

Nature



6. Nature

**"Let us be
'protectors'
of creation,
protectors of
God's plan
inscribed in
nature."**

Pope Francis

The sixth in a series of six booklets

CONNECT!
contemporary crises and everyday faith

Nature is...

"...full of genius, full of divinity, so that not a snowflake escapes its fashioning hand."

Henry David Thoreau

"...the greatest source of excitement; the greatest source of visual beauty, the greatest source of intellectual interest. It is the greatest source of so much that makes life worth living."

David Attenborough



How would you complete the sentence "Nature is..."?

Has the lockdown of 2020 had an impact upon your answer?W

As well as being everything and more which Thoreau and Attenborough describe above, nature is also under terrible threat. Raging bush fires, constantly diminishing habitats and biodiversity, intense locust plagues, melting glaciers, rising sea levels, broken heat records, far more frequent flooding...

"With all these events," asserts Inger Anderson, Executive Director of the UN Environment Programme, "nature is sending us a message. So many pressures on our natural systems means something has to give. We are intimately interconnected with nature, whether we like it or not. If we don't take care of nature, we can't take care of ourselves. We can only face the planet's future of 10 billion people with nature as our strongest ally."



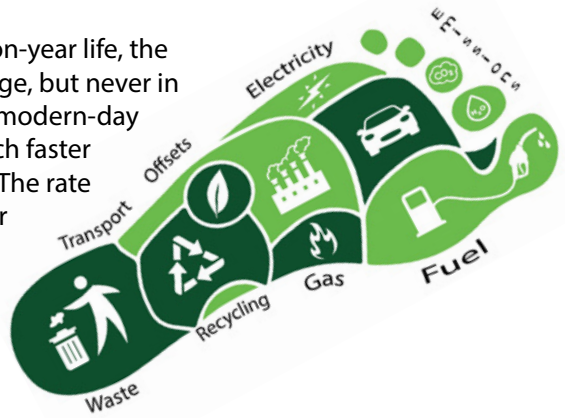
Cover image: Used by kind permission of the artist (www.hallowed-art.co.uk), this is one of Michael Cook's many depictions of St Kevin and the Blackbird (2014).

So great was Kevin's gentle protection towards the natural world, says the legend, that, when a blackbird laid an egg in his hand, he patiently, tenderly, let her stay and sit until it hatched.

Our warming world

At various points during its 4.54 billion-year life, the planet has experienced climate change, but never in this way. Human activity lies behind modern-day global heating and it's occurring much faster than previously rising temperatures. The rate at which Antarctica's ice is melting for instance, has tripled since 2007. And melting ice in the Canadian Arctic has revealed land not seen for at least 40,000 years, scientists say.

To reduce carbon emissions by the necessary 45% to avoid yet more major disasters, we have until around 2030.



What is your own carbon footprint?
Do you know? Check it out at www.carbonindependent.org

One aim of the 2015 Paris Agreement, endorsed by 197 countries, was to limit global warming to well below 2°C. For many islands in the South Pacific, such action is too late. Anglican clergy there are being recruited to monitor rising sea levels. Dubbed “Green Apostles”, they will gather information from most of the 900 Solomon Islands where houses have been inundated and wells and farmland polluted by salt water.

Whole islands have already been washed away...



For an overview of the nature and scale of the changes brought by global warming, watch Al Gore’s ground-breaking film, *An Inconvenient Truth* (2006) and also his *An Inconvenient Sequel* (2017).

The earth is the Lord's (Ps 24.1)

But ask the animals, and they will teach you;
the birds of the air, and they will tell you;
ask the plants of the earth, and they will
teach you;
and the fish of the sea will declare to you.
Who among all these does not know
that the hand of the Lord has done this?
In his hand is the life of every living thing
and the breath of every human being.

