to work.

⁴ וְלַעֲבֹד = be'i-tza-vo-vn= toil.

⁵ Pope Francis, lit. encycl., *Laudato Si* 24 May 2015, no.53.

⁶ *Ibid.*, no.2.

⁷ Cf. *Ibid.*, no.161.

⁸ *Ibid.*, no.78.

⁹ *Ibid.*, no.84.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, no.89.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, no.92.

¹² See, <https://christopherbrown.wordpress.com/2009/01/03/genesis-128-to-subdue-and-have-dominion-over-creation/>

¹³ *Ibid.*, no.202.

¹⁴ This is reflected in the Nicene Creed's reference to the Holy Spirit as proceeding from the Father and the Son.

¹⁵ See, Roger E. Olson, "Resurrection, Cosmic Liberation, and Christian Earth Keeping" in *Ex Auditu* 9 (1993), pp. 123-132.

3

Responding to the Sufferings of the Creation

Rev. Dr Yusak B. Setyawan*

Romans 8:18–30

¹⁸ I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory about to be revealed to us. ¹⁹ For the creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the children of God; ²⁰ for the creation was subjected to futility, not of its own will but by the will of the one who subjected it, in hope ²¹ that the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to decay and will obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God. ²² We know that the whole creation has been groaning in labour pains until now; ²³ and not only the creation, but we ourselves, who have the first fruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly while we wait for adoption, the redemption of our bodies. ²⁴ For in hope we were saved. Now hope that is seen is not hope. For who hopes for what is seen? ²⁵ But if we hope for what we do not see, we wait for it with patience. ²⁶ Likewise the Spirit helps us in our weakness; for we do not know how to pray as we ought, but that very Spirit intercedes with sighs too deep for words. ²⁷ And God, who searches the heart, knows what is the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for the saints according to the will of God. ²⁸ We know that all things work together for good for those who love God, who are called according to his purpose. ²⁹ For those whom he foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, in order that he might be the firstborn

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within a large family.³⁰ And those whom he predestined he also called; and those whom he called he also justified; and those whom he justified he also glorified.

Introduction

Romans 8:18–30 is very relevant for our post-pandemic context, i.e., while the current humanitarian problems are not over, the aftermath of the pandemic is exacerbating the situation in society worldwide. In general, the world is still riddled with various inequalities and injustices that have caused a gap between the rich and the poor. Amid various social problems, the issue of the ecological crisis must immediately get a concrete response from religious communities, including Christianity.

Romans and Social Facts: τὰ παθήματα

A word that needs to be taken seriously in reading this text is the word the sufferings, τὰ παθήματα in Romans 8:18. However, this word (plural form) suggests a meaning that is much broader than just suffering. These words come together to form the phrase τὰ παθήματα τοῦ νῦν καιροῦ, “our present suffering” (NIV) which includes everything that happens in this day that brings about sufferings.

The entire text of Romans 8:18–30 is framed by the affirmation of the fact of suffering in this life, which is a time before believers experience rapture or death. Suffering is a fact that has happened and will happen in this world. This experience of suffering is experienced by all beings (verses 19–20). All creation experiences suffering because it has been colonised by vanity, ματαιότητι, or subjected to frustration (verse 20, NIV).

The terms “all beings” and “subject to vanity” reconnect to the ideal of the universe that God had created as one that was good. And when humans were created, the quality of the created nature was given the title “very good”. (Genesis 1:31, NIV). But the fall of human beings into sin made the ideal of the universe created by God subject to vanity. Because of sin, the creatures experience suffering too.

It is not only all creation that is experiencing suffering at that time but also the believers. The understanding that believers receive God's presence through the Spirit appears after the resurrection of Jesus. However, in the text, it is very much emphasised that a believer who has received the Spirit is not immune to the events that occur in the world and society that cause suffering. Christians who believe in Christ and who experience the inclusion of God through the Spirit, do not isolate themselves and form a ghetto community, but are in and with society and live in the wider community. Christians are in this world with creation.

The experiences that Paul alludes to in the Epistle to the Romans may be reminiscent of those that occur in the present which causes suffering. This suffering includes individual and social conditions that are closely interwoven with one another in a fabric of social, cultural, and community structures. Also, the experience of suffering experienced by all creation as mentioned in the text is reminiscent of the "suffering" experienced by all creation, including our planet Earth. Hence we can include the suffering that creation experiences, such as environmental pollution, ecological damage, species extinction, and the disruption of biodiversity.

In the face of the factors that inflict suffering on all beings including believers, the text emphasises two important theological points, namely renewal in the Spirit of God and restoration of the universe.

Renewal in the Spirit of God

The renewal experienced by the believer is as a being who has been saved (ἐσώθημεν). Salvation happened in the past, but it is still ongoing today. That salvation and hope exist with believers in situations of experiencing suffering together with all creatures. The sentence in verse 24: τῇ γὰρ ἐλπίδι ἐσώθημεν, is more accurately translated as "because we were saved in/by hope". Salvation makes believers children of God, but at the same time, it is emphasised that salvation makes believers continue to hope amid situations of suffering.

In the text, it is emphasised that hope is always oriented towards the future. "But hope that is seen is no hope at all" (v.24, NIV). In other words, the experience that occurs in the present is not



something that is expected; what is expected is that in the future things will be better, more prosperous, and there will be no more suffering that causes complaints. The salvation that believers have experienced will be full in the future when our bodies are liberated, τὴν ἀπολύτρωσιν τοῦ σώματος ἡμῶν (v.23).

The salvation that has been given in the past and which continues to occur in the present does not only make believers have hope, but helps them experience renewal because of the presence of the Spirit of God. Renewal is done by the Spirit of God. The Spirit of God is with and within the believer. It is also recognised that the salvation that has been bestowed upon believers does not make a believer free from weaknesses. And in this case, salvation becomes something that happens today because amid these weaknesses the Lord God is still present and with the Spirit who is with us. The Spirit helps us in our weaknesses (v.26).

Continuous renewal occurs because the Spirit continues to connect us with God. God's Spirit gives us strength in our grievances. The renewal experienced by believers is due to the power of God through His Spirit. In this case, a transcendental relationship with God through the Spirit is an affirmation that enables a believer to endure situations of suffering. Renewal through salvation from God and continuing in a mystical relationship with God is our strength to face even the most severe realities of suffering.

Restoration of Creation

In Romans 8:19, Paul comes to a stage of theological thought that the renewal experienced by believers is an integral part of the restoration of the whole creation. While it is said that all beings experience suffering (v.22), they long for the time when the children of God are revealed. The sentence in verse 19, ἡ γὰρ ἀποκαταδοκία τῆς κτίσεως τὴν ἀποκάλυψιν τῶν υἱῶν τοῦ θεοῦ ἀπεκδέχεται, indicates that while experiencing suffering the status of the believers as children of God has not been revealed, even though salvation has already been granted.

The relationship between the salvation that has occurred in the past and the revelation of the children of God in the future will be understood if verse 19 is read in conjunction with verse 29. Predestination theology has been in Paul's mind, that God has a plan to elect people to be believers. Those who have believed

in God receive salvation and are determined and chosen to be children of God. Christ has become the Son of God and one day it will be revealed that believers will become children of God, become brothers and sisters of the firstborn Son of God. In other words, the idea of salvation in the past does not conflict with the idea of revelation of the children of God that will occur in the future.

The understanding of verse 19 as stated in the previous section confirms that all creatures rely on believers as people who have experienced renewal. All creatures, who experience suffering, place their hope in believers because just as the creation of human beings made all creation very good, but also because of the fall of humans into sin, all creation was in a situation of suffering. When humans fall into sin, it is as if the whole creation is in solidarity with humans, and when creation experiences suffering, believers also share in the suffering of the entire creation. And in connection with this understanding, all beings also have hope (v.20–21).

Meanwhile, people who have experienced renewal become a mainstay and hope for all creatures; God will perform the restoration of the creation. God will redeem all creation from the slavery that has occurred and enter into the freedom of the glory of God's children. That is why all creatures long for the time when God's children are revealed because that is when all creation experiences restoration, namely liberation from slavery that leads to destruction, to glory together with God's children.

The restoration of creation seems to reverse the sequence of the events of creation. If in creation, God created all of creation and finally humans were created as God's image and likeness, then in the restoration event, God chooses the chosen people to be saved and become God's children, and then all creation is liberated and enters the glory of the children's freedom. God works to bring goodness as stated in verse 28. The world created by God does not end in destruction but ends in restoration. Restoration is an event that turns what has been damaged into good again. A creation that is corrupted and is covered by suffering will be transformed into a creation that is full of glory, in which the children of God experience renewal.



Believers and all creation have shown solidarity in suffering. And when believers have experienced renewal, they are called to be involved in God's work in the restoration of the world. God's work in everything means that it is not enough to renew humans to be God's children, but rather in continuing to restore the whole creation of which the believers are part.

Conclusion

In light of this passage, believers are encouraged to embrace their responsibility as agents of renewal and restoration. Romans 8:18–30 speaks to the suffering and inequalities in our post-pandemic world, urging each individual to respond to the ecological crisis. Believers experience ongoing renewal through the Spirit of God, providing hope amid suffering. Restoration of creation is intertwined with believers' renewal, liberating it from sin and suffering. Believers are called to actively participate in restoration, addressing social, cultural, and environmental challenges. By fulfilling this role, believers contribute to the flourishing of the world, bringing hope and healing in the face of injustice. Let us be inspired by this call to renew our spirits and restore creation.

Questions for Reflection

1. *The passage emphasises the ongoing renewal experienced by believers through the Spirit of God, even in the midst of suffering. How can this understanding of renewal empower believers to face societal injustices and inequalities? How can believers find hope and strength to bring about positive change in the world?*
2. *What does restoration mean in the context of our present world? How can believers actively contribute to the restoration of broken relationships, systems, and structures in society? How does this align with the mission of the Church?*

4

Seeking God's Will for His Creation during Post-Normal Times

*John Paul Devakumar**

Ephesians 1:9–10

⁹ He has made known to us the mystery of his will, according to his good pleasure that he set forth in Christ, ¹⁰ as a plan for the fullness of time, to gather up all things in him, things in heaven and things on earth.

Introduction

We live in a day and age that has crippled our ideas of normalcy. Contemporary scholars believe that things can be totally 'controlled' and 'managed', which has no meaning in the present epoch where problems do not have 'right' or 'wrong' answers but rather require multiple perspectives simply for us to even grasp their true dimensions.¹ These "post-normal times" represent a new epoch which generates fear of the future—significantly when the future is associated with the loss of power, paradigmatic angst and potential collapse of society, civilisation and the ecosystems of the earth.² Ephesians 1:9–10 offers valuable insights into seeking God's will for His creation during post-normal times. This passage highlights the cosmic scope of God's will and the role of the Church in fulfilling His plan.

Exegetical Analysis

These verses are another example of Paul's rhetorical style of explaining complex biblical themes. He uses "*gnorizo*" (to make

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known) and “*musterion*” (mystery) in v.9, where *gnorizo* in Koine Greek is used especially for something unknowable by natural means, but communicated by divine initiative. The core concept of “*musterion*”, regardless of its specific application, is that it requires initiation for understanding. In this passage, it does not signify something unknowable, but rather something that remains unknown until a proper revelation is made. It is a hidden matter that has been revealed by God, and therefore, it is purely a matter of divine disclosure. The mystery itself is revealed in the subsequent verse. It is not the gospel in a general sense, but a specific purpose of God concerning His creation.

In the first portion of v.10, “*eis oikonomian tou pleromatos tonne kairon*” (as a plan for the fullness of time), we see Paul using “*oikonomia*” (*oikos* = house + *némo* = manage) which we find in most of the English translations getting rendered as “plan”. However, *oikonomia* has a much deeper meaning in the New Testament; for instance, in Luke 16:2–4 it is used to refer to “management”, while it is also referring to “stewardship” in 1 Corinthians 9:17, Ephesians 3:2 and Colossians 1:25. We can deduce that Pauline usage of this word refers to stewardship and, in this context, it is evident that stewardship is part of the divine God’s character. This also provides a profound message that the Church is no longer just a co-creator with the Creator God, but also a co-steward who works together in managing the creation.

In the following portion in v.10, “*anakephalaiosasthai ta panta en to Christo*” (to gather up all things in him), Paul uses his “in-Christ” theme to highlight the role of Christ in this cosmic plan of God. Christ is the focal point, the cornerstone or the foundation of God’s will which brings together all creation. The purpose of Paul’s use of the word “*anakephalaiomai*” (gather together) here can be clearly understood that Christ, the promised Messiah, was not just a Saviour for people of God, but the only being who could bring together, uniting all God’s creation.

