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Hope Rediscovered: Climate Change and Gospel

Hope Rediscovered

I have been asked to speak about my book *Hope Rediscovered: biblical wisdom for an anxious world*, or at least a few themes from it, and I'd like to start by telling you how it came about. There were three primary motivating factors.

First, I am very concerned – as we all are – about the environmental degradation we are causing to the planet, particularly due to climate change.

Do you recall the opening ceremony of the 2012 London Olympics – with England's green and pleasant land transformed by the smoking chimneys of the industrial revolution? There is so much to thank God for in science and technology. I spent some years as a research chemist, and am grateful for all the benefits science and technology have given us. But one of the things the early industrialists did not know is that by burning fossil fuels, by cutting down rain forests, by some aspects of industrial agriculture, we are putting a blanket around the earth, which is changing the climate. My grandfather did not know this, nor did my mother and father. But we do. This places a new and very particular responsibility on our generation.

More and more people are agreeing with David Miliband when he was Environment Secretary: 'climate is not simply an economic or political issue, it is a moral and ethical one'. Think of some of the questions climate change poses to us: our human relationship to other creatures, the trust we place in technology, our duties to the poorest parts of the world, and to future generations - and how we handle our fears and vulnerabilities about the future; and perhaps most poignantly: what sort of world will my grandchildren find when they are my age? These are all moral and I suggest spiritual questions. They are about global justice, about inter-generational justice, about living in the truth. There are a small but growing number of academics who discuss all this in terms of an almost inevitable near-term social collapse, a probable ecological catastrophe, and a possible extinction of all animal life including human life by the end of this century. That is the motivation behind the growing Extinction Rebellion movement. What are we to make of that? Climate change illustrates what Professor Mike Hulme characterised as a 'wicked' problem, that is a problem with no clear solution, one in which parameters keep changing, and which needs a systemic response holding together science, ethics and spirituality.

I think we are in need of spiritual wisdom. Where is spiritual wisdom to be found? Are there any grounds for hope?

Secondly, I am concerned that we humans are losing any true sense of who we are. In this anxious world, we are becoming more and more divided into the haves and the have-nots; we are becoming more and more commodified and our value seen only in our utility; everything including the environment is given a price-tag. We are losing any sense of the common good, and we are being driven by a model of 'economic man' which is individualized and self-interested. Our traditional human values are constantly called into question by the internet / social-media world; bio-genetics and neuroscience put questions to us about what it means to be human; we live in a world dominated by systems of corporate power. AI, despite all its potential huge benefits, also requires us to question what is authentically human and how to safeguard human values, human creativity and choice. In this sort of context what counts as flourishing as a human being in God's world?

We rightly hear about sustainable development: how does this tie in with ecology, economy and equity? What does it mean to flourish? What counts as authentic humanity? Again: are there any grounds for hope?

How have we got to this point?

I think we have lost the biblical sense that there is a creative triangle of relationships between God, humanity and the earth - that we humans are part of the earth, and dependent on the earth for our well-being, but we also have responsibility as God's image-bearers to care for God's creation on God's behalf. Instead of this rich triangle of relationships, some Christians seem to have concentrated entirely on the 'God - human' axis of the triangle and - damagingly, - have ignored our human interdependence with the earth. Others - particularly Western culture in the last 200 years, have tended to displace God, and think only of our human relationship to the earth. This is what Martin Buber called 'The Eclipse of God.' Then we think of ourselves as the Masters and Possessors of Nature (as Francis Bacon once put it). We use the world to provide for all our wants, so we exploit it, and extract it, and damage it without thought of the future. Alternatively, we think that Nature is some great power which we cannot control, nothing we do can make any difference, so let us 'eat and drink for tomorrow we die' - a sort of fatalism. John Donne captured something of the sense of loss, which the new science of Francis Bacon was producing: 'Tis all in pieces, all coherence gone.' One Christian moral imperative, if we are to live hopefully, is to recover that triangle: God, humanity and the earth in creative interrelationship. God's earth is resilient, but we are called to exercise responsibility for it, and the decisions we make have a great effect on it for good or bad. That triangle, I believe, is a key to living hopefully in today's anxious world. It is one way of bringing ecology, economy and equity together under God.

