

The University and Cathedral Lecture 11th June 2015

THE CHILD OF ADAM AND THE FUTURE OF THE EARTH
LETTERS BETWEEN A CHRISTIAN BISHOP AND A MUSLIM
SCHOLAR

As an honorary graduate of this university I am honoured to give this inaugural lecture that brings together the University and the Diocese of Gloucester. My eldest daughter and son-in-law are graduates. And it was in Gloucester that I first went to school on our family's return from Singapore. Staying with my aunt I remember my first experience of nature, providence and trees through a surfeit of Victoria plums! This invitation was first mooted by Bishop Michael alongside whom I served in the House of Bishops. I accepted because of my high regard for him. He above all bishops took strategic responsibility for securing the legislation that enabled women to become bishops. Less well known but important to record, he transformed the spiritual life of the House of Bishops through its liturgy and corporate study of the Bible. Bishops are of no use to God or the world without the word and worship.

I am glad to be here also because Bishop Rachel, whom you will soon enthrone, will make history in this Diocese. A bishop's calling embraces feeding the body of Christ. The first person to feed the body of Christ – literally - was a woman.

As you will see from Bishop Rachel, if a woman can feed the body of Christ in the flesh she can also feed the body of Christ in the Spirit.

It is with the Word of God that Christians are called to feed both the Church and the World. The Hebrew understanding of the Word sees it as dynamic and life-changing. Sometimes theology can become undone by its very processes especially if it ends up arresting the Word mid-flight and subjecting it to sterile analysis, abstracting it from the dynamics of changing lives. Whatever is being studied at that point is not the Word in its Hebraic and biblical senses. Doing theology that way is a bit like trying to appreciate a black and white photograph by measuring the distance between the dots on the paper! The Word is active. The Word is creative and transformative. To appreciate its truth and power we need to witness where the Word is active.

So for the purpose of the subject of this paper let me take you to the Amazon rain forest and its eponymous River. Some years ago at the invitation of the Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew I about 100 guests gathered to consider the future of the river and the forests. These were scientists and religious leaders who shared the Patriarch's commitment to the environment. We spent the week sailing up the river into the heart of the jungle with religion and science deep in discussion with one another.

Along the way we met heroic communities resisting the barons of illegal logging some of them led by Catholic nuns and priests whose lives had been threatened and in some cases taken.

We each gave presentations to one another. I spoke about the Gospels and in particular what they told us about Jesus' relationship with the Earth. There was one scholar on the symposium who stood out for me. Nariman Gasimoglu. He was from Azerbaijan. And a Muslim. He spoke about the Koran and in particular what the Koran and the Hadiths tell us about humanity's relationship with the earth. And so began a dialogue which has given birth to this lecture.

It is not an exaggeration to say that the earth is under threat on a scale not hitherto known. In the vanguard of these forces that could affect our future two stand out. The first is the ecological stability of the planet. The opportunity that humanity has to destabilize its equilibrium is unprecedented in history. Once we were the vulnerable victims of nature, now we are its terrifying tyrant. When will we see that our future is furthered best by being in harmony with nature? This is the thesis expounded prophetically for quarter of a century by the Prince of Wales.

The second of the most severe threats is the tension between Islam and other religions, and, in particular, Judaism and Christianity, and, because of their historic influences, Western Civilisation. What is particularly problematic is the way that the two sacred texts, the Koran and the Bible, are used literally by some to support a world-view that involves the cataclysmic destruction of the earth.

At the risk of gross oversimplification you have a form of Christianity and a form of Islam that are pitted against each other, each envisaging an apocalyptic catastrophe. Each is extremely influential in geo-political terms. On the one hand, you have a selective and literalist biblical movement in America that is politically significant which sees a violent denouement to the earth as a fulfilment of prophecy and a future reality; on the other hand, you have a movement based on a selective and literalist reading of the Koran with the same vision. These religious world views have major implications on a vast range of issues from the Middle East to the Environment. They can be summarized by what is admittedly a gross caricature, 'Because the earth is going to end up in a ball of flames you might as well milk the earth for all its worth while you've got the time. And if along the way you should start some conflagration in the Middle East then bring it on because this is what the Bible/the Koran predicts.'

