

Theological Perspectives

Three theological perspectives on care for creation and net zero:

- A reflection from a member of the General Synod on the Routemap to Net Zero Carbon by 2030, prepared for the Routemap in 2021. Rev Ruth Newton.
- A theological perspective on net zero carbon, prepared for the Routemap in 2021. Rev Canon Dr Mark Powley
- The Gift of Creation, prepared for the Environmental Working Group in 2019. Simon Oliver.

A reflection from a member of the General Synod on the Routemap to Net Zero Carbon by 2030

Reflections from Rev Ruth Newton, in her role as a member of the General Synod Environment Group:

Young people are urging us to act and act with speed (See Supporting Information Young People). The rule of St Benedict notes that "the Lord often reveals what is better to the younger". These young people rightly remind us that this is God's world, not ours and locate addressing climate change at the very heart of what it means to be a Christian. They speak for those who have grown up knowing their future is threatened by the actions and inaction of their predecessors. Their concerns must become our concerns if we are to proclaim the gospel afresh to this generation.

They remind us that the climate emergency is fundamentally unjust. Those who are least culpable, the global poor and future generations, will be most impacted by it. The World Health Organisation predicts that between 2030 and 2050, climate change is expected to cause approximately 250,000 deaths annually from malnutrition, malaria, diarrhoea, and heat stress. It suggests that children, particularly those living in global poverty, are amongst those most vulnerable¹. As members of the Anglican communion, we have learned how climate change is already impacting the Global South. What we, in this country, perceive as a future threat is for them, a lived reality. We are the Body of Christ; when one suffers, we all suffer. We are called to stand in solidarity with our brothers and sisters. The ecological crisis is a humanitarian one that relates not only to how we relate to the natural world but how we love one another. Against this backdrop, familiar words from our scriptures urge us to act. How can we claim to love our neighbour, hunger and thirst for righteousness, or be good news to the poor yet fail to make addressing climate change a priority?

Achieving a net zero Church is symbol. The members of the General Synod who voted for the 2030 target recognised this was not the only Christian response to the ecological challenges our world faces, and that it does not, in itself, prevent climate change. Yet symbols are powerful. The net zero target stands in a long and Biblical tradition of prophetic action which draw attention to that which runs contrary to God's will and the common good. The Kingdom is characterised by justice, peace, and ecological wholeness, where our relationships with God, each other, and the natural world are as God always intended them to be. The vocation of the Church is to be a sign, a sacrament, and a foretaste of this kingdom². In the Pilgrim course, the Bishop of Manchester puts it like this:

When we take some action that shows what the world is like when God's reign is acknowledged, we are erecting signposts to the Kingdom"³

It is hoped that the move to Net Zero will be such a signpost and a catalyst which raises awareness and give authenticity to the Christian voice in the public sphere. It is a prophetic

¹ <https://www.who.int/news-room/fact-sheets/detail/climate-change-and-health> accessed 19.10.21

² www.anglicancommunion.org/media/108028/MISSIO-Anglicans-in-Mission-1999.pdf p9 accessed 20.10.21

³ Walker D (2015) Treading lightly in the Earth in *Pilgrim: Church and Kingdom* ed Cotterell, S. et al . London: Church House Publishing.

act of defiance in the face of a great evil and a small, if costly, act of love which tells the world's most vulnerable and our young people, that they are heard, that they matter and that we stand alongside them.

A theological perspective on net zero carbon

Reflections from Rev Canon Dr Mark Powley, in his role as Principal of St Hild College:

An Act of Worship and Mission

In the wonder of our climate we see the glory of God, and in all the complex processes that support it we glimpse God's wisdom. To learn about this, and to be moved to care about it, is part of our worship – an overflow of thanks and praise.

