

Creation Care Seminar

'Preaching for Creation'

Jack Ryan Shadow Recruit

One of the little techniques I often use in preaching, as a hook to draw the listener in, is to describe a scene from a book or a movie, something which has caught my attention and is relevant.

So, let me start with what might seem a slightly obscure movie in terms of talking about preaching about the environment: *Jack Ryan: Shadow Recruit*. The film features the character Jack Ryan, originally developed by the author Tom Clancy, although this particular film is not based on one of his novels.

Starring the actor Christopher Pine (no relation!) Jack is working for the CIA, but simply as a financial analyst, not a field agent. In one scene, having been sent to Moscow, he is advising a very small team of CIA agents, led by Kevin Costner's character, on breaking into a secure Russian bank in the middle of the city and hacking into their computer system. The bank is suspected of illegal trading, with the goal of completely crashing the world stock markets.

Jack is advising the team, "Okay tell your guy once he's in there he needs to enable all encrypted financial sell packages. Tell him to look for dark pool algorithms. And if your guy, if the guy ...

Then Jack realises that the team leader is just looking at him, and the penny drops, abruptly, "I'm the guy, aren't I?"

Kevin Costner's character just says, "Yeah ... you're going to be great."

Sometimes in life, the people God is going to use are very close to home.

We are what God has to work with.

This creation is what God has to work with.

So, preaching for the environment: What's the urgency? *and* Why bother?

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What's the urgency?

Grant Moore, "As it becomes increasingly apparent that humankind is facing an existential threat of its own making, the potential for future global-scale catastrophe demands a sustained and multi-faceted involvement on the part of the Church."¹

¹ Grant Moore, *A Critical Task for the Church: Addressing Anthropogenic Climate Change Denialism and Unmasking End-Time Apocalyptic Literalism* (Charles Sturt University: Unpublished Honours Dissertation, 2019), 1.

A literature review of research into the field of rising sea levels, for example, which is what Grant undertook, reveals a frightening reality. The “dawning realisation for the scientific community in recent decades ... is now a realisation hardening into certainty.” There is “compelling evidence that irreversible, anthropogenically-induced changes in the earth’s atmosphere are in train, and the resultant global warming trend, if left to run its course unchecked, will result in the eventual melting of all planetary ice. The inevitable consequence would be a calamitous rise in sea-level, sufficient to render the world’s coastal towns and cities uninhabitable.”²

Why bother?

But still, why bother? Doesn’t the promise of eternal life just mean that we don’t really need to worry about this, let alone join the fray by preaching about it and running Bible studies on it?

The world that we inhabit, and the vast cosmos in which we exist, is incredibly beautiful and intricate. The advances of modern physics, including the latest telescopes and space exploration vehicles, have simply increased the sense of wonder which the ancient Jews wrote about in the psalms.

Let’s start by having a look at some theology and science in conversation with each other, before I focus specifically on theology.

We are intimately connected ... We are intimately and inextricably connected with the cosmos, at the deepest and most fundamental level. “The cosmos is a unity. To understand ourselves we must understand the stars. We are star-dust – the ashes from long-dead stars.”³ What Martin Rees is pointing out here is that at the basic chemical level of our bodies, we are connected with the rest of the cosmos.⁴

This cosmos is a miracle!

Two examples will show that the conditions in the universe are perfect for the evolution of life and indeed must be this way for us to exist.

Gravity vs Kinetic energy

First, of crucial importance is the finely tuned balance between the effects of gravity and the kinetic energy of the inflationary universe. If gravity had been too strong at any point in the evolution of the universe, expansion would have ceased and the universe would have begun to contract. The galaxies would not have evolved as they did and therefore life would not have emerged.

Yet, if the expansion had occurred too quickly, gravity would not be strong enough to cause matter to come together, so we would have a universe expanding too rapidly for stars and planets to form.

² Grant More, *A Critical Task for the Church*, 2.

³ Martin Rees, *Before the Beginning: Our Universe and Others* (London: Touchstone, 1998), 19.

⁴ see Theo McCall, *The Greenie’s Guide to the End of the World* (ATF: Adelaide, 2011), 18.

“Ripples” represented by Q.

