Song of the prophets
A global theology of climate change
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Christian Aid is grateful to those partners and theologians from the global South whose expertise, wisdom and passion give this report its most powerful testimony. Our request is that they are heard above all else.

Christian Aid exists to create a world where everyone can live a full life, free from poverty. We are a global movement of people, churches and local organisations who passionately champion dignity, equality and justice worldwide. We are the change makers, the peacemakers, the mighty of heart.

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Executive summary

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

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

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

From the global South, we hear the very clearest insights into the urgent situation facing us all and a challenge to do something before it is too late. By the international actions of the young student strikers and the non-violent direct action of groups like Extinction Rebellion, we are reminded that we need to press on for climate justice. And we are called to reframe our theologies of creation, and to live by them, in renewed faithfulness to the wisdom of Scripture.

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

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

Many Christians now see the need to respond in a practical, theological way to the reality of climate change though there remains a small number of voices who say we should not worry about changes to the climate, as they are simply welcome signs that Jesus will return soon. Some of these voices, suggesting that we should not concern ourselves with this physical world at all, are still influential in a number of church traditions. However, many more Christians now, all around the world, are urging us all that the ‘signs’ of climate change point to a very different truth.

There are more and more calls to reshape our understanding of creation and our place within it and to be more faithful to a scriptural vision of a humanity ‘in communion’ with creation, not dominating or exploiting it. Churches and Christian leaders are coming to consider climate change as something that demands a faith response. Pope Francis made an inspiring contribution to this when he issued his encyclical Laudato Si in 2015 which invited everyone on the planet to care for our common home. We need to understand what is happening and to find the meaning in it. And we need to find sources of hope, so that we might be inspired to take action. Christian faith searches always for the ‘good news’, for the grace and love of God from which we can draw the faith to act for justice and for the future. It is restless, persistent in looking for the vision of a renewed world so that people might be inspired not only to repent, but also to hope.

What can theology do?

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

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

But prophets are much more complex than their popular caricature. Their most dominant note is not actually doom-saying, for they bring most a joyful and hopeful vision of a new world. The Old Testament scholar Walter Brueggeman has taught us to celebrate the ‘prophetic imagination’, and to look for those who offer us a vision of a renewed world, holding on fast to hope. Prophets call people to behave differently, to keep the good laws they have been given, to do what is right. They help us all face up to the future we are walking towards and that we are creating for future generations.

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

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

Below: Community prayer in Sierra Leone.
Method and framework

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

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

A real challenge to global justice

Climate change is happening. The impacts of conventional industrialisation and the burning of fossil fuels have meant an unprecedented rise in the amount of carbon dioxide in the air we breathe (now at its highest level for 800,000 years), and our planet is warming. This means that there are already more extreme climate events, rising sea levels, more floods in some places, droughts in others, and radical threats to life. Human-induced warming reached approximately 1°C above pre-industrial levels in 2017. This is well evidenced, with more than a 97% degree of scientific certainty. As Rowan Williams commented:

‘The most immediate concern is very simple: who is actually paying the price of our global crisis? The answer is painfully clear: it is the poorest in the human family, those with least resource to meet the appalling demands that a warming world places on all of us. And this is where the question of justice most plainly arises, and where any Christian perspective will tell us that we cannot let this go unchallenged. As Christians we believe that anyone’s suffering or danger is everyone’s challenge – and potentially everyone’s loss.’

Climate change is a global justice issue. Although it will affect us all, those who will bear the brunt of predicted changes are the poorest people in the world. They are the ones who are, even now, losing their land to the sea, whose low-lying islands are disappearing below the waves, whose crops are failing and who are more vulnerable to diseases like malaria.

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

As Nazmul Chowdhury once put it, ‘Forget about making poverty history. Climate change will make poverty permanent.’

But it is also true that we can do something about this. We have only a short time, but it is possible. Around the globe, the drive to respond effectively to climate change is growing. Adaptation programmes seek to compensate for the impact of higher temperatures but the outburst of physical protest, from young people across the world mobilising student strikes and the eruption of the Extinction Rebellion (XR) movement and non-violent direct action, has demanded a more fundamental response from the international community of nations to avert the ‘climate emergency’.