Thus, the two great challenges that face us are Faith and the Earth, theology and ecology.

This lecture tonight is but a scratching of the surface. But it's the surface of our common future. And, in my humble opinion, it is in need of more attention than it is currently receiving and by comparison with which all other considerations are but fiddling while Rome burns.

Which brings me to my thesis tonight. It is imperative that we find new ways for Christians and Muslims to work together from their sacred texts of the Bible and the Koran in order to establish a secure future for the Earth.

I advance this proposition now through what some may feel to be an unlikely friendship namely between me, a Christian bishop in England, and Nariman Gasimoglu, a Muslim scholar in Azerbaijan and through our iterative discussion about the role of Jesus, the Child of Adam and Son of Mary, and his relationship with the earth past, present and future.

Although the future of the earth gives us common ground there are, of course, major differences between Islam and Christianity. The cause of dialogue and friendship is best advanced by declaring and not denying these. Tarif Khalidi in his book 'The Muslim Jesus' gathers together from the Koran and the Hadiths the many sayings about Jesus to be found in Muslim literature down the centuries. It is an illuminating thesis that gives Christians much food for thought about Jesus. Nevertheless, Khalidi does not shy away from the two principal differences - the Crucifixion of Jesus and the Trinity. "In denying the Crucifixion, the Qur'an is in fact denying that the Jews killed him, and elevates him to God as part of his vindication as a prophet, thus reconciling him to the general typology of Qur'an prophecy. It is the Ascension rather than the Crucifixion which marks the high point of his life in the Qur'an and in the Muslim tradition as a whole" (p.15). In other words, it is a theological motif and purpose which is shaping the narrative in the Koran.

The second difference identified by Khalidi is ‘the rigorous Qur’an denunciation of the Trinity as tritheism’. The most dramatic passage is cast in the form of an interrogation of Jesus by God.” In it Jesus denies that he has ever said “Take me and my mother as two gods beside God” (Sura 5). Khalidi contextualizes this as a response to early church controversies such as about the nature of Jesus and the need to reject polytheism. It is undeniable that the development of Christian doctrine and ethics was, and remains, an iterative process and Khalidi locates the Qur’an tradition and the Hadiths in the Middle East as an engagement with and response to Christian communities there. Nevertheless, these two Christian doctrines, central to the life and faith of a Christian, present a challenge to any Christian-Muslim dialogue. For some it will be a bridge too far. For me it’s a call to go the extra mile in understanding because the rewards of friendship outweigh the consequences of enmity.

For some time I have drawn on the model of St Paul in Acts 17 where at the Areopagus in Athens he engaged with people of different convictions. Instead of dismissing the altar to the unknown God and belittling their superstitions he builds on their insights and in the context of genuine dialogue proclaims the role of Jesus in the future of the earth. He even takes that beautiful phrase ‘In whom we live and move and have our being’ and applies it to the God of Abraham. What most people do not know is that these words were originally an ascription to Zeus. Here was the purist Paul being generous and creative in building bridges of understanding between faiths. Our current dialogues will benefit from the same generous orthodoxy.

When I wrote my small book 'Jesus and the Earth' I was humbled by responses from two Muslims. Firstly, in Liverpool Akbar Ali, Chairman of the Council of the Mosque, who said that there was nothing in it with which he would disagree. The second was from Nariman who in the Journal of Azerbaijani Studies engaged constructively with my arguments about the relationship between Jesus and the Earth.

A simple and straightforward question prompted the study that led to the book: did Jesus have anything to say about the earth?

In the rising awareness about the environment Christians engaging in the debate have drawn mainly on the Old Testament - Genesis and the Psalms and the writings of Paul. They continue much in this vein. But my concern was to find out whether there was anything in the Gospels, in the sayings of Jesus that would form the basis of a Christian perspective on the environment. You can read the book for the full story. These insights stand out for the purpose of this paper.

