

**Global Warming and the Bible**  
**Robbie Tulip**  
**Kippax Uniting Church**  
**6 December 2020**

Bible readings:

Mark 1:1-8 – John the Baptist prepares the way for Christ

2 Peter 3:8-15a: The eschaton – fiery end of the world

The theme for today, the second Sunday of Advent, is love. Love is the binding power that connects our relationships and keeps us together. The ultimate connection of love is between us and God, a relationship mediated by Jesus Christ. The saving power of Christ's love rescues us from our selfish indifference and brings us into right relationship with God, with each other and with the world.

Love is the highest eternal value, deepening all our personal connections. The love of Christ creates a path toward honest and open dialogue, helping us to build a life of integrity and respect and care. Where the trauma of emotional brutality or worse has stunned us into silence, the love of Christ invites us to reveal our vulnerable true self to find the liberating way of grace, so the truth can set us free (John 8:32).

There is a cosmic dimension to the love of Christ. Saint Paul tells us in his Letter to the Colossians (1:15-20) that Christ is the image of God, connecting and reconciling everything, holding everything together from the beginning of time as the source of order in creation. This high metaphysical vision of the eternal nature of Christ tells a story of how the love of God infuses the whole universe. The love of God is present on our planet in the story of Jesus Christ, the word made flesh (John 1:14). The incarnation of Christ brings us the message of God's deep and abiding love, coming to save the world and not to condemn it. (John 3:17)

Love can be a high-risk endeavour. The example of Jesus shows the bewildering cruelty that the worldly powers can deliver when confronted by the innocent honesty of pure love. The death of Christ on the cross shows how the world is ruled by hatred and ignorance, while his resurrection is all about the ultimate redeeming victory of love.

Hatred can seem so simple and safe and secure for those who are consumed by it. In reality, hatred is a bleak and degrading emotion, preventing mutual learning and growth. When our ideas of security teach us to be constantly suspicious and untrusting, the idea that we could live through love looks like a dangerous threat. And yet the message of Christ is that love is the path of salvation. The real danger comes from the seduction of hatred, which offers the wide and easy path to destruction, while love gives us the hard and narrow path to life (Matt 7:14).

In our first reading today (Mark 1), Saint Mark begins his story of the advent of Christ in the desert, the dry and barren place where Isaiah said the glory of the Lord will be revealed (Isa 40:5). The glory of Christ had been foretold by Isaiah, and again by the wise desert hermit John the Baptist, whose spiritual focus on the love of God is amplified by a life of extreme simplicity. John is at the margin of society, excluded from worldly power, indifferent to the values of image and wealth and uncorrupted by the pleasures of desire. Here we see the paradox of God's love, made known in a place that the dominant values of the world find forbidding and unlovely.

In an uncompromising message preparing the way for the coming of Christ, John looks forward to how the love of God in Christ will break through into the world as a universal cosmic power. The love of God is freely given to all without condition, just as a celebration that we exist, despite our flaws. And yet Mark tells us that John put conditions on the forgiveness of God.

John gives a baptism of forgiveness for repentance (1:4). This means that while God's love is unconditional, God's forgiveness of sin is conditional upon our recognition of our wrongdoing.

John's baptism provides access to the healing grace of God, in return for genuine sorrow and reflection about our mistakes that have made forgiveness necessary. Restorative justice comes through dialogue and understanding about truth and reconciliation.

John is saying that our salvation, putting us into right relationship with God, requires that we understand what we have done wrong, why it was wrong and what harm our wrongs have caused, and that we feel genuine remorse for our wrong actions and words and thoughts. Only when we are truly sorry for our mistakes can we commit to a life of repair and restoration, of love grounded in truth. The forgiveness that comes through repentance gradually opens us up to a deeper understanding of the love of God, working to build expanding islands of grace and creative power amidst the oceans of emptiness in our deluded world.

Opening ourselves to the cosmic love of God in Christ offers a vision of the possible transformation of our world. Jesus offers us a shift from separation and emptiness and delusion toward connection and fullness and love. Jesus calls us to embark on the slow journey from a state of corruption to a state of grace, as we ask what it would mean for the world to listen to his message.

Saint Peter's Second Epistle helps us to think about this need for transformation with his claims that for God a thousand years are as a day (3:8), and the alarming idea that the coming apocalypse will consume the world in fire (3:10). This idea of a fiery end to our present age is something that rings too true in our current situation of global warming. Regardless of any views on literal prophecy, as we look at our current fraught world situation we can find a deep relevance in the Biblical teachings.