Second, the formation of stars, galaxies and planets depends on ripples or fluctuations in the early universe. The height of the ripples is described by the number Q. If Q were too small the universe would be too smooth and remain dark and featureless. On the other hand if Q were too big, “the cosmic scene would be dominated by black-holes rather than galaxies, and stars (even if they managed to form) would be buffeted too frequently to retain stable planetary systems.”⁵ But Q was perfect for the evolution of the universe we now live in and which gave rise to our very existence.

We live in a miraculous universe.

The cause behind the miracle, the primary cause?

Causing this miracle, intimately connected with this miracle, is God. I particularly like Denis Edwards’ take on this:

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Denis Edwards writes, “The Spirit is thought of as working with creation ... The zone of the Spirit embraces the chanciness of random mutations and the chaotic conditions of open systems.”⁶

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Catherine Keller

One of the good contributions from eco-feminist theologians in particular has been to criticise the apocalyptic tendencies within the Judeo-Christian tradition and the destructive attitude to the environment which they engender.

This apocalyptic assumption, she suggests, under-girds everything we do at a national and international level.

Despair, and the sense of ultimate futility, rob us of the impetus to put a stop to the destruction.

Whatever destruction is wreaked upon the earth as a result of the ecological destruction caused by Western consumerism will be forgotten, along with the earth, because God will make all things new.

Both nuclear annihilation and ecological destruction have at their source the connection, which Keller identifies, between the myth of the Apocalypse and the

⁵ Rees, *Before the Beginning*, 246.

⁶ Denis Edwards, *Breath of Life: A Theology of the Creator Spirit* (Maryknoll/New York: Orbis Books, 2004), 34.

flagrant waste of our world's resources due to Western consumerism and our utter contempt for the environment.

This is precisely the problem with Christian eschatology as it has developed, argues Keller, because there can be no human contribution to the systems of domination and destruction, only a supernatural solution. Thus prolonged human activity in the field of environmentalism becomes completely pointless because, "human accountability for the polysystemic ecosocial injustices of the earth is swallowed by the ultimate hope for resurrection into deathlessness."⁷

Keller suggests that the sustaining of a complex and bio-diverse creation provokes a bottomless love, which is itself its own reward and needs no final prize.

There is no need for a new heaven or a new earth, because we have this Earth, this sky and water to renew.

But, in my opinion, to lose the hope of the resurrection, particularly the hope of the transformation of all things, is to lose a significant impetus for environmental ethics and therefore environmental action. I'm suggesting that the environmental actions we take now are of eternal significance, and that eschatology is a powerful ally in striving for ecological action now.

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Rosemary Ruether is critical of early Christianity and its attitude to creation, although she does remind her readers of one of the early gems. For Irenaeus, the earthly or bodily nature becomes the 'sacramental bearer of the divine'.

There are some lovely link with the 20th century Orthodox theologian Alexander Schmemmann talking about the sacrament of creation.

Ruether's study of two key historical apocalypticists is helpful. She cites both the historical example of an English puritan in Mary Cary writing her interpretation of the events in England of 1640–1660 (the civil war and the reign of Parliament and then Oliver Cromwell) as well as the American Adventist Ellen White.

Mary Cary's various writings are an interesting study in radical apocalypticism, in which particularly historical figures and events are identified with biblical characters and events in the book of Revelation and Daniel. Not surprisingly, given the anti-royal, anti-establishment flavour of the Puritan movement in general in England at the time, the overthrow of King Charles I is viewed as an indication that the time of affliction has ended and that the rule of the saints is about to begin. England is seen as God's elect nation, where the saints will rule peacefully for a millennium, before a final battle with Satan. This will all end with "the final judgement, the destruction of the mortal heaven and earth, followed by its immortal recreation."⁸

⁷ Catherine Keller, 'No More Sea: The Lost Chaos of the Eschaton'. in *Christianity and Ecology: Seeking the Well Being of Earth and Humans*, edited by D Hessel and R Radford Reuther (Cambridge Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2000), 185.

⁸ Rosemary Radford Reuther, *Gaia & God: An Ecofeminist Theology of Earth Healing* (London: SCM, 1993), 77.