In a conversation with the Chief Rabbi, now Lord Sachs, he reminded me that the one title above all others that Jesus took to himself to define his mission, ministry and identity was 'Son of Man'. In Hebrew 'Ben Adam'. In English 'Child of the One hewn from the Earth'. We Christians rightly worship Jesus as Lord, Saviour, Christ, Son of God - but left to himself he humbly styles himself 'Child of the Earth'. I suggest to you that this is quite a revelation to the current generation that in fear for the future of the earth goes in search of a faith that speaks into our current crisis. Here we are part of this extraordinary organism called earth that seems hell-bent on self-harming and is in need of salvation in the broadest sense of that word; and to our great surprise we find that the founder of one of the great world religions speaks to us self-consciously out of a symbiotic relationship with the earth. Context has always set the agenda for theology. It sent me back to the Gospels to read again familiar passages and to find unfamiliar thoughts.

The second insight came as a jolt. Going in search of 'the earth' in the teachings of Jesus there it was at the heart of the Lord's Prayer, 'your will be done on earth as it is in heaven'. It's a prayer for the earthing of heaven. How could I have missed that?

Jesus' vision of the Kingdom of God is a fusion of heaven and earth. Alastair McIntosh, the Scots ecologist and author of 'Soil and Soul', on reading the draft of this lecture pointed out that it is in the Nazareth Manifesto (Luke 4) that Jesus spells out his own relationship with the earth and the Jubilee principle of being in a right relationship with the land.

The third insight was to discover a collection of sayings where Jesus calls himself 'Child of the Earth' and in the same breath talks about the earth. In the preface to 'Jesus and the Earth' I made a plea for a substantial theological study of the collection of 'Son of Man/Earth' sayings. Maybe this University would take up the challenge. It's one of the reasons I have accepted the invitation to give this inaugural lecture!

One of those sayings is found in Matthew 12:40 "Just as Jonah was in the belly of the whale three days and three nights so the Son of Man/Child of the Earth will be in the heart of the earth". Without now expounding it I nevertheless draw attention to the Gospel narrative. Before they laid the Child of the Earth in the earth it quaked and when his body was raised from the earth it quaked again. The earth was not silent at the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus. It was a more eloquent commentator than the Temple Curtain that tore only once.

The single point I want to make of this is that at this moment in time when anxiety is mounting about our own relationship with the earth we should be going not just to the Old Testament and to the letters of Paul but to the teachings of Jesus himself and searching those scriptures for clues as to how he and we relate to the earth.

Thus it was with great surprise and some feeling that one day I received in the post two copies of the Journal of Azerbaijani Studies in which Nariman Gasimoglu, a Muslim scholar, had done just that! (Volume 13 numbers 3 & 4 ISSN 1027 – 3875).

In two articles under the heading ‘Spiritual Reading Guide on Shared Nature Commonalities in Bible and Koran from Eco theology Perspectives’ Nariman, now of Khazar University in Baku, describes his awakening love of nature through the poetry of Gasim Gasimzada and the landscape of Azerbaijan in the “vine and fig orchards of the Absheron peninsula, on sandy coasts of the Caspian sea, at high latitudes of Kelbejar region, Shusha and Gubadli forests”. Then as he translated the Koran into his native Azeri Turkic he sensed God appealing to his people and laying upon him and them “divine environmental teaching about conservation ethics.” Nariman confesses that “Unfortunately, the current mindset of the Muslim majority is not sensitive to ecological issues” in spite of the efforts of a number of Muslim scholars. The same could be said of the church.

Nariman refers to our exchange of papers:

“James Jones draws a parallel between eschatology and ecology, meaning ‘a link between what we think will happen to the earth and how we now treat the earth’, and saying: ‘Some people subscribe to what is in effect a theology of obliteration. This means that if you believe that one day the world will end in some great cosmic combustion then you need not worry about what happens to it now. It means that you can concentrate on securing your personal salvation in another world while sitting loose to your obligations in this one. It means that there are even some people who actually believe that we should hasten the day of such obliteration.... Although the Bible talks about the future in language of both continuity and discontinuity the overall sense of scripture is that God is at work sustaining, renewing and transforming his creation rather than destroying it. The Lord’s Prayer has at its heart the petition for ‘God’s will to be done one earth as it is done in heaven’. This is a prayer for the earthing of heaven. The biblical vision of the future is one in which heaven and earth are fused together.

“As an author of Koranic translation in my native Azeri Turkic I would add that these comments are in full compliance with corresponding Koranic verses, which require that both worldly and hereafter life balance out in the religious thought and practice as believers are called to pray before God, uttering: ‘Our Lord! Give us good in this world and good in the Hereafter, and defend us from the torment of the Fire!’ Which they actually do in their traditional daily prayers.