The international agreement reached at the Conference of Parties (COP) in Paris in 2015 to limit global temperature rises to below 2°C above pre-industrial levels, and, preferably, below 1.5°C as demanded by the most vulnerable, was an encouraging breakthrough. But progress on implementation has lagged. The implications mean keeping more than two-thirds of known fossil fuels in the ground, unburned. If we keep going as we are, with fossil fuel consumption and greenhouse gas emissions at current levels, temperatures will rise by between 3°C and 5°C as soon as 2100, which will have unprecedented and devastating impacts.

But we could choose instead a low-carbon future and set fair carbon reduction targets for all countries. We could prioritise improved energy efficiency and invest in renewable sources of energy. We could give much more support to those who are already suffering the impacts of change. We could make sure that developed countries bear the weight of change while low-carbon and sustainable development can happen in the least industrialised countries. Achieving this will require more ambition from governments and the private sector, more changes to individual lifestyles as well as a major shift in public opinion. It will take a vision powerful enough to inspire resolute action.

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

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

Our 2019 report, Counting the Cost, provides overwhelming evidence of how climate change is already having a severe impact on many communities around the globe. In Africa, Asia and Latin America, our partners witness increasing food insecurity, an increasing prevalence of diseases like malaria, and many incidents of drought, flood, storm surges and rising sea levels. Our partners' experience is that climate adaptation and disaster risk reduction is increasingly important in their work.

In Malawi, humanitarian aid was provided for displaced people in the wake of Cyclone Idai which hit southern Africa in March 2019 affecting 3 million people. Disaster preparedness programmes are running in vulnerable areas and technology, like mobile phones, has been introduced to improve awareness of weather warnings. Partners in the country were already working to enable women to utilise solar energy to support their businesses in rice growing, fish rearing and horticulture through access to refrigeration and drying facilities.

In Kenya, the Makueni county government in the east of the country has set aside 1% of its development budget for climate change work. Working through our partner Anglican Development Services, the money has enabled the county to access funding from partners, financing 16 community-prioritised public good investments. These include sand and earth dams, mega water tanks, a water distribution line and a rock water catchment project.

In Bangladesh, land that has traditionally been used for agriculture is now salinated because of increased flooding and storm surges that bring sea water inland. Now farmers who used to produce rice are farming crabs instead. The Nowabenki Gonomukhi Foundation (NGF) provides training and financial support to farmers to set up their own crab farms so they can still make a living despite the adverse effects of climate change. Shefali Begum, a crab farmer said: ‘Summer is extremely hot. The rainy seasons are delayed... And also, fishes and crabs were abundant in the river which is also decreasing. We feel like everything has reduced. The resources have been reduced.’

In Nicaragua, a country with very low carbon emissions, climate change is making coffee production unreliable. Christian Aid partner Soppexca is helping small producers of coffee to diversify their crops to combat this, supporting farmers to organise themselves into cooperatives and giving them training to improve production, marketing and sales skills so they can reach new customers and earn a better and dependable living. Now the smallscale farmers are
introducing cocoa as part of an innovative initiative funded by the Inter-American Development Bank (IADB) and Christian Aid as part of a Fairtrade coffee cooperative.

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

Below: With Christian Aid’s support, Florence Muthiani’s community built the Mikuyuni earth dam in Kenya to help fight the effects of climate change.
Theological voices from the global South

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

An urgent call to repentance

In 2019, participants from 22 countries and from different faith traditions gathered in Wuppertal, Germany for a conference entitled Together Towards Ecotheologies: ethics of sustainability and eco-friendly churches. In a document entitled Kairos for Creation they issue a call to the churches. They refer to the ‘urgency’ of the crisis and to ‘the need to read the signs of the time, to hear God’s call, to follow the way of Christ, to discern the movement of the Spirit.’ Central to their message is the confession of human arrogance towards creation, and repentance for our desire for endless growth, our alienation from and our violence to ‘our God-given home’. They challenge churches to educate and inform their members, to create liturgy to inspire new attitudes and behavior, and to lobby governments to work towards the 1.5°C ceiling agreed in Paris.10

Ernst Conradie is a South African theologian working as a Professor at the University of the Western Cape. He contributed to the Wuppertal Conference and has a clear sense of the urgency of our climate change emergency, and a vision of the particular contribution the Church can make beyond political action and campaigning. This must come in the context of the much deeper spiritual change needed to solve what is a spiritual problem:

‘The spiritual roots of climate change are less obvious but still widely recognized (...) In short, if we know that there is a problem, realize the extent of the problem, know what is to be done, have the technology to address that, can calculate that the related economic costs are still bearable, have some political will to find solutions (...), but have collectively still been unable to turn the tide of carbon emissions, this suggests a spiritual problem. It points to a lack of moral energy, moral imagination (imaging what kind of different world is possible) and moral leadership.’11

‘In the past, the compelling moral visions of prophets such as Amos and Jesus of Nazareth have changed the world. If Christians can dig into their own texts, this may unearth the treasures that the world truly needs.’12
'One is inclined to say that, as long as life prevails, it can never be “too late” for those alive to make changes and to believe that such changes may and will affect future outcomes.’

**A challenge to find the will to act**

Professor Jesse N K Mugambi, from the University of Nairobi, Kenya, has long been reflecting, writing and campaigning about climate change and calling the churches to action. He has been involved in key international meetings about climate change since the 1990s, including the significant United Nations Conferences of Parties and is widely acknowledged for his expertise on the science and politics of climate change. He writes:

‘The global ecology in 2020 is much more precarious for humans than it was then. It has been worsening rapidly since the first World Environment Conference convened at Stockholm, Sweden, in 1972. The facts pertaining to global climate are glaring and scary, as provided by meteorologists, climatologists and ecologists.

‘The Earth Charter (1992) has provided concise principles on the basis of which we humans can constructively respond to climate change. These principles are respected more in default than compliance. The greatest polluter nations contribute the least for remedial measures per person. But the greatest damage is inflicted upon the nations and regions where the poorest and most vulnerable people live.

‘It is clear that this imbalance will continue. The only respite for the “wretched of the Earth” is to fend for themselves, within the limits of their capacity and capability. Global warming continues worsening. Individuals and communities at local levels in Africa have to fend for their own survival, aware that the greatest polluter nations have neither the interest, nor the commitment for changing their industrial, production and consumption policies. At the same time, too little attention is accorded to adaptation to climate change.

‘Churches and church agencies are part-and-parcel of the nations to which their members belong. Their responsibility, first and foremost, is to influence policy at home, both among the citizens and the governments. This is the only approach that will constructively reduce the rate of carbon emission into the atmosphere, which, in turn, will improve the welfare of individuals and communities, especially in Africa. Owing to the equatorial position of Africa on planet Earth, Africans suffer much more than people in other continents. Equity, rather than charity, is the justifiable approach toward compensating Africa and Africans for the consequences of carbon emissions originating from outside the tropics.’

Jesse Mugambi makes it clear that the problem is not that we are ignorant of the world’s plight or that we have no means to mitigate the challenge. The problem is one of ethics or of will, and is rooted in the very same power struggles that leave some poor and others rich.

Upolu Luma Vaai is the Principal of the Pacific Theological College where a project called *Reweaving the Ecological Web* focuses on addressing the Pacific islanders' experience of rising sea levels which affects food and water supplies but also has a cultural dimension. He writes:
‘The obsession for growth based on ‘the visible material’ is at the heart of the climate crisis. We see today that someone’s gain in the global north that has contributed immensely to climate change has become the death and loss in the global south. This loss is not just a loss of the natural environment. It is also the loss of cultures, language, relationships, and social structures. Our current knowledge of climate and adaptive models are so confined to visibility. As a result, when we talk about climate change, it is an ecological issue only of the visible physical environment, not an issue that affects everything, including that which is not visible. What is seldom realised today is that there is no security without spiritual security. No wellbeing of the individual without the wellbeing of the whole. The visible cannot be healed unless the spiritual is healed. Because of the inextricable relation of the whole, the ‘damaged physical’ also indirectly affects all other life dimensions such as humanity, culture, identity, gender, economy, and social structures, to name a few.’

A question of justice

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

‘The monotheistic world view has a strong focus on ethics and therefore on the care for the other as a brother and sister because God as creator of the earth and its sustainer is the one who gives the laws, demands justice and love and wants humans to flourish. It is with this basic insight in mind (...) that a Christian eco-theology and ethics can be developed. (One) of its main pillars should be: a widening of the perspective of salvation which is to include the whole cosmos. Climate change teaches us in an almost experimental way that our actions influence not only other humans in a positive or negative way but also the whole universe (cf. Romans 8.19-22).’