History is written and directed by its Creator, who will see it through to the fulfilment of His own ultimate purpose—the

summing up of all things in Christ. He designed His great plan in the ages past; He now sovereignly works it out according to His divine will; and in the fullness of the times He will complete and perfect it in His Son, in whom it will forever operate in righteous harmony and glorious newness along with all things in the heavens and things upon the earth.³

The last portion of v.10, “*ta epi tois ouranois kai ta epi tes ges.*” (things in heaven and things on earth) is the fitting summation of Paul’s explanation of the cosmic grandeur of God’s plan for His creation. This is not just the hope of a promised harmony of all God’s creation across the realms, but a revelation of the all-inclusive nature of God’s will.

Cosmic Scope of God’s Will

Paul in his letter to the Ephesians, provides a rich theological framework that emphasises God’s plan of redemption and the role of the Church in it. He also highlights this plan encompasses both the spiritual and physical realms, demonstrating God’s comprehensive will for His creation, which was established even before the foundation of the world. The passage emphasises the theme of cosmic reconciliation, which entails the restoration and unity of all things in heaven and on earth through Christ. God’s will for His creation during post-normal times involves bringing healing, harmony, and wholeness to every aspect of existence.

This passage is also one of the “in-Christ” motives of Pauline theology, as Paul yet again asserts Christ as the central figure in God’s plan. Through His redemptive work, Christ brings together all things and serves as the head of all creation. Seeking God’s will requires aligning ourselves with Christ and His purposes. Thus, the overview of the taken passage and context clearly presents us with two vital tenets of God’s will for His Creation, i.e., Cosmic Reconciliation and Christ as the centre and focal point. The reminder of God’s cosmic plan for all his creations should be the hope we need in this dire situation we face during these post-normal times.



Embracing the Mystery of God's Will

While we may not fully comprehend the depths of God's plan, we can trust His wisdom and guidance. Seeking God's will involves embracing the mystery and surrendering our own agendas, trusting that His purposes are ultimately for the good of His creation. As we navigate post-normal times, seeking God's will involves pursuing unity and reconciliation. We are called to break down divisions, promote understanding, and foster harmony among diverse individuals, communities, and even in our relationship with the natural world. Understanding God's comprehensive plan for creation should motivate us to actively participate in its restoration. This includes caring for the environment, advocating for justice, and working towards healing and wholeness in every sphere of life. Seeking God's will requires centring our lives on Christ and aligning our thoughts, actions, and priorities with His teachings and example. Christ should be the focal point from which our decisions and actions flow, guiding us in fulfilling God's purposes.

Conclusion

Ephesians 1:9–10 reminds us that even in post-normal times, God's will for His creation remains steadfast and comprehensive. Seeking God's will during post-normal times entails pursuing unity, actively participating in restoration, centring our lives on Christ, and embracing the revealed mystery. As we meditate on the theme of the 15th CCA General Assembly, "God, Renew Us in Your Spirit and Restore the Creation", may we approach our lives and the world around us with faith, hope, and a deep longing to see God's purposes fulfilled in and through us.

Questions for Reflection

1. *How can we maintain a balance between actively pursuing God's will and acknowledging the mystery and sovereignty of His plan? How does trust play a role in our seeking and understanding of God's will during post-normal times?*

2. *How does the concept of seeking God's will in post-normal times inform our approach (both as individuals and as the Church) to caring for the environment, advocating for justice, and promoting healing and wholeness in every sphere of life? How can we practically engage in these areas while seeking to fulfil God's purposes?*

¹ Ziauddin Sardar, ed., *The Postnormal Times Reader* (United Kingdom: Centre for Postnormal Policy & Futures Studies, 2017), 65.

² Silvio O. Funtowicz and Jerome R. Ravetz, 'Science for the Post-Normal Age', *Futures* 25, no. 7 (1 September 1993): 739–55; Ziauddin Sardar, 'On the Nature of Time in Postnormal Times', *Journal of Futures Studies* 25, no. 4 (June 2021): 18–30

³ John F. MacArthur, *Ephesians* MacArthur New Testament Commentary (Chicago: Moody Publishers, 1986), 26



5

Mary's Song: A Call to Reconciliation of Creation and Embracing God's Will

*Te Aroha Rountree**

Mary's Song from the Gospel of Luke often referred to as the 'Magnificat' is a testament to one's faith and trust in the will of God. Mary's song is revolutionary in that it reveals her vision for a radical shift in the social order. Her song challenges the hierarchy and patriarchy of the Roman empire, and advocates for a dismantling of dominance. This gives way to significant indigenous, native liberational readings of the text, that confront the dominant imperialism of modern society and the resultant colonisation that continues to permeate our tribal communities and churches. The language of song also offers a medium familiar to our native ears and hearts as we discern God's will for us and our people.

Mary's song exemplifies her unreserved commitment to follow God's will at great cost to her body, her moral character, her freedoms and her own will. Mary sings of her blessings but also contests our human relationship with other parts of God's creation. Mary's example to us is multifaceted and complex in that we are human, and we are impacted by the Creator and by creation. This text challenges us to identify, analyse and critique the nature of God's will and the implications for us as native people of faith in modern society.

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Luke 1:46–48

‘E hari ana tōku wairua ki te Atua, ki tōku Kaiwhakaora’
My spirit rejoices in God, my Saviour.

‘Mōna i titiro ki te iti o tāna pononga, ta te mea hoki katahi ahau ka kīa e ngā whakatupuranga katoa e haere ake nei, he wahine hari’

For he has been mindful of the humble state of his servant, from now on all generations will call me blessed.

The discernment of the will of God is encapsulated in the life-affirming Scripture that also speaks to our intimate relationship with God. Mary recognises herself as one that is unworthy yet blessed when she says *‘te iti o tāna pononga’* (the least of his believers). She believes herself to be someone of humble status but was chosen to be elevated as the woman whom God revealed to be the Mother of the Christ child. Mary sings to us as the blessed Mother of Jesus Christ, proclaiming God’s anticipated will to be realised through Jesus Christ. Mary praises God and rejoices in Jesus Christ; her place in history and amongst Christians is immortalised for generations, *‘ka kīa e ngā whakatupuranga katoa e haere ake nei, he wahine hari’* because of her faithful devotion to God’s will. The payoff (so to speak) for *‘the spirit that rejoices in God’*, is salvation. We are reminded of God, who manifests as Jesus Christ to appear in flesh and blood, to walk among us, to be an example of God’s love, and to bring us to the revelation of *‘te Kaiwhakaora’* (the Lifegiver).

Luke 1:49–50

‘He nui hoki ngā mahi a te Mea Kaha ki ahau; he tapu hoki tōna ingoa’

For the Mighty One has done great things for me; holy is his name.

‘He mahi tonu tāna ki te hunga e wehi ana ki ā ia, ki tēnei whakatupuranga, ki tēnei whakatupuranga’

His mercy extends to those who fear him, from generation to generation.



The text evokes in humankind a sense of reciprocity, God has *'done great things'* and we in turn have a duty to fulfil God's will. In the same way that God blessed Mary, she in turn was faithful to God's will despite her hardships and ridicule. Humanity, therefore, has a responsibility to be in relation with both God and God's creation. Our relationship with God's creation has most often been one of abuse, violence and destruction. Humankind has the tendency to be all-consuming of creation with no regard for God's will. Mary's song speaks of her unwavering commitment to submit to the will of God, however daunting and uncertain.

Mary makes known God's mercy that favours her as a humble servant and in doing so exalts the lowly, the poor and the hungry. Mary's song suggests we must fear God to know his mercy, *'he mahi tonu tāna ki te hunga e wehi ana'* and that each generation must reconcile their relationship with God through Jesus Christ for themselves, *'ki tēnei whakatupuranga'*. Christ reminds us of our capacity for compassion and love through his sacrifice, even though time and again we disappoint. However, we are never forsaken or abandoned, generation after generation we are called to be in relationship with God, to know his holy name and to call upon him when we are in need.

In our Aotearoa New Zealand context, as native peoples, we are called to reconcile our own devastating colonial history and its continued societal, political and environmental implications. God calls us to reconcile with one another, as the colonised and the colonisers, just as Mary was subjected to hardship and societal judgement, we too must weather the implications of the colonial storm both past and present. As Māori, we have our own knowledge and wisdom of the spirit, that form the foundations of how we relate to the Creator and to creation. We identify our whakapapa (genealogy) that connects us to Ranginui (Sky Father) and Papatūānuku (Earth Mother). In doing so, we recognise our responsibilities to be good kaitiaki (caretakers) of creation. As we grapple with the will of God in our context, Mary's song reminds us of our duty of care for creation through our faithful relationship with God.

Luke 1:51–52

‘Kua whakaputaina he kaha e ia, ara e tōna ringa; nāna te hunga whakakake i marara ai, i te whakaaro o ō rātou ngakau. Kua whakataka e ia ngā piriniha i ō rātou torona, a whakateiteitia ake ana te hunga iti’

He has performed mighty deeds with his arm; he has scattered those who are proud in their inmost thoughts. He has brought down rulers from their thrones but has lifted up the humble.

Mary’s song leads us to a revolution, socially, politically and environmentally. Mary’s song praises God’s ‘mighty deeds’ and righteous actions to expose and scatter those who are full of pride and self-importance, ‘*nāna te hunga whakakake i marara ai*’ (He shall disperse those who assume superiority). Mary sings of God’s capacity to bring down those in power, ‘*Kua whakataka e ia ngā piriniha i ō rātou torona*’ (Princes shall fall from their thrones), while those who are powerless and oppressed shall be raised up.

This resonates with our context as native peoples, as colonised peoples who have had our way of life irrevocably annexed, assaulted and occupied for more than 250 years. We as Māori can relate to the liberation message of Mary’s song. Her song encourages us to look to God for recompense and to take comfort in the knowledge that God’s judgement will prevail. In other words, exposing the exploitation of our people is God’s task, and what is required of us is our faith in the will of God. Perhaps, we are asked to see our suffering as a part of our servitude, ‘*whakateiteitia ake ana te hunga iti*’ (the least shall be made lofty), just as Mary endured judgement in serving God’s will, just as Christ’s example of sacrifice is our salvation.

Luke 1:53–55

‘Kua whakakā e ia te hunga mate hiakai ki ngā mea pai; kua tona kautia atu te hunga taonga. Kua tautokona e ia a Ihairā, tāna pononga, he whakamahara hoki ki tāna mahi tohu; Ki a Aperahama rātou ko tāna whanau ake tonu atu, pērā hoki me tāna i korero ai ki ō tātou matua.’



He has filled the hungry with good things but has sent the rich away empty. He has helped his servant Israel, remembering to be merciful to Abraham and his descendants forever, just as he promised our ancestors.

Mary's song characterises the poor as those who are filled and the rich who leave empty. The social inequities of the Roman empire are reflected here in Mary's reference to the rich and poor. The disparities between Māori and non-Māori are reflected in every part of Aotearoan society, in health, education, criminal justice and in church. The social inequalities, discrimination, and institutional racism experienced by Māori, is in large part the residual implications of colonisation. In our Te Haahi Weteriana o Aotearoa (Methodist Church of New Zealand) context, we have attempted to identify opportunities for redress by establishing a bicultural imperative. The church, in wanting to find a resolution for injustices perpetrated by missionaries and church officials over generations, made the powerful step to begin a bicultural journey. The journey began in 1983 with the realisation that Te Tiriti o Waitangi 1840 needed to be the basis for partnership and power-sharing within the church. We, as a church, acknowledged Te Tiriti as a covenant between Māori people and all others who choose to make Aotearoa their home. We engaged and continue to engage in the sharing of power through consensus decision-making processes that reflect our commitment to equitable partnership as the right relationship.

God's fulfilment to abide with us, implies a right relationship. God calls humanity to be in a covenantal relationship. The covenant is our universal pledge to God to do his will in the world, *"With joy we take upon ourselves the yoke of obedience and for love of you commit ourselves to seek and do your will."*¹ We make a conscious and collective decision to submit to the will of God as we engage in covenant with one another and with God.

We make the impassioned proclamation, *"Your will, not mine, be done in all things, wherever you place me, in all that I do and in all that I may endure."*² In doing so we affirm or reaffirm our covenant to set aside our natural inclinations and material interests and



prepare to endure whatever hardship befalls us in order to fulfil God's will. We often use the phrase in our covenant renewed every year, *"We are no longer our own, but yours."*³ What does it truly mean to be God's? What does it mean to live by God's will, to be obedient to God's tenets? What does it require to be devoted to the will of God and not your own?

Questions for Reflection

In light of Mary's song of revolution and the theme of moving *'Affirming the Will of God'* consider the following questions:

1. *How might you discern the Will of God in your context?*
2. *What 'revolution' is required to affirm the Will of God?*

¹ Trinity Methodist Theological College – Service of Beginnings, Sunday 28 March 2021.

² Ibid.

³ Ibid.