Moreover, the Koranic text characterises those constantly thinking and asking of the judgement day that will mark the end of the world as if they hasten the advent of the world's end and thus views them in the list of disbelievers: 'They ask, 'When will be the Day of Judgement?' A Day when they will be tried (and tested) and over the Fire! 'Taste ye your trial! This is what ye used to ask to be hastened!' "James Jones also is right when saying: 'Yet just as within Christianity there are those who subscribe to a theology of obliteration so too there are Muslims who contemplate the future involving the destruction of the earth. If these, if I can use this word, 'obliterationists' gain the ascendancy in Christianity and in Islam and dominate their own cultures with a political world view based on their theological conviction then we are facing an eschatological scenario of the bleakest proportions. It does not require much imagination as to what might happen to us all if the world is held captive to a struggle between two religiously based political ideologies that are predicated on the ultimate destruction of the earth ...' I would only add that this very point, eco-theology regardless of what religion it belongs to should be seen as one of the tools of true salvation for humanity."

Nariman goes on to argue that we should "try to put the possible moral potential of religions at the service of environmental activities" so as "to assist in reversing the environmental crisis". He readily acknowledges that religion about salvation in the next world has kept human beings "away from the need to take care of life on earth". Furthermore, he concedes that "the neglect of both the manifestation of the divine in the natural world and creation processes caused humanity to mistake the entire revelatory process".

Quoting Thomas Berry he calls for us all to turn “from a spirituality of alienation from the natural world to a spirituality of intimacy with the natural world” and affirms that humanity is a part of and not apart from nature. Echoing Christian and Jewish eco-theologians’ interpretation of ‘dominion’ in Genesis as ‘servant Lordship’ he asserts “the Koranic principle of stewardship” from the verse that reads ‘Behold, your Lord said to the angels: “I will create a vice-regent on earth ...” (Sura 2:30)

One of the most interesting aspects of his paper for me is his discussion about my exposition of Jesus as the Son of Man/Child of Adam and what it tells us about his relationship to the earth. He draws attention to the Lord’s Prayer and the earthing of heaven.

“The call for the ‘earthing of heaven’ can be heard of in a Koranic verse where an inner vision permeated through with belief in God’s creation is considered as needed to assume that spiritual connectedness felt with the heavens is deeply rooted in the ever-existent physical unity of the latter with the earth: ‘Have not those who disbelieve seen how the heavens and the earth were once one mass which We separated’

The fusion of heaven and earth anticipated by the Lord’s Prayer harks back to the unity of the original creation when ‘the heavens and the earth were once one mass which We separated’ (Sura 21: 30).

Exploring further Jesus' self-designation as the "Son of Man/Child of Adam" Nariman finds parallels in the way the Koran assigns to Jesus the title 'Son of Mary'.

"It also seems quite interesting to observe how similar the title 'Son of Man' is to what the Koran reads while talking about Jesus Christ. 'Son of Man', meaning partly of human origin, is represented in the Koranic interpretation as the title 'Son of Mary', which may sound all the more environmentally flexible as the 'earthing' of divinity by Mary the Virgin, having given birth to Jesus out of the Holy Spirit sent by God." Philip Leigh, Chair of Faiths4Change in Liverpool, when reading the draft of this lecture commented that this portrays Mary too as 'a vessel for the earthing of heaven'.

Nariman also draws attention to the Koranic verse that explicitly connects Jesus with Adam.

'The similitude of Jesus before God is that of Adam' (3: 59). It is to Adam that God divulges 'the nature of all things'. Adam is the 'Guardian', 'the Vice Regent' and 'God's Agent' (Sura 2:30). And Adam and his descendants will be 'the inheritors of the earth' (Sura 6:165).

What all of this shows - and this is but the surface - is that the figure of Jesus as the second Adam offers Muslims and Christians scope for a new and different dialogue.