Responding to the climate crisis is also an act of mission. It demonstrates the relevance of Christianity when the church's actions so far have fallen short. It models responsible discipleship. It responds to human need. Quite simply, addressing climate change is something the Good Samaritan would do in our day, and other "Good Samaritans" around the world are already showing us how to do likewise. It is a response to injustice: it is our economy, and our churches, that have benefited most from fossil fuel use, but it is the poorest societies who face the most tragic costs: drought, famine, fires, extreme weather events, resource insecurity and mass migration. Because of all this, and simply because the earth is the Lord's, achieving net zero is an act of mission.

A Life Within Limits

Living within limits is deeply rooted in Scripture. Life within God-given limits can be faithful and fruitful; but outside those limits there is catastrophe. When Adam and Eve ignore God's restrictions or when Israel disregards the boundary markers in the land, when traders in Tyre pursue profit at all costs or when wealthy farmers plan ever bigger barns, there are always consequences.⁴

It has now become painfully clear that industrialised nations have broken the atmospheric limits in creation. We have taken and burnt more of the earth's resources than our climate can support. As we have been warned for some time, this unsustainable over-reach has potentially unimaginable consequences. And in this discovery, in the very cry of creation, there is a call to repent – to change our minds and live within the limits creation can sustain.

A Natural Counterpart to Evangelism

This call to action doesn't conflict with the urgent need to declare the gospel, make disciples and develop new worshipping communities. In Acts, for instance, we see the compassion of the kingdom and the work of evangelism going hand in hand. This is especially clear for Paul, who doesn't only plant churches, but also carefully organises a collection to relieve the impact of an ecological crisis – in that case, a famine.⁵ So today the church can pursue growth and revitalisation whilst at the same time making plans to reduce emissions.

It's here we see the liberating effect of the gospel. The grace of God in Christ sets us free: free to take responsibility for our actions, free to recognise the scale of the issue, and free to act with Spirit-empowered faith, hope and love in a time of crisis. We can step up and speak out as a church. And each one of us can be a beacon for change in our communities, workplaces, schools and homes. May God give us the courage to do this.

⁴ Gen 3; Job 24:2; 2 Chron 36:21; Is 23 (see Rev 18); Luke 12:18.

⁵ Acts 13, see 1 Cor and 2 Cor

The Gift of Creation

The following reflection was written by Simon Oliver, Van Mildert Professor of Divinity at the Department of Theology and Religion, Durham University, as part of exploring the theology of environmental work in general terms. It is not specific to the net zero consultation but provides some of the theological framework that guides all the work of the Environmental Working Group.

Introduction

In his 1967 article entitled ‘The Historical Roots of our Ecological Crisis’, the American historian Lynn White Jr. famously attributed the abuse of the natural realm through technology and industry to Christianity. He wrote:

Since both science and technology are blessed words in our contemporary vocabulary, some may be happy at the notions, first, that, viewed historically, modern science is an extrapolation of natural theology and, second, that modern technology is at least partly to be explained as an Occidental [Western], voluntarist realization of the Christian dogma of man's transcendence of, and rightful mastery over, nature. But, as we now recognize, somewhat over a century ago science and technology – hitherto quite separate activities – joined to give mankind powers which, to judge by many of the ecologic effects, are out of control. If so, Christianity bears a huge burden of guilt.

According to White, Christianity is a deeply anthropocentric religion which regards creation as an array of resources for humanity's use. In fact, the natural theology of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries which later gave birth to modern science and technology proposed a very particular understanding of nature's purposes. The founders of the Royal Society in the 1660s stated that one of the aims of their ‘physico-theology’ was the discernment of the uses of creatures for human beings. In 1688, Robert Boyle wrote a treatise on the final causes of natural things, by which he meant their utility for human beings. He articulated the drive to understand the utility of nature.

Since, if we neglect this inquiry [physico-theology], we live in danger of being ungrateful, *in overlooking the uses of things*, that may give us just cause of admiring and thanking the author of them, and of losing the benefits, relating as well to philosophy as piety, that the knowledge of them may afford us.⁶

For the natural theology and natural philosophy of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, creatures did not have an intrinsic purpose and value; they only had a purpose in relation to human utility. This is the view of creation to which White points in his article, namely the anthropocentrism which regards nature as a resource for humanity's use. Does the deeper Christian tradition offer an alternative doctrine of creation which may help us to reimagine Christianity's contribution to addressing the environmental crisis?

