

Reconciling a Wounded Planet

Professor Richard Bauckham, July 2015

The reconciliation of all creation

The conference theme – *Reconciling a Wounded Planet* – echoes what is sometimes called the “Christ hymn” in Paul’s letter to the Colossians (1:15-21). The climax of the hymn comes when Paul says that, through Christ, “God was pleased to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, making peace by the blood of his cross.” Interpreters have struggled with the cosmic scope of this claim. We are accustomed to think of reconciliation as something that happens between God and humans or between humans and fellow-humans. Paul himself goes on to remind his readers that God has reconciled them to himself through the cross of Christ (1:22). But the hymn says that God has reconciled “*all things*” through the cross.

The phrase “all things” is a thread that runs through the whole passage. Each time it picks up the reference to “all creation” with which the hymn begins and each time it relates “all things” to Jesus Christ. From the beginning he was related to “all things.” As the pre-existent divine Son, he created “all things.” As the incarnate Son he reconciled “all things.” The scope of reconciliation is as broad as the scope of creation.

This passage surely challenges our habit of confining God’s purpose and activity within narrow bounds. Salvation is bigger than we thought! God’s love is more encompassing than we thought. The paradoxical power of Christ’s cross is greater than we thought. Jesus Christ himself is even more significant than we thought.

That phrase “all things” points us back to the Genesis creation narratives and other passages that celebrate the comprehensive wonder of God’s whole created world. It invites us to fill it out with all the variety and abundance of created things that Genesis 1 depicts. In Genesis 1 we also hear of God’s delight in all of these creatures as, at the end of each day’s work of creation, “God saw that it was good.” “All things” are good in God’s sight. They all have inherent value, given them by God their Creator. They matter to God. We should not, then, be surprised that the God who made all things, sustains and cherishes all things, should also work to reconcile all things, to put right all the damage his beloved creation has suffered and to restore the harmony he always intended for it.

“All things,” in the Colossians Christ hymn, of course include humans. Remarkably, Paul does not refer explicitly to humans anywhere in the passage, except when he refers to Christ as “the head of his body, church” (1:18). Undoubtedly humans are in mind throughout, implied among the “things on earth.” But we are seen here as part and parcel, so to speak, of God’s whole creation. We are inextricable from the whole world of amazingly diverse creatures that share our common home, the earth. We are part of this great community of interdependent creatures, something the Bible fully recognizes and which we can now understand in so much more detail through ecological science. Any notion of ourselves as independent of the rest of nature looks more and more ludicrous as we come to understand the world better. But it never

made any biblical sense. According to Genesis, we are creatures of earth, fashioned by God from the soil, living from the soil and its produce, so much so that Adam's name (the Hebrew word for "man") is a pun on the Hebrew word for "earth" (*'adamah*).

We were made from the earth. We are also destined for glory, but this does not separate us from the rest of creation. The God who made "all things" says that he will "make all things new" (Rev 21:5). God's whole creation is destined for glory. Humans, embedded by creation in the natural world, are not to be extracted from the rest of creation, but to find fulfilment along with "all things" in God's eternal love. This is why the Christ-hymn says that all things were "created through him and for him." Christ is both the source and the goal of all creation. In this overall understanding of God's purpose, it is not, after all, surprising but *necessary* that through Christ "God was pleased to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven."

But how are we to think of this divine "peace making" in all creation? We know that, for us humans, it involves overcoming our alienation from God and our hostility to God. God's love went to the lengths of his Son's self-giving for us in order to reach us in our godless condition. We know that, for us humans, reconciliation also includes all aspects of our relationships with each other. God's redeeming love heals the deep and festering wounds of human society. It makes God's people peacemakers.

It may be less easy to see how reconciliation is needed in the rest of creation. Since the passage lays some emphasis on the supernatural powers, we could think of God pacifying the destructive powers that work behind the scenes of history to attack God's creation. Probably this is part of the meaning. But it is surely not an adequate account of what is meant by "all things on earth."

It will help to keep in mind that we humans are closely related to the rest of creation on earth. We are related not only to God and to each other but also to other creatures. All three relationships are fundamental to our nature and the three are not separable but closely intertwined. Just as we cannot be truly reconciled to God without being reconciled to our human brothers and sisters, so we cannot be fully reconciled to God and to our fellows while a state of hostility mars our relationships with the rest of the community of God's creation. The same deep flaws in our nature that set us at odds with God and other humans also make us enemies of other creatures. When God deals with those flaws, he surely heals all our relationships. Peace with God should create peace in all creation.

In his recent encyclical *Laudato si'*, Pope Francis says: "The violence in our hearts, wounded by sin, is also reflected in the symptoms of sickness evident in the soil, in the water, in the air, and in all forms of life." If we take into account the damage humans have done to God's creation over the past two hundred years and the escalating scale of destruction we continue to inflict, it becomes easier to see why Christ needed to shed his blood for all creatures. He bore the cost of our sins against creation and the cost of lifting from creation the unbearable burden to it that we have become.