Job 12. 7-10

*O glorious God
you sing this world into being
and write yourself
in the wonders of creation:
open our eyes
to its vulnerable beauty
that we may read you in it.
Amen*

'A Rocha' was founded in 1983 in Portugal (its name means 'The Rock' in Portuguese). It is a charity working for the protection and restoration of nature and for the mobilisation of all Christians to care for the environment.



Listen to members of the A Rocha family worldwide reading verses 5-13 of Psalm 65, an infectiously joyous outpouring of praise to God for the natural world: <https://vimeo.com/452146898>

Haydn drew on the opening verses of another psalm (19) for one of the most famous choruses from his oratorio "The Creation": *The heavens are telling the glory of God; the wonder of his work displays the firmament.* You might like to find a YouTube version online before downloading (<https://youtu.be/nMbSY7b0fuM>) a contemporary setting by Eric Whitaker of another paeon of praise, the poem by E E Cummings (right). Cummings, who famously disdained capital letters, nonetheless uses them for God so that the Godness of God is particularly discernible not just in "most this amazing day" but in the look of the poem itself.

Listen out half way through for Whitaker's musical depiction of 'wings' - so shimmering and delicate that it calls to mind a butterfly perhaps and therefore life-systems so interconnected that a fluttering of wings on one side of the world can effect weather systems on the other...

*i thank You God for most this amazing
day: for the leaping greenly spirits of trees
and a blue true dream of sky; and for everything
which is natural which is infinite which is yes*

*(i who have died am alive again today,
and this is the sun's birthday; this is the birth
day of life and of love and wings: and of the gay
great happening illimitably earth)*

*how should tasting touching hearing seeing
breathing any—lifted from the no
of all nothing—human merely being
doubt unimaginable You?*

*(now the ears of my ears awake and
now the eyes of my eyes are opened)*

E E Cummings

“One of the first conditions of happiness,” Leo Tolstoy reflected, “is that the link between humanity and nature shall not be broken.” We live in a time when that link is at breaking point.

Is *your* happiness affected by this? Does the constant backdrop of the climate crisis make you overwhelmed or resolute? Hopeless or still hopeful of humanity's capacity for change? Other feelings?

Teenage activist Greta Thunberg doesn't want us to be hopeful. “I want you to panic,” she says. “I want you to feel the fear I feel every day. And then I want you to act. I want you to act as if our house is on fire. Because it is.”



The Song of the Prophets

Prophets come in all shapes and sizes. God's mouthpieces, they rise up to call truth to power, to state clearly what's wrong, to challenge injustice and to point towards restoration. Their voices can be heard today just as much as in the past.

Theologian Walter Brueggemann urges us all to deepen our 'prophetic imagination', by soaking ourselves in the biblical story so utterly that we can envision the world as God envisions it. Myriad injustices around the globe distort this vision, many of them now inextricably linked with climate change. We must listen to the song of the prophets more than ever.

The average Briton produces as much CO₂ as 212 citizens from Burundi. Yet nations like Burundi, Congo and Nicaragua, despite being the least responsible for it, are hit the hardest by the results of climate change and face precarious harvests, hunger and homelessness. It's an outrageous injustice, making ever wider the chasm between the globe's rich and poor. No wonder that the C of E's environmental advisers have urged churches to prepare "to provide sanctuary to 'climate refugees' from within and beyond the UK."

"Let justice roll down like water" Amos 5.24



Watch *There is no Planet B*
(vimeo.com/channels/1506363/433910405)

from The Amos Trust, a charity taking its name from the OT prophet who spoke up so vehemently against the injustices of his day. This brief film shows Nicaraguans lamenting the loss of water in their land.

Then slowly, line by line, pray these words, also influenced by Amos:

*Let justice roll like a river
and wash all oppression away.
Come, O God, and wake us,
come now and make us anew
that we might
love justice like you.*

Marty Haugen (hymn refrain)

From the orchestra *Chineke*, Christian Aid has commissioned a 12 minute piece called *Song of the prophets: A Requiem for the Climate*. The orchestra's founder, Professor Chi-chi Nwanoku (left), said, "As someone of Nigerian and Irish descent, I recognise the stark inequalities that exist between the richest and poorest globally, and want to do my bit to help." Look out for the première - possibly in 2021.

