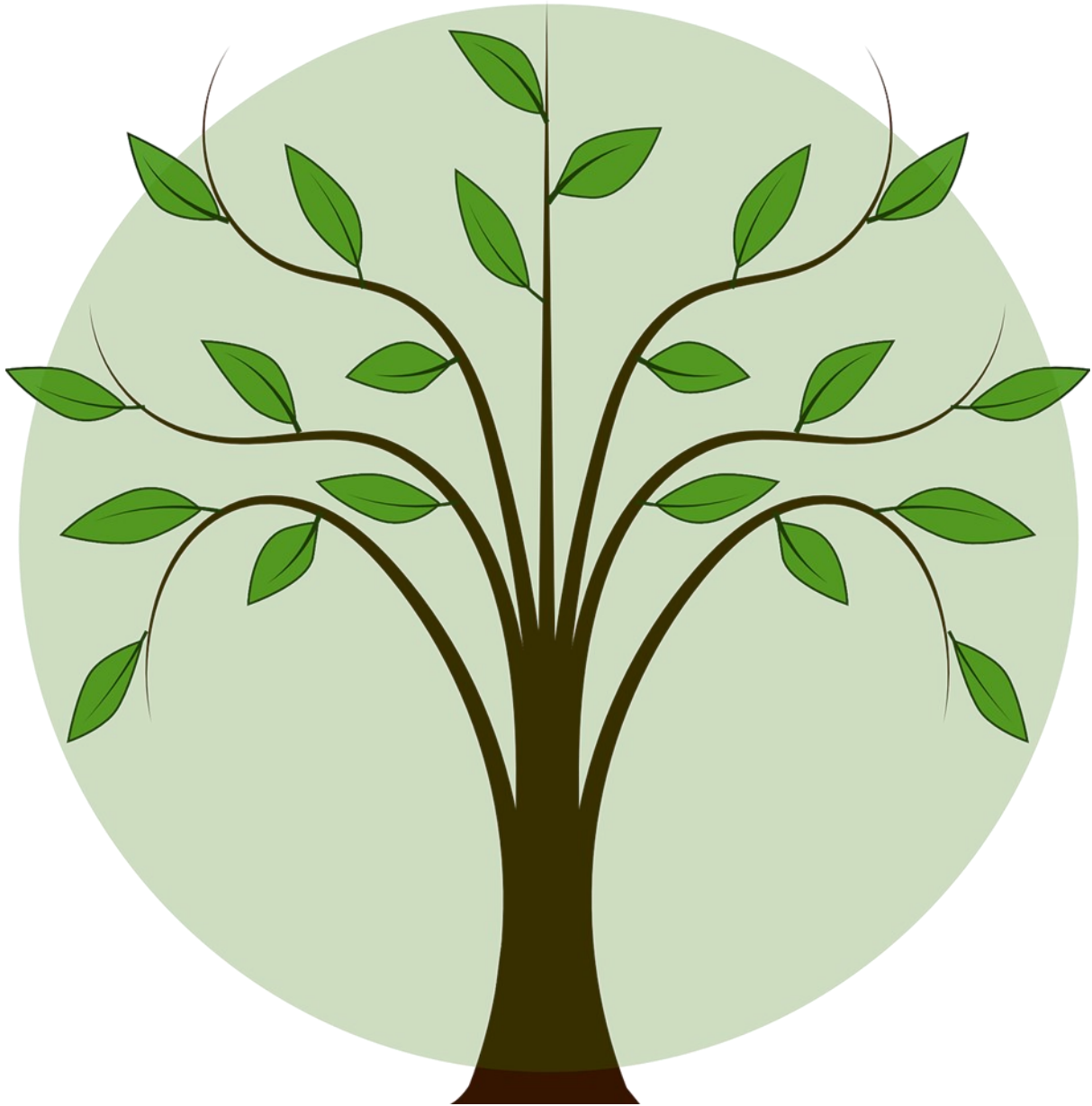


MANCHESTER ECO DIOCESE RESOURCES: THEOLOGY OF ECOLOGY



THEOLOGY OF ECOLOGY



Jesus said: 'I have come that you may have life in fullness.' The context of Jesus' words makes it clear that the 'full life' he wants is spiritual. He did not say: I have come that you can live life in material excess.

This brief theological introduction is intended for those who want a spiritual justification for ecological action. But do not have access to longer, detailed treatments or do not have time to read more widely.