6

A Makeover of All Things

Dr Elaine Wei-Fun Goh*

Isaiah 65:17–25

¹⁷For I am about to create new heavens and a new earth; the former things shall not be remembered or come to mind. ¹⁸But be glad and rejoice forever in what I am creating, for I am about to create Jerusalem as a joy and its people as a delight. ¹⁹I will rejoice in Jerusalem and delight in my people; no more shall the sound of weeping be heard in it or the cry of distress. ²⁰No more shall there be in it an infant who lives but a few days or an old person who does not live out a lifetime, for one who dies at a hundred years will be considered a youth, and one who falls short of a hundred will be considered accursed. ²¹They shall build houses and inhabit them; they shall plant vineyards and eat their fruit. ²²They shall not build and another inhabit; they shall not plant and another eat, for like the days of a tree shall the days of my people be, and my chosen shall long enjoy the work of their hands. ²³They shall not labour in vain or bear children for calamity, [a] for they shall be offspring blessed by the Lord— and their descendants as well. ²⁴Before they call I will answer, while they are yet speaking I will hear. ²⁵The wolf and the lamb shall feed together; the lion shall eat straw like the ox, but the serpent—its food shall be dust! They shall not hurt or destroy on all my holy mountain, says the Lord.

Introduction

When God's people started to rebuild their lives after the Exile, the endeavour was met with multiple hardships. It was

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a disheartened picture of God's people caught in conflicts and threats in the midst of hopeful restoration. The rebuilding of the community of God's people then was a painful and dangerous experience.¹ Under a profound disillusionment, the book of Isaiah revives the promise of salvation.² In line with this promise, Isaiah 65:17–25 encapsulates a vision of a makeover that prevails over conflicts and challenges in the process of rebuilding the community of God's people.

Historical Context

The overriding motif in Isaiah 65:17–25, as much as throughout Isaiah 56–66, is the restoration that follows the exilic experience. Yet, the returning exiles soon discovered that the rebuilding of Jerusalem was extremely challenging. There was bitter enmity between two rival groups in Judah who sought to lead the post-exilic Judaic community in differing ways.³ Isaiah 65:17–25 appears to be located somewhere between a historically identifiable ground of hope and a threatening vision of hope which stands at risk toward its fulfilment.⁴

Literary Context

Isaiah 65:17–25 is part of a rhetorically constructed larger unit of Isaiah 63:7–65:25, which represents two oracles: Israel's petition (63:7–64:11) and the LORD's reply (65:1–25).⁵ Chapter 65 is a triadically-structured poem linked by word repetitions, like "call" (65:24; cf. 65:1) and "former" ways (65:17; cf. 65:7)—the first concerns the rebellious (65:1–12), the last concerns the chosen (65:17–25), and the central one presents balanced comparisons of the two (65:13–16).⁶ Isaiah 65:17–25 demonstrates a salvific theme of proclaiming a vision anew. Within Isaiah 65:17–25, its opening unit (vv.17–18) promises a new creation—heaven and earth, Jerusalem and the people. The next unit (vv.19–23) concerns the joy of a promise fulfilled to God's people. The closing unit (vv.24–25) concludes with a scene of perfect peace under God's rule.⁷

Intertextual Connections

Within the Book of Isaiah

The idea of new heavens and new earth in contrast with the former things (v.17) recollects a hope for new things, and a



forgetting of old things in Isaiah 40–55 (cf. 42:9; 43:18–20).⁸ The word “create” in v.17 echoes God’s creative act in history that would rejuvenate an old and dying world (Isaiah 41:18–20).⁹ The call for joy in Jerusalem (v.18–19) recalls the joy of returning to Zion in 51:11 and 35:10. The imagery of peace in the animal world which concludes 65:17–25 also picks up the words of 11:6–9. The designations for the chosen people, Israel, are also coherent.¹⁰ Concisely, Isaiah 65:17–25 depicts the overall Isaianic themes and concepts.

Within the New Testament

Revelation 21:1–4 has made abundant use of lexical, thematic, and stylistic parallels in Isaiah 65:17–25 in order to present a Christian version of the passage. First of all, the phrase “new heaven and new earth” in Isaiah 65:17, a unique phrase by itself in the OT, is rendered similarly in Greek in Revelation 21:1.¹¹ Secondly, the emergence of a New Jerusalem (Isaiah 65:18) is echoed in Revelation 21:2 in the same context of its relationship with the new heaven and new earth. Further, the passing of “the former things” in Isaiah 65:17, and the absence of weeping, pain and death in Isaiah 65:19–20 is also pointed out in Revelation 21:15.¹² Finally, the order of the verbal parallels: the new heavens and new earth—the former things—Jerusalem (Isaiah 65:17–18; Revelation 21:1–2) denote a stylistic parallel in both passages.¹³

Message and Theological Reflection

The New Creation (Isaiah 65:17–18)

The three-fold “to create” (*bara*) in vv.17–18 upholds the theme of creation.¹⁴ The idea of returning to the first creation in the Garden of Eden is further implied later in v.25 which refers to the dust as the serpent’s food. Since the temple was regarded as a miniature world, given the similarity in wording between v.17 and v.18, it appears that “creating a new heaven and new earth” refers to the rebuilding of the temple-city, Jerusalem.¹⁵ In this manner v.17 and 18 are complementary.¹⁶ Undoubtedly there is one particular focus here: Jerusalem, and the core of Isaiah 65:17–25 depicts the circumstance of a newly-created Jerusalem as a state of *shalom*—well-being, characterised by freedom from war, a good and just society, and an idea of richness and completeness in life.

However, the re-creation here reflects a radical reordering in the life and society of Israel that ultimately encompasses the larger scene of humanity and the universe. The idea that God as the Creator will re-create a new world forms an *inclusio*—the opening verse announces it (v.17), and the closing verse restates it (v.25). God’s city, known as *Jeru-Shalom*, will be a city of *shalom* on a larger scale, given by the God of all peace, assured by God’s presence, and governed by God’s rule.¹⁷ It is only in this larger context of re-creation that the prophet sets the restoration of God’s chosen people.

There is “a gospel newness” depicted in Isaiah 65:17–18, that a wondrously new and life-giving phenomenon will override the despair of exilic experience.¹⁸ “The former things” encapsulate violence, fears, losses and death; but “the new things” embrace peace, joy, life and renewal. The word “new” means a miraculous transformation (42:9; 43:19; 48:6) and here too, the renewal of existence becomes so radical that no painful memory survives.¹⁹ This depiction points to the theme of newness in restoration where “new things” will happen as a reversal of “the former things,” so preoccupied in Second Isaiah and reaffirmed here in Isaiah 65:17. For that reason, God’s people are summoned “to be glad and rejoice!” (v.18)

The Joy of Promise Fulfilled to God’s People (65:19–23)

Questions and doubts arise when the returning remnant does not experience the immediate fulfilment of prophecies that speak of rebuilding. God’s people face the reality of hardships despite being assured by Isaiah’s prophecy that begins with the phrase “comfort-my-people” (Isaiah 40:1). This passage, however, speaks about the authority and validity of the prophecy to affirm God’s people and to call for repentance in the midst of failures, threats and conflicts.

The quality of miraculous transformation brings about stability and order that guarantees joy and long life (vv.19–20) and supersedes the former weeping and even premature death. Also, the new city makes possible economic stability (vv.21–22) and well-being for children (v.23). The rewards in vv.21–23 recollect the longevity of the patriarchs (cf. Genesis 5; 11:10–32) and correspond to the reversal of the curses in Deuteronomy 28:30.²⁰



In the context of disappointment, the prophet *forth-tells* the vision of the new heaven and new earth, repeating the earlier *foretelling* of prophets. In fact, the exiles did return and the walls of Jerusalem were rebuilt. This recalled God's fulfilment of an earlier promise to God's people, God's chosen (v.22). Hence, it is hope and promise revisited in Isaiah 65:17–25, and the stirring hope of a promising new heaven and new earth is still very much valid.

Isaiah 65:17–25, therefore, indicates how later generations related the prophecy of hope and promise to the changed circumstances.²¹ This vision is recreational and renewing. It is a powerful acknowledgement of God's sovereignty and a compelling vindication of Israel's faithfulness.²² In a nutshell, this vision offers a *concrete* promise that infant mortality will be reduced, the aged will have adequate health care, everyone will have sufficient housing and shelter, every work of human hands will no longer be in vain and pointless, and childbearing will become a blessing. The vision is more universal than the hope of radically restoring the Davidic kingdom through political insurgency. It is also girded beyond a passivity of apocalyptic dream which has no relevance to the present reality. This vision provides God's people with the enthusiasm required to strive to a new and just society, particularly in Jerusalem and universally in the world. As such, it necessitates the participation of God's people alongside God who makes all things new. Thus, it signifies a theme of hope in action. Such participation anticipates human struggles for justice and peace but nevertheless represents a "human participation as co-creators with God" in the creation of the *New World Order*.²³

The Perfect Peace Under God's Rule (65:24–25)

The passage concerns God's immediate attentiveness to the new city (v.24). The communion with God's presence is a genuine possibility that echoes God's words, "Here I am, here I am," in Isaiah 65:1.²⁴ As such, chapter 65 begins with God's readiness for interactivity and ends with divine availability. In short, Isaiah 65:24 affects the "God is near" theme that has already been denoted in Isaiah 65:1, as well as throughout Isaiah 40–55.

The final part of the vision (v.25) illustrates a radical reordering of the New Jerusalem extended beyond God's people. "A wolf

and a lamb” are proverbial opposites; the wolf is aggressive and avaricious, the lamb is weak and vulnerable, and the lamb is the wolf’s natural food.²⁵ A lion is known to be carnivorous but here it “eats straw like cattle.” “They shall not harm or destroy in all my holy mountain” summarises the absence of violence. “My holy mountain,” a special phrase in Isaiah, illustrates the New Jerusalem (the Christian community today!) as a place where God’s presence, peace and joy may be experienced.²⁶ It points to harmony like that in the Garden of Eden before the Fall. “Dust will be the serpent’s food” brings to mind the curse in Genesis 3:14 and implies the restoration of the present conditions from the beginning.²⁷ Here lies the theme of peace, where bitter enemies are reconciled and the original nature is firmly restored. Such imagery of peace in the animal world picks up the words of Isaiah 11:6–9.²⁸ This is a reversal of the creation-story-gone-awry in the Book of Genesis, which heralds the makeover of everything,

“that has gone wrong in creation, touching every aspect and phase of life and remaking them whole, and overcoming hostility at every level – not just in Israel, or the human community, but throughout creation. Nothing could be more embracing, so radically new, and yet so related to the world we know and experience.”²⁹

Consequently, the presence of God’s rule yields a sense of newness and peace, both local and cosmic.³⁰ *Shalom* will be full and pervasive. It is a makeover of all things!

Conclusion

The task of keeping hope alive is at stake. Without a vision, God’s people would be unable to assure future existence, much less to fulfil the calling to establish justice for other nations. Therefore, Isaiah 65:17–25 imparts a vision of new heavens and new earth amid troubles that envisages all things anew. The city of peace—the Church today—shall be a city of *shalom*. God’s people will enjoy long and prosperous lives in this “city.” God’s people are called to have the right relationship with God and to be at peace with the natural world. This vision calls for the faithfulness of God’s people as God is commencing a makeover of all things.

Questions for Reflection

1. *The threat of terrorists, wars, disasters and widespread new viruses soon followed in recent years and devastated the hope of realising a new world order. What do we make of the promises in the Bible when reality is confronting us? How do we put our faith in the sovereignty of God into conversation with real-life threats (for example, life under COVID-19), to stay faithful, and to keep trusting?*
2. *How does the Church be the “city of peace”—where people of God meet and work together toward renewal, restoration, and transformation?*

¹ John W. De Gruchy, “A New Heaven and A New Earth: An Exposition of Isaiah 65:17-25,” *Journal of Theology for Southern Africa* 105 (1999): 66.

² Claus Westermann, *Isaiah 40-66: A Commentary, Old Testament Library*, ed. Peter Ackroyd et.al. (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1969), 307.

³ According to Paul Hanson, there was one group, “the temple party,” wanted to reestablish the cultic worship. In opposition to them was “the visionary group,” who was awaiting the fulfillment of Yhwh’s promise announced by Isaiah. See Gregory J. Polan, “Salvation in the Midst of Struggle,” *The Bible Today* 23 (1985): 91. See also De Gruchy, “A New Heaven and A New Earth,” 66. De Gruchy points out that not all post-exilic Judaic community shared the same enthusiasm to the idea of restoration.

⁴ Ulrich W. Mauser, “Isaiah 65:17-25,” *Interpretation* 36 (1982): 183.

⁵ Edwin C. Webster, “The Rhetoric of Isaiah 63-65,” *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 47 (1990): 89-102.

⁶ Webster, “The Rhetoric of Isaiah 63-65,” 96-102.