The message of reconciliation

Paul does not use the language of reconciliation often, but another key passage in which he does so is 2 Corinthians 5:17-21. Here Paul famously says that “in Christ God reconciled the world to himself” (2:19). The statement is similar to the one in Colossians: “through him God was pleased to reconcile to himself all things, whether in earth or in heaven.” Does “the world” in 2 Corinthians have the same comprehensive reference that is clearly stated in Colossians? The Greek word *kosmos* does mean “the universe” (hence the English “cosmos” and “cosmic”), but it can be used to refer merely to the world of humanity. That Paul’s concern here is with humans seems clear from the way he continues (“not counting their trespasses against them”), but we need not exclude a wider overtone. Paul already used “cosmic” language in v. 17: “If anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new!” Literally, the first part of the verse translates as: “If anyone is in Christ, new creation!” Though he is speaking of what happens when someone becomes a Christian, Paul is deliberately echoing conventional ways of speaking about the coming new creation of all things, as we can see from the very similar language used in Revelation (21:1-5). He is thinking of the transformation God effects in human life through the Gospel and the Spirit as an instance of God’s renewal of all things. It is the new creation happening already, the same new creation that is God’s purpose for all his creatures, human and non-human.

So when Paul speaks of reconciliation here, even though humans are his focus, we have good reason to include our fraught and fractured relationships with other creatures in the sin that Christ bore for us. When God reconciled us to himself in Christ he had his whole creation in view, including the degradation and destruction that we modern humans have inflicted on the earth.

Paul here represents himself and his missionary colleagues as ambassadors brokering peace between warring parties. That is what the Gospel does. Paul can say both that God was reconciling the world to himself when Christ died and also that the Gospel’s appeal to its hearers is, “be reconciled to God” (5:20). God has made peace, but we must embrace peace. Peace with God is there to be had. To embrace it is to become a channel for it, to let it flow for the healing of our broken world, human and non-human.

Some key implications

From what has been said, some key points to ponder and discuss:

- God’s love for all his creatures is expressed and at work in Jesus Christ.
- Human abuse and destruction of creation is seriously sinful.
- God’s work of peacemaking, healing and renewing extends to all creation.
- Care for creation is not only an “Old Testament” imperative, but also a Gospel imperative.
- In a world devastated by human evil, Christians have been given a joyful and hopeful message of reconciliation.

Praise, lament and hope

In the Psalms and some other parts of Scripture we find both praise and lament addressed to God. There are the praises of God, celebrating his goodness in creation and salvation, and there are laments, which arise out of the sufferings and injustices of the world. The laments give rise to urgent, often anguished, prayer for God's deliverance and transformative action.

Most often we think of both praise and lament as human activities. But the Bible sees the whole of creation engaged both in praising God and in crying out to God in protest at the state of his world.

A fine example of creation's worship is Psalm 148, where the psalmist calls on all creatures to praise their Creator, beginning with the heavenly beings and ending with the earthly creatures, including ourselves. All sorts of creatures – including the stars, the weather, mountains, trees and insects – are instanced. The effect of this catalogue of worshippers, with human beings at the end, is to portray a vast cosmic choir that is constantly engaged in the worship of God. When we join in, we are joining this cosmic praise and are helped to worship by the rest of creation.

It would be a big mistake to see this notion of cosmic praise as just an out-dated animistic view of creation or as merely a poetic fancy. Most of the other creatures do not worship with conscious intention, as we are called to do, but praise God simply by being themselves, the creatures God made them to be. They exist for his glory. They cannot, as we can, refuse to worship God. They show us that we too should glorify God, not only in our minds and our hymns, but also in the whole of our lives.

However, there is a certain sense in which the creatures fail to praise God as they were meant to. When creation is damaged or devastated, lament interrupts praise. In the prophets there is a strong sense of the solidarity of humans with the rest of creation, so that human sin not only brings judgment on humans but also affects other creatures. A vivid example is in Joel 2:8-20, where the cries of wild and domestic animals alike join the laments of the priests and the farmers.

It was surely such passages that Paul had in mind when he wrote that "the whole creation has been groaning and in travail until now" (Rom 8:22). Paul here aligns the laments of all the creatures with those of the Spirit in Christian believers, awaiting in hope "the redemption of our bodies." Again we have the biblical sense of solidarity between human beings, in our full integrity as bodily creatures, with the rest of God's material creation. But Paul suffuses this solidarity with hope. We hope for our full redemption in bodily resurrection. The other creatures hope for it too, because for them it will be liberation from our abuse of them. They too will come into their own in God's new creation of all things. Up till now creation's praise of God has been mingled with lament. In the new creation there will be only praise.

It is no accident that Psalm 148, with its picture of unqualified praise by all creatures, comes near the end of the Psalter. It anticipates the perfection of creation that is still to come. Similarly, in the prophet John's vision of the Lamb triumphant in heaven, he hears "every creature in heaven and on earth and under the earth and in the sea, and all this in them" (note the emphatically

comprehensive language!) praising the Lamb for his victory over all evil (Rev 5:13).

Realism and hope

We live in the midst of a worldwide ecological crisis that is rapidly gathering unstoppable momentum. It would be easy to despair. Indeed, if we do not feel the temptation to despair, then it is unlikely that we have really taken in the gravity of the situation. But the way beyond despair is, first, to turn it into lament, addressed to God, and then to appropriate the full Christian hope that God is assuredly going to liberate and to reconcile his whole creation in his coming kingdom.

Whatever we can do to mitigate human abuse of creation and to make peace between human and other creatures of God is in line with God's purpose for his world. Without doubt God will prosper it. Not that we ourselves can usher in the new creation. Only the Creator can redeem his whole creation from destruction and dissolution. But we must do what we can and we can do it hopefully because Jesus Christ has died and risen for the reconciliation of all things.