Instead of clashing a priori over the Trinity and the Divinity of Jesus we should look first at our ethic of the earth in the Bible and the Koran and then explore what our traditions tell us about Jesus, the Child of Adam and the Child of Mary, and his relationship with the earth past, present and future. This is not a call for Christians to deny our belief in the Trinity and in the Divinity of Jesus, but it is an invitation to shift our gaze from the mountain range of high doctrines and to walk with our Muslim friends in the foothills and who knows what new things we might both see on the horizon.

It was in this spirit that I wrote to Nariman with a request that he might consider more fully five questions, the answers to which he had already touched upon in his article.

1. What are the principal texts in Islam that refer to Jesus as the Son of Man?
2. What is the role of Jesus in Islamic eschatology?
3. Christianity divides into two camps. One believes in a theology of obliteration whereby God will destroy the earth before establishing his Kingdom; the other believes in a theology of restoration whereby through the coming of his kingdom God will renew the earth. Does Islam also have their two contrary emphases?
4. What do the Koran and Hadith teach about renewal and regeneration of the earth?
5. In the New Testament Jesus teaches us the Lord's Prayer in which we are to ask for 'God's will to be done on earth as it is in heaven'. In the history of Islamic thought are there any references to the role of Jesus challenging us to care for God's Creation and protecting the Earth?

With Nariman's permission I shall append his full answers to the transcript of this lecture. Let me summarise his responses.

Firstly, Nariman believes that "Son of Man' can be partly correlated with the title 'Son of Mary' used as a sign of human origin in Koranic verses. In that sense through the maternity line he might be considered a Child of Adam". As in the Bible the Koran sees Jesus "as the only prophet with no sins ever committed unlike others including even Muhammed with minor human sins".

He also sees parallels between the Gospels and the Koran in their identification of Jesus as the Word of God "Jesus Christ, the son of Mary, was an apostle of God, and His Word which he bestowed on Mary, and a Spirit proceeding from Him" (Sura 4:171). Just as the Son of Man/Earth sayings in the Gospel point to his unique mission as the Go-Between Heaven and Earth so the Koranic ascriptions of 'Son of Mary' and 'His Word' demonstrate the mediating connectivity of Jesus with the human and the divine. This corresponds to the Johannine testimony to Jesus as the Word, 'without whom nothing was made that was made' (John 1:3).

Secondly, according to Nariman "among those Islamic prophets believed to be alive in traditional Islamic mind, Jesus is the only one whose aliveness is not disputed and thus related to his role in Islamic concept on eschatology referred to in Islamic texts as 'The Hour'."

He quotes the Koran (Sura 3:55) ‘O Jesus I will take you and raise you to myself and purify you from those who disbelieve and make those who follow you superior to those who disbelieve until the Day of Resurrection’. And there is much more in the Hadiths about a second advent of Jesus as a sign pointing toward ‘The Hour’ (which stands for the Day of Resurrection and Judgement) and of a reign by Jesus over the earth. Although neither the Koran nor the Hadiths go into detail about the eschatological role of Jesus he is clearly seen in both as an eschatological figure in the future history of the earth. The Gospels, the Letters and the Book of Revelation offer many more images and symbols about the role of the Son of Man/Child of Adam at the ‘regeneration of all things’ (Matthew 19:27). “Truly I tell you at the renewal (Palin genesis) of all things when the Son of Man is seated on the throne of his glory...”.

For Christian and Muslim who care for God’s creation there is clearly scope for mutual study about the role of Jesus.

Thirdly, Nariman states that although there are a “few reformist Muslim scholars who (also) believe in renewal of the earth” the vast majority of Muslims subscribe to “a theology of obliteration” after which “the Kingdom of God comes to reign in a renewed universe with the Resurrected faithful moving into the next world to live on a new earth.”

This is a theological outlook that has been shared by the church for two millennia and is strongly held today in communities that take a literalist view of the Bible.

It is the vision that informs the closing scenes of the Last Battle in the Narnia stories by C S Lewis. But the fact that there are albeit a small number of Muslim scholars interpreting the Koran and Hadiths more figuratively shows that there is scope for more dialogue within Islam and with Christianity about the nature of the end-times and its implications for the earth both future and present. Both the Koran (Sura 6:165) and the Bible (Matthew 5:5) see the faithful disciple as the inheritor of the earth.