So to my third motivating factor. I have for a very long time had a particular fascination with the Fourth Gospel - John's Gospel - and of all the gospels this one seems to draw most on the Wisdom traditions of the Hebrew Bible, and also talks most about human flourishing: *'I am come that they might have life in all its fullness.'*

So I wondered what would happen if I tried, as it were, to put my questions about our need for wisdom in our relation to God's creation, and concerns about human well-being, to the author of John's Gospel, and try to draw on some of the Wisdom themes of the Gospel to find some wisdom for today.

In the Hebrew Bible, Lady Wisdom does two things. First, she gives us a sense of order in the world - Wisdom is at the heart of God's creation; wisdom holds everything together; wisdom is behind nature's laws and patterns. Second, Wisdom helps us to cope; gives us stories and patterns and guides to live by;

helps us find our way, which is God's way, in all the uncertainties of this world. Wisdom shows us what life in its fullness is about.

So this gives the structure to my book. The book is divided into three main sections, each of which draws on themes from John's Gospel: (i) Wisdom embedded in creation; (ii) Wisdom embodied in Jesus, The Man; and (iii) Walking Wisdom's Way: living authentically as God's people in God's world. Throughout, I think we can discover grounds for hope in the faithfulness of God.

(i) Wisdom embedded in creation.

The opening words of the Gospel of John, '*In the beginning was the Word*', take us immediately back to the opening words of the Hebrew Bible: '*In the beginning, God*'. The Gospel writer assumes that God is Creator, and Nature is God's Creation in which God's Wisdom is embedded, holding all things together. The wonderful poem at the start of our Bibles, Genesis chapter 1, is a reflection on Nature as God's creation. In much of the Hebrew Wisdom literature, Wisdom offers us a way to understand God's gift of creation, and our human place within it. It gives pointers to how we are to live and care for the rest of God's creation if we are to flourish, and how to cope when things are hard.

If you read the Book of Proverbs, you find Wisdom's world is one of discovery and excitement. Everything is to be explored. Wisdom's path is one of delighted, playful discovery, a sense of wonder and enjoyment. Are there echoes of the Lord God walking in the Garden in the cool of the evening, just to enjoy the flowers and the breeze? Or, as the Book of Job puts it (38.7), of the morning stars singing together and all the heavenly beings shouting for joy?

The poet who wrote Psalm 104 speaks of God's wisdom and joy in all the creatures and ends with a dominant note of joy: '*May the Lord rejoice in his works*' (v.31). God's Wisdom is embedded in creation, and is a source of God's delight. As John's Gospel puts it 'God so loved the world.'

Part of our human responsibility in the care of God's creation, in response to God's gift, is to safeguard the possibilities of delight and joy in God for ourselves and for others and for future generations. When we capture God's joy in God's creation, we find one source of hope in the faithfulness of God.

If 'the earth is the Lord's', we as his image-bearers are called first to an **ethic of allegiance**.

Creation in Jeopardy

However, sometimes Nature fills us rather with anxiety and fear, and seems to be a place of inexplicable suffering. In the Wisdom writings, we also find this other perspective on Nature, darker and more perplexing. To use one of Walter Brueggemann's phrases, we can often see 'creation in jeopardy' There is within God's creation that which is broken, seemingly cruel, without obvious purpose. God's Providence has somehow allowed a 'deep disruption of creation'.

One aspect of the brokenness of the world is human sin and selfishness, of which John's Gospel says a good deal. '*The world was made through him, and the world knew him not.*' And behind that, John's Gospel speaks of the powers of darkness and destructiveness that infect everything, and need themselves to be destroyed.

As long ago as the sixth century BC, the prophet Isaiah referred to environmental damage as a symbol of God's judgement on human sin, and the breaking of what he calls the 'everlasting covenant':

The earth dries up and withers, the world languishes and withers; the heavens languish together with the earth. The earth lies polluted under its inhabitants; for they have transgressed laws, violated the statutes, broken the everlasting covenant. (Isaiah 24:4f.)

It was with that theme in mind that Pope Francis produced his magnificent Encyclical *Laudato Si.* in 2015, in which he calls on humanity to awaken our conscience and to take urgent action.