Creation as Gift

⁶ Robert Boyle, *A Disquisition about the Final Causes of Natural Things* (London, 1688), p. A2.

The traditional Christian doctrine of creation begins with the conviction that we must speak of God creating out of nothing (*ex nihilo*). This teaching emerged in Hellenistic Judaism and Christianity in the first and second centuries as a reflection on the scriptural teaching that God is the source of all things, including space, time and matter. Creation *ex nihilo* has three important implications for our present purposes. First, it distinguishes God's act of creation from all our acts of making. It points to divine freedom and the primordial peace of creation because, unlike all our acts of making, God is not constrained by, and does not contend with, any pre-existent primordial matter.

Secondly, creation *ex nihilo* implies that creation is not a change in something – it is not one thing becoming another. This distinguishes creation *ex nihilo* from all scientific views concerning the origins of the universe. To put the matter bluntly, creation *ex nihilo* has nothing to do with the Big Bang. The natural sciences will, of necessity, always consider processes – one thing becoming another. Creation *ex nihilo* is precisely not a process. It is a metaphysical doctrine that establishes the very basis of there being anything like the natural sciences at all.

Thirdly, and most importantly, creation *ex nihilo* establishes the fundamental nature of creation: it is gift. That there should be anything other than God can only be an act of pure gratuity. In God's act of creation, he gains nothing because God is eternally replete; he is therefore in no way compelled or obliged to create. If we were to speak otherwise of God, we would be speaking as if God were a creature. There is, as it were, no ulterior motive in God's act of creation. God creates as a pure selfless act of donation. There is only one beneficiary of God's creative act: creation itself. For this reason, it is a pure and free gift.

Why is understanding creation as gift so important? In recent years, the concept of 'gift' has been widely discussed within a range of disciplines, including theology, philosophy, anthropology and history. The origins of this discussion lie in the work of the French sociologist Marcel Mauss and his publication of *The Gift* in 1923. By gift, Mauss does not mean simply material presents that we exchange at Christmas. A gift can be a meal cooked for a family, attention given to a friend or a kiss given to a lover. Mauss's conclusions about the nature of gift giving are various and complex, but perhaps his most important point is that gifts involve reciprocity. Mauss's conclusion is that there is never a pure one-way gift. To put the matter simply, true gifts are exchanged. This idea will be explored in more detail below.

Another conclusion proffered by Mauss concerns the meaning of gifts. A simple example will help to explain his view. I have on my desk a fountain pen given to me by my brother when I was installed as a Canon of Durham Cathedral. It bears with it my brother's attention to my vocation as a writer and our shared liking for beautiful and traditional things. This means that the gift mediates a relationship and, crucially, bears meaning. The gift points beyond itself to a relationship and a shared life. The value of the pen is, in a sense, beyond measure by money because it is irreplaceable. I also have a computer on my desk which I bought to help me with my work. It is very useful and worth a few hundred pounds, but it doesn't bear any meaning; it is purely functional. It is entirely replaceable in a way that my pen is not. If life is a gift which bears with it something of the giver to us, the recipients, our life bears the divine with it. In other words, human life is sacred. For Christian life, the gift is given once at our conception and birth, but again at our re-birth in the waters of baptism. To live a Christian life is to understand one's life as a gift twice given. The second, new gift is the promise of an eternal share in the life of God. Creation is also a sacramental gift in the sense that it bears a meaning – it bears with it something of the giver, the creator, to the recipient, creation. This has enormous ethical consequences because, if we understand creation as gift, this means that the gift makes a moral claim on us. Creation is not composed of functional or useful objects, but creatures

which bear an *intrinsic* (not merely functional) significance beyond their use or exploitation by human beings. For Mauss, the gift not only signals a relationship; it is also imbued with something of the giver's character or power. He writes that, '...it follows that to make a gift of something to someone is to make a present of some part of oneself.' This means the significance and meaning of a gift – whether it be a material gift or the gift of one's time, attention and skill – can bear almost no relation to its monetary value. We treasure gifts that are of no economic value at all, precisely because of the relationship they mediate and the value of the person from whom they were received. The gift is not merely a useful object – it bears meaning.