And this response cannot be the product of Christians alone.

‘The ecological and climate crisis have led to joint interfaith statements and actions that, stressing the ethical commonalities of faith communities, alert and propose common actions to deal with these interlinked crises. The centrality and sacredness of life, the care for the earth and for the most vulnerable, and the critiques of exploitation and overconsumption are some of the common values many faith traditions share.’

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

His words evoke a renewal of the ecumenical task, seeing the focus of Christian witness as being about renewal of the whole created earth,
and not just the Church or even the human community alone. Recent years of theological work have seen the overcoming of old divides and fears as urgent voices have shown us that creation is not simply the scenery for human beings to play in or work in, let alone for human beings to exploit, but that the whole of creation belongs to God and that we belong to it. Globally, the Anglican Church has long been concerned with environmental issues. The Anglican Communion states that the fifth mark of mission is: ‘To strive to safeguard the integrity of creation and sustain and renew the earth.’ The Anglican Church in Southern Africa Environmental Network (founded in 2004 and now bearing the name Green Anglicans) aims to support churches and Dioceses to fulfil God’s call to be earthkeepers and to care for creation.

The Green Anglicans made a great impression at the 2019 UN Environmental Assembly held in Nairobi, Kenya. Led by Bishop Wanyoike from Kenya, they showed creativity and simplicity by sharing their efforts to get churches and dioceses to begin tree nurseries in their localities. They have also encouraged the communal planting of a tree to mark each ceremony that their parishioners engage in, such as baptisms, weddings and funerals.

Emmanuel Anim from Ghana writing in the Wuppertal Kairos for Creation document adds his voice on climate justice:

‘It is without doubt that perilous events in our generation draw our attention to understand and act decisively on the ecological crisis, particularly the threats of climate change that confront us. The rapid depletion of non-renewable natural resources raises the question of our responsibility to future generations. Poverty is a function of ecological crisis. Sometimes the poor and marginalised are driven out of their habitat in the name of development. Uneven distribution and use of natural resources raise issues of equity and justice. Unless the poor and marginalised have alternate sources of food and basic needs such as fuel and shelter they will also exploit and destroy and whatever natural resources are within their reach.’

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

Belonging with creation

Dr Monica Jyotsna Melanchthon is a Lutheran theologian and theological educator currently teaching at Pilgrim Theological College, Parkville, Australia. Her work is driven by the conviction that Scripture and its interpretations should meet people at the point of their needs and struggles. She is a contextual theologian with a strong commitment to the marginalised, who, in the Asian/Indian context, are the poor, women and Dalits. She writes:

‘Climate change is a global issue but it has different effects on communities, exacerbating poverty and existing inequalities. In India, the impact of climate change and the ecological crisis has animated the anxieties of the poor, the tribal/Adivasi communities and especially those at the bottom of the caste ladder, who have to constantly negotiate their lives to access opportunities for work, food and water. This has reinforced an organic link between the destruction of the environment and social, economic and political injustice.’
‘Environmental degradation is intricately intertwined with the Dalit experience of discrimination, humiliation, fear, violence, deprivation, death, displacement and exploitation.’

It is with this basic insight in mind that a Christian eco-theology and ethics can be developed.

‘...the cultures and the traditions of the tribal and marginalized communities of India contain within them resources and insights that are liberative. More than dogma and beliefs, they embody the relationship of peoples to the eco-system in their day-to-day lives. The Muria Hond tribes of Bastar in north India consider human beings to be the crops of God, raised by Mother Earth. As the crops depend on the soil, all human beings rely on Mother Earth. ...The recurrent insights in such myths of creation constantly interrelate God, humanity and nature.’

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

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

The Wuppertal Call acknowledges that churches have followed ‘toxic theologies’ that have pursued dominion in the name of differences of race, gender, class and species; dualist ways of relating heaven and earth, soul and body, spirit and matter; flourishing with the well-being of the whole of creation. They criticise the prolonging of myths of unlimited progress, putting trust only in technological solutions to ecological problems instead of realising their cultural, moral and spiritual nature; the pseudo-gospel of emphasising the accumulation of wealth and prosperity. They call for an ‘understanding of the Kairos moment in history in which we find ourselves’:

‘The task ahead is immense and will require decades of dedication. The urgency of the situation implies that a comprehensive response cannot be delayed. The next decade will be decisive to allow the Earth a time of rest.

