

"Re-imagining the Promised Land"
The Green Christian Festival

Praise we the Fashioner now of heaven's fabric,
The majesty of his might and his mind's wisdom,
Work of the world-warden, worker of all wonders.
How he the Lord of Glory everlasting
Wrought first for the race of men
Heaven as a roof-tree,
Then made he Middle Earth to be their mansion.

This poem, recorded by Bede in his History of the English People, was composed by the 7th Century monk Caedmon. It is a poetic exposition of the theology of the Creation of all things.

I would love to add a line to the creed; after saying that we believe in the resurrection of the body, I would add, "We believe in the Earthing of Heaven" because that is now the Promised Land. And it's what we pray for every time we say the Lord's Prayer: "Your will be done on Earth, as it is in Heaven" - the Earthing of Heaven. I often prefer the older version which says, "Thy will be done in Earth as it is in Heaven". That little preposition 'in' suggests that God's will is to be done not just on the surface of the Earth but in the deep ecology of the world.

I sometimes feel that we are caught between two forces; that force which prays and works for the 'Earthing of Heaven' and a sinister force that is about the 'earthing of hell'. I urge you to watch David Attenborough's 'Witness Statement' which is sponsored by WWF on Netflix. It is his assessment of what we are now doing to the Earth, and it is nothing short of the Earthing of Hell.

In the Gospels, the word for Hell was Gehenna and it comes from the name Hinnom and the valley of Hinnom which was the municipal rubbish dump outside the walls of Jerusalem - a smouldering heap. When Jesus used that image, it was as if he was saying to people, "Look, if you carry on living in this way, you will end up wasting your lives and you will turn everything into some great heap of rubbish!"

That image was extraordinarily prescient because that is exactly what we are doing today. By living in the self-centred way that we are, we are gradually turning the Earth to waste. We are polluting the atmosphere, poisoning the rivers and the oceans, contaminating the land; we are earthing Hell.

One image that strikes me very powerfully is the Thames Barrier, which was built to protect London from flooding. The Barrier went up 4 times in the 1980s, 35 times in the 1990s and up until this moment 2020 it has been raised some 200 times. If the City of London with its financial institutions at the centre of the World's economy, and if the Palace of Westminster, the heart of our constitutional democracy - had been flooded as many times as the Thames Barrier has been raised, then we would be taking much more urgent action on Climate Change and environmental degradation.

Why should Christians be concerned? Very simply, desecrating God's Creation is to undo God's creative work in, through and for Christ and it is nothing short of a blasphemy. Yes, it's a crime against humanity and future generations but it is also an act not just of defiance but of rebellion against God's creative purposes.

In the Gospels whenever Jesus talked about his own mission, he more often than not called himself "Child of the Earth". Well, I've never seen that, you may say, but that's because the translations we read have him describing himself as "the Son of Man". But in Hebrew "Son of Man" means "Child of the One hewn from the Earth". Libraries are full of books about the meaning of 'the Son of Man' but there's a unique collection of sayings in the Gospels where Jesus called himself, "the Son of Man, the Child of the Earth" and in the same breath talked about the Earth. For example: thinking about his future and his own death, Jesus said, "Just as Jonah was in the belly of the whale three days and three nights, so the Son of Man, the Child of the Earth will be in the heart of the Earth".

At his crucifixion before they laid him in the heart of the Earth, the Earth quaked and then on the third day when God raised him from the heart of the Earth, the Earth quaked again. It's as if the Earth could not remain silent as it saw the Child of the Earth being crucified and bringing about the salvation of the world. It says also that salvation is not just about the saving of individuals, but about the rescuing of the Earth itself and the restoring of all things.

Jesus also said, "Blessed are the meek for they will inherit the Earth." That promise speaks of people who are humble in their relationship with God, with the Earth, and with one another. It is Jesus thinking beyond the present and seeing a future for the Earth itself. That's also clear when shortly before his Passion he talked about when he would come again. He spoke about the Son of Man, the Child of the Earth, coming again in glory. When? At "the renewal of all things". Jesus saw himself as central to re-imagining the future and the Promised Land.

Lots of people quote that poem by Gerard Manley Hopkins, *God's Grandeur*: "The world is charged with the grandeur of God". Later on in the poem he says something significant: he writes "And for all this nature is never spent". Why? "There lives the dearest freshness deep down things." That verse speaks to me of how the human family is a part *of* nature and not apart *from* it; of how within the natural world the human family has its part to play; how we bring to the whole of nature human ingenuity, human conscience and the human spirit. Jonathon Porritt has just written a brilliant book "Hope in Hell" which charts how we, the human family, can play our part, as a part of nature, to restore nature.

Hopkins ends his poem by looking to God, 'the World-Warden' as Caedmon called him, and to God's own commitment to His Creation: "Because the Holy Ghost over the bent World broods with warm breast and with ah! bright wings." It's our invitation to work with God's Spirit to steer us away from the Earthing of Hell to the Earthing of Heaven.

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