*Spirit of the rushing wind, sweep through our indifference.
Spirit of the fiery flames, ignite our compassion.
Spirit of myriad voices, open our mouths against injustice.
Empower our actions to transform this broken world. Amen*

USPG



It's often those who have travelled the furthest who have the most acute sense of the Earth's vulnerability. The polar explorer Robert Swan, for instance, says that, "The greatest threat to our planet is the belief that someone else will save it", and the new tenderness with which those standing on the moon in 1969 gazed back at planet Earth is well known. "Preserve and cherish the pale blue dot, the only home we've ever known," urged the astronomer Carl Sagan.



Here are three of the most powerful prophetic voices speaking out today about crises in the natural world. Do other voices also challenge you?



Watch Greta Thunberg's passionate call to action (<https://youtu.be/EAmnUIEsN9A>) in which, aged 16, she explains why she organized a school strike to raise awareness of global warming, triggering a remarkable rise in youth activism across the globe. *"The climate crisis has already been solved. We already have all the facts and solutions. All we have to do is to wake up and change..."* Even more than hope, she says, we need action *"and once we start to act, hope is everywhere"*.

Watch Sir David Attenborough's most recent documentary: *Extinction: The Facts*. Extinction is now happening at 100 times the natural evolutionary rate, one million species under threat. Take the northern white rhino: only one mother and daughter remain – the last the world will ever see. The film is heart-breaking but not without hope. *"If we make the right decisions at this critical moment, we can safeguard our planet's ecosystems and its extraordinary biodiversity... What happens next is up to every one of us"*.



Christiana Figueres was the public face of the most pivotal climate agreement in history (Paris, 2015). Since then she's co-founded the Global Optimism Group and co-written *The Future we Choose*. This can either be our final hour, she says, or our finest. The book is a practical, optimistic and empowering manifesto. *"This is the decade and we are the generation... Stubborn optimism needs to motivate you daily. Take a deep breath and decide that collectively we can do this. And that you will play your part."*



Rapidly melting Arctic ice caps



Deliberate deforestation in the Amazon (viewed from space)



Habitat loss endangering many species

the Earth
only a few feet
floating a few feet
somewhere, people
everywhere to marvel at
around it marvelling at it
little pools, and the water from
People would marvel at the
in it, and they would marvel
surrounding it and the water
people would marvel at all the
the surface of the ball and a
The people would declare it
only one, and they would pro
hurt. The ball would be the
people would come to pray
knowledge, to know bear
could be. People would live
their lives because they
that their lives, the
could be nothing
Earth were only
diam

Joe Mill

f
th were
t in diameter,
et above a field
e would come from
t it. People would walk
its big pools of water, its
lowing between the pools.
bumps on it, and the holes
at the very thin layer of gas
er suspended in the gas. The
he creatures walking around
t the creatures in the water.
as sacred because it was the
tect it so that it would not be
greatest wonder known, and
y to it, to be healed, to gain
uty and to wonder how it
ove it and defend it with
y would somehow know
their own routines,
y without it. If the
y a few feet in
eter.

er, 1975



Drought in Australia



Rising sea levels in the Pacific



Air pollution in China

Creation and coronavirus

The globe (right) is full of cracks and fissures. We knew its natural systems were at breaking point long before Covid-19 but now it appears the fractures go even deeper. And that's before we acknowledge the new threat to the environment – and particularly to marine life – of millions of masks and other PPE used and discarded during the pandemic.