Peter took his idea that a thousand years are a day for God from Psalm 90:4. The traditional reading in the early church linked this idea to the seven days of creation in Genesis 1, reflecting the very slow operation of the will of God in the world. The Church Fathers believed that just as God symbolically rested for a day after six days of work, so too will the world rest and recover for a thousand years under the rule of Christ after six thousand years of toil and fall. In this Christian scheme of seven thousand years of history, Christ's first appearance came four thousand years after Adam and Eve, and served to check the destructive direction of the world.

Saint Augustine warned back in the fifth century AD that it is a mistake to read the seven-day creation story literally. He said in his book *The Literal Interpretation of Genesis* (2:9) that if anything in the Bible seems to contradict the perceptions of our rational faculties, it just shows we do not properly understand the message of the scriptures. The wisdom of the early church recognised that many stories in the Bible are parables, whose real meaning is symbolic, presenting ideas about the real world in a poetic way. Similarly today we know that life on earth began four billion years ago and has evolved by the natural causal processes of evolution.

My view is that our whole understanding of the scriptures needs to evolve to reconcile our faith with reason, as Augustine recognised in part. But this process needs to be far more thorough, so that theology can be recognised as a coherent science. That may mean giving up some cherished and beautiful traditional beliefs, in order to construct a systematic worldview that fully accords with evidence and logic, while holding to the true core of faith.

Rather than asserting that Biblical events really happened as described, when there is no external historical evidence, it is better to accept that the stories are primarily symbolic. It does not matter to our faith whether the descriptions are historically accurate or not. The idea that God intervenes in the world through supernatural miracles is difficult to reconcile with the laws of physics.

A better approach sees miracles as parables, conveying deep moral wisdom about the nature of the world. Jesus himself supported that approach. Immediately after feeding the five thousand, Jesus explained at Matthew 8:12 that no sign will be given from heaven, seemingly asking us to understand the miracle as a parable rather than as a sign from heaven.

The story of the Second Coming can also be read in this symbolic way. We can leave aside the idea of a miraculous intervention from God to save the world and instead open dialogue to construct our own view of what it would mean for Jesus Christ to rule the world in love. Such a conversation can help us to see the real meaning of the Bible in its call in the Lord's Prayer (Matt 6:10) for the will of God to be done on earth as it is in heaven.

That call looks especially to the Last Judgement in Matthew 25:40 with its clear statement that our salvation depends primarily on doing good works that include the least of the world as though they were Jesus Christ. At the same time, salvation requires a coherent shared story, seeing an articulate faith as the essential inspiration for encouraging acts of love and mercy.

Peter's warning about the coming fiery doom and the promise he relates from Christ of a new heaven and new earth (3:13) can serve as a very useful parable for our current planetary predicament, understood as purely scientific messages. The Bible tells us in Revelation 11:18 that the wrath of God is against those who destroy the earth, indicating that our duty as people of faith is to preserve and enhance our planetary biodiversity.

A recent scientific article, [Trajectories of the Earth System in the Anthropocene](#), explains the choices facing the world are to either make the planet into an unliveable hothouse by continuing with business as usual, or to recognise our global responsibility to restore the stable and fertile climate of the past. The new idea of the Anthropocene means we have already shifted into a situation where human decisions are decisive for the planetary climate. The choice, in our old religious language, is between heaven and hell, salvation or damnation. These old religious ideas are now acquiring a very practical scientific meaning as our technological progress constantly increases human power over nature. Our moral sense needs to catch up to understand the destruction we are causing.

The saving power of Christ came from his explanation of the cultural changes that would be needed for good to triumph over evil and for love to prove stronger than hatred. In Matthew 24:14, Jesus tells us that this Gospel of the Kingdom will be preached to the whole inhabited earth before the end will come, meaning that the rule of Christ on earth will only be possible once the whole of humanity is connected together. Then Jesus tells us that all the tribes of the earth will mourn, and will see the Son of Man coming with power and great glory.

The voice of Christ will speak like a sword (Rev 1:16), cutting through our fog to proclaim the clear and simple message of the transformation of the planet, a judgement of mercy to bring the peace of God. As we contemplate the fiery fate that seems in store, the saving love of Christ provides the framework for the existential dialogue needed to address the scale and urgency of climate change as a primary security emergency for the planet.

Seeing the Bible in a modern light requires that we develop what Pope Francis has called an integral ecology, a vision that combines love for humanity with love for the planet. As we look for a practical redemption by sustaining a liveable planet for our children, we can see that the forgiveness of God demands a practical and thorough repentance. Christ calls us to express sorrow about what we have done and a commitment to transform our world in love. That means ending the indifference that is seeing climate problems steadily worsen, and approaching our collective problems in a true scientific spirit, grounded in the values of the love of Christ.