The Pope writes on behalf of the Earth, 'our common home', and particularly from the perspective of the poorest inhabitants. We need, he says, to integrate the question of justice so as to hear *together* both the cry of the earth and the cry of the poor.

It was that in mind, too, that in 2012 Operation Noah published its *Ash Wednesday Declaration* on 'climate change and the purposes of God'. It reflected on God's joy in creation, and our joy in God's gift; our need to repent of past stupidities and sins, on the call to love our neighbours and do justice in the world, and on the grounds for hope in God's faithfulness. Professor Mary Grey commented on this: 'For Christians, the themes of this statement - joy, repentance, hope, justice and so on - are not optional: they are at the heart of our identity as Church. We will encounter them in the form of a question when we face God's judgement: "*What did you do to cherish my creation in its hour of danger?*"

Hour of danger? Could it be hour of opportunity? Just suppose we had a world in which we were not all trying to consume as much as we could to keep GDP growing and growing as though there were no boundaries, or in which we could significantly reduce our dependency on coal, oil and gas, and satisfy our energy needs in other ways. We would not be extracting so many resources from the earth, and the earth would be more sustainable; the air would be cleaner and we could breathe more easily; the water would be fresher and there would not be wars fought over clean water; the land would be more fertile and our food security would be stronger; people who live in London or New York or Shanghai - not to mention the Solomon Islands - would not be afraid that their cities will flood. We could build a cleaner and healthier and better-fed world that is more just, with less poverty, and less anxiety about what the future will hold. Is that still within our reach? The time available is diminishing.

To achieve that we need an **ethic of restraint**. This is one of Archbishop Rowan's comments on the Pope Francis' wonderful Encyclical *Laudato Si*:

'Measureless acquisition, consumption, or economic growth in a finite environment is a literally nonsensical idea; yet the imperative of growth remains unassailable, as though we did not really inhabit a material world.'

We need to live within limits: the physical limits of a material world, and the moral limits of God's ways of Wisdom. There is significant growing literature about the boundaries (physical and economic) within which human flourishing - and indeed the flourishing of all creation - is possible. We seem to be overreaching many of those limits already. Our **ethic of allegiance** requires also an **ethic of restraint**. A call to live differently.

(ii) Wisdom embodied in Jesus

Most of the great themes of John's Gospel relate to the Wisdom literature of the Hebrew Bible, and point to Jesus Christ. Where John's Gospel speaks of The Word, that is the equivalent of God's Wisdom. Irenaeus, Bishop of Lyons in the second century, tried to make sense of things by saying

God creates with two hands: the Son and the Spirit, the Word and the Wisdom.

The great text in the Prologue to John's Gospel says something astounding:

The Word = Wisdom was made flesh and dwelt among us ... and we have seen his glory.
(John 1:14, *ESV, Anglicised*)

No one had ever thought of the Word or Wisdom of God as being part of the material world. Many of the philosophers believed in a major divide between 'spirit' and 'matter'. This verse in John's Gospel shockingly brings together matter and spirit, earth and heaven. The thought that God's Wisdom – embedded throughout God's creation and holding all things together – could become embodied in a person was a shatteringly new idea. The theological word for this is 'incarnation.'

I believe that the incarnation is the repair for our cultural splits between body and spirit, nature and culture, science and ethics. Whereas John's Donne wrote "Tis all in pieces, all coherence gone", the Incarnation - at the centre of our triangle - is 'coherence restored': God, humanity and earth reconnected.

(QUOTE Augustine: on Psalm 96.15:

Adam therefore hath been scattered over the world. He was in one place, and fell, and as in a manner broken small, he filled the whole world: but the mercy of God gathered together the fragments from every side, and forged them by the fire of love, and made one what was broken. That Artist knew how to do this; let no one despair: it is indeed a great thing, but reflect who that Artist was. He who made, restored: He who formed, reformed.)