Fourthly, Nariman quotes the Koranic verses ‘On the Day the earth will be replaced by another earth, and the heavens, and they will emerge before God, the One, the Subduer’ (14:48) and ‘as we began the first creation, We will repeat it’ (21:104) and poses “the question: does this renewal of the earth really mean it will be accompanied by its whole destruction when ‘the Hour’ comes?” Traditional Koranic commentators believe that the earth will be totally obliterated before God will create a new one and base it on another Koranic verse: ‘everybody will be destroyed except His Face. His is the judgement, and to Him you will be returned’ (28:88).

At this point in our correspondence Nariman refers to his own research into ‘the Great Day’. He examines a number of micro-doomsday episodes in the Koran in order to throw light on the macro-doomsday scenario of ‘the Great Day’. He comes to a remarkable conclusion “Now I am tending to think that the expected obliteration will be limited in its scale however big it may appear with its greatly transforming and renewing consequences”.

He bases this on his studies of Lot, Noah, Jethro and Moses where the faithful are left physically unharmed and safe within their own territories from the impending threat.

The significance of Nariman's research cannot be exaggerated. Both the Bible and the Koran lay upon humanity the ethical imperative of caring for God's creation. But the application of that imperative is undermined if we believe that ultimately the earth will be discarded and destroyed. Conversely, if we believe there is continuity between this earth and 'the new earth' our acknowledgement of its sacred nature is underlined. Nariman quotes the Koranic verse about the Son of Mary, 'Verily there is knowledge of the Hour. So doubt you not concerning it, but follow me. This is the right path.' And what is of particular relevance is that it is prefaced by a reaffirmation of humanity being vice-regents in the earth. In other words, there is from the Koran an invitation by implication to consider Jesus in our considerations of the earth both present and future. Nariman agrees, "I find it very important and helpful for Muslims to enlarge their views at this point by learning Jesus as a knowledge for the 'Hour'." (Sura 43:60.61).

Yet the language of discontinuity about the earth between Now and Then which is there in both the Bible and the Koran does press the question as to how we are to understand the metaphor of 'narrative catastrophe'. John Ashton, who was the UK's Climate Ambassador in the Foreign Office, on reading the draft of this lecture put into my mind that the language of obliteration could be metaphors for the 'death of the ego'. Certainly Christian theology resonates with that sort of purging and purification.

Fifthly, Nariman acknowledges that Jesus occupies a special place in Islam thought with titles such as Spirit of God, Word of God, Prophet of God, Messenger of God, Servant of God and the Messiah. He finds many references to Jesus in Azerbaijani classics. In one masterpiece ‘The Epic of Layla and Majnu’ the author Muhammad Fuzuli embraces “the traditional Christian perception of Jesus whose appearance in the world was to take away sins And to take all sorrows of people on himself to redeem the humanity of all kinds of grief.”

In Nariman’s article in the Journal of Azerbaijani Studies he gives his testimony of how God spoke to him about the importance of environmental and conservation ethics:

“The love for nature that was passed on to me from Gasim Gasimzada since my early childhood had its own intimate place in my deep feelings towards the Divine. Once we were on a visit to Netchala region in close vicinity of the Kur river banks. We were invited there to take a river trip on board a ship to reach the final destination of the Kur river where it merges with the Caspian Sea. During the trip we happened to see fishermen pulling a big net, apparently cast long ago, up to the shore where a related government-run fishery was located. One of those accompanying us on the trip was a local influential governmental official, and he jokingly suggested that we sail up to the shore and observe how many fish would be caught for good luck.

I knew that as a sign of respect for my father the poet, people around would insist we take a few fish as a gift. This made me feel uneasy and have pity on fish. I expressed in silence my deepest prayer to God for no fish to be caught in the net. What happened was that they were pulling and pulling the net with no sign of a fish. The fishermen looked embarrassed, telling each other ‘no, it is impossible, it would never happen, this big net and no damn fish?’ But when they were about to take the net out of the water, one of the fishermen screamed, “‘look what is there in the net’. To our great surprise there was a very big salmon with plenty of red stains on it. ‘This seems to be by your fortune, as we very rarely happen to catch any salmon in these waters, not to mention the kind of this size’ - they said happily. My happiness I had enjoyed a little earlier got mixed up with an uncertain sadness. At first I had thought my prayer was answered by God and many hundreds of fish were saved as a result. But what happened then? Why was this big salmon to be caught in the net? I could find the answer only later when I translated the Koran into my native Azeri Turkic. Now I assume that was a sign of divine environmental teaching about conservation ethics, as if God were appealing to the eyes, minds and souls of people - those in the presence of a poet and nature lover - and telling them ‘look, I am granting you the most beautiful fish ever caught, but no more than one of this kind, so be satisfied with this; do not be greedy, do not put an end to beauty’.