⁷ Webster, “The Rhetoric of Isaiah 63-65,” 99.

⁸ Mauser, “Isaiah 65:17-25,” 181.

⁹ Mauser, “Isaiah 65:17-25,” 181.

¹⁰ Westermann, *Isaiah 40-66*, 411.

¹¹ Jacques van Ruiten, “The Intertextual Relationship Between Isaiah 65: 17-20 and Revelation 21:1-5b,” *Estudios Biblicos* 51 (1993): 477.

¹² Mauser, “Isaiah 65:17-25,” 182.

¹³ Ruiten, “The Intertextual Relationship,” 478, 510.

¹⁴ Westermann, *Isaiah 40-66*, 408.

¹⁵ J. D. Levenson, *Creation and the Persistence of Evil* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1988), 86. See also Brooks Schramm, *The Opponents of Third Isaiah: Reconstructing the Cultic History of the Restoration*, *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament Supplement Series* 193, edited by David J. A. Clines and Philip R. Davies (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1995), 159-160.

¹⁶ Schramm, *The Opponents of Third Isaiah*, 160.

- ¹⁷ Walter Brueggemann, *Isaiah 40-66*, Westminster Bible Companion, ed. Patrick D. Miller and David L. Barlett (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1998), 246.
- ¹⁸ Brueggemann, *Isaiah 40-66*, 245-246.
- ¹⁹ Jan L. Koole, *Isaiah III, Historical Commentary on the Old Testament*, trans. Antony P. Runia, ed. Cornelis Houtman et. al. (Leuven: Peeters, 2001), 447.
- ²⁰ Deut 28:30 says, "You will build a house but not live in it; you will plant a vineyard but not enjoy its fruit." See Blenkinsopp, *Isaiah 56-66*, 289; also Douglas Rawlinson Jones, *Isaiah 56-66 and Joel: Introduction and Commentary* (London: SCM Press, 1964), 113.
- ²¹ Hanson, *Isaiah 40-66*, 191.
- ²² De Gruchy, "A New Heaven and A New Earth," 67.
- ²³ De Gruchy, "A New Heaven and A New Earth," 69.
- ²⁴ Brueggemann, *Isaiah 40-66*, 249.
- ²⁵ Watts, *Isaiah 34-66*, 925. Such peace among the animals may be mirrored in Jesus' temptation, "he was with the wild beasts; and the angels ministered to him" (Mark 1:13).
- ²⁶ Watts, *Isaiah 34-66*, 925.
- ²⁷ Jones, *Isaiah 56-66*, 114.
- ²⁸ It is generally assumed that 65:25 is a quotation from Isa 11. See Westermann, *Isaiah 40-66*, 410. See also Blenkinsopp, *Isaiah 56-66*, 288.
- ²⁹ De Gruchy, "A New Heaven and A New Earth," 71.
- ³⁰ Brueggemann, *Isaiah 40-66*, 250.



7

Towards Dwelling in Harmony with the Creation

*Rev. Connie Semy Mella**

Job 12:7–10

But ask the animals, and they will teach you, or the birds in the sky, and they will tell you; or speak to the earth, and it will teach you, or let the fish in the sea inform you. Which of all these does not know that the hand of the Lord has done this? In his hand is the life of every creature and the breath of every human being.

Introduction

I have a favourite place in my mother's garden, which I call "infinity sacred space". It is called such because it is designed with an infinity character symbolised by the number eight. This sacred space lies between two trees that provide it with shade and fresh air. It is surrounded by flowers and plants of different colours and shapes and with rocks and white pebbles. In the centre of the space hangs a wind chime that gives melodious music every time the wind blows. Two Zen houses are placed among Aloe Vera plants. A colourful flowering vine named "Secret Love" (a member of the 'Cadena de Amor' family; scientific name: *Antigonon leptopus*) adorns the branches of the two trees in an arch-like manner. This is not only my favourite space. It is also a space favoured by different creatures: birds, ants, crickets, earthworms, butterflies, and sometimes bumblebees. Every time I commune with nature through silent meditation at the centre

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of this space, I feel I am one with God and the rest of the created order. It is, always, a sacred moment.

Learning how to dwell in harmony with creation is imperative if humans want to understand the deeper meaning of life. The text in the Book of Job teaches us of this reality. It challenges our anthropocentric notion that human beings are the pinnacle and the centre of creation, rendering other beings less important and only existing for the benefit of humans. Instead, the text teaches us to learn from the wisdom of the earth and the rest of the created order.

The Text in its Context

The Book of Job, although associated with wisdom literature like Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, and Sirach, is classified by scholars as “sui generis” or one of its kind. Most scholars assume that the book was written during the early post-exilic period, probably during the fifth century.¹ This book deals with important issues such as the importance of experience as a source of wisdom, the critique of the traditional model of God, the necessity of being in solidarity with those suffering, and the relationship between human existence and the whole of creation.² Carol Newsom said that it is like a parable in that it tells its outrageous tale for disorienting and reorienting the perspectives of its readers. It speaks about the ordering of creation—from the foundation of the earth to the mysteries of the sea, to the wisdom of the animals, birds, and fish. It reorients the readers towards the knowledge and the power of other creatures, thereby negating the anthropocentric perspective that renders humans the centre of everything.

The Text in Our Context

The world is in chaos because we failed to dwell in harmony with creation. This is an understatement of the reality we are in right now. The groaning of mother earth, because of the indiscriminate logging, uncontrolled use of chemicals, and inconsiderate disposal of non-biodegradable waste, is already reverberating worldwide



through climate change. The extinction of many species of wildlife and the hazardous effect of climate change brought about by our destructive actions are grave realities calling us to account.

Eleazar Fernandez, in his book, “Reimagining the Human” explains that humans’ transgression against nature is caused by anthropocentrism. Anthropocentrism is a worldview that makes human beings the centre of the universe and relegates others to subordinate positions. It is the ideological undergirding that finds expression in naturism, which is a way of thinking and dwelling that places the human species at the top of the hierarchy in which other species are relegated to the status of objects exploited.³ He argues that naturism is the ideology that undergirds our genocidal acts against nature. Sadly, this naturism, the destruction of the ecosystem, interlocks with other forms of oppression. “Where there is classism, sexism, and racism, there is ecocide. In the lives of the poor, we can discern the interweaving of naturism and classism; in environmental racism, we can discern the link between naturism and classism; in the exploitation and rape of women’s bodies, we can discern the interlocking of naturism and sexism.”⁴

The Book of Job denounces naturism. It draws our attention to nature as a path of knowledge and invites us to drink from its well of wisdom. True to what it says, we can learn much from nature. The following are some of the amazing facts about nature.

“Trees can communicate and defend themselves against attacking insects. Scientists have found that trees can flood their leaves with chemicals called phenolics when the insects begin their raid. They can also signal danger to other trees so they can start their own defence. Willow trees, for example, emit certain chemicals when webworms attack them. Other willows then produce more tannin, making their leaves harder for the pests to digest. Aside from that, trees also have the capacity to reduce or block noise through a phenomenon called

sound attenuation, which is the reduction of sound intensity. Leaves, twigs, and branches on trees, shrubs, and herbaceous growth absorb and deflect sound waves to mask unwanted noise.”⁵

It is an experience of many that walking under the trees reduces stress levels among humans. At Union Theological Seminary in Cavite, Philippines, part of the students’ spiritual practice is to hug a tree. According to research, trees release chemicals called phytoncides which reduce blood pressure, lower anxiety levels, and increase pain thresholds when we breathe them in.

Another interesting study shows that dolphins are very interesting creatures. According to research,

“Dolphins brains typically weigh about 1600 grams. They have an impressive flair for solving problems and a built-in capacity to plan for the future. They process language and auditory information in the temporal lobes, located on their brain’s flanks. Dolphins process auditory and visual information in different parts of the neocortex. They have an extremely well-developed and defined paralimbic system, which is responsible for processing emotions. Many scientists hypothesise that dolphins’ highly-developed paralimbic systems play a large role in the intimate and complex social and emotional bonds that exist within dolphin communities”.⁶

The “Colours of the Wind”, the theme song in the movie Pocahontas is one of my favourites. It is powerful in the sense that it reorients one’s perspective about life and our relationship with other life forms. It criticises consumerism and anthropocentrism. Pocahontas, a free-spirited girl who by chance met Captain John Smith, taught the latter that the earth is not a dead thing one can claim. That every rock, every tree, and every creature; has a life, a spirit, a name. She said that the rainstorm and the rivers are her brothers, the heron and the otter, her friends. She taught him that all are connected, in a circle, in a hoop that never ends. That



one can own the earth and still will not understand; until one can paint the colours of the wind.⁷

Dwelling in Harmony with the Creation

The word “dwell” frequently rendered “*yashabh*” in Hebrew means “to sit down” or “to abide”. Another word which is rendered “dwell” is “*shakhan*” or “*shakhen*” (to settle down) from which is derived the rabbinic word “*shekinah*” (literally, “that which dwells”) the light that symbolised the divine presence.⁸ To dwell in harmony with the creation is to see the creation as a place of God’s presence and understand that we are part of the web of life. It is to see the sacredness in all of creation. It necessitates unshackling ourselves from our anthropocentric view and naturism. Fernandez contends that “finding the right relationship within the web of life requires us to place human beings within the wider scheme of things or within the scheme of relationships.” It can be seen only in an ecological framework because in this way we can relate ecology to the “structure of the household” (*ecology*), “rules of the household” (*economy*), and “the dynamic of power relations in the household” (*politics*). Ecology sets constructive insights in the much broader framework of cosmology. “Ecological cosmology helps us to see and situate human beings within the wider web of relationship.”⁹

Conclusion

Dwelling in harmony is to live in peace or shalom. Shalom means total well-being, completeness, tranquillity, and prosperity. It is a celebration of our connectedness with our fellow human beings and other creatures. In the web of life, we are not dependent on, nor independent from, but interdependent with others. It affirms the Filipino concept of “*kapwa*,” which is from the Filipino phrase “*kapareho ng kaluluwa*” or “same spirit”. Parallels are found in the ancient Korean concept of *Sangsaeng*, of sharing community and economy that allows all to flourish together. From the African *Ubuntu*, “I am because you (we) are,” a concept that captures African anthropology and the cosmic vision of life in a

community. Indeed, when *Sangsaeng* and *Ubuntu* meet together in a perichoretic dance of life, justice and peace kiss each other, and the vision of shalom shines. Dwelling in harmony with the creation is a celebration of the sacredness of life as a gift of God where life in its fullness can be experienced and celebrated by all.

Questions for Reflection

1. *In what way can you proactively respond to the issue of climate justice?*
2. *What are specific programmes you can introduce to your church/community/organisation that can celebrate dwelling in harmony with the creation?*

¹ Anthony Ceresko, *Introduction to Old Testament Wisdom: A Spirituality of Liberation* (Quezon City: Claretian Publication, 2000), 73.

² Carol A. Newsom, “Job”, in *The Women’s Bible Commentary* (Westminster: John Knox Press, 1992), 130.

³ Eleazar S. Fernandez, *Reimagining the Human: A Theological Anthropology in Response to Systemic Evil*, (St. Louis, Missouri: Chalice Press, 2004), 165.

⁴ Ibid, 160.

⁵ <https://www.precisiontreemn.com/tips/14-fun-facts-about-trees.html> accessed: 20 April 2021.

⁶ <https://www.vallarta-adventures.com/en/blog/how-smart-are-dolphins> accessed: 20 April 2021.

⁷ “Colors of the Wind” is a song composed by Alan Menken and with Stephen Schwartz as lyricist for Walt Disney Pictures’ 33rd animated film *Pocahontas* (1995).

⁸ International Standard Bible Encyclopedia, rev.ed in PC Study Bible v5.

⁹ Eleazar Fernandez, “Reimagining the Human”, 189–191.