Mauss is clear that gift-exchange is a more primitive and important social and economic foundation than barter. However, the reciprocity of gift giving is always under threat from the possibility that it will become merely market trade mediated by money. If I were to give you the gift of a birthday present, would you feel obliged to give me a birthday present in return? Would you not estimate the value of my 'gift' and buy a return 'gift' of roughly similar value? The category of gift could, therefore, be understood in terms of the market. The giving of a gift is always potentially as much about achieving a benefit for oneself as it is about conferring a good upon another. Even the charitable gift involves some kind of economic exchange: I give to Oxfam and, in return, receive a soothed conscience and the warm sense that I have benefitted another. So an important question emerges: can a true gift really ever be given, or are we always embroiled in trade? When I give to charity, am I 'buying' a soothed conscience and the sense that I have done all I can? More acutely for Christian theology, when I give the gift of myself in good deeds towards others, am I expecting some eschatological benefit in return?

The reciprocal nature of gift-giving seems to be particularly under threat in asymmetrical relationships, of which God's creative act *ex nihilo* seems to be the utterly irreducible and absolute example. Put simply, what can we possibly give to God that we have not already received from God? As St. Paul puts it, 'What do you have that you did not receive? And if you received it, why do you boast as if it were not a gift?' (1 Corinthians 4.7). The utter dependence of creation on God suggests the impossibility of reciprocity (Romans 11.34-35). While creation at every moment receives its very existence from God through participation in divine being, what could creatures possibly offer to God in return? In short, nothing. Despite this apparent impossibility, the scriptures attest to God's gift of a reciprocal relationship with him through which we share in the divine life. This is expressed, for example, in contemporary Eucharistic liturgies at the offertory when the following verses are recited, recalling the offering by King David on behalf of the people for the building of the Temple.

Yours, O Lord, are the greatness, the power, the glory, the victory, and the majesty; for all that is in the heavens and on the earth is yours; yours is the kingdom, O Lord, and you are exalted as head above all...*For all things come from you, and of your own have we given you.* (1 Chronicles 29.11 and 14).

To see the measure of the difficulty in establishing reciprocity even in creaturely relationships of profound asymmetry, consider a young child and her parents. A child has nothing of her own: shelter, food, education and clothing are all provided. The child has no economic power and is entirely dependent upon the daily gifts of her parents. At Christmas, the child's parents buy her a splendid present – a new bike. The child, however, has no means of buying her parents a gift; she has nothing that she has not already received. She receives the gift of her new bike with apparently no hope of reciprocating. Yet as she tears the paper from her new bike on Christmas morning, she turns to her parents, smiles and says, with joy and delight, "thank you". The smile and the "thank you" are the reciprocal gift. In other words, for the child's bike to be truly a gift, it must be received and

acknowledged as such, otherwise it becomes a mere object that is useful for getting to and from school. The exchange of gifts – the bike and the smile – cannot be reduced to trade because they are so utterly different in kind. Trade requires a degree of univocity – of sameness – in the goods traded so that they can be subject to a common currency called money. The bike may have cost £150, but the value of the child’s smile and “thank you” cannot be subject to that kind of measure. One cannot trade smiles and bikes. Whilst the child’s exchange with her parents is not trade (and we cannot imagine reducing our most important and intimate relationships to trade), it is an example of reciprocal exchange within a highly asymmetric relationship of dependence, one that points to the need for gifts to be recognised as gifts through thanksgiving, lest they become merely useful objects.