Ruether comments, “Thus did one English prophetess confidently survey the future from the years immediately after the execution of King Charles by the Puritan army.”⁹

The apocalyptic elements within American culture owe much to Ellen White’s *The Great Controversy*, which continues to be a foundational text for apocalyptic groups within America. Indeed the work was reprinted in 1988 and is still distributed in America under the title *America in Prophecy*. Ellen White belonged to a core group of leaders in a small remnant of the Millerite movement. The movement was named after William Miller, a Baptist minister who preached that the end of the world would come in 1843. The date was later recalculated to October 1844, but, needless to say, his followers were disappointed.

The cold war of the 1950s to the 1980s and the ever-present threat of nuclear war have provided Cary and White’s theological successors with ample material for apocalyptic speculation. Likewise, the founding of the state of Israel in 1948, and the expansion to the Gaza Strip and the West Bank in 1967, have provoked a fresh round of premillennial, apocalyptic predictions.

Although Ruether doesn’t explore this, the notion of ‘the rapture’ is a development of this. This is the concept of some Christians being ‘raptured’, or snatched, up to God before the general resurrection. The individual Christian leaves behind the world and all its concerns, including ecological concerns, and is taken to be with God. The connection between the individual and the world is suddenly and irreparably broken. The key publication promoting this concept has been the *Scofield Reference Bible* (published 1902– 1909, revised 1917, 1966). This publication promotes the system of biblical interpretation known as *dispensationalism*.

As Grant Moore¹⁰ has also pointed out, The *Left Behind* series of novels by Tim LaHaye and Jerry B. Jenkins are based on the same theology of the rapture. (As an aside they have been turned into several movies, including one starring Nicholas Cage.)

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A helpful way forward in appreciating the value of apocalyptic thought may initially lie in the proper understanding of the term itself. In fact the term does not imply any sense of hoping for catastrophe, in the sense of longing for the total destruction of the world. Rather, as Körtner reminds us, apokalypsis simply means “uncloaking, unveiling, disclosure, uncovering, or revelation.”¹¹

Thus, when we talk about apokalypsis we are simply talking about the unveiling of what is now hidden. In the etymological sense of the word, then, apocalyptic thought is that which enlightens.

⁹ Ruether, *Gaia and God*, 77.

¹⁰ More, *A Critical Task for the Church*, 39.

¹¹ Ulrich Körtner, *The End of the World: A Theological Interpretation* (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 1995), 199.

It's important to note that apocalyptic thought has been marginalised. This marginalisation has contributed to apocalyptic thought being dominated to a certain extent by fundamentalist thinking, leading to a total rejection of the world. Apocalyptic thinking was abandoned by other theological disciplines, resulting in peripheral church groups and sects outside the church administering "this unwanted heir in their own fashion."¹²

the virtual abandonment of apocalyptic theology by the mainstream churches, left apocalypticism in the hands of the extremists, such as William Miller and the early Seventh Day Adventists.

Körtner suggests that millions of people were affected by Miller's apocalyptic spirit and his predictions of the end of the world. 'Some of the faithful let produce rot in the fields, left their place of work, or closed their businesses, and many gave away all their possessions.'

Though Körtner does not do so, the environmental ramifications may be drawn from these events too. If the end of the world is nigh, with fiery judgment promised for unbelievers, with the purging of the world the means to achieve this, then any environmental action would be deemed a waste of time.

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Elements within Ronald Reagan's administration seem to have been influenced by apocalyptic thinking.

The historian Gore Vidal suggests that Reagan believed, apparently with some fervour, that Armageddon was near.¹³

Moreover, according to Daniel Wojcik, the Secretary of Interior, James Watt, and Secretary of Defence, Caspar Weinberger, "expressed interests similar to Reagan about the imminence of the coming of Christ and the end of the world."¹⁴

The notion of the rapture also creates rather odd, from my point of view, but also fascinating debates within the movement, including whether the rapture will save believers before the 'great tribulation', in the midst of it, or only afterwards.

Within this framework of millenarianism, Jürgen Moltmann develops a detailed critique of American culture, which has elements of the 'Redeemer Nation' within its nation's key founding myths.

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But, perhaps closer to home for mainstream Christianity, it's not simply apocalypticism which creates issues, potentially, for Christians who believe in

¹² Körtner, *The End of the World*, 12.

¹³ Gore Vidal, 'Armageddon', in *United States: Essays 1952–1992* (London: Abacus, 1993), 995–1006.