8

A Time for an ‘Anthropause’: To Dwell in Harmony with God’s Creation

*Rev. Dr Raj Bharat Patta**

Collins English Dictionary has chosen ‘lockdown’ as the word of the year for 2020. On the other hand, the Oxford English Dictionary (OED) has chosen not to name a word of the year, describing 2020 as the ‘unprecedented year’ and ‘year that left us all speechless’ and named too many names, to sum up the events of 2020. These words include a wide range of words in various settings. The chosen words for 2020 include ‘unmute,’ ‘mail-in,’ ‘coronavirus,’ ‘lockdown,’ ‘pandemic,’ ‘face-masks,’ ‘Black Lives Matter,’ ‘key workers,’ ‘workation’ ‘staycation,’ ‘remote,’ ‘social distancing,’ ‘systemic racism,’ and ‘anthropause’.¹ It was reported that during this year the levels of media coverage for climate change have decreased due to the pandemic. But it was said that it resulted in the use of a new word, ‘anthropause,’ referring to “the global slowdown of travel and other human activity and the subsequent welcome consequences, such as a decrease in light and noise pollution, and an increase in opportunities for wildlife to thrive.”²

I recognise the very meaning and faith relevance of the word ‘anthropause’ which literally means “human interruption,” where ‘pause’ is a verb. A time for an ‘anthropause’ creates an opportunity to dwell in harmony with God’s creation. In the text from Isaiah 64:1–9, we notice that the prophet called ‘third

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Isaiah' was lamenting to God, confessing the trespasses and the iniquities of his community and seeking the intervention and interruption of God in their situations. The community just returned from the Babylonian exile through the favour of the Persian King, with the challenge of restoring their city, temple, faith and scriptures, in front of them. This post-exilic, post-colonial community as they returned to their own land, out of their desperation, helplessness, division and tiredness were interpreting their times as the period of God's absence. Through this poetic lament, the prophet calls for an 'anthropause,' a human interruption to such notions of periods of God's absence, for there can never be a phase, space or period in time and history which is devoid of God's presence. God is always present in every situation, waiting and wanting to work with people and communities in restoring their hope, confidence, faith and harmony with God's creation. The prophet in this text invokes 'anthropause' in at least two ways, which offer two insights into dwelling in harmony with God's creation. Firstly, the prophet upholds 'God's play', recognising God's being and God's activity, where God is at work with some awkward pauses. Secondly, the prophet explains 'anthropause' in seeking a confession about humans, an offering made in the presence of God to wait on God, driving away all iniquities and self-righteousness. In other words, 'anthropause' is a time for humanity to be waiting on God, on the one hand celebrating God's play forward, and on the other hand pulling back on humanity's self-righteousness, thereby re-working harmony with God's creation.

Celebrating God's play as a time for 'Anthropause'

As regards this post-exilic community, though they came back to their ancestral land and were free from Babylonian captivity, their faith still remained under the rubric of colonisation, where they spelt hopelessness as a situation of being forsaken by God and even as God's absence. The prophet was calling for an 'anthropause' in their play and faith, and uplifting them to wait, recognise and celebrate God's play which has been at work. To dwell in harmony with God, God's creation, and God's people is to celebrate God's play. Human beings wanted to play the



game their way, drawing their own rules, and taking everything into their own control, without any fair play on the ground. The prophet begins to explain God's play by calling God his playmate, inviting God to "tear open the heavens and come down," (v.1) for when God starts playing, the mountains will quake, where the creation serves as a playfield. On God playing in the field, "the nations might tremble" for their unfair rules, disharmony, unjust play, "for God's name known to their adversaries," for God will play against the forces of injustice, inequality and hopelessness. "For no one has heard, no ear has perceived, and no eye has seen" such a player of the histories, the God, whose play is known through eternities, for God is a just player and the best player. God the just player, "meets those who gladly do right and those who remember God in God's ways." The height of this moment of 'anthropause' arrives, when the prophet affirms God's play, declaring that God is "our Father" and "our potter" (v.8).

God is the father of the play that God plays, and also the father of the play that humanity plays, which is a wake-up call for the community, for they had assumed that they were the be-all and end-all of their play. In other words, history is God's play where God, the father of the play, plays along with the creation as God's playmates. In that recognition, their faith is reinvigorated and revived. When God plays with God's playmates, the creatures, God is at work, and God helps God's playmates in overcoming their sense of hopelessness and helplessness. God is also called "our potter" who spends time in the dirt and dust designing diversified pots from clay. This image of God, the potter, explains that God is at play designing wonderful and unique pots. Both these images of God as "our Father" and "our potter" challenge all notions of God as someone away from all the pains and perils of life and relocates God among people, knowing that God is at play working with them in their common jobs. 'Anthropause' therefore is a time to celebrate God's play as God is our Father and our potter, for harmony with the creation and with God comes from God.

Humanity Seeking Confession As a Time for an 'Anthropause'

In knowing that humanity along with the creation has been chosen as the playmates of and with God, the prophet in this text invoking an 'anthropause,' confesses their pride, privilege and prestige explained in their self-seeking righteousness. The playmates, humanity, have thought that God, the father of the play, was hiding and therefore they have "sinned and transgressed" (v.5). 'Anthropause' is a time to understand that lack of God-consciousness is sin and transgression, which implies being God-conscious is finding salvation in God the father of the play. The prophet calls for 'anthropause' from humanity where they collectively seek confession, where he laments, "We have all become like one who is unclean, and all our righteous deeds are like a filthy cloth" (v.6). This post-exilic community not only de-recognised that they were God's playmates, they were also proud of their own righteousness, thinking that their righteous deeds can save and bring solace and hope in their desperate situation. The word used for 'filthy cloth' is the same as that for the cloth women use during menstruation. In a patriarchal society where men considered any discharge of blood during menstrual periods as polluting, they thought such blood would have made these Israelites ceremonially unclean. Without undermining or demeaning the normal physical cycles of women, one can still infer that this type of uncleanness for the ritual-seeking Israelites was the worst sort. To equate their acts of righteousness with such cloths is the prophet's way of emphasising the depth of their uncleanness, explaining that they are at a cul-de-sac in their journey of faith, and are now called to turn towards the righteousness of God and dwell in harmony with God's creation in their own 'foreign' land.

'Anthropause' is a time, when the community have recognised that they are 'clay' used by God the potter to be moulded and designed in God's creativity. In that moment of 'anthropause,' the prophet continues his collective confession by saying, "We all fade like a leaf, and our iniquities, like the wind, take us



away” (v.6). The self-righteousness will not save them, for they will be carried away by wind and will fade like a leaf, but in the righteousness of God the community now realises that they can flourish, dwell in harmony with God’s creation and stand up against all odds of life. In that moment of ‘anthropause,’ a time of confession, the prophet ends with a prayer, where he pleads, “Do not be exceedingly angry, O Lord, and do not remember iniquity forever. Now consider, we are all your people” (v.9). ‘Anthropause’ is a time of interruption from the norm and status quo, a time wherein the community on their return to their land recognise that they as humanity are ‘God’s people,’ ‘God’s playmates’ and ‘God’s co-workers.’

The relevance of this text for our times today is at least three-fold. In the context of the pandemic, lockdown and restrictions, with the vaccine for COVID-19 now available, the first learning from this text is to recognise that this is a time for an ‘anthropause,’ where we are called to slow down from the busyness of our life, interrupt the norms of our society, and hold on to the fact that God has always been at play, for God invites us as God’s playmates to join with God in collectively overcoming this phase of life filled with hopelessness and helplessness. Self-righteousness is very unchristian and pulls us down, for we are called to recognise that it is a ‘filthy cloth’ in the presence of God, for it cannot save us. It is through purely waiting on God and being willing to be led by God’s grace that this ‘anthropause’ has the desired effect of enabling us to dwell in harmony with God’s creation.

Secondly, it is now time to celebrate God’s play, for God in Christ is at play in this field of creation. In his book *The God Who Plays: A Playful Approach to Theology and Spirituality*³, Brian Edgar writes, “the central idea around which everything that follows revolves on the notion that *play is the essential and ultimate form of relationship with God*. A playful attitude, I suggest, lies at the very heart of all spirituality and is critical for the whole of life.”⁴ Christ is God at play, and it is important to recognise this element of play as part of our theology and spirituality; kindly do not discount play as childish and unspiritual. God’s

play interrupts the flow of games this world engages with, for in God's play, fairness, justice, peace, equality and love are the only rules and guidelines. Anyone who subscribes to such a play is welcome to join Jesus in playing the play of the Kingdom of God. Our time today is a preparation towards that play, giving us time for warming up, to know the rules and get into the field to play along with Jesus, so that we can build harmonious relationships with our neighbours, with creation and with God.

Thirdly, it is time we reaffirm the worth of 'anthropause' to this our creation, where we are called to interrupt ourselves from polluting this God-given creation and ecology with our selfish acts of greed and accumulation. It was reported that as bustling metropolises have calmed down due to the 'anthropause' in the first lockdowns during this pandemic in 2020, it improved the air and water quality, as well as reduced wildlife disturbance. These ecological benefits should not be limited to the short-term, rather we need to consciously allow 'anthropause' to happen in our lives, contribute towards greening our planet and strive towards sustainability, addressing climate emergencies. Our commitment to our earth is directly proportional to our faith in Jesus Christ, where the deeper our faith in Jesus Christ, the stronger our commitment to a green planet.

In conclusion, the signs of our times today call for a time of 'anthropause,' waiting and celebrating God's play at work towards peace and justice, transforming our planet into a better and greener place to live. "The shortest definition of religion: Interruption," wrote Johanne Baptist Metz, a Catholic theologian from Germany who was articulating his theology after 'Auschwitz', where he was pointing out that Christian faith cannot be slipped into uncritical weaving into the culture of the powerful and dominant society. By its very nature, for Metz, Christian faith disrupts the histories of conquerors and vanquishes and interrupts the ideologies of the powerful at the same time as it erases the powerlessness of the victims. To that end, may this time of the pandemic and post-pandemic help us to pause and wait on God so that we can be God's instruments in interrupting



the norms and status quo of this world that upholds unjust systems, which create disharmony among God's creation and join with God as playmates in transforming this our planet into a truly green planet. 'Anthropause' is not only one of the words to define the year 2020 but also serves as a word that finds its meaning and significance in the Christian faith lexicon, especially in the context of the recent pandemic. Amen.

Questions for Reflection

1. *How can the idea of 'anthropause' inspire us to reevaluate our relationship with the Creator and the creation?*
2. *How can we embrace the concept of 'anthropause' in our lives and communities, and what changes can we make to dwell in harmony with God's creation?*

¹ <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/entertainment-arts-55016543>.

² <https://www.wired.com/story/the-anthropause-a-new-way-to-study-wildlife/>.

³ Brian Edgar, *The God who Plays: A Playful Approach to Theology and Spirituality*, (Eugene: Cascade Books, 2017).

⁴ Brian Edgar, *The God who Plays: A Playful Approach to Theology and Spirituality*, (Eugene: Cascade Books, 2017), p.1.

9

Dwelling in Harmony with Our Fellow Creatures

*Elia Maggang**

Introduction

Dwelling in harmony with God's other created beings is necessary for humans. That is not only because of humans' need, as they cannot live without other creatures, but also because being in that harmony is what God intends for the whole creation. That intention of God must bring peace and joy to all creatures. Conversely, the absence of that harmony means humans and non-human creatures are dwelling in danger, suffering and groaning.

Furthermore, from the human perspective, injustice occurs because the poor suffer the most from the inharmonious relationship, even though they are arguably less responsible for that broken relationship. The poor are the powerless whose life is affected by the acts of those in power for diverse interests: economy, politics, etc. Poverty, food security, clean water issues, and threats to livelihood are some inevitable and actual experiences of the poor, particularly in developing countries. In Indonesia, for instance, the ongoing dispute on the South China Sea has led to the destruction of the artisanal fishers' boats and threats to those fishers' livelihood, let alone the destruction of the marine life itself due to the destructive fishing methods used in that territory.¹ Likewise, the ecological crisis at sea threatens the food security of the coastal people, especially the poor.²

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The local wisdom of traditional communities that supports the sustainable and harmonious life of all creatures is denied for economic interests. As a result, the destruction of mangroves and tropical forest bring disasters such as tsunami, flood and hunger in many places. The sea and the land are oppressed as they are hindered from actualising their agency, one aspect of which is to feed those in need.

The powerful compete and fight, but the powerless suffer. The poor, the land and the sea with all non-human inhabitants are groaning. That is the sign of an inharmonious relationship among God's creatures. That relationship was "good" and "very good" (Genesis 1), as the Creator saw and valued, but then corrupted because of "some" humans' acts.

Nevertheless, although those creatures are in pain, they are waiting for the Spirit's work of renewal (Romans 8:22-23). The inharmonious relationship among God's creatures is not the story's ending. There is always hope for God's creatures to dwell in harmony because God intends and is at work to fulfil it. If the land and sea can actualise their agency by producing food for all people in need as an expression of that harmony, emphasised in this Bible study, no one should struggle with hunger. Isaiah 65:17–25, as we will reflect on below, is one of the biblical texts that speaks of that harmony as God's will and work.

Theological Reflection (Isaiah 65:17–25)

Walter Brueggemann says that Isaiah 65:17–25 is "the most extreme statement" of God's capability to renew the whole creation.³ Considering the context of exile in Babylon, that statement of renewal is addressed to God's people that their suffering will have its end. God is going to bring them back to their land and restore joy to their city of Jerusalem. That renewal will make God's people delightful in all aspects and stages of life instead of pained and suffering. Yet, that voice of hope is not exclusively for humans, God's people and other human communities. Instead, it encompasses the non-human created

beings, biotic and abiotic. Living creatures and elements in creation as a community partake in that new creation as God promises.⁴ That harmony is not yet a utopia because God is still at work to fulfil it.

