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## Extinction Rebellion—how can Christians respond?

'[T]reat the climate crisis like the acute crisis it is and give us a future', exclaimed school strikes leader Greta Thunberg during a Climate March in Stockholm in September 2018.<sup>1</sup> 'Our lives are in your hands', she concluded with striking force and clarity.<sup>2</sup> On the one hand, the present ecological crisis is occasionally viewed as an insurmountable task; hence the necessity of Thunberg's forceful tone. On the other hand, the situation can be viewed as the crucible where essential and new configurations for Christian witness might be forged; hence the wisdom in her counsel that '[e]verything'—however small it might seem—'counts.'<sup>3</sup> Of central importance if we are to adopt the latter approach, this essay will argue, is the re-enchantment or sacramental repurposing of the created order. Or, to put it another way: Christian disciples must rediscover and proclaim (in the famous words of Gerard Manley Hopkins) that '[t]he world is charged with the grandeur of God',<sup>4</sup> and that 'Christ plays in ten thousand places'<sup>5</sup> throughout the created order.

First, one of the most obvious ways Christian disciples can rediscover this vision of creation is by facilitating and encouraging regular participation in the sacramental life of the Church. As Rowan Williams has recently noted, central to the practice of the sacraments is matter, drawn from the ordinary and everyday aspects of the created order, which later carries the full significance of God's activity in the ecclesial context: bread and wine, body and blood.<sup>6</sup> The Christian disciple's participation in the sacramental life of the Church invites us, in turn, to recognise God's activity (albeit hidden from the human perspective) throughout the rest of creation. That is, through the sacraments, Christian disciples acknowledge and proclaim the created order as the site of sacramental power, and thus the imperative to care for it.

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<sup>1</sup> Thunberg, G. (2019), *No One Is Too Small to Make a Difference*, 4, Penguin Press.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> Hopkins, G.M. (1995), *"God's Grandeur" and Other Poems*, 15, Dover Publications.

<sup>5</sup> Idem (1967), *The Poems of Gerard Manley Hopkins*, 90, Oxford University Press.

<sup>6</sup> Williams R. (2019), *Jesus Christ: The Unanswered Questions*, St Paul's London.

Second, when faced with the enormity of the ecological crisis—and, indeed, when we encounter those in the extremes of distress (James Hansen exclaims: ‘We are in a planetary emergency’<sup>7</sup>)—our instinct is not to say something, but to do something. To put it another way, in times of crisis, our default *modus* is sacramental, illustrated by the nonviolent protests of the Extinction Rebellion movement. The difficulty of the situation and the complexity of the issues involved serve as a reminder that nice, neat answers simply will not do; trite or clichéd responses melt away—in fact, they collapse entirely (and rightly so)—in the face of such unimaginably difficult and pressing circumstances.

Third, from personal experience, what we value most from those who meet us in times of distress is some sort of concrete, tangible demonstration that they care for us, and that our concerns are their concerns too, which, of course, begins with their physical presence with us. For this reason, the role of the Christian disciple is often simply to be present, all the while hoping and praying that his or her presence (in some small way) might act as a parable of the presence of our loving God in the midst of the difficult realities of the crisis. This presence is twofold in nature: the Christian disciples must be present with those distressed by the present crisis, and he or she must be competently present in the political sphere, providing a credible voice in the current discussions.

Fourth, our purpose as ‘ambassadors for Christ’ (cf. 2 Corinthians 5:20) in such situations is likewise sacramental: to point out the ‘hidden presence’ (as it were) of Christ in the midst of pain, frailty, and vulnerability. Or, to put it another way, we have a role to play in gently ‘naming’ what is happening in the world around us and in the lives of those we are called to serve.

Fifth, in the sacraments, God encounters us at the point of our need. That is, God takes the initiative, and he meets us where we are—in the midst of human suffering; hence the Eucharistic Prayer in the Anglican tradition often begins, ‘The Lord is here’.<sup>8</sup> We are called to meet people at their point of need too, demonstrating the love of Jesus; hence our calling to

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<sup>7</sup> Quoted in Miller R.W. (2010), *God, Creation, and Climate Change: A Catholic Response to the Environmental Crisis*, 2, Orbis Books.

<sup>8</sup> Church of Ireland (2004), *The Book of Common Prayer*, 209, Columba Press.

be ‘walking sacraments’<sup>9</sup> (quoting Austin Farrer’s famous phrase)—to be people that make others aware of God’s love and presence in the difficult realities of the world (oftentimes, once again, by simply being present).

All of the above is grounded in, and possible as a result of, the liberty of Jesus. Williams notes that Saint Paul stresses the liberty of Jesus in conjunction with the Resurrection by writing: ‘We know that Christ, being raised from the dead, will never die again; death no longer has dominion over him’ (Romans 6:9).<sup>10</sup> Or, as poet John Masefield expresses it, we serve others in the sure and certain hope that Jesus is ‘alive and at large in the world’, praying that he would ‘help me to follow and find you there today.’<sup>11</sup> Jesus is present and active, even when the task ahead seems insurmountable.

Finally, that the sacramental repurposing of the created order is central to the Christian response to Extinction Rebellion is clearly demonstrated by considering the Eucharist. When the gathered community share in the Eucharist, they encounter Christ in the proclaimed Word of the Gospel, in the presence of their neighbours, and in the bread and wine (matter drawn from the created order and repurposed), receiving his risen life; they encounter his historical body, ecclesial body, and sacramental body, as Henri de Lubac might express it.<sup>12</sup> They are then sent back into the world to carry his presence with them: they pray, ‘Send us out in the power of the Spirit to live and work to your praise and glory’,<sup>13</sup> and the Deacon dismisses them, ‘Go in peace to love and serve the Lord’.<sup>14</sup> That is, the Eucharist is (at the very least) a missional enterprise; the gathered community are sent out to be a ‘living sacrifice’ (cf. Romans 12:1), serving the world—the human and nonhuman aspects of the created order.

**Words: 1,000**

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<sup>9</sup> Farrer, A. (1970), *A Celebration of Faith: Communications, Mostly to Students*, 111, Hodder and Stoughton.

<sup>10</sup> Williams, R. (2017), *God With Us: The Meaning of the Cross and Resurrection—Then and Now*, Ch. 5, SPCK.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

<sup>12</sup> de Lubac, H. (2013), *Corpus Mysticum: The Eucharist and the Church in the Middle Ages*, SCM Press.

<sup>13</sup> Church of Ireland (2004), *BCP*, 221, Columba Press.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.