Nevertheless, reciprocal gifts, even within the most asymmetrical relations between creatures, are not the same as exchange within the asymmetrical relation between God and creation. God does not give a gift to some thing that is already present. According to creation *ex nihilo*, God gives the recipient being whereby it can be the recipient of further gifts: a gift of a gift to a gift. This leads the Anglican theologian John Milbank beyond the contrast between unilateral and reciprocal gifts to the paradox of ‘unilateral exchange’. There can only be reciprocity within God’s Trinitarian life or between creatures, whereas the ‘unilateral exchange’ between God and creation is only ever a matter of God’s influx by which creation is given the power of receiving and returning to God. This has an important theological consequence: God’s gifts to creation are never a matter of entitlement or right. Creation cannot make any claim on God because creation, in its entirety, is always in the mode of recipient. To be a creature is, first and foremost, before all else, to receive being. This is unilateral from God to creation. But to receive being truthfully, to be a creature, is to acknowledge the gift in thankfulness. Creation returns to God the gift of praise and thanksgiving and, in that return, receives itself most fully as created.

Conclusion

The natural theology of the early modern period to which Lynn White refers still dominates common understandings of ‘creation’. The Christian approach to creation is charged with regarding creatures as products of divine design with no intrinsic purpose or value. This is the position targeted by the New Atheists; they reject any notion of creation whilst maintaining that nature is indifferent, purposeless, and of no intrinsic value. All values are human and only human; they do not find their origin in God – the eternal Good itself – nor are they shared with wider nature. A recovery of the deeper Christian doctrine of creation reveals a very different picture.

- If creation is fundamentally a gift to itself, every creature has an *intrinsic* purpose and meaning, not simply a functional purpose in relation to human utility. A creature’s meaning is derived from its divine source. In other words, every creature is a *sign* of God’s beauty, truth and goodness.
- The value of creatures lies not simply in their exchange or trade value, but in their intrinsic value as gifts and signs of the divine.
- If human life is a gift twice given – the gift of life itself and the gift of life with God through baptism – this invests human life with moral and theological significance. Our first response, therefore, is gratitude.
- Every human life is a unique and irreplaceable gift which bears something of the giver – God – to the recipient – the human person. Yet the human person is not the only recipient of their life. Insofar as every recipient in turn gives themselves (e.g. in loving service), they are a gift to others.

The Marks of Mission

To proclaim the Good News of the Kingdom

The kingdom is not a political and cultural structure. It is a creation kingdom in which an original peace, devoid of exploitation, is re-established. This can be reaffirmed by understanding the intrinsic meaning and value of every creature as a gift to itself which mediates the divine goodness. Moreover, creation is a single gift (it is one) composed of an infinite variety of gifted creatures.

For in him all things in heaven and on earth were created, things visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or powers—all things have been created through him and for him. He himself is before all things, and in him all things hold together. *Colossians 1:16-17*

The Gospel is therefore Good News for creation, not simply humanity.

To teach, baptise and nurture new believers

To teach and baptise new believers is to teach them that their life is gift twice given. This inaugurates them into a pattern of relationships – a *koinonia* – which is the Church, the community of the gifted (Acts 2.1-13; 1 Corinthians 12; Ephesians 4.11). Within that pattern of relationships, only one is wholly definitive for every person: their relationship with God, their creator. Nevertheless, the Church is catholic in the sense that it draws all creation into this economy of gift exchange. A crucial ethical question arises for every baptised Christian: what do we give to creation, as well as receive from creation?

To respond to human need by loving service

If God's creation is fundamentally an economy of gift exchange which is made visible in the sacramental life of the Church, the response of the baptised Christian must be to ask 'to what will I give myself?' This may include giving oneself in loving service to nurturing the gift of the environment *as an aspect of the Church itself*.

To transform unjust structures of society, to challenge violence of every kind and pursue peace and reconciliation

The Christian doctrine of creation resists the classic modern dualism of culture (the human domain of freedom and creativity) and nature (the non-human domain of instinct and determination). The power of this dualism should not be underestimated: it structures the modern university into the disciplines of culture (the Humanities), the disciplines of nature (the natural sciences) and those which sit uncomfortably in the middle (the social sciences). The domains of nature and culture, which so often blend (is global warming a natural or cultural phenomenon?), are inextricably bound together in the category of 'creation'. The transformation of unjust structures and the challenge to violence cannot be restricted to the human cultural or political domain. Such transformation and the challenge to violence must reach every aspect of creation, including the natural environment.