Here are three theologians reflecting on the relationship between creation and coronavirus:-

We've got to the point where the combined mass of domesticated animals is 24 times that of all wild animals... We've basically monopolised the earth's productive capacities. One of the consequences is the greater possibility for diseases to pass from animals to humans, such as this coronavirus. This is a pandemic which we ourselves have created.

David Clough, Professor of Theological Ethics at Chester University and a Methodist lay preacher



Life after the pandemic should not return to 'normal'. We must ditch any temptation to believe that the pre-Covid past was somehow 'normal'. It was not 'normal' that we should have been living on this earth in a way that was increasingly unsustainable, with global warming becoming a growing reality and a threat to human flourishing.

Bishop Philip Mounstephen (Truro)

A child asked me, "Did God create coronavirus?" I answered, "I don't believe so. But God made the ability to change. Biologists call it mutation. Some changes are really bad ones, like this virus. But human beings can change too. And to get out of this hole, we're going to need to change a lot. Maybe for the better.

The Revd Dr Sam Wells, Vicar of St Martin in the Fields



The first lesson a disaster teaches is that everything is connected... At moments of immense change, we see with new clarity the systems in which we are immersed – political, economic, social, ecological – as they change around us.

Rebecca Solnit, writer and activist



Silver linings in the Covid cloud?

The inter-connectedness of all life was what Jacob Lawrence wanted to show in his painting (left) entitled, "We exist for the sake of each other". Surrounded by children, a man holds a small tree with tendril roots. We see its fragility and its potential – a few shoots and leaves already in evidence. But its twigs are also ominous cracks: we must tend the world together, suggests the painting, otherwise its/our future is in jeopardy.



Here is a video reflecting upon the positives offered by pandemic:

<https://youtu.be/FX3NQKb5ZGk>



COVID-19 is a wake-up call to us all and the crisis gives us a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to reshape society and build a better world. We have seen that we're capable of adapting incredibly quickly as human beings and as a society. Fundamental renewal feels not only desperately needed, but perhaps even possible...

Dr Ruth Valerio, www.tearfund.org/about_you/action/reboot_message

In light of Covid-19 being linked to transmission from bats to humans via a wildlife host, Vietnam is ending its trade in wild animals killed for meat or parts. This, says the WWF, has inspired a crackdown on the trade in pangolin scales.



*Yes there is fear.
Yes there is isolation.
Yes there is sickness.
Yes there is even death.
But... they say that in Wuhan
after so many years of noise
you can hear the birds again.
They say that after just a few weeks of quiet
the sky is no longer thick with fumes
but blue and grey and clear.*



from *Lockdown – a reflection*
Fr Richard Hendrick, OFM

Loss and lament: resolve and renewal



Refresh your memory of Genesis 6.11 – 9.17 and then watch

Simon Armitage at www.simonarmitage.com/ark-video reading his poem *Ark* with its touching refrain *Bring back, bring back the leaf*. (Download the text too?) Written for the launch of the new polar research ship, the RRS Sir David Attenborough, it is, in many ways, a lament for a lost world.

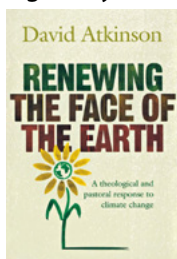
Which of the poem's ideas and images strike you most? Do you hear any hint of hope?



*Bless our lament, Creator God,
Bless the tear we shed
for the resources we have squandered.
Bless the sigh we breathe out
for the atmosphere.
Bless the head we hang
for the creatures lost and exploited.
Bless the hands we wring
for the things we have broken & wasted.
Bless us as we lament
Cradle us as we regret.
Restore us as we start afresh.
Amen*

John Polhill

Fifty years after the first Earth Day (www.earthday.org), our global home hourly more vulnerable, the biblical concept of Jubilee seems poignantly perfect, a concept explored in the important and readable book (right) by a former Bishop of Thetford.



