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## Your gospel is too small

*Why the environment and climate change are central for Christian faith in the 21st century, and the importance of embedding this in our liturgy*

There is a growing and deepening awareness, and massive scientific evidence, that the environment and climate change is one of the biggest issues of our time. For Christians, our response to this is not simply a moral one, but it springs out of our whole understanding of how we see our place in the universe – our relatedness to God, the world, each other, and all of God's creation. It is central to the primary themes of the gospel – creation, redemption, salvation, and the resurrection order. As such, it needs to be properly expressed in worship, which both expresses our Christian faith and shapes our hearts and minds and the way we live. Looking at the central elements of the gospel through the lens of the environment and all God's creation can deepen and enlarge our understanding of the good news of God's love in Christ.

In the early 1970s I was greatly influenced by three seminal books: *Only One Earth – the Care and Maintenance of a Small Planet* (1972) by Barbara Ward and René Dubos, *Small is Beautiful – Economics as if People Mattered* (1973) by E.F. Schumacher, and *Enough is Enough* (1975) by John V. Taylor with the theme of simple living. The global population was then about 4 billion, now it is well over 7 billion and heading towards 9 billion by the mid 21st century. In addition, we are faced with huge inequalities of wealth, massive loss of biodiversity, and global warming, with potentially catastrophic effects. In short, as has been well expressed in Pope Francis's Encyclical, *Laudato Si*, we are in great need of a radical reappraisal of our culture of consumption, inner ecological conversion, and significant changes in our lifestyles.

In church life there have been some important developments such as the

establishment of a national Church of England Environment Working Group, on which I sit, and the crucial Eco-Church and Eco-Diocese programme run by A Rocha (<https://ecochurch.arocha.org.uk/>). Liturgically some very good material has been produced especially for the Creationtide season, which runs from 1 September to 4 October, embracing themes from Franciscan spirituality and the harvest festival season (<https://seasonofcreation.org/>). This is a good start, but it needs to go far deeper.

The Bible translator J.B. Phillips wrote a book entitled *Your God is Too Small* (1952) which captured his experience of a deepened understanding of God, which came from his translation work. In a similar way, if we learn to look at the themes of the gospel through the lens of the whole created order, then our theological understanding can deepen. Many central theological themes embrace all God's creation – e.g. salvation (Ephesians 1.9-10), Wisdom (Proverbs 8), the Holy Spirit (Romans 8.18-25), the Incarnation (John 1, Colossians 1.15-20), the Resurrection (2 Corinthians 5.17, 1 Corinthians 15), etc. Out of these theological building blocks we can develop a vision of the gospel which takes us beyond a narrow anthropocentrism to all God's creation. Another way of expressing this is to develop a theological language which thoroughly intertwines the five Anglican Marks of Mission rather than seeing them as separate.

The challenge for our liturgists is to develop ways of embedding and expressing these deep theological truths in our regular liturgy all year round. So it is very encouraging that Praxis has now focused on this – and I look forward to the fruits of this engagement.

✠ *Richard Cheetham is the Bishop of Kingston.*

### What is Praxis?

See [www.praxisworship.org.uk](http://www.praxisworship.org.uk)  
Praxis was formed in 1990, sponsored by the Liturgical Commission, the Group for the Renewal of Worship (GROW) and the Alcuin Club to provide and support liturgical education in the Church of England.

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