To strive to safeguard the integrity of creation, and sustain and renew the life of the earth

Creation's 'integrity' refers to its integral unity. We cannot deal with the environmental crisis piecemeal. The call to safeguard the integrity of creation and renew the life of the earth is a challenge to the very form and structure of human life, not simply an aspect of human society.

Appendix

A Meditation on Genesis 41-49 and the Eucharistic Sacrifice: Agricultural Prudence and the Gift of Food

Joseph the dreamer was the favoured son of Jacob's old age. Joseph's eleven brothers, mired in jealousy, sold him into slavery in Egypt. He rose to prominence in Pharaoh's court because he was able to interpret Pharaoh's dreams. In these dreams God revealed that there would be seven years of plenty and seven years of famine. Pharaoh put Joseph in charge of agricultural and economic policy; reserves were accumulated during the seven years of plenty so that the lands could survive the seven years of famine. When the famine struck, people from far and wide were forced to travel to Egypt where Joseph sold them grain. Jacob and his remaining eleven sons were amongst those driven from Canaan to Egypt in search of food. They encountered their brother Joseph in the Egyptian court. He recognised them but they did not recognise him. Joseph's brothers were afraid that their plight was a direct consequence of what they had done to their brother and they fought amongst themselves whilst Joseph looked on. After many years, Joseph's brothers remained deeply guilty over what they had done to their brother; this affected all their relationships. Physical hunger drove Jacob's sons to seek food in Egypt, yet there is also an emotional, spiritual hunger lying at the heart of this story – a desire for reconciliation and peace.

Joseph shared food with his brothers – the grain that he had stored from the seven years of plenty. However, Joseph secretly gave back the money his brothers had brought to pay for the grain (Genesis 42.25). The food was therefore not traded: it was an unanticipated, secret gift from Joseph to his brothers. This becomes the meaning and the use of the food that Joseph had stored: a gift that eventually effected reconciliation with his brothers and the unity of what were to become the twelve tribes of Israel. Joseph's reconciling gift to his brothers was a result of his grateful and measured reception of the gifts of God's creation. The implication is that Joseph's gift – to coin Mauss's phrase cited above – bore something of himself to his brothers: his prudence and receptivity to God's will and providence, as well as his love for his brothers. Joseph's brothers returned with gifts (Genesis 43.11-15) and Joseph offered further gifts of food to his brothers (Genesis 43.16-25; 44.1). Reciprocity and communion were eventually restored in Jacob's blessing of his reconciled sons (Genesis 49.1-27).

In the story of Joseph, the meaning and value of food, the fruit of creation, was to be found in reconciliation and the celebration of communion. The offering of gifts as expressions of thanksgiving and penance with the purpose of effecting reconciliation with God was the basis of the ancient practice of sacrifice. In the Temple in Jerusalem, the priestly families offered gifts to God on behalf of supplicants for the restoration of communion. These took the form of grain, oil or incense as well as animal sacrifice. Rather than these sacrifices being 'given up' or lost (which is the modern colloquial sense of 'sacrifice'), they were often returned to the people, sometimes in the form of food. This established a reciprocal economy of the gift within the elaborate system of Temple rituals. Such reciprocity established the worshippers' fellowship with God: the worshipper was invited by divine graciousness to offer gifts to God which were returned to form a relational bond. Ritually, this was

expressed in the form of a meal shared in God's Temple using the gifts sacrificed on the altar. The return of sacrifices in the form of food, while certainly not an element of every Temple sacrifice, was nevertheless an important expression of fellowship with God and amongst God's people.

