

But what is precious?

Sermon given on the Cambridge Theological Federation Research Day| 8 June 2023

Alongside other themes, today we have been thinking about the rediscovery of Christian cosmology in the light of climate change. It has to be acknowledged that in the face of the environmental crisis facing the earth that Christian theology is not always a help and is often a hindrance.

Our readings this evening (Revelation 11; 1 Pet 1.6-9) exemplify some of the problems because they can be read to imply that it is souls rather than bodies that matter; that it is human beings who are the focus of everything; and that the next world far outshines this one; in which case the fate of the earth and its non-human creatures is of no real consequence.: a soteriology that is based on the rescue of the guiltless few out of the burning mass of the world does not lead us towards environmental activism; rather, all we need is to protect our faith so that whatever happens to the world and its creatures, God will save those whose faith has been tested and endured.

Of course there is nothing wrong with a faith that endures testing; and nothing wrong with cultivating a faith that at the end of time Christ will wrap up all that is precious in God from whom all that was made has come. But what is precious... and who is this Christ?

In 2005 I walked the 500 miles from St Jean Pied de Port to Santiago de Compostela as a pilgrim carrying my pack and wearing my pilgrim shell. About 3 weeks into the journey I arrived in the cathedral square of Burgos where, on a bench, sits a bronze statue of a naked pilgrim. His body is racked with scars. His feet are blistered and around his neck is the pilgrim shell.



Whether this statue was intended to represent a particular pilgrim, racked with the leprosy that was not uncommon amongst those who undertook this pilgrimage in medieval times, or every pilgrim, stripped bare by the discipline of the road is open to interpretation. I saw myself: his feet, painful and glad to be unencumbered by boots, were my feet; his bones, exposed to the world reflected how raw and near the surface I felt my deepest self to be. And I saw pilgrims throughout the ages, travelling along these roads, experiencing these states of body and mind and I felt at one with them. But more than

that, in this body I saw the whole of humanity – particularly those who suffer – but all of us in our vulnerability and mortality, however well we hide it. And I saw Christ – the new Adam, identified with the whole human race in our suffering – and identified, even, with the suffering of the whole earth.

I stood, bodily creature, so in tune on this pilgrimage with the seasons and the weather, the earth and the skies, the stamping horses in the morning mist and the leaping frogs into the spring melt waters, and touched this body and felt I was touching the word made flesh; the word made matter; the one whose incarnation makes all matter precious – or reminds us that God hates nothing that God has made – even though none of us are guiltless in the matter of climate change for we continue to put human comfort, greed and survival above all things – these are our gods.

So when I read from 1 Peter that when Jesus Christ is revealed I will be filled with a joy so glorious that it cannot be described; for me, this joy will be in the Christ whom I have not seen, yet have loved - – who walked in the fields and went out to the tombs and challenged the powerful on behalf of the little ones of the earth and counted all creation, precious enough to give his life for it; whose mercy is not only for me but for the whole inhabited earth, and who bids me work with him in the knitting together of all things.

So, today, with the Brazilian theologian, Rubem Alves, then, I would invite us not to live and teach and preach and research to rescue ourselves from the guilt of our idolatry, but 'to live (and teach and preach and research) by the love of what we do not see, and a stubborn commitment to the future of our grandchildren.'