A key point we can grasp from that text is that the renewal of creation is not abstract but concrete or practical. Following Daniel J. Stulac's reading of this passage from a canonical-agrarian perspective,⁵ I think the renewal of humans' relationship with the land results in the success of eco-agriculture where humans and the land work together to produce food: "...they shall plant vineyards and eat their fruit" (verse 21); "...my chosen shall long enjoy the work of their hands" (v.22). In other words, as the harmonious relationship between humans and other created beings takes place, none of the humans is left without food because the land is supported so as to express a form of its agency, which is to provide food for all people. "Food and eating" as key themes in chapter 65, as Stulac demonstrates,⁶ are a concrete aspect of life for humans. As the land produces food and all people have food, God's creatures begin to dwell in the harmony of the new heavens and earth.

It is important to note that such a harmony is not anthropocentric as those who use ecological hermeneutics might suspect.⁷ Instead, the passage has an anthropological dimension, which will be renewed with ecological characteristics. The passage implies that humans will still need food in the new heavens and earth. What is new, or restored, to that anthropological feature is its ecological characteristic. The political and economic interests of humans have negative impacts on nature. Exploitation and oppression of the non-human worlds are the consequences. Therefore, Isaiah 65 says those interests are the expressions of the old order which "will not be remembered or come to mind" (verse 17). There will be no exploitation and oppression of nature because "the former troubles are forgotten and are hidden from [God's] sight" (v.16). The ecological characteristics become inherent to humans and their interests. Humans' life is no longer about themselves but about their interconnectedness and interdependence with non-

human creatures. Food speaks of that relationship.⁸ Humans need food, and only their fellow creatures can provide it. But, for the land to give the food, in this case, as an expression of its agency, human hands are needed to play their roles. Accordingly, humans support the land to express its agency and extend the agency of the land. Such an interdependent relationship and its expressions are the ecological characteristics of human beings in the new heavens and earth.

Nevertheless, that harmony does not only apply to the agrarian or land-based contexts. The delight and joy are not exclusively on the holy mountain. The delightful and joyful harmony is also present in diverse contexts or all edges of creation in Asia. One of the contexts is maritime, in which coastal people, in particular, have a relationship with the sea, which is also sacred. There are numerous coastal communities that are in an interconnected and interdependent relationship with the sea. The harmonious relationship God will create also takes place in the maritime communities. The maritime people will dwell harmoniously with the sea and creatures. Unlike the agrarian people who need to plant and then eat the fruit, the handiwork of the coastal people is to go fishing (capture fishery and aquaculture) with no destructive methods. They will always catch nutritious and healthy seafood as the sea will fully recover to produce food.

For instance, as Tom Therik writes, in the maritime community of Pantai Rote, Semau Island, Indonesia, the seafood (aquatic plants and animals) collected/caught during the low tide twice a day is the food for the poor. Given that the poor—who in local language and traditional poetry are regarded as *ina falu* (widow) and *ana mak* (orphan)—cannot afford boats and adequate fishing equipment, that traditional practice, known as *meting* in the day and *pele* in the evening, is intentional.⁹ This culture, which relies on the conditions of the ecosystem in the shallow sea, is under the threat of destructive fishing, climate change, and pollution. As it happens, the life of the poor and the sea's agency are threatened. However, for that maritime community, the renewal God is going to bring will make the sea always feed those in need

of nutritious food because the old order that is destructive to marine life will have its end. Dwelling in harmony here means no coastal people will be left without food. They will go fishing in sustainable ways, and they will catch and collect enough food from the sea.

We can reflect that the renewal God promises and its aspects is the ideal state of God's creation. That harmonious relationship has not been realised in the history of Israel and other communities. Christian scholars then consider that harmony as an eschatological picture. In fact, that text resonates with Revelation 21–22 regarding a new heaven and a new earth,¹⁰ which is resistant and opposed to a similar order, the Roman empire's political and economic power. However, although that intertextual connection could be plausible, Isaiah 65:17–25 itself is enough to depict the ideal condition of creation that God will create. Again, to affirm succinctly about the new heavens and earth, humans' harmonious relationship with their fellow creatures takes place when in joy, the land and the sea and other water bodies produce food, and all people have sufficient food. There will be no more hunger and malnutrition, and exploitation and oppression of non-human creatures.

Conclusion

We have reflected that God will create a new heaven and a new earth in which all creatures dwell in harmony. In that harmonious relationship, humans and other creatures will flourish by actualising their agencies in cooperation. One of its expressions is that all people will have enough food. Delight and joy will characterise all members of that harmonious community—humans, animals, plants, fish, lands and seas, all creatures.

That renewal has yet to arrive. However, God's creatures can anticipate it, having the foretaste of it, as the practical implication of Isaiah 65:17–25. For us humans, that implication encompasses farming and fishing in ways that support the land and the sea to play their roles in the creation community. But not limited



to farming and fishing, any relevant actions with that motif are necessary. That includes resisting the systems and structures that hinder all humans, the land and the sea and their non-human inhabitants from dwelling in harmony. At the same time, we must seek an order that will lead God's creatures to a harmonious relationship. These practices are visible in Jesus' act of feeding the multitude, as recorded in Mark 6:30–44. That act is a resistance to the political power and economic system of the Roman empire that exploited and oppressed the Galilean people, as Raj Nadella shows,¹¹ and the land and the waterbody/sea of Galilee, as I demonstrate elsewhere.¹² For Jesus, the loaves from the land and the fish from the inland waters/sea of Galilee are for all people, not for the greedy interests of a few elites. As Jesus' followers, should not we, then, model that act?

Questions for Reflection

1. *How does Isaiah 65:17–25 as reflected above, speak of humans' harmonious relationship with their fellow creatures in the context of Asia in general and in your church in particular?*
2. *What acts do you think should be the practical implications of the text for the churches in Asia in dealing with the issues you raise in the previous question? (Keep in mind Felix Wilfred's emphasis on the interreligious context to address ecological issues in Asia).¹³*

¹ Hannah Beech and Muktita Suhartono, "China Chases Indonesia's Fishing Fleets, Staking Claim to Sea's Riches," New York Times, 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/03/31/world/asia/Indonesia-south-china-sea-fishing.html>. Accessed 25 January 2023.

² See Elia Maggang, "Blue Diakonia: the Mission of Indonesian for and with the Sea," Practical Theology, 2022, 1. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1756073X.2022.2143348>.

³ Walter Brueggemann, *Theology of the Old Testament* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1997), 548.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 548–49.

⁵ Daniel J. Stulac, "Rethinking Suspicion: A Canonical-Agrarian Reading of Isaiah 65," *Journal of Theological Interpretation* 9/2 (2015).

⁶ Ibid., 186-88.

⁷ Ibid., 185-86.

⁸ Norman Wirzba, *Food and Faith: A Theology of Eating* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), p.2.

⁹ Tom Therik, "Meramu Makanan Dari Laut: Kearifan Masyarakat Pantai Rote Di Semaui." *Setia* 1 (1997), 77-78.

¹⁰ See Jiří Moskala, "Does Isaiah 65:17–25 Describe the Eschatological New Heavens and the New Earth?" (2016). Faculty Publications. 206. <https://digitalcommons.andrews.edu/pubs/206>.

¹¹ Raj Nadella, "The Two Banquets: Mark's Vision of Anti-Imperial Economics." *Interpretation* 70/2 (2016), 172-74.

¹² Elia Maggang, "Blue Disciple: A Christian Call for the Sea in Peril," *International Journal of Public Theology* 16/3 (2022), 330-31.

¹³ See Felix Wilfred, *Asian Public Theology: Critical Concerns in Challenging Times* (Delhi: ISPCK, 2010), 305-17.



10

Renewing Hope in the Valley of Desolation: Embracing God's Call for Restoration

*The Rt. Rev. Dr Daniel Thiagarajah**

I was delighted to receive the CCA General Secretary's invitation in January 2020 to attend a February meeting of 'a core group of Asian theologians to reflect on the proposed theme' of the 15th CCA General Assembly. A year later I am again invited, this time to prepare a Bible study of the postponed 15th Assembly, focussing on the same theme and subthemes as the postponed 2020 General Assembly. These themes may have been envisaged to help us prepare for a renewed future, a restored creation, and life in its fullness.

But for the past year, I have been stuck in an energy-sapping, sad and fearful present due to the COVID-19 pandemic, which has swept the globe. A future with life in its fullness seems inconceivable. The cost to our world and our region may never be fully known. What we do know is that the virus has brought to light the radical inequalities of life on this planet. Those who suffer injustice are today even more disadvantaged by the pandemic, both within nations and between nations. The weight of this fresh injustice is symbolised by the burden of living in lockdown. While death and illness overwhelm us, many of us feel stuck, or paralysed. Sadly, this circumstance has also driven a global pandemic of mental illness, especially among young people. We cannot save ourselves by our own efforts, and the

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suggestion that we contemplate the future feels beyond our present resources. Indeed, I come to this Bible study depleted, and unsure of what to pray.

And yet if we are to find our heart for prayer in the midst of our overwhelming crisis, the prophet Ezekiel envisions that we are to begin our discernment amongst our world's dead, saying: 'The hand of the Lord came upon me, and he brought me out by the spirit of the Lord and set me down in the middle of a valley; it was full of bones. He led me all round them; there were very many lying in the valley, and they were very dry' (Ezekiel 37:1–2). For Ezekiel, being amongst the dead is not a matter of choice. Just as the Spirit drove Jesus into the wilderness to be tested (Mark 1:12), Ezekiel is brought to the midst of his people's despair and hopelessness (37:11) by 'the hand of the Lord' and 'the spirit of the Lord'. Perhaps even more confrontingly, the spirit of the Lord leads the prophet amongst the dead, of which there 'were very many' and he knows their lifelessness intimately, for they were 'very dry'.

Why is it important that Ezekiel is required to be so fully immersed in the lifeless despair of his people? Stulman and Kim suggest:

The book of Ezekiel is a daring textual act of hope. But for hope to resonate, it must thoroughly engage those at risk. This is no easy task, for Ezekiel addresses refugees who were not only homeless but also hopeless. War had devastated their lives. It had shattered dreams, families, overarching systems of value, and the entire way the world was organised. It had thrown into question beloved beliefs, ethical arrangements, ritual practices and core understandings of community identity. The result was tangible chaos and disorientation.¹

The prophet knows his people's devastation because he is living with them in the trauma of their exile under the weight of occupation by a foreign power. We come to the 15th Assembly from a region upended by suffering and death, representing minorities experiencing tangible chaos and oppression, and living



with shattered dreams, broken families and church communities rendered powerless by conflict and despair. We know their trauma because it is our trauma also. Yet, *if God has guided us to experience the fullness of pain and injustice in our own valley of dry bones, what is it that God wants us to see and hear?*

Walter Brueggemann traces out the key themes in Ezekiel that lead up to the prophet being transported in a vision to the valley of bones. The journey begins with Ezekiel's authorisation, mandated in his divine call (3:1), to speak the sad and lamentable truth (2:10) of God's judgement on Israel about the people's 'wickedness' (3:16–21). The truth of God's word is of God's impending judgement on idolatrous Jerusalem and the 'abominations' in the Temple (chs.4–10). The city and Temple's disobedience includes:

- Prophets who falsify reality and falsely proclaim 'shalom' over the city (ch.13), perpetuating the belief that God's presence in the Temple made the city inviolate and God was contained by human devotion.
- National political and religious leaders who have brought corruption and pollution upon the land (22:23–31). And what is important for this study is the condemnation of the priests (22:26) for their failure to protect holy things and maintain the distinction between 'the holy and the common', and 'the clean and the unclean'.
- A history between God and Israel of Israel's violation of God's trust (chs. 16, 20, 23), resulting in God's hostile reaction towards Israel for profaning God's holy name in 'the sight of the nations' (22:16).²

Yet there is a turning point in Ezekiel's narrative of God's judgement when an escapee from the besieged city of Jerusalem arrives in Babylon to inform the exiles, 'The city has fallen' (33:21). The truth Ezekiel has spoken is vindicated, and the collapse of Israel's old world is consummated. From Ezekiel's divine call to the fall of Jerusalem, the prophetic poetry and prose vigorously attest to the sovereignty and intentionality of God's judgement

on idolatrous Israel. ‘The poetry is clearly designed to shake the displaced out of lethargy, despair, and excessive accommodation to the force of empire.’³

It is only from this point of painful truth-telling that the possibility of healing and restoration from the pandemic can begin. Our futures and the futures of the next generations will endure more of the same until the truth of the past is acknowledged, and the present denials and the false hopes of a ‘new normal’ are confessed. As Ezekiel’s vocation could not allow him to sanitise the violent devastation of war or cover over its traumatic consequences, nor can we who are called to speak God’s word of truth sanitise the harsh reality of this pandemic and pretend a vaccine can turn our trauma into life in its fullness. With Ezekiel, we must insist ‘that the community must make a clear break from the old forms of institutional life.’⁴

As Jerusalem and the temple were being displaced from the very centre of the Israelite universe by prophetic testimony, so we must consider what God wants us to confess and what we need to let go of in our own world. At the core, the prophetic witness proclaims the main issue is our idolatry and disobedience to God. ‘The tradition is adamant that God’s people have deserted God, defiled the temple, and participated in flagrant acts of moral and economic irresponsibility.’⁵

COVID-19 requires us to confess that Christ’s promise to shepherd God’s people to life in its fullness has been replaced by our religious-like devotion to market-centred capitalist economics that believes monetary value is the ultimate value for every aspect of life. This reductionist thinking has brought death to God’s intention for relationally connected ecologically holistic humanity. John’s gospel points us to where our idolatry of capitalist economics appears to have contributed to unleashing the COVID-19 pandemic, the destruction of our planet’s biodiversity, and violating the boundary between human and animal life.