With strong echoes of Wisdom, St Paul tells us that through Christ all things were made, and in him all things hold together. It is through Christ, that God reconciles all things to himself, making peace through the blood of the Cross. In other words, it is through Christ entering into the depths of disintegration, even to death, that reintegration, new coherence, healing and resurrection are possible, and the hopeful vision becomes one of the whole creation made new - or, as Hans Kung puts it, 'The Kingdom of God is creation healed'.

Michael Northcott discusses many of the contractions we find in our present situation in terms of the 'pulling apart' which happened at the Enlightenment. With the eclipse of God, nature is pulled apart from culture, body from spirit, science from ethics. I find it interesting that in the New Testament, the word used for pulling apart, separating, dividing, setting at variance, is 'diabolos'. The ministry of Jesus, on the other hand, is predominantly healing, gathering up fragments, restoring, putting back together, making things new.

But that is to get ahead of ourselves. First: what of Jesus, the Man?

In each of three of the corners of Trafalgar Square in the centre of London there is a huge, impressive statue. One is of a King of England, two are of army Generals. They all look imperial and important.

They speak of power. But the fourth plinth has no permanent statue. In recent years, different sculptors have been asked to provide a short-term statue to go on the empty fourth plinth. In 1999 Mark Wallinger made a sculpture of a small, life-sized, unimpressive, ordinary human being, cut out of plain marble, wearing only a loincloth, and a crown of thorns. The contrast with the imperial symbols on other plinths was remarkable. Mark Wallinger called it 'Ecce Homo', which is Latin for 'Look: the Man'. 'Here is the Man'.

This was the description which Pontius Pilate gave to Jesus in John's Gospel, referring then to Jesus' humiliation, dressed up by mocking soldiers in crown of thorns and purple robe: 'Here is the Man!' (19:5).

Life in its fullness is the life of God lived fully on earth, seen in Jesus, bringing heaven and earth together. It is a life, the Gospel goes on to make clear, which God intends to be shared out in the Christian community by the Holy Spirit.

If we trace Jesus' relationships through the Gospel we find a number of interesting themes. The first is that he lived 'close to the Father's heart'. Then, astonishingly, this is where Jesus wants his disciples to be: 'Father, I desire that those also, whom you have given me, may be with me where I am'. So part of our Christian calling is to follow Jesus, to find where he lives, where he is at home. One way we can explore where Jesus is 'at home' today, is to draw on some of those phrases where Jesus says of himself 'I AM'.

Food

Jesus in the Gospel says, 'I AM the Bread of Life'; he provides food for the hungry and drink for the thirsty. To be where Jesus is, means to stand with the needs of hungry and thirsty people in our world now.

Health

Jesus in the Gospel says, 'I AM the Light of the World'; he brings sight to the man born blind, as well as healing to others who are sick or paralyzed. Several of today's Sustainable Development Goals seeking to reduce extreme poverty relate to the provision of health care. To be where Jesus is, means to shine his light on the needs of the sick, and seek to alleviate suffering when life is at its darkest.

Education

Jesus in the Gospel says, 'I AM the Truth', and much of his ministry is teaching and educating his disciples. To be where Jesus is, means to be with the primary school teacher, with the student in need of fees to pay for her course, with those who decide on political educational priorities.

Security

Jesus in the Gospel says, 'I AM the Gate of the sheepfold', providing safety and security for the sheep. He tells his anxious disciples not to let their hearts be troubled. He says to fearful disciples behind locked doors, 'Peace be with you.' And in the Gospel Jesus also says, 'I AM the Good Shepherd', a rich metaphor which covers many aspects of his ministry, but in particular that there are other sheep from other folds that he needs to find and bring in.

Inclusion

Jesus in the Gospel includes the marginalized Samaritan women, saying to her, 'I AM he, the one who is speaking to you.' Much of today's world is marked by gender inequalities and by exclusion. To be where Jesus is, means to be on the side of the poor, the marginalized, the excluded and those unjustly treated, and to work for gender equality, inclusion and empowerment.

If in Jesus we see authentic human life, life in all its fullness, it is life that is inclusive and equalizing, looking out to those on the margins whom others despise. It recognizes our human place within the whole of God's creation, our freedom to make choices and exercise responsibilities, the importance of health, worship, recreation and renewal. The fulfilled life recognizes in Jesus the light of the true and liberating way, and finds a sense of being provided for, protected, looked out for, known and loved, within an inclusive and united community of those who follow his way. It is concerned for education, a willingness to be taught, and a responsive obedience to God's word. It is expressed in the loving, and sometimes menial service of love to others, within a community of love that bears fruit for the father's glory.