Jubilee urges a radical reset every half century, a re-booting of social, economic and ecological worlds: *You shall consecrate the fiftieth year and proclaim liberty throughout the land to all its inhabitants. It shall be a jubilee for you...* (Leviticus 25:10)

Jubilee is a time to renounce overconsumption at the cost of the Earth and those who are poor. It involves a restoration of justice and a time of rest for the land.

*Perhaps in all this crisis, all this pain,
This reassessment of our loss and gain
Nature rebukes our brief authority
Yet offers us the chance to start again*

*And this time with a new humility,
With chastened awe, and mutual courtesy;
To re-accept the unearned gift of life
With gratitude, with joy and charity.*

*Perhaps we'll learn to live without so much
To nurture and to cherish, not to clutch,
And, if I'm spared, I'll hold the years I'm given
With gentler tenure and a lighter touch.*

From Malcolm Guite's 2020 Quarantine Quatrains (stanzas 32-34 of Section VI) and used with permission

St Francis



Words: Diaper's hymn re-working St Francis' 'Canticle of the Sun'
Painting: St Francis preaching to the birds; Giotto

All creatures of our God and King,
lift up your voice and with us sing
alleluia, alleluia!

In the passage below from Carlo Carretto's *I, Francis* (1980), Francis of Assisi (b.1181) who proclaimed the gospel "to the whole creation" (Mark 16.15), speaks directly to a contemporary world:

All creation is one and if you present yourself peaceably, creation will recognize and meet you with a smile. This principle of non-violence concerns the natural world, the skies, the seas, the mines, the forests, air, water... Yet you have violated the forests, defiled the seas, plundered everything like bandits. Your contempt for nature knows no bounds... And now you have appointed me patron saint of ecology! You must admit it is a little late. ...But try being governed by those who still look at the stars at night, or spend an hour watching a beetle under a dry leaf in the forest, or dream over a glow-worm in a wheat-field in May... Give primacy to the countryside... Make the land a garden, and the garden will become an Eden, giving you what you need: bread and peace.

Pope Francis

"Because of us, thousands of species will no longer give glory to God by their very existence, nor convey their message to us. We have no such right."



Jorge Bergoglio didn't only take St Francis' name on becoming Pope: he also set out to mirror his message. In 2015, he issued a powerful encyclical entitled *Laudato Si* (Praise be to you) which urged the world's response to two related cries - that of the earth and that of the poor.

Both experience and research show that the gravest effects of our attacks on the environment are suffered by the poorest.

What Christians need is an "ecological conversion", whereby the effects of their encounter with Jesus Christ become evident in their relationship with the world around them.

And in the light of Covid-19 and its backdrop of humanity's hubris, the Pope has spoken again: *How did we think we would stay healthy in a world that was sick?*

Local responses

Each of these responses attempts “to safeguard the integrity of creation and sustain the life of the earth” (Anglican Communion’s Fifth Mark of Mission). As Greta Thunberg says, “Avoiding climate breakdown requires cathedral thinking. We must lay the foundations without knowing exactly how to build the ceiling.”

Carbon neutral by 2030?

Listen to members of churches at Cawston and Hethel reflect on the CofE’s aim to be carbon neutral by 2030:

twitter.com/i/status/1253000612192514048

Hethel Church has installed a full heating system using ultra-efficient air-source heat pumps. They are run off wind farm Ecotricity, resulting in zero carbon emissions and other pollutants. In partnership with Secker & Sons (Norwich) Ltd, churchwarden Peter Nicholls did the research, designed the system and obtained the necessary permissions and a significant grant from the British Airways Carbon Fund. He says, “At Hethel, we are committed to following the Church of England’s ‘Shrinking the Footprint’ lead, doing all we can to minimise our carbon emissions. And the improvement in our comfort is dramatic.”



Air-source heating pumps at Hethel Church: photo Peter Nicholls

Norwich CCA, founded in 2019, is a branch of Christian Climate Action, a nationwide group demanding radical change in the face of environmental breakdown (christianclimateaction.org). On a recent CCA march, former Archbishop Rowan Williams joined other Christians in holding a banner reading ‘CREATION CRIES OUT’, words reminiscent of Romans 8.19-22.