The sheepfold (or household of God) is plundered by ‘thieves and bandits’, who come ‘only to steal and kill and destroy’ (John 10:10a). Today, the disciples of economic growth rob our planet of essential biodiversity by destroying forests for agricultural expansion and urban development, causing more species to become extinct. ‘A loss of biodiversity usually results in a few species replacing many—and these species tend to be the ones hosting pathogens that can spread to humans.’⁶

Jesus points to the sanctity of boundaries and their significance for the divine ecology, saying ‘I am the gate. Whoever enters by me will be saved, and will come in and go out and find pasture’ (10:9). The sovereignty of God’s covenant with God’s people is at the centre of Jesus’ promise for the fullness of life, and this covenant has boundaries which are essential to the divine ecology. But ‘when people venture into forested areas for resources and when animals venture out of their habitats to raid crops, the chances increase for transmission of ... animal-to-human disease. A ... (previous) example is HIV, which is caused by a virus that jumped from wild primates to humans via infected bodily fluids.’⁷

Returning to Ezekiel, I am reminded that in his vision the prophet’s prayer for the renewal of life is first commanded by God, and secondly, it is offered in the midst of the valley of dry bones. *What does it mean for CCA to gather in Assembly if we are not cognisant of the end of the world as we have known it prior to this pandemic? What is the end of the CCA world that we have known that needs to be acknowledged before our sovereign God, if we are to prayerfully place our future in God’s hands?* I acknowledge that my study of these texts reflects my own experience of the devastation and burden of the pandemic. I also acknowledge that I am at the limit of my experience in reflecting on the economic and ecological implications of this situation. I believe that this is the time to reflect on how to engage our theological task as Asian Christians with a much wider public.

If we are to cultivate new modes of being and thinking for the restored creation to which God is calling us, then I for one would welcome the creation of new opportunities for initiating and

forming broader communities, such as with those versed in ethical investment and ecology, to help bring about renewed ecological foundations for economic activity in the household of God from both Christian and other faith traditions. Perhaps this is the force of Jesus' guidance to the fullness of life in his Spirit: 'I have other sheep that do not belong to this fold. I must bring them also, and they will listen to my voice. So there will be one flock, one shepherd (10:16). Jesus' insistence that his disciples are those who have listened to his voice is perhaps beyond their imagining, but it is a vital reminder of our need for programmes to ensure our worship of God enlivens our prayerful discernment of Christ's voice and strengthens our prophetic truth-telling in the midst of the forces that currently keep so many of our people living a hand-to-mouth existence, which threaten our precious shorelines, and make us more vulnerable to deadly diseases.

Questions for Reflection

1. *How can the prophetic voice for renewal and restoration to a fullness of life be relevant to the community around us?*
2. *How can we confront and dismantle the idols and systems of oppression that hinder the restoration and fullness of life that God desires for us and our communities?*

¹ L. Stulman and H. Kim, *You are my People: an introduction to prophetic literature* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2010), 166.

² W. Brueggemann, *An Introduction to the Old Testament: the canon and Christian Imagination* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2003), 192-194.

³ W. Brueggemann, *Out of Babylon*, (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2010) 59.

⁴ Stulman and Kim, *You are my People* 165.

⁵ Stulman and Kim, *You are my People* 167.

⁶ J. Tollefson, 'Why deforestation and extinctions make pandemics more likely', *Nature*, 584. (13 August 2020): 176.

⁷ R. Jordan, 'Stanford researchers show how forest loss leads to spread of disease', *Stanford News*, (8 April, 2020): 2/4. (accessed 25/2/2020, <https://news.stanford.edu>).



11

Creation and New Creation: God's 'Mission Statement' in 2 Corinthians 5:19

*Rev. Dr Vicky Balabanski**

2 Corinthians 5:14–19

¹⁴ For Christ's love compels us, because we are convinced that one died for all, and therefore all died. ¹⁵ And he died for all, that those who live should no longer live for themselves but for him who died for them and was raised again. ¹⁶ So from now on we regard no one from a worldly point of view. Though we once regarded Christ in this way, we do so no longer. ¹⁷ Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, the new creation has come: The old has gone, the new is here! ¹⁸ All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ and gave us the ministry of reconciliation: ¹⁹ that God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ, not counting people's sins against them. And he has committed to us the message of reconciliation.

Introduction

There are many Christians throughout the world who do not think that the ecological crisis our world is in has any spiritual significance, except perhaps to be welcomed as a sign of the end times. Many expect that there will be a new creation that replaces this one, and believe that the damage that humans cause will be

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wiped away by God. Is this the biblical vision of the end? What is the big picture of salvation, from which we as Christians derive our attitude to creation?

The passage from 2 Corinthians 5:14–19 sets out the big picture of God’s saving plan. This big picture comes more clearly into focus if we set this passage against the background of—Genesis 1 and 2—and the new creation, the end in view. This Bible study seeks to understand what is meant by the ‘new creation’ in this passage, and what that means for our relationship with this present creation.

Theological Reflection

Let us begin with the phrase in 2 Corinthians 5:19: ‘God was reconciling the world (*kosmos*) to himself in Christ...’. This distils the story of salvation into a few words. There are two keywords in this phrase that we can think about more deeply. The first is ‘reconciling’ (*katalassōn*). The verb means ‘restoring relationship’, ‘changing from enmity to friendship’, ‘establishing harmony’, and ‘making peace’. Is there a word in your language that has this sense? Is this something of value in your culture?

The second notable word in this phrase is ‘world’ (*kosmos*). Who or what is included in this word? Does it refer to humans alone, or does the *kosmos* include all of creation?

Depending on how we answer these questions, we will understand the meaning of this phrase very differently. Over the past twenty years, I have been learning to notice that the Bible has something to say not only about the salvation of individual people, but also about God’s care for communities including non-human creation—trees, plants, animals, and the earth itself. God created all the creatures that together form ecosystems, and continues to sustain them. I have been learning to read Scripture in solidarity with the earth—the community of life, the creation. This endeavour has led me to see creation implied when I read *kosmos*. The Greek term has the sense of the *ordered* world, the sum of heaven and earth, set in order by God in the first creation story of Genesis 1 and named in Genesis 2:1 in the Greek version.



‘God was reconciling the world (*kosmos*) to himself in Christ...’ refers to the story in which God is in the process of making peace with the *kosmos*. Christ is the means whereby God is doing this profound act of restoration and renewal. Clearly, there is some fundamental breakdown in the relationship between God and the *kosmos* that needs reconciliation. This breakdown is clearly articulated in Genesis 3:17: ‘cursed is the ground (*hē gē*, the earth) because of you.’ Human sin has led to the breakdown in the relationship not just between God and humanity, but also between God, humanity and the natural world, the earth.

The phrase in 2 Corinthians 5:19 states that Christ’s work is effective for the whole *kosmos*. Human sins are clearly a central part of the picture, but the reconciliation in view embraces not only humans but the rest of creation as well, the whole *kosmos*. Christ died for the sins that humans commit, and Christ restores the relationship between God, humanity and the whole *kosmos*. This cosmic reconciliation reminds us that the world – which was created ‘very good’ by God (Genesis 1:31)—lost its ability to fully reflect the glory of God, due to human selfishness and hubris (Genesis 3). The original goodness and order need to be restored.

If it is indeed true that God both creates and reconciles the *kosmos* through Christ (Colossians 1:16, 20), this means that this present creation matters to God. It does not appear to be disposable, to be thrown away and replaced by a different one.

This seems to stand in contrast with other biblical passages, notably ones where the powers of heaven are shaken (Matthew 24:29, Mark 13:24–25, Luke 21:25–26), and the statement that heaven and earth will pass away (Matthew 24:35, Mark 13:31, Luke 21:33). There are also other New Testament passages that seem to indicate cosmic destruction: Hebrews 12:26–28, 2 Peter 3:10–12 and Revelation 6:12–14, 20:11. Revelation 21:1–2 offers a picture of a new heaven and earth and a new Jerusalem descending from heaven. Do these various passages contradict the claim that God reconciles the *kosmos* through Christ? Scholars are now recognising that each of these passages

picks up Old Testament imagery that refers to the judgement that precedes salvation (such as Psalm 102:25–26, Haggai 2:6–7). ‘None of the multiple Old Testament precedents for the shaking of the earth or the darkening of the sun and moon implies the eradication of the cosmos; rather, these celestial signs indicate the momentous nature of the events they portend.’¹ Never in the history of the church has it been more important to read the biblical witness carefully in relation to the significance of creation; our eschatology (our understanding of the end times) matters now more than ever before, as it will shape our understanding of our own vocation in the present. Are we to continue to dominate and destroy creation, or are we to work to restore and protect creation?

The original vocation of humanity is set out in Genesis 1 and 2—the role of humanity was to be the custodians of the creation in God’s image (Genesis 1:26–28) and to serve and preserve the Garden (Genesis 2:15, with the Hebrew words *avad* and *shamar* meaning serve and protect). The fate of humanity and the fate of creation are closely connected at the opening of the biblical story, and they are also closely connected in the story of salvation. As the passage in 2 Corinthians 5:17 says, ‘If anyone is in Christ, the new creation has come: The old has gone, the new is here!’ Notably, it does not say: if anyone is in Christ, that person is a new creation, but instead sets the reconciliation more broadly, embracing humanity and all things in harmony. To be in Christ is to have a harmonious relationship both with God and also with creation restored. It is a return to our vocation as custodians and servants of creation. As Paul puts it in 2 Corinthians 5, the final restoration of all things is already anticipated among those in Christ: the new creation has come!

This may be a surprising way of interpreting Paul’s theology. But when we look at his letter to the Romans this way, we see that Romans articulates this story too. The fundamental problem is set out in Romans 1:23–25: humans have forfeited the glory of the immortal God, and also a right relationship with creation. We have done that by worshipping images of ourselves and by



worshipping creatures rather than the Creator. Our relationship both with God and creation is broken. The vocation of creation is to tell the glory of God (Psalm 19:1–4), not with words, but simply by being the beautiful interconnected web of life that it is. This is becoming less and less possible, as ecosystems break down.

Salvation fundamentally addresses this brokenness between God, humanity and creation. This is what creation itself also longs for (Romans 8:19–21). The creation eagerly longs for the glory of God to be restored in the children of God, so that creation too may be liberated. Creation longs to see the new creation in us!

When we look around the world today, we can see how the loss of our God-given vocation is playing out. Human-induced climate change, habitat loss, floods and landslides, unprecedented fire events, species extinction and the accompanying pressure on the poor and displace—all of these ruin the visible manifestation of the glory of God. The pandemic is also a symptom of the dysfunction between humanity and nature and is made more devastating by poverty. Consumerist lifestyles are reducing creation’s ability to tell the glory of God (Psalm 19:1). Redemption is needed not just for humanity, but for all things caught up in the human mess.

Paul’s Gospel may often seem to focus on the salvation of the individual person, but there is a broader horizon as well, where *all things* are part of the interconnected vision of reconciliation and redemption. Hope in Christ is hope for all creation. Creation and humanity together will participate in the ‘glorious freedom of the children of God’ (Romans 8:21).

Our passage in 2 Corinthians has something further to say about vocation: ‘God ... has committed to us the message of reconciliation.’ We are entrusted with proclaiming and carrying out the peace-making of God, restoring harmony with the *kosmos*. The Greek word for entrusted (*themenos*, from *tithēmi*, place or give) is in the middle tense, indicating God’s close involvement in this action. God’s glory is at stake, and the message of reconciliation for the whole *kosmos* matters to God.