The crisis of climate change is an ecological issue

The eco-systems of the world are interdependent, so climate change impoverishes the ecology of the whole world, including all humans. Our generation will bequeath a world with impaired biodiversity, fewer species, changed landscapes, and with whole cultures displaced by the resulting geographical change. The rate of these negative changes is accelerating so the numbers of people affected is increasing fast.

The crisis of climate change is a moral issue

Denying the existence (or extent) of climate change contravenes the eighth Commandment not to bear false witness—to tell the truth that human action has indeed caused the climate to change.

The crisis of climate change is a justice issue

Those most vulnerable to the effects of climate change are those least likely to have caused it. The victims are overwhelmingly the poorest people living in the poorest countries.

The gospels stress Jesus' solidarity with the vulnerable and those who suffer injustice. He interpreted his mission as coterminous with a bias toward the poor and seeking justice. Luke records Jesus applying Isaiah 61 to himself:

[Jesus said] 'The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor ...' (Luke 4:18).

Jesus emphasised that solidarity further when he said, 'just as you did it to one of the least of these ... you did it to me' (Matthew 25:40). The text cites specifics of clothing and feeding, etc. but the tacit underlying theme is empathy and wanting to reverse all underlying need.

The crisis of climate change is a theological issue

God is love (1 John 4:16) and creation is a fruit of His love. That explains why He delights to operate in the world that He created. Genesis 1 records God pronouncing every stage of His creation as 'good.' This adjective (טוֹב *tō·wḇ*) has connotations of 'pleasant, agreeable to the senses' and 'advantageous' but also 'pure' and 'in proportion.'

Translators often phrase the 'dominion verses' Genesis 1:26–28 as,

'Be fruitful and multiply; fill the earth and subdue it; and have dominion over ... every living thing that moves upon the earth.'

The word translated 'have domination' (רָדוּ *rā·dū*) is elsewhere rendered 'trample,' 'chastise' or 'defeat.' It's a late Hebrew word implying military action. It postdates the shifts toward agriculture, when the context suggests a role of caretaking, stewardship and oversight. As spiritual beings capable of listening to God, these verses express a responsibility to care for nature in ways that are consistent with God's will. The concept of sabbaths (Leviticus 25:2–5) gives further insights into God's attitudes towards the environment.

God's dealings with humankind are described within many covenants. The first is that between God and Noah (Genesis 9:8–17). God gave an unconditional pledge to every living thing. It commits to maintaining the relationship between Creator and creation.

Humankind and not God has broken the covenant. The damage caused to creation represents a falling short in humankind's oversight, for which a common shorthand is 'sin'. People of faith must therefore respond to climate change. That response will be twofold: firstly, with acts that evince personal repentance such as lifestyle change. Secondly, they will seek to bring about the Kingdom of God, actively opposing those actions that damage the environment as an act of discipleship.

A theological response

Hope is a characteristic Christian virtue. The Bible describes God our world as perfect and beautiful (Genesis 1) and the way The Fall causes its moral pollution (Genesis 3). But its concluding paragraphs describe a new earth that is new, clean and without pain or death (Gen 21:1–6). God wants us to see all Christian endeavour through the lens of hope. We are working for a new earth.



A missional response

Theology seeks to explore the will of God and thence respond. This activity is often labelled *missio Dei*, which can be loosely translated 'the mission of God'. One of the key themes in Jesus' teaching was the Kingdom of God which represents one of the principal end-goals of discipleship because Jesus taught his followers to seek the Kingdom and pray for its fulfilment. Much recent thought therefore explores the links between *missio Dei* and those that work to improve the world. The fifth 'Mark of Mission' makes this link explicit: one essential strand of the Church's mission is 'to strive to safeguard the integrity of creation, and sustain and renew the life of the earth.'

A discipleship response

At the core of Jesus' teaching are the New Commandment, to 'Love one another as I have loved you' (John 13:33–35) and the Great Commandment, 'Love the Lord your God ... love your neighbour as yourself' (Matthew 22:37–39 and Luke 10:27). They come from God and have the same force as the better-known Ten Commandments. Jesus directs us to love all in a sacrificial way, particularly the needy (Matthew 25:40 *passim*). God therefore directs us to love those made destitute by climate change. God's command to love calls us not only to alleviate this destitution but address its causes.