“Go into all the world and preach the good news to the whole creation” ¹

I stand looking out across a panoramic view of the earth. I hear these wonderful, inspiring, final words of Jesus ringing in my ears. However, what my eyes actually see are the storm clouds of global ecological crisis darkening and deepening. “What good news?” I ask. The news is devastating, it is anything but good.

But, astonishingly, the news is in fact good! As a Christian, I am learning to walk with gentle footfall within creation, following Jesus, who says it is the meek – those whose strength is under perfect control – that inherit the earth.² I gladly work shoulder to shoulder with every other eco-activist, whatever their faith or belief, who, like me, are driven by compassion with a mission to bring healing to our planet. Yet, as a Christian, I feel the agony of the earth but refuse to despair, I see the current unfolding catastrophe within a wider more profound vision.

The vision of creation is distilled in the concept of shalom

The cosmos is not here by chance; it has been created, spoken into being by God’s word and sustained every moment by the breath of the Spirit.³ It is neither neutral, nor divine; it is in fact sacred. Its source and origin are in God and so is its destiny. This biblical vision of creation’s reality is distilled in the concept of shalom – ‘complete and absolute wholeness’, the total harmonious yet dynamic integration of all things – the certainty that every aspect of this current physical world has its ultimate future in God. This understanding of shalom is without question the secret of the universe!

If this is so, then clearly something terrible has gone wrong; a cataclysm that has contaminated every molecule in creation. The origins of this cosmic evil are shrouded in mystery within the biblical story, but its presence is acknowledged everywhere. The earth is ‘subjected to futility’, in ‘bondage to decay’, and ‘groaning in labour pains’;⁴ it is locked in a prison house. Added to this, human beings – created in the image and likeness of God to serve creation – have wilfully embraced wickedness and increased the impact of evil upon the earth.⁵ This stark fact is at the very heart of the environmental crisis we find ourselves in today.

However dark the ecological night seems to be, or may even yet become, Christians have a ‘living hope’⁶ that shines like the rim of dawn breaking over the curvature of the earth bringing in a new day beyond the night. We know that vibrant all-pervading shalom will come to its fulfilment ‘at the renewal of all things’ and ‘the time of universal restoration’.⁷ These New Testament phrases find their roots in the astonished Hebrew vision of ‘the new heavens and new earth’.⁸ Traditionally Christians have been taught that this universe will be ‘burnt up’⁹ and that they will spend eternity in heaven, but nothing could be further from the truth:

The creation itself will be set free from its bondage and decay and will obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God ¹⁰

We are not going to heaven!

We are not going to heaven! These astonishing words show that the final climax of God’s salvation involves the total integration of absolutely everything; it is heaven embracing earth, quite literally, and the two becoming one. We will live as a resurrection body within a transfigured cosmos, as a new creation within the new creation – not somewhere else but here!

This breathtaking experience of just ‘getting it right’ – the same powerful and present ‘elements dissolved’ destruction it is the fibre of the cosmos torn relationships, broken totality, complete with seismic hope!

All this is possible through Jesus, who has been seen in suffering,achtobetortmarkedstandingontip-toe, having finished!¹¹, was followed by his new words again su

Noel Moules is the founder of ‘Anvil Trust’ and the originator and co-ordinator of its national training programme ‘Workshop: Applied Christian Studies’, which has been running since 1983 with some 4000 participants to date. He was born in India in 1945, the eldest son of missionary parents, and grew up in the mountains of the Himalaya. He studied theology and education and went on to teach. He was head of department in religious studies for a number of years before starting Workshop. He has been involved in church leadership in several parts of the country. He is a founder member of the ‘Anabaptist Network’ and also the ‘Root and Branch: the radical vision network’: He is one of the directors of ‘Peace School: exploring shalom activism’ and is also developing the ‘PeaceChurch’ concept to help people think differently and creatively about being church both locally and globally. He has been a frequent speaker and worship leader at Greenbelt. He is currently producing a workbook for Christian groups on ecology and the environment. Noel loves every kind of wilderness, hill walking, world music and the songs of Bob Dylan. He is a gentle vegan. He would describe himself as a ‘messianic anarchist’ and is passionately committed to non-violence, social justice and the integrity of all creation.

The values of peace, freedom, truth and wisdom are central to his spirituality. He lives in Sheffield with Rowena to whom he has been married since 1971 and they have three adult children.

His personal ‘motto’ and daily summed up in the words of Colossians 1:28-29:

“It is (Jesus) we proclaim, warning everyone and teaching everyone in all wisdom, so that we may present everyone mature in Christ. For this I toil and struggle with all the energy that he powerfully inspires within me.”
Hope

This word ‘Hope’ is one of the most exciting of all words, stressing ‘relationship’ and ‘companionship’22 with the mind's us of the strong biblical theme that truly righteous people live in harmony with wild animals24. As priests we hold a ‘deep ecology’ that embraces ‘all things’ including people, animals, plants and the whole natural environment. We teach the truth; we serve the poor, the weak and the vulnerable and work to restore the covenant between God and creation wherever it has broken. We move with the authentic ‘dominion’ of ‘meekness’25, recognising that:

“Everything is sacred;
live gently within the sacred world with wisdom”26

Sacredness, gentleness and wisdom, are the essence of true Christian priesthood; the excitement is in exploring what happens as we put them into practice!

We must act as prophets in solidarity within creation

We must act as prophets in solidarity within creation. Our message of hope is breathtaking; we cannot keep silent and must work for transformation. This means much more than changing from ‘eco-worrier’ to ‘eco-warrior’; but rather standing energised as a ‘shalom-activist’ – working together with God, empowered by the Spirit, to hasten in the new heaven and earth. We are to be strident campaigning voices in the face of global injustice. We feel creation’s pain and work tirelessly to assuage it. We embrace despair with love. We work together with others with different motivations; encourage and enriching one another, and praying that our witness may encourage at least some of them towards discipleship of Jesus.

Ours is a seismic vision of hope. May it inspire and energise you; but remember that to play our part in its astonishing fulfilment not only calls us to energetic action but also to walking with gentle footfall one day at a time.

19 The usual mistaken reading of 2 Pt 3:10
20 Mt 19:28 and Acts 3:21
21 Jn 12:32 the phrase ‘all things’ (Gk: ‘panta’) means ‘absolutely everything’ not just people
22 Col 1:20 see previous note
23 Mt 27:45-51
24 Mt 5:5; cf Zec 9:9-10
25 cf Zec 9:9-10
26 This is a maxim I coined in 1998 and seek to live by daily