Conclusion

This study has looked at the big picture of God's saving plan set out in 2 Corinthians 5:14–19. By emphasising the importance of creation for our human vocation, as set out in Genesis 1 and 2, and by seeking to read the passage in solidarity with the creation, we have seen that the new creation is not a replacement creation, but a return to a harmonious relationship between God, humanity and all creation. This new creation is already anticipated in those who are in Christ. The fate of humanity and the fate of creation are closely connected, as we see in Romans 8. So, when we read in 2 Corinthians 5:19 that God was reconciling (restoring relationship or re-establishing harmony) with the *kosmos*, this means that our own lifestyles, economics and politics should all reflect the Gospel of reconciliation with the *kosmos*.

Questions for Reflection

1. *Can you reread this passage in harmony with creation? When you do so, note that the references to 'all' can be neuter (all things) or masculine (all people). Does this change how you would define 'knowing Christ from a worldly point of view' (literally 'according to the flesh')?*
2. *Is the idea of 'new creation' as renewed rather than replacement something that your Christian community would find attractive, or would they find it problematic? Is harmony with creation a topic that is discussed frequently in your community? If so, are there actions that are flowing from this concern?*

¹ J. Richard Middleton, *A New Heaven and a New Earth. Reclaiming Biblical Eschatology* (Baker Academic, 2014), 184.



12

From Surviving to Life Thriving

*Asai Soror**

Introduction

Oh! Creator of Me

Where are you?

*My feet feel the thorny ground, my tear has filled the
rivers and my fate is in the air*

I am tired of this Survival Mode

The life that we are going through, as you know it and we know it, was, is, and will never be easy. It is incomplete and deficient in many forms, whether physical, emotional, or spiritual. Then why the need to discuss the life of fullness when we know death is inevitable? To cry out for 'life in fullness' in a world of death, disease, broken relationships, broken hopes, and destitute living is never easy.

Existential Crisis

The 21st century has its own collective neurosis. Asia is the largest and most populous continent and is full of diverse cultures, traditions, religions, languages, and cuisines. Asian people are buttressed in their colourful traditions. However, they have gone through certain trauma due to the history of colonisation, political unrest, economic crisis, and the depletion caused by natural disasters, which has left them with a deep unhealed wound. The continent also has to tackle the issues of human trafficking, female foeticide, substance addiction, famine, poverty, and diseases. Existential crisis or inner emptiness has characterised

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the phenomena of the century. What do you see as the single most serious challenge facing Asia right now? There is no one answer as the complex issues Asia holds within it vary.

Self-Destruction

The Inuit of the Arctic (Eskimos), have an interesting way of hunting wolves. They dip a knife in a seal's blood, freeze it and tie it to a pole. Wolves who love the scent of blood, signifying potential food, would be drawn to the frozen knife. From here, the wolf licks the frozen blood of the knife. Each lick melts the hydrated exoskeleton, bringing the wolf's own tongue closer to the knife's blade. The wolf's craving for the warm blood becomes so great, it does not even recognise the sharp blade. To the wolf, it only tastes of more blood. Which motivates it to lick even more! Over time, the wolf dies of haemorrhage. The Inuit people used the predator's own biology against it to attract and kill the beast. Like the wolf, we might become trapped in our own self-indulgence, self-desire, and selfishness.

Many people are discontented with the forest of reality. Can we delve deep into what causes this unique feeling of meaninglessness in our lives? According to Frankl, existential frustration is neither pathological nor pathogenic. Human despair, over the worthwhileness of life, is a spiritual disease.¹ Asia accounts for about 60 percent of world suicides, with China, India, and Japan accounting for about 40 percent of the world's suicides.² Acute life stress, family conflicts, pressure in educational institutions, lethal diseases, and negligence towards aged persons, are the other basic causes of existential crisis and frustration, whereby some take to suicide as a means to end their pain.

God's Irrepressible Love for the World

There seems to be a constant tension between human irresponsibility and divine grace. Deuteronomy 30:11–20 portrays a speech that can change the direction of people's lives. God is talking to the Israelites through Moses. A speech that is addressed to people who are landless, demoralised, and confused. The Deuteronomic historians thus seek to dissuade



from apostasy a bewildered people whose theological basis had collapsed.³ The covenant law is intelligible to all and accessible to all. It is not an obscure philosophy, complex rules, or religious rituals. It is not confined only to the privileged few, but all who are included in the covenant relationship. It is a commandment with practicality. It is a way of life.⁴ The author here probes deeply into the psychology of faith. Faith is the perspective on life and the world that requires a proper understanding. Just as the first generation of the Israelites in the wilderness challenged God, so the author implies that many of his contemporaries still do not understand.⁵ The Israelites were given a choice, that is the choice of life or death. The way of the former led to blessing; the latter to curse.⁶ For St. Ambrose, life is the enjoyment of the gift of breath, death and deprivation.⁷ The Israelites by holding to their God can have a future. Even when God knows that these people are going to be unfaithful, they are summoned to choose life. To choose life is not just a contract; we also see the passion and desire of God for the people. The curse of death signifies confused people, hopelessness, or discontent. Life here signifies shalom. The survivor among the Israelites in their confused-suffering state, may be a people seeking to find a path of hope in a situation that seems hopeless.

Choosing the Godly Way of Life

Choose life? What is a godly way of Life then? Romans 10:4, Paul reminds us that Jesus Christ is the true fulfiller of the Law. John 10:7–15, counters the gnostic worldview pertaining to the concept of the Saviour in the Hellenistic World.⁸ *Pleroma* (state of fullness), a gnostic concept, deals with self-knowledge that can be regained to achieve salvation or redemption.⁹ Contrary to the *pleroma* of the Greeks, Johannine faith is faith in Jesus as the word becomes flesh and the fullness of life of the believers is to identify with Jesus. Jesus represents the well-being of the sheep.¹⁰ Knowledge of God for the Greeks is primarily contemplation of the divine reality, for the Hebrews, it means entering into a relationship with God.

Jesus is the Shepherd of God's flock who is willing to lay down his life for the sheep. The Shepherd knows the name of the sheep and not the reverse. The Shepherd's personal investment in this relationship was the life of the shepherd, i.e. the death of Jesus Christ.¹¹ The death of the Shepherd embraces all people.¹² God's grace has left us free to choose. To choose a full life.

Stanley Jones in his recorded document, *'I heard a Voice in India'*,¹³ mentions that he found it immensely difficult to endure his mission work due to the terrible heat waves and constant brain fatigue. He collapsed several times during his missionary journey. The doctor even advised him to stop his work which frustrated him even more and meaninglessness gripped him. Then, in his existential crisis, he heard:

A voice, "Are you yourself ready for this work to which I have called?"

He replied, "No Lord I am done. I have reached my limit."

The voice replied, "If you will turn that over to me and not worry about it, I will take care of it,"

He replied, "Lord, I close the bargain right here."

After this incident, he experienced a surreal peace which settled in his heart. He said, "Life-abundant life had taken possession over him." He worked in India for more than forty years and even at 63 he travelled all over the world with the enormous joy of serving and living for others.

Choosing to Live a Thriving Life

Can our life depend on happenstances? Surviving is not a life that we want for ourselves or those we love. Merely surviving is depressing. Survival is too often our default; there's comfort in its familiar discomfort. Not willing to change is an acceptance of inner unworthiness, a self-defeating pattern, and self-destructive.¹⁴ In mean-spirited faithlessness, there is also the temptation to indulge in selfish complacency. This leads to the abandonment of any concern with the larger fate of the nation.

A responsible individual on the other hand actualises the potential meaning of one's life. Transitioning from surviving to



thriving is not an easy step. Nietzsche said the best way to live one's life is "to live dangerously,"¹⁵ which means to full energies to avoid stagnation and death by inactivity. Seligman also encourages us to use our signature strength and virtues in the service of something larger than ourselves which can drive us to have a meaningful purpose in life.¹⁶ None of us is responsible for our physical appearance or the environment which we are born into but we are all responsible for the precious gift given to us, our life.

Finding the Meaning of Hope in God

Can there be hope, hidden in despair? Hopelessness degenerates into despondency. It de-energises and dehumanises persons so that they no longer reach to grasp the possibilities that life brings. It generates self-pity and condemnation.¹⁷ Frankl holds that "suffering ceases to be suffering when one finds a meaning in it."¹⁸ The striving to find meaning in one's life is the primary motivational force. The 'will to meaning' is not just blind faith.¹⁹ One must come to terms that pain and suffering are a part of life.

Hope in God becomes larger, surer and more comprehensive. The fullness of life for Jesus is a liberated life, life in and with the Spirit, a life of *kenosis*, a life filled with compassion, a life of justice, a life of hope, and life with meaning.²⁰ Fullness of life is loving God, and walking in God's ways. Life, in the end, is not found in the Law itself, but in God who gave it. For ultimately, the Lord is our life. Christ chose death so that we could live.

The appeal to faith in Jesus Christ also calls upon hope that God has promised. This ray of hope can emerge from a deep gloom and emptiness. It is an appeal to heart-searching and self-examination. Change is hope and we must foster that hope. Well, there can be no doubt that the eradication of violence, poverty, hunger, war, and disease is God's will, and these aspects cannot be fulfilled if humanity does not acknowledge this truth and participate in the Mission of God.

Conclusion

The frozen tears, behind one's self-enforced smile, who can know? Humanity has questions, how can God know his or her

pains, as the former has never been rejected, heartbroken, never been hungry, or suffered? Does Jesus' crucifixion answer the above? Greater love hath no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends (John 15:13). Choosing to live an abundant life that Christ has offered is not only circumstantial but takes deliberate consistent action. Faith in Jesus Christ requires choice.

Christians are called upon to choose life so that life becomes meaningful not only for themselves but for others too. The hope for life can become real because God's covenant with the Asian People is bound with justice and righteousness, hope and faith, and mercy and love. We the Christians are not just called to survive life but rather to take full responsibility for God's given gift, to own it, and to thrive to the fullest. We need to experience the abundant life given by our Lord Jesus Christ so that our life is not just living to survive, but to thrive; spreading the aroma of Christ to the wounded world.

Questions for Reflection

1. *How can we transition from a mindset of survival to a mindset of thriving in our daily lives, despite the challenges and struggles we face?*
2. *Amid pain and suffering, can we still choose to become responsible individuals to ourselves and to the community for life in its fullness?*

¹ Victor E. Frankl, *Man's Search for meaning* (New York: Pocket Books, 1963), 163.

² Beautrais, A. L. (2006). Suicide in Asia: Crisis: The Journal of Crisis Intervention and Suicide Prevention, 27(2), 55–57.

³ Anthony Phillips, *Deuteronomy: The Cambridge Bible Commentary* (London: Cambridge University Press, 1973), 199.

⁴ Christopher Wright, *New International Biblical Commentary*, (Massachusetts: Hendrickson Publishers, 1996), 291.

⁵ Ronald E. Elements, *The New Interpreter Bible: A Commentary in 12 Volumes. Volume II* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1998), 513

⁶ Anthony Phillips, *Deuteronomy: The Cambridge Bible Commentary* (London: Cambridge University Press, 1973), 202.

⁷ *Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture: Old Testament III*, Edited by Joseph T. Lienhard S.J., (Illinois: InterVarsity Press, 2001), 326.



- ⁸ Raymond E. Brown, *The Gospel According to John*(i-xii), (New York: Doubleday & Company, 1996), 393.
- ⁹ Violet Macdermot, *The Concept of Pleroma in Gnosticism*
- ¹⁰ Gerald S. Shoyam, *John: Interpreting, A Biblical Commentary for Teaching and Preaching* (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1973), 129-130.
- ¹¹ Gerald L. Borchert, *The New American Commentary: An Exegetical and Theological Exposition of Holy Scripture* (Nashville: Broadman and Holman Publishers, 1996), 333-334.
- ¹² George R. Beasley Murray, *World Biblical Commentary: John* (Waco: Word Books)
- ¹³ E. Stanley Jones, "I heard a Voice in India," in Daniel Carnegie *How to Stop Worrying and Start Living* (New York: Simon and Schuster INC, 1984) 304-305.
- ¹⁴ Arnold A Hutschnecker, *Hope: The Dynamic of Self-Fulfilment* (New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1981), 59-62.
- ¹⁵ Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, (New York: Vintage, 1974), 228.
- ¹⁶ Martin Seligman, *Flourish: A Visionary New Understanding of Happiness and Well-Being* (New York: ATRIA paperback, 2011), 30-36.
- ¹⁷ Ronald E. Elements, *The New Interpreter Bible: A Commentary in 12 Volumes. Volume II* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1998), 513.
- ¹⁸ Victor E. Frankl, *Man's Search for Meaning* (New York: Pocket Books, 1963), 179.
- ¹⁹ Victor E. Frankl, *Man's Search for Meaning* (New York: Pocket Books, 1963), 156-157.
- ²⁰ Setri Nyomi, *That All May Have Life in Fullness*, 59-61. *World Alliance of Reformed Churches, 24th General Council Proceedings*, (Geneva, 2004).

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