¹⁴ Daniel Wojcik, *The End of the World as we know it: Faith, Fatalism, and Apocalypse in America* (New York: NYU Press, 1997), 30.

environmental action. Platonism believed that the human soul was pre-existent, originally dwelling in the stars in the upper regions of the cosmos, before being incarnated.

Hebrew thought, in marked contrast, believed that the soul was the life principle of the body, “and future life takes the form of a resurrection of the body on a renovated earth.”¹⁵ The Christian position, particularly as it developed at the hands of Augustine, attempted various syntheses of these two positions.

Whilst the Christian tradition, particularly Latin Christianity, accepted the Hebraic view of the concept of the soul as the life principle of the body, it also accepted the Platonic understanding of the soul being capable of being detached from the body.

Critically, this concept of the created soul, which is nevertheless capable of an immortal, transcendent life apart from the body, made clear the distinction between human beings and the rest of creation.

Ruether argues that a direct consequence of this particular Platonic understanding of the nature of human beings and other creatures is that human beings have no ultimate responsibility towards the rest of creation.

So ... what to do with our preaching, especially as we try to connect environmental action with Christian hope: a hope which is dependent on a transcendent God, yet which does not abrogate the importance of our contribution?

I think there are two aspects which need to be a part of our preaching, when we talk about the significance of creation and especially its redemption.

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God’s Action – Transcendence: the ‘Objective’ side of the Consummation of all things.

&

Our Participation – Immanence: the ‘Subjective’ side of the Consummation of all things.

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God’s Action – Transcendence: the ‘Objective’ side of the Consummation of all things.

Represented by: Jürgen Moltmann & Ernst Conradie

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Our Participation – Immanence: the ‘Subjective’ side of the Consummation of all things.

¹⁵ Ruether, *Gaia and God*, 28.

Represented by: Elizabeth Johnson & Alexander Schmemmann

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Jürgen Moltmann. God's coming towards us means that he brings eternal life and eternal time. The coming of God means a fundamental change in the conditions of time. Moltmann understands the "transcendental future of time" as surpassing the present and the past. Consequently, when God comes from this future, he will gather up all of time and transform it.

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God's coming towards us is also understood as meaning that God comes to dwell with us, in the world which will be transformed by God's presence in it. Thus, not only is time fundamentally transformed, but so too is space.

The concept of God's Shekinah arriving to dwell in creation is Moltmann's way of making sense of this.

The Shekinah is the notion of God's very presence in creation. There are times when it is close by the people and times when it is quite remote. One of the most vivid descriptions is of the Shekinah journeying with the people of Israel out of Egypt and protecting them from the pursuing Egyptians: a pillar of cloud by day and a pillar of fire by night.

It is this vision of the Shekinah returning to dwell with the people of Israel forever, which inspires Moltmann's final vision of the consummation of all things. Creation itself becomes the dwelling place for God. The whole creation becomes the house of God.

As well as this notion of the Shekinah, Moltmann explores aspects of Orthodox theology and its idea of the deification of the world. The Orthodox have a notion that, through the transfiguration of human bodiliness, as disclosed, for example, in the Transfiguration of Jesus on the Mount, the whole of nature is gathered into the fellowship of this transfigured, transformed humanity. The intimate connection between human beings and creation is crucial.

Using this Orthodox doctrine of deification as leaping off point, Moltmann explores the idea of the entire world becomes shot through with the divine Spirit. It becomes a new world-organism, in which heaven and earth are united. God and human beings too then dwell in perpetual fellowship.

This transformed world comes from this current one. This temporal earth holds within itself the promise of the new earth, in which God will dwell. The earth itself becomes indeed the bearer of our future.

The matter and time of this creation will be gathered up by God, created anew and will form the basis of the new creation.

The temporal conditions of the whole of creation will be transformed. Thus the eschaton is the consummation of history, not its rupture.

The earth is valued as the bearer of the promise of something greater. Redemption comes from the mutual indwelling of God and the earth. We look to the earth as giving us a real experience of the promise to come and as being the locus of that promise. Creation itself becomes the dwelling place for God.