‘The biblical motifs of Sabbath and Jubilee provide a unique source of hope and inspiration, an interruption in the cycle of exploitation and violence, expressed in the vision that there shall be “a year of complete rest for the land” (Lev. 25:5).’
Kuzipa Nalwamba is an eco-theologian from Zambia working with the World Council of Churches. She says:

‘The church’s calling to service (diakonia) must necessarily be directed towards a life-affirming sustenance of all of creation... But the church is not primarily the building up of a growing “counter-cultural community”, a new people, with a renewed sense of being and calling as an ecological community. Rather, God’s people at worship, during the celebration of the sacraments (and other rites of intensification), recall the essence of the church’s being and calling as an ecological community. Therein lies the potential for the church to garner its credibility and moral authority to participate authentically in caring for the earth. That may in turn lead to a critique of consumerist Christianity that exalts the amassing of wealth without regard to the resultant devastation of creation.’

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

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

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

That these voices continue to speak says much about their hope and their determination. How can we in the North who grow weary of political negotiations in conference rooms not gird our loins again, when those who daily persevere in places despoiled and damaged are still ready to carry on fighting for the sake of our present and of our children’s future?

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

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

She writes that:

‘...prophetic voices have composed an alternative song, one that is being heard also in the South.’

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

**Searching the scriptures for a vision today**

**Prophets of old**

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

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

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

Many of those speaking out on climate change from the global South recall the prophets who have come before them. Dr Kapya John Kaoma from Zambia, working in the United States as visiting researcher at Boston University Center for Global Christianity and Mission, for example, looks to the prophet Jeremiah as he writes:

‘Earth-killing multi-national companies are making money on the backs of the poor and the earth. It is within this socio-economic crisis that God invites us to speak truth to power. This invitation, however, is not easy. It demands gracious courage from God’s prophets called to disturb the status quo with strong moral case for earth care...’

‘Prophecy comes from God in the time of crises. God’s word to Jeremiah, for example, suggests the divine agenda for God’s sacred Creation. In fact, prophecy flows out of God’s love and care for the Creation. It is not Jeremiah who chooses to become a prophet but God makes him one...’
‘Jeremiah was invited into the Creator’s prophetic mission. He had to courageously stand up against the forces of injustice, “Do not be afraid of them, for I will deliver you.”’

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

Walter Brueggemann writes:

‘Prophetic ministry consists of offering an alternative perception of reality and in letting people see their own history in the light of God’s freedom and his will for justice...’

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

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

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

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

Creation poetry

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

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

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

In the Renaissance period, theologies of creation in the West made so much of the role of human beings as those who were called to dominate creation that the concept of stewardship was elided with ruthless exploitation.

The Genesis stories offer us a different vision of what it means to live in the world, different from the one that became the norm in much of the developed world. We need to return to that vision and begin to live by it again. As Rowan Williams puts it, we need to regain a sense that our relationship to the earth is about ‘communion not consumption’.

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

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

Across the world, theologians are engaging with scripture with new eyes. Anglican bishops meeting in Lima, Peru in 2018, reflecting on Genesis, reiterated their recognition that creation is loved and sustained by God and requires the love, care and sustenance of humans, placed as God’s agents and stewards on earth. They declared: ‘Therefore we include Creation Care as an integral part of our expression of the preaching of the Good News of Salvation, which includes a constant proclamation of the sustenance and renewal of the earth.’

Passages such as Leviticus 25 – which legislates for the use of the land, imposing limits on human action through a weekly Sabbath, a sabbatical year and a 50-year jubilee – now seem astonishingly wise in a world where too much land has been exploited ruthlessly, with no proper
sense of limit.

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

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

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

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

Jesus, first of a new humankind

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

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

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

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

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

**Radical witness of the Christian tradition**

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

‘...a distinct way of being in the world, not over things, but together with them, like brothers and sisters of the same family.’