However, this reciprocity was broken by human sin, for sin is the refusal of God's gifts. Sacrifice was seemingly inadequate to renew humanity's intimate relationship with God. The author of the letter to the Hebrews puts it this way when writing of humanity's estrangement from the Holy of Holies, the inner sanctuary of God:

This is a symbol of the present time, during which gifts and sacrifices are offered that cannot perfect the conscience of the worshipper, but deal only with food and drink and various baptisms, regulations for the body imposed until the time comes to set things right. (Hebrews 9.9-10)

How can the relationship of reciprocal exchange with God be restored in the face of human sin? Because humanity has estranged itself from God, it is humanity which must offer sacrifice to God for the renewal of that reciprocal relation. However, any human action will be tainted by sin; it 'cannot perfect the conscience of the worshipper.' Only a divine action will be fully replete and perfect. Only a divine action can, once and for all, atone for human sin. The perfect once-and-for-all sacrifice can therefore only be offered by a divine humanity, namely the incarnation of God himself in the person of Jesus Christ. So it is Christ's sacrifice of himself on the cross, as both fully divine and fully human, which brings the salvation of humanity and the re-establishment of reciprocity with God.

The nature of Christ's sacrifice and atonement is, of course, a matter of considerable theological controversy. However, in contrast to later theories of the atonement that refer to civic legal practices of justice, punishment and recompense, the New Testament writers frequently refer to Christ's sacrifice with reference to the prevalent Jewish theology of sacrifice. For example, it has been argued that Christ's sacrifice is best understood through the narrative and practices of the Passover sacrifice of a lamb. I wish to discuss the suggestion that Christ's sacrifice is best understood in terms of the Jewish sin offering.

The ritual system of sin (or guilt) offerings is described particularly in Leviticus 6.8-7.10. These sacrifices involve flour, grain, oil and animals. Some elements are 'wholly burned' (Leviticus 6.8-23). However, there is an important element of reciprocity in these 'most holy' sacrifices. Whoever touches the flesh of the sacrificed animal in the ritual of the sin-offering is rendered holy and the animal is returned to the priests – but only to the priests – as food to be consumed in the holy place (Leviticus 6.24-30). Similarly, every grain offering baked in the oven is to be returned to the priest (Leviticus 7.9). However, 'every other grain offering, mixed with oil or dry, shall belong to all the sons of Aaron equally.' (Leviticus 7.10). As sacrificial gifts are offered to God for atonement following the sin of the people, these are returned to the people for their nourishment. Typically, however, the reciprocity is enjoyed by the priests – they receive back the flesh of the animal of the sin-offering and guilt-offering, as well as the grain-offering.

The letter to the Hebrews describes these sacrifices, which are offered year after year, as 'only a shadow of the good things to come.' (Hebrews 10.1). Christ's sacrifice is interpreted as the fulfilment of Levitical sacrifice. He is a priest according to the order of Melchizedek who, in being replete and without sin, offers himself not over and over again, but 'once for all' (Hebrews 10.10). He is both priest and victim while also standing in our place. Christ represents all of humanity, yet this is, at one

and the same time, the sacrifice of God. However, how is this sacrifice rendered reciprocal? In what sense is the sacrificial gift of Christ offered to the Father returned to the people? Is there any way in which, like the sin-offering, guilt-offering and grain-offering described in Leviticus, the sacrifice of Christ is returned to the people as food? Is a relation of ‘unilateral exchange’ between creation and God restored? The sacrificial offering of Christ, who as sinless nevertheless represents every sinner, is returned to the people as food in the Eucharist in the form of the body and blood of the victim and priest (1 Corinthians 10.16). Whereas the reciprocity of the sin offering was enjoyed particularly by Levitical priests, now the Church is ‘a royal priesthood’ (1 Peter 2.9-10) so everyone partakes in the reciprocity of Christ’s gift of himself: the people of God are a priestly people in receiving the gifts of Christ’s once-and-for-all sacrifice in the Eucharist, this royal priesthood being made visible through the apostolic order of priests who preside at Christ’s meal.