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Ernst Conradie grew up enjoying the exquisite natural beauty of the Jonkershoek valley near Cape Town. His childhood experience helped him appreciate such beauty and his training as a minister in the reformed tradition guided him to see this beauty as God's creation. However, his wider experience helped him realise that the rest of the world is not always as beautiful as the valley of his childhood.

Perhaps as a result of being exposed to the "ugliness"¹⁶ as he terms it of part of the world, any source of hope must be located primarily in God's transcendence.

"If there is any hope beyond the deaths of human persons, the human species, life on earth, the planet itself and the universe, then this hope can only lie in being taken up into God's eternal presence."¹⁷

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The Christian hope is that everything, the entire, vast history of the cosmos itself, will be taken up into the loving presence of God.

God is both the Creator of time and space, and therefore "must exist beyond the finite dimensions of both space and time."¹⁸ In other words, eternity exists beyond the dimension of time and encompasses time.

As a way of trying to make sense of this dimension, Conradie uses the story of "Flatland", based on the work of Edwin Abbott, *Flatland: A Romance of many Dimensions*,¹⁹ in which the inhabitants of a two dimensional world are challenged to think in terms of three dimensions. They are completely unable to do so, until they hear a story about the limited thinking of the inhabitants of a country known as "Lineland", where the inhabitants are so simple they only exist in one dimension. This story gets them thinking and they wonder whether perhaps the notion of a three-dimensional land is not as ridiculous as they first thought. By extension in our thinking the concept of another dimension, or another depth, may simply be hard for us to grasp because we are confined in our thinking to the concept of a three (or four, including time) dimensional world.

¹⁶ Ernst Conradie, *Hope for the earth: Vistas on a new century* (Bellville, South Africa: University of the Western Cape, 2000), 11.

¹⁷ Conradie, *Hope for the earth*, 219.

¹⁸ Conradie, *Hope for the earth*, 358.

¹⁹ Edwin Abbott, *Flatland: A romance of many dimensions* (London: Seeley & Co, 1884).

The eschaton is then understood as the full participation of the finite in the eternal. Heaven, in this model, is a dimension which transcends the earth, or rather the entire cosmos, but also includes it. The eschaton is then the transformation of the cosmos into the heavenly realm.

How does this transformation occur?

“The history of the cosmos, this ‘cosmic pilgrimage’, is *inscribed* in the eschaton.”²⁰ Nothing that has been inscribed can be removed or pass away – it endures. These inscriptions then provide the building blocks, as it were, for life in the eschaton. Every moment, therefore, is of eternal significance.

This includes, Conradie is quick to point out, moments of ecological action and preservation. Indeed caring for the earth and its creatures becomes absolutely crucial, because these are the building blocks for the new creation.

Christian hope, as Conradie points out, is not based on the endless continuation of the universe or on the fulfilment and consummation of the universe within the realms of time and space. Rather our belief is that the entire cosmos will be transformed in God’s transcendent presence.

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Elizabeth Johnson. Something else might be possible: by remembering sufferings and victories of the past, those who are bored or despondent are startled into movement.

The Christian story of Jesus of Nazareth is a powerful example of the narrative genre being used to allow communal behaviour and personal identity to flourish and political justice and meaningfulness in all areas of life to exist. All aspects of the narrative about Jesus speak powerfully to situations of oppression, suffering and violence. His table-fellowship with ‘sinners’, tax-collectors and prostitutes, his openness to and love of the poor and the outcast, his confrontation with the self-righteous and hypocrites, the parables and Jesus’ own, tremendous story-telling ability, all speak to people in situations of fear. And they are all set against an eschatological horizon.

Telling the narrative means oppression and violence, and the history written by the victors, is not granted legitimacy.

“Thus, remembering the dead, telling their stories, making lists, creating art, reciting martyrologies, keeping memorial days, tolling bells, crafting litanies, all strike a blow against oppression. Narrative memory refuses to grant it legitimacy.”²¹

Link with hope for life with God: “hope for life with God after death for human persons and the whole earth not only does not cut the nerve for action on behalf of justice but actually sustains it, especially in violent situations. Furthermore, such

²⁰ Conradie, *Hope for the earth*, 373.