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

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

Eastern Orthodox Christianity has had a better history of understanding that humankind belongs within a larger creation. It views creation as absorbed in the praise of God and as redeemed through the incarnation, death and resurrection of Christ. Orthodox theologians have been faithful to this tradition and the Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew I of Constantinople has been the most outspoken church leader of our times on climate change. He sent a message to the Conference of Parties (COP) meeting to discuss climate change in Warsaw in 2018:

*Below: Jeksani Mapolisi’s house was demolished when Cyclone Idai hit Malawi in 2019.*
'In our understanding the way we relate to nature, as creation directly reflects the way we relate to God as Creator. There can be no distinction between concern for human welfare, protection of the environment, and care for our salvation. In order to restore the planet, we need a spirituality that brings humility and respect with regard to our attitudes and actions, our life choices and lifestyles. It should be abundantly clear by now that we must direct our focus away from what we want to what the planet needs.\textsuperscript{34}

Now many Christian thinkers around the world recognise that a theological understanding of creation matters. We may rightly have feared 'new age' or pantheistic theologies, but such fears have led us to a different kind of heresy in neglecting to honour and care for the creation which is God's gift to us. Twentieth-century literary critic Northrop Frye commented that we really do need to steer a course between a gnostic contempt for nature and a pagan adoration of it.\textsuperscript{35} More recently, Michael Northcott has written that:

\begin{quote}
‘At the heart of the pathology of ecological crisis is the refusal of modern humans to see themselves as creatures, contingently embedded in networks of relationships with other creatures, and with the Creator. This refusal is the quintessential root of what theologians call sin.’\textsuperscript{36}
\end{quote}

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

A call to respond

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

- We need to work together to limit global warming to ‘well below’ 2°C. The urgency is greater considering that we will hit the 1.5°C mark between 2030 and 2052 if things stay as they are.
- We need to support affected communities to adapt to the adverse effects of climate change that they already face.
- As the new decade begins, we call for the urgent shift of present economies to low-carbon, climate-resilient and sustainable economies that ensure fulfillment of all global goals for the benefit of humanity.
- We need to increase support for internationally agreed approaches such as the Sendai Framework that manage disaster risk reduction to protect the lives and livelihoods of people everywhere, and particularly the most vulnerable communities on the frontline of climate change.

All countries need to contribute to this global effort, since all share responsibility for the climate, even if they have contributed to the problem to different degrees and have different capacities to deal with it. Through the Paris Agreement of 2015, 196 countries agreed to reduce national emissions and adapt to the impacts of climate change within a
process of Nationally Determined Contributions (NDCs). These have to include ambitious plans to cut greenhouse gas emissions as well as commitments to a low-carbon development path, and are required to be communicated widely and reviewed regularly.

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

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

We also need to hear and respond to the voices of young people who are aggressively demanding action. Julius Mbatia, a COP25 youth delegate from Kenya says:

‘This crisis threatens both the sustainability of the earth and well-being of young people noting we stand to bear the brunt of climate change impacts and climate inaction longer. A world that partners with us to overcome existing barriers to effective youth engagement that include limited capacity, inadequate representation in decision making processes, inadequate mechanisms and finance to build climate innovations, will come a long way in making our climate action ambitions a reality. The present older generation has a great responsibility to empower, support and facilitate the younger generation to act. Leaders, governments and all actors need to appreciate, tap into the abilities, strengths and talents of the youth to enable them to provide impactful and sustainable climate solutions.'

The Rev Dr Dave Bookless radiates optimism when he says:

‘As new scientific reports suggest an ever-blacker future, and political agreements are bogged down by compromise or failure, there is a famine of hope regarding the possibility of tackling climate change. As Christians, our ultimate hope is rooted in God’s commitment to creation, and in the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ (Colossians 1:15-20; Romans 8:19-22). This hope does not lead us to complacency but call us into joyful action. We affirm the need for urgent action, at every level from the personal to the intergovernmental, to mitigate the worst effects of climate change and to enable adaptation. Our hope in Christ means that even when we face disappointment or failure we remain committed to serving the victims of climate change and to working for the economic, technological, political and societal changes that are necessary to address it.'

The theologians meeting in Wuppertal echo this challenge for Christians and churches to act. They call on the churches to renew the liturgical and spiritual practices of their traditions and to reread and study scripture with a focus on creation and the earth; to nurture eco-congregations, to pursue gender justice in church and society given its multiple connections with ecological concerns. They urge the encouragement of sustainable lifestyles in households and communities and seek alliances of thought and action with other faiths, environmental movements and the available scientific expertise. They begin their declaration:
‘If my people who are called by my name humble themselves, pray, seek my face, and turn from their wicked ways, then I will hear from heaven, and will forgive their sin and heal their land.’ (2 Chronicles 7:14)

‘If anyone is in Christ, the new creation has come: The old has gone, the new is here! All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ and gave us the ministry of reconciliation.’ (2 Corinthians 5:17-18)
Conclusion: prophetic hope

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

Leonardo Boff asks:

“How are we to inspire new behaviour, nourish new dreams, and bolster a new kindness toward the Earth?”