It is worth pausing here to notice how many of the stories we tell each other about nature and about climate change, illustrate the eclipse of God from the world, and the consequent attempts to separate humanity from God's earth.

(i) There is a story about **Management and Control**.

From Francis Bacon onwards there is a view of nature as a mechanism which we can manipulate, exploit for our own benefit. You get this in Nigel Lawson's book about global warming: In broad précis: 'The earth is very resilient; technological discovery has always come to our rescue in the past; we can manage the world for our benefit; there is no need to worry.' How do we respond to such complacency?

(ii) There is a second sort of story that seems to be about **greed**. We are a 'market-led' economy in which something called The Market rules; finance trumps every other consideration; everything, including the environment becomes a commodity to be desired, or given a price tag. In Boris Johnson's Margaret Thatcher Lecture a year or two back, he celebrated greed, along with self-interest and competitiveness as important drivers for economic growth.

(iii) Then, thirdly, there is a **story of doom**. 'The earth system is very fragile and sensitive to climate change; we are seriously damaging the environment: Be afraid - be very afraid.' In his book 'Ten Billion', Stephen Emmott's verdict is "I think we're stuffed" - well, he actually uses a rather stronger Anglo-Saxon word. How do we respond to overwhelming despair?

John's Gospel gives us a different story:

Portraits of Jesus, the Man show us how Jesus demonstrates faithfulness in God's Way of Wisdom. If we trace the theme of 'glory' through the Gospel, we find 'glory' referred to in contexts of abundant generosity - as at Cana, in compassionate service - as at the grave of Lazarus; in self-giving love and in confronting the powers of darkness and destruction supremely at the Cross.

So:

- instead of management and control: a story of interdependence, cooperation and fellowship;
- instead of greed and competitiveness: a story of generosity, self-giving restraint and service;
- instead of despair: a story of compassionate love and mercy leading to hope.

This is a picture of authentic humanity.

All in all, the John's Gospel is a story about love: God's love for God's creation; God's call to us to love our neighbours and do justice in all our human affairs, and to exercise responsible care for God's creation. That is from where our hope springs. We hear Jesus' word to the frightened disciples in the sea storm: 'I AM: do not be afraid.'

(iii) Walking Wisdom's Way

Part III of my book draws out some implications of following Jesus in the Way of Wisdom, and into a life that is 'fully alive'. To cut this down to manageable size for this talk, let me concentrate on a word Jesus speaks several times to his anxious disciples: Shalom: Peace be with you. 'Shalom' means well-being in all our relationships – with God, with others, with our environment, within ourselves.

Flourishing includes a recovery of a sense of human freedom, human values and an overall purpose that is bigger than we are. And it places all this within the context of a relationship with God, through Jesus Christ, and empowered by the life of God's spirit. Shalom is peace with justice.

Justice, especially for the poorest and most disadvantaged people. Climate change calls us to love and to do justice for our neighbours - including those overseas and those not yet born. Justice requires a fresh look at our economy: we need different sort of economics, rooted in human values. Economy, Ecology and Equity need to be thought through together, in what me might call an **Ethic of Love and Justice**.

Nicholas Wolterstorff is right, therefore, when he says: 'not only is Shalom God's cause in the world, but all who believe in Jesus will, along with him, engage in the world of Shalom. Shalom is both God's cause in the world and our human calling.'

The words eco-logy and eco-nomy of course both come from the same root, *oikos*, which means home or household, and, they belong inseparably together.

Shalom points us to an approach to human flourishing that is in the direction of community and of a sustainable future for the whole environment of God's earth. It recognizes the interplay of social, ethical, economic and spiritual factors, and understands that human well-being and the well-being of all God's creatures belong inseparably together. We and all God's creation are dependent on God for life and the means of life – and interdependent with each other. Human flourishing depends on, and is part of, the sustainable flourishing of all God's creation, our 'common home'.