²¹ Elizabeth Johnson, *Friends of God and Prophets: A Feminist Theological Reading of the Communion of Saints* (New York: Continuum, 1998), 174.

transcendent hope, when cast into a nondualistic framework, functions critically and creatively to promote care for the earth precisely because it sees that this world has eternal value.”²²

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From the perspective of ecological eschatology, Johnson’s most interesting and helpful line of thought is that the communion of saints does not simply refer to human beings.

Thus, although Johnson’s work is actually mostly anthropocentric in focus when she writes about the communion of saints, it is nevertheless readily adapted to include our solidarity with creation itself and remembrance of those parts of creation which have been victimised or destroyed completely. For example, in an Australian context, the remembrance of the destruction of Lake Pedder in Tasmania becomes a spur for environmental action in the future. Our subversive memory means that the history written by the victors of that particular disaster is never the final word.

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Alexander Schmemmann. Life needs to be understood as capable of being transformed into the liturgy – the work of Christ. If life can be understood to be sacramental, revealing something of the kingdom of God, then our task as human beings is consciously and deliberately to dedicate that life to God.

Whilst the liturgy is served on earth, it is accomplished in heaven. We are raised up in the Holy Spirit and in the Holy Spirit the old time is transfigured into the new time. The entire liturgy then becomes a transformation, by which Schmemmann means that each part of the liturgy, each rite, “is transformed by the Holy Spirit into that which it is, a ‘real symbol’ of what it manifests.”²³

The cosmic liturgy. Thus, lest this eucharistic theology be viewed as being overly anthropological, it is important to explore the deep connections between the church, the priest and the rest of creation in Eastern Orthodox theology. The Eucharist is never celebrated in isolation from the rest of God’s creation. Schmemmann quite helpfully writes that, “The Church is not a religious cult but a liturgy, embracing the entire creation of God.”²⁴ The Eucharist is understood as a “cosmic sacrament”²⁵ and the world “as the ‘matter’, the material of one all- embracing eucharist”²⁶ in which human beings are the priests. Human beings receive the world from God and then offer it to God, in an act of blessing God. They do this on behalf of the world, connected with it.

²² Johnson, *Friends of God and Prophets*, 197.

²³ Alexander Schmemmann, *The Eucharist: Sacrament of the Kingdom* (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 1988), 223.

²⁴ Schmemmann, *The Eucharist*, 153.

²⁵ Schmemmann, *The Eucharist*, 154.

²⁶ Schmemmann, *The Eucharist*, 155.

If the relationship between human and non-human beings is indeed reciprocal, exactly what part do the non-human beings play in transforming the world? A potential model may be found in psalm 148. It is a song which all of creation is called to sing. Not only are living creatures, including human beings, called to praise God, but every created thing. From the sun, moon and stars, to the sea-monsters and all deeps, to the fire, hail, mist and snow, to the mountains and trees, all created things are called to praise the Lord. It is this litany of praise which unites all created things in praising God's glory.

For human beings this praise finds a particularly powerful and beautiful expression in the celebration of the Eucharist. How then do other created things sing God's praises?

Other created things sing God's praises precisely when they embody everything God means them to be. When they are the fulfilment of all that God has created them to be, they are singing God's praises. When the wedge tail eagles, some of the largest birds of prey in the world, soar in the clear Australian sky thousands of feet up in the air, their keen eyes searching for movement on the ground, they are the embodiment of everything God has created them to be.

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At our best, when we participate constructively in the cosmic liturgy, human beings remember all of creation, both in the celebration of the Eucharist and in other acts of remembrance, and thus bring creation and themselves to God. Creation longs for human beings to do just that. As profoundly spiritual creatures we commend all of creation to God and bring it to God. But the nature of the reciprocity means that creation itself also plays a role.

Equally, the singing of God's praises, whether in the Eucharist or in the wider created order, and the memory of all of this, allows human beings and all of creation to participate in the final consummation of all things.

Creation itself participates actively in the process of "material inscription", because it sings God's praises. Human beings have upset the balance. But, at our best, when we participate constructively in the cosmic liturgy, human beings remember all of creation, both in the celebration of the Eucharist and in other acts of remembrance, and thus bring creation and themselves to God. Ultimately the triune God is the one who transforms the creation into the purely sacramental world it was intended to be. To use one of Moltmann's favourite phrases, "God will be all in all"; however, our participation in that process of transformation, or "material inscription", is crucial, and is a compelling reason to behave environmentally responsibly.