The Eucharist bears further meaning: it is also eschatological as an anticipation of the wedding feast of the Lamb. Meanwhile, the sacrificial offering of Christ on the cross is the manifestation of the eternal offering of the Son to the Father in the Holy Spirit. In other words, the sacrificial offering of Christ is not something that just happens to take place in first century Palestine as a reaction to human sin; it belongs to very Trinitarian life of God. Refracted through human sin and violence, Christ’s obedient gift becomes bloody and violent. It is by means of the Eucharistic sacrificial gift that we are incorporated into the perfect sacrifice of Christ on the cross and the eschatological banquet of heaven, both of which are participations in the eternal reciprocity of the Trinity as the Son eternally offers himself to the Father in the Holy Spirit.

This understanding of the Eucharistic sacrifice does not involve the external mimicking of divine gratuity, as if we witness God’s generosity at a distance and set about copying him. Rather, we are drawn into the infinitely merciful reciprocity of donation that is the divine life. This is the gracious sharing in the overflow of glory that the Father and the Son eternally exchange in the Spirit. By means of the return of Christ, the sacrificial victim and priest, as food in the Eucharist, we enter into the divine life – the divine economy of reciprocated gifts – to feast at the table of the Lord.

The Eucharist is therefore about the ultimate meaning and value of food. It is the providential gift of God for the sustenance of his creatures and the means of communion. Through a sacrificial meal, God restores his people to the divine economy of reciprocated gifts by the offering of his own life as our food: the body and blood of Christ. This points to the sacred nature of food as the fruit of God’s creation and the means of communion. In this context, it is striking that one of the most damaging practices for our environment is the commodification and waste of food which simultaneously renders large portions of the world’s population without enough to eat. The food that found its meaning and value in reconciliation and communion in the story of Joseph and Christ’s gift of the Eucharist is now a locus of separation and division in the contemporary world.

It is particularly striking that in many religious communities, food – which is both cultural and natural – is never treated as a mere commodity but is received thankfully as a gift. Moreover, as we have seen, food bears meaning in liturgical practice and is not merely useful for the satiation of the body. The Eucharist, suffused with the imagery of the gift of Christ’s body for the salvation of the world, is about the meaning of the food we receive as God’s gift in creation. The meaning and purpose of food for the whole created order is communion and fellowship, including the restoration of reciprocal relationships of love that have been broken by sin. As the psalmist writes, ‘The eyes of all look to you, and you give them their food in due season.’ (Psalm 145.15).

As we have seen, God's gift of creation bears 'something of the giver to the recipient'. God does not offer in creation an object for our use, a commodity for our consumption or a domain for our exploitation. God does not offer in creation simply a manifestation of his own power that in turn invites a manifestation of human power. God offers in creation nothing less than his own gratuity. In other words, creation is the gift of a participation in the divine life. As John Milbank puts it, 'The Creature only is, as manifesting the divine glory, as acknowledging its own nullity and reflected brilliance. To be, it entirely honours God, which means it returns to him an unlimited, never paid-back debt.' This is to say that what creatures receive from God – our very existence – could never be subject to a common measure with what creatures return to God. What creatures offer to God is honour and thankfulness by being most fully themselves as they have been gifted that nature by God. God grants to humanity, made in his image and likeness, the gift of entering his life by sharing in the eternal reciprocity of the Trinity through the offering of gifts, supremely the bread and wine of the Eucharist. In turn, this has implications for the meaning of the food given through the earth.

In contrast to this language of creation as gift, we live in a culture saturated in the language of the market and rights. In this context, a gift becomes merely an expression of the human will. Yet Christian theology does not sanction gifts simply as acts of the benevolent human will which copies a benevolent divine will. Instead, it has an ontology of gift grounded in the doctrine of creation. Existence itself is gift. What it is to be a creature is to receive the gift of existence with thanksgiving. God does not happen to be generous by an act of will; God is graciousness and creation is the expression of that eternal benevolence. As Nicholas Lash puts it:

God's utterance lovingly gives life; gives all life, all unfailing freshness; gives only life, and peace, and love, and beauty, harmony and joy. And the life God gives is nothing other, nothing less, than God's own self. Life is God, given.