Wisdom shows us something of the meaning of creation and our place within it. Ecology, Economy and Equity belong systemically together. Wisdom shows us authentic humanity in Jesus: what it means for life to flourish. The Upper Room discourses in John chapters 13 – 17 show Wisdom's way to include the life of Holy Spirit energising the community of Christ's people.

What might this mean in practice here?

At a *personal* level, we try to restrain the drivers of over-consumption, radically restrain our consumer lifestyles; we try to become more energy efficient, and reduce our own dependence on fossil-fuel energy.

At a *social* level, we work with others in our neighbourhoods, or with the local council, perhaps with farmers markets, or community energy schemes, or managing waste disposal, or arguing for better local public transport and safer cycle lanes. We could develop more local democracy and local accountability – instead of being bound so much by the power of global corporations.

At the *national* level, we hold our governments and corporations to account - and to the legal obligations of the UK Climate Change Act (2008), and our national commitments under the 2015 Paris Agreement. We think about how our money is invested, how to **create an economy** which is not based on the false assumption of unlimited growth, but on human values. We think about what can be done to help us reduce our corporate dependency on fossil fuels, and work for energy efficiency and a low carbon economy.

All in all we need to find a way to bring economy, ecology and equity back into relationship again within the triangle of relationships between God, humanity and the earth.

(iv) Hope:

Hope is a big New Testament word, linked to the incarnation of Jesus and his resurrection from the dead - and rooted in the redemption and healing of the whole of creation.

Hope does not mean the false optimism that imagines we humans have the key to all our problems. It does not mean the blind optimism that refuses to believe there is a problem at all. If our hope is optimistic, it is an optimism of grace. It is a hope such as sustained the NT writers in the face of various impending catastrophes in the ancient Roman world, a **hope in the faithfulness of God** – that the earth is the Lord's and all that is in it – and that the Lord, the Giver of Life, even in the midst of the forces of death, has a purpose for God's creation which includes what the Book of Revelation calls 'destroying the destroyers of the earth'. I think that means the triumph of Love and Life over all the powers of destructiveness. That Book of Revelation reminds us vividly that behind the powers of destructiveness and death in the world is a spiritual power - what Walter Wink called a 'Domination System' – which destroys God's creation and human life within it. This is the spiritual power which John's Gospel calls 'the Prince of this World', and which is destroyed at the Cross of Calvary. We will not understand our present predicament without taking seriously the evil of a spiritual system that is powerful and destructive.

By contrast, **Hope in the Faithfulness of God** empowers us to live hopefully, and to redouble our endeavours to live faithfully and urgently to recover our human calling as God's image-bearers in responsible care for God's creation. I believe our current environmental crisis requires of us

- an ethic of **allegiance** to God, the Creator of earth and heaven, and a recognition that human well-being depends on the earth's well-being;
- an ethic of **restraint** in response to the sacredness of God's gift, and requiring living within limits;
- an ethic of **Love and of Justice** in relation to our neighbours - those especially in the poorest parts of the world, and those not yet born;
- and **ethic of Hope in God's faithfulness** - not a blind optimism that all will work out well, because at the moment it looks as though we are heading for some sort of catastrophe - but Hope in the Faithfulness of God, centred in the Christ who holds God, earth and humanity together, and whose promise is to make all things new.

So the question remains: Can the environmental crisis of our time be a wake-up call to live

differently, more safely, more healthily, with more space for the human things money cannot buy: friendship, loyalty, communion, creativity, love and worship. Can it provoke us into hope-filled transformative action –a different way of living, informed by God’s Wisdom? a rethinking of our desires, and the costly restraint that discipleship will entail?

Let me conclude by returning to Pope Francis. The whole Encyclical is ‘book-ended’ with prayer and worship. The Pope celebrates creation as gift of God’s love; he grieves over our sin and selfishness; he expresses gratitude to God for science and technology; underlines the damage done by the power of a technocracy unrestrained by morality; he pleads for a recovery of our humanness as God’s joyous image bearers in responsibly loving, cultivating and caring for God’s earth. He ends: ‘Laudato Si’, mi’ Signore: Praise be to you, my Lord’