CCA is the Christian wing of Extinction Rebellion whose strategies often make headlines:

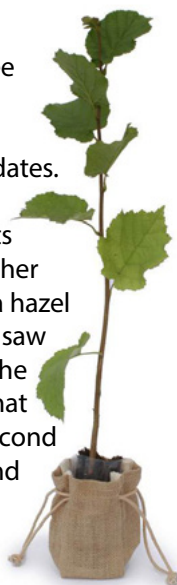
<https://youtu.be/Jhl-9UBRK4w>

How far would you go to get your voice heard on the climate crisis?



A bishop’s gift

Since 2019, our three bishops have given hazel saplings to confirmation candidates. As well as offsetting emissions, the plants evoke words of Mother Julian... Looking at a hazel nut in her hand she saw three truths about the world: “The first is that God made it. The second that God loves it. And the third, that God keeps it.”



Trees of Hope

Early in 2015, Daphne Sampson, a Reader in West Norfolk, (right in photo) watched *The Age of Stupid*. In this pioneering docu-drama, Pete Postlethwaite stars as a man living alone in a devastated world of 2055, looking at archival film and asking “Why didn’t we stop climate change when we had the chance?”



Galvanised by the film, Daphne and others formed King's Lynn Climate Concern. They started by campaigning for serious steps to be taken at the Paris Climate Summit (2015) and were jubilant at its positive outcomes. Since then, the group has organised local events for Earth Day each April; conversed and collaborated with the local Borough Council and begun a project to help people access the government's *Green Homes Grants* and showcase low carbon domestic dwellings.

Approached by Churches Together in King's Lynn for project suggestions, KLiMATE Concern also helped to bring to birth both 'Nourishing Hope' (celebrating food that's gentle on the planet) and 'Trees of Hope'. So it was that, at the beginning of 2020, the local community came together for a major tree-planting - beech, oak, rowan, cherry, hawthorn.



Ian Burt Photography



Watch facebook.com/watch/?v=162973264979795 to hear local clergy Becca Rogers and Dan Tansy (left and centre in photo) explaining how the planting of trees is one brilliant way of “capturing carbon naturally”.

THE MAN WHO PLANTED TREES



JEAN GIONO

ILLUSTRATED BY GARY KRICKEN
WITH AN INTRODUCTION BY
RICHARD JARRET

Be further inspired by getting hold of the slim volume (left), by Jean Giono, describing a shepherd's dogged determination to fill a barren valley with leafy beauty.

'What then should we do?' (Luke 3.10)

Here are three suggestions: choose your depth and dive in!

Resolve to bring the climate crisis into your 'kitchen table conversations', regularly discussing how to respond with family/friends.

Do the gas and electricity fuelling your home come from renewable sources? Switch providers if not!

Become an Eco Church! Sign up for support and advice: ecochurch.arochoa.org.uk

Image: Bokica/Shutterstock.com

National/International websites:

- operationnoah.org
- worldwildlife.org
- arochoa.org.uk
- amostrust.org
- renewourworld.net
- earthday.org
- globaloptimism.com
- greenchristian.org.uk
- greenpeace.org.uk

- christianaid.org.uk/campaigns/climate
- jubilee-centre.org/environment
- christianclimateaction.org

Useful Norfolk websites:

- cprenorfolk.org.uk
- friendsoftheearth.uk/groups/norwich
- norfolkwildlifetrust.org.uk
- eveshillvegco.com
- thepapillonproject.com
- dofn.org/social

About the series...

This is the sixth in a series of six booklets exploring the relationship between Christian faith and some of the most pressing issues of our time. The hope is that individuals and groups of all sorts will find them challenging and inspiring.

Written by Susanna Gunner