When I first read these words, the parable of the fish leapt off the page like a salmon swimming upstream. There was a vicarious element to the catching of the fish that led to the release of the others. Those familiar with the Gospels will see the parallel in the parable with Jesus, the Son of Man, Child of Adam, dying as a ransom for many.

“The Son of Man did not come to be served but to serve and to give his life as a ransom for many.” (Mark 10:45).

Just as the hundreds of fish were saved by ‘granting you the most beautiful fish ever caught’ so humanity and the whole of creation are saved by the most beautiful human being to have ever lived, the Child of Adam, the Child of Mary. This is but one example of how the conversation between me and Nariman in the foothills of our understanding has enabled me to see new things on the horizon of faith.

Later this year Pope Francis will issue an encyclical on human ecology. Cardinal Turkson in a Lenten lecture this year flagged up ‘the four principles of integral ecology’ which the Pope will address. The first will be the call to be protectors so that we can protect others, so that we can protect creation. The second principle is that ‘care for creation is a virtue in its own right’. As Pope Francis has already said “a Christian who doesn’t safeguard creation, who doesn’t make it flourish, is a Christian who isn’t concerned with God’s work, that work born of God’s love for us.” The third principle draws on the example of St Francis of Assisi and his sense of awe, wonder and solidarity with the whole created order. We must care for what we cherish and revere.

The fourth principle goes to the heart of this lecture and the correspondence between this Christian bishop and the Muslim scholar, my friend Nariman Gasimoglu.

The Pope will call for dialogue and a new global solidarity on ecology. Dialogue does not mean abandoning one's own convictions. It offers new insights to inform our convictions through putting ourselves in the shoes of our interlocutors and seeking to see the world from their vantage point. Such is my journey with Nariman.

Cardinal Turkson ends his letter with the conclusion "Let us become artisans of the revelation of tenderness". Here with this image I sense the creative and transforming dynamic of the Word. He urges us to heed the forthcoming Papal encyclical. Later this year the Pope will visit America; later this year in Paris the nations of the world will gather yet again to address the global impact of Climate Change. These offer opportunities for reflection and action for us all. But if Christians and Muslims could begin to forge a new dialogue centred on the role of Jesus the child of Adam, the child of Mary in the future of the earth it could chart a path away from mutual antagonism which would in itself offer new hope for the world.

I know that some may think that to make such an appeal for such a dialogue is vain and fanciful. Those who seem hell-bent on terror would not be interested in theological niceties. But before we are too dismissive it's worth pausing and reflecting on the recent news as to what was discovered on the bookshelf of Osama bin Laden.

Famously there was the book of profiles of bishops of the Church of England! But of greater significance were the books about ‘Mohammed in the Bible’, ‘the Resurrection’ and ‘Was Jesus Crucified for Our Atonement?’ We have no idea what Bin Laden made of these but the fact that they were there raises the possibility that as a Muslim he was considering the role of Jesus, the Son of Mary and exploring both the Muslim and Christian perspectives. His deeds were truly terrifying. But I want to ask the question as to whether the theological motif that motivated such terror could be modified by dialogue.

In an address to the Oxford Centre for Islamic Studies in Oxford’s Sheldonian Theatre the Prince of Wales spoke about ‘Islam and the Environment’ and called for the building of “good relationships between our faith communities” and “mutual respect”. He ended by saying “The inconvenient truth is that we share this planet with the rest of Creation for a very good reason - and that is, we cannot exist on our own without the intricately-balanced web of life around us. Islam has always taught this and to ignore that lesson is to default on our contract with Creation.” This is the wisdom of both the Koran and the Bible. It is the wisdom that we must explore together, Christian and Muslim, and in harmony with all faiths reflecting on the ecological and theological challenges that threaten the future of the earth.

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