Many campaigners on climate change have recognised that there is huge capacity in the human community for both denial and despair. We sometimes do not act because the challenge just seems too great, and sometimes it is easier to delude ourselves that the challenge does not exist. There are voices that ‘reassure’ us by saying that climate change is not really happening. Or they say, if it is, it is not caused by us and so there’s nothing to be done except to adjust to its impact where we can. Sometimes the reality of what is happening is accepted, but the scale of the challenge and the constant refusals of governments to act prove demoralising and demotivating. The action of individuals to change our own lifestyles can seem like whistling in the wind. Simply telling people to ‘repent’ and change their ways, with no positive vision of what a changed world might be, often has little impact. The temptation, even for the most generous-hearted people, is to close our ears because it seems hopeless. If we are to resist the denial and despair that keep us from changing anything, then above all, we need hope. It is hope that inspires change, and hope that makes even sacrifice a joyful and willing act.

For Christian theology, hope is foundational. It is hard to sustain a hope that people will simply become less selfish, or that humankind will simply become better. Since we have lived through the 20th century, we know that humankind is very far from naturally progressing in a positive direction. We know that it will be hard to persuade all industries, governments and economies to work for a low-carbon future. But, there are sources of hope, which could lead to change, and it is these that theology can unfold.

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

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

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

In his encyclical, *Laudato Si*, Pope Francis reminds us that:

'The Creator does not abandon us; he never forsakes his loving plan or repents of having created us. Humanity still has the ability to work together in building our common home.'

'How wonderful is the certainty that each human life is not adrift in the midst of hopeless chaos, in a world ruled by pure chance or endlessly recurring cycles! The Creator can say to each one of us: “Before I formed you in the womb, I knew you” (Jer 1:5). We were conceived in the heart of God, and for this reason “each of us is the result of a thought of God. Each of us is willed, each of us is loved, each of us is necessary.”

'The rich heritage of Christian spirituality, the fruit of twenty centuries of personal and communal experience, has a precious contribution to make to the renewal of humanity.'

In 1989, Ecumenical Patriarch Dimitrios I of the Orthodox Church instituted an annual Day of Prayer for Creation on 1 September. This has now been extended to the feast day of St Francis on 4 October and is known as the Season of Creation. It has been embraced by other European Christian Churches and also the Roman Catholic Church as a time for prayer and action to protect creation.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Ivone Gerbara, a feminist, liberation theologian from Brazil, says to theology:

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

She is echoed more recently by others from different traditions. Brian McLaren, acclaimed author on spirituality, and a public theologian from the evangelical tradition of the southern United States, follows this thinking by emphasising how this revisioned theology needs to find expression in the liturgies, prayer lives and church witness of our denominations and congregations. In a presentation entitled *Worship that Destroys (and Saves the World)* he challenges churches to examine their practices over 500 years: of preaching a God who is found outside of creation, a salvation that sees the world as something to be left behind, sin that is only identified in personal terms while ignoring the abuses humanity has visited on other human beings and the whole natural world. He points to the language of our prayers and our hymns which deliberately or accidentally reinforces this orientation and its dualist expression of what is spiritual and what is material, what is of concern to faith and what is not, where humans stand with regard to
creation and how we ‘other’ nature around us.54

Miroslav Volf, a theologian from a Croatian Pentecostal upbringing speaks of how human beings are called to be ‘at home’ in the world to the degree that they also find God ‘at home’ in his creation. ‘Home’ is featured in both the beginning and the end of scripture, in the Garden and in the New Jerusalem. The gap between the two is the story of how we hear the call to ‘re-home’ ourselves within creation and with the Creator in the relationship that Jesus promised when he said: ‘We will come to the ones who follow my commands and dwell with them’ (John 14:23 Volf’s translation). 54

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

Leonardo Boff once wrote that ‘...human beings are finding their way back to their shared home, the great good and bountiful Earth.’55

May it be so.
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