

A close-up photograph of a pair of hands, likely belonging to an older person, gently cupping a small, vibrant green tree. The tree has a thick, gnarled trunk and dense, needle-like foliage. The soil is dark and rich, and the hands are positioned to support the base of the tree. The background is dark and out of focus, emphasizing the hands and the tree.

Week One

**THE HOPE OF
SOMETHING NEW**

*A*nd it was good



THE HOPE OF SOMETHING NEW

The life and ministry of Jesus Christ impacts on creation, and offers us a vision of 'new creation.'

Bible Exploration

Isaiah 11.1-9

Reading the Book of Isaiah immediately faces us with the dark history of the Middle East in the eighth to the sixth centuries BC. The story of God's people that it tells was forged amid the dominance of the 'world powers' of the day, the elephant-sized empires of Assyria and Babylonia, renowned for their brutality. The people of small nation states, such as Israel and Judah, were like ants, easily exploited or trodden down.

Many chapters in Isaiah reflect this darkness and the suffering of the people. Yet from time to time – as here in chapter 11 – we are given a glimmer of something very different, a vision of the world as God wants it to be. The harmony that this chapter speaks of is not simply a harmony between the warring parties of humanity, but extends to and transforms the entire creation, even those creatures traditionally most hostile to each other.

This work of transformation is linked to the 'branch' that will come 'out from the stump of Jesse', (*Isaiah 11.1*) the royal House of David which ruled in Jerusalem until the people were exiled in 587 BC. Christians have seen these words as reflecting the life and ministry of Jesus Christ, born of the family of David, Jesse's son. (*cf Matthew 1.6, Romans 1.3*).

One of the most powerful images and metaphors used in the Book of Isaiah to describe the situation of God's people throughout the Book of Isaiah is that of a 'tree'. Cut down to a stump it may be (*Isaiah 6.13; 11.1*) or burnt to a cinder (*Isaiah 11.1*) after a bushfire (*Isaiah 10*). Yet, like the olive trees of Israel/Palestine or Australian gums, which sprout new stems out of ancient roots, this tree

will grow again from **Jesse's stump** even more abundantly, so that eventually the whole people can be described as 'oaks of righteousness, the planting of the Lord.' (*Isaiah 61.3*)

Mark 1.9-15

These verses from the beginning of Mark's Gospel tell of Jesus' baptism and wilderness experience and are often read at the beginning of Lent. Yet we are so familiar with the account of Jesus' temptations in Matthew and Luke, that it is sometimes difficult to read Mark's account without trying to fill it out from the other gospels. But Mark's brief, sharp verses have an important message to share in their own right.

First the baptism of Jesus, in which water and the Spirit play prominent parts, recalls the story of creation through water and the Spirit told in Genesis 1. However, this '**new creation**' offered at the beginning of Jesus' ministry goes further. In Genesis, God's creative work proceeded by establishing a series of boundaries separating light and dark, sky and earth, sea and land, humankind and other creatures. By contrast Mark 1.10 tells us of heavens '**torn open**' to enable the Kingdom of God to '**come near**' (*Mark 1.15*). Also, Jesus' experience in the wilderness '**with the wild beasts**' which follows '**immediately**' after his baptism offers us a picture of what the Kingdom of God, this new creation, might mean.

Reflection

There is a painting by the artist Stanley Spencer called 'The Scorpion', one of a series, which were together called 'Christ in the Wilderness'. The paintings '*relocate moments from the teaching ministry of Jesus back into the desert, as though they had all flowed out of that formative wilderness experience.*

"The Scorpion" illustrates the symbolism of wild beasts, which represents a tension between blood lust and the harmony of paradise regained, and that tension Jesus alludes to as the struggle between the hiddenness of the Kingdom of God and the power and presence of its reality.

... Jesus sits on the ground, holding in cupped hands an angry scorpion. He looks at this little creature with compassion and acceptance, knowing that its nature is to inflict deadly pain when it is threatened.



Christ in the Wilderness, the scorpion
©The Estate of Stanley Spencer 2011. All rights reserved. DACS
"Part of the State Art Collection at the Art Gallery of Western Australia."

The scorpion is a sign of the destructive force of the natural world. But the holding of it by Jesus suggests something else. Divine love consumes this raging force and will bear its pain. Out of that bearing divine love will reveal the peace of the Kingdom of heaven that lies hidden within love's mysterious ways.' (Martin Warner)

Reading the Bible with Anglicans around the World

One of the parts of the Communion which has already engaged with **The Bible in the Life of the Church** project is the Episcopal Church of Sudan.

Sudan was a country torn by civil war over several decades (it has now become two independent states) and many of the Christians of South Sudan had to flee as refugees – taking shelter for weeks or months in the jungle. Their experiences of living as refugees have influenced how they read the Bible.

In a leadership seminar for Anglican clergy of Sudan held in July 2010, and linked to the project, a number of principles for reading the Bible were identified.

'A key one was that the Bible is read in contemporary context. The Bible is constantly related to many aspects of Sudanese life: social, economic, and political history (especially the recent experience of war), African Traditional Religion, the natural world and the rich relationship with it which has been characteristic of village life through the generations.

One of the important findings was the extent to which traditional practices are congruent with the values that the Bible upholds. For example, humans are meant to have a genuine relationship with animals (as inferred from Adam's naming of the animals in Genesis 2), a value that was much better honoured by non-Christians in the village than it is now by Christians in the city (where, for instance, donkeys are worked without sufficient care). People spoke with great sensitivity about the problem of disharmony between people and animals that Genesis represents as an effect of "the fall": How can we live in harmony with snakes, scorpions, and (especially) the Nile leopard?

Many participants knew stories of snakes allowing themselves to be used as pillows by people fleeing into the bush during the war, but they said that would no longer happen, that snakes are again fearful of people. Bishop Hilary of Malakal said that when they have a rat infestation in their house, the first thing they do is pray that they may see any disharmony in their immediate social world – and then they stop up the holes!

Another principle agreed by participants in the seminar is that the Bible is the best commentary on itself, and biblical scholarship should be read critically and selectively, according to how far it accords with the basic pre-suppositions of biblical faith. For example, commentators who exclude the possibility of miracles a priori should not be trusted...'(Ellen Davis)

Questions for Discussion

1. What do you understand by 'new creation'? How do you understand the hope expressed in Isaiah for the harmony of all creatures? How far does your understanding about 'new creation' link to the way you read the Bible? In what ways does the experience of Christians in the Sudan inform your understanding?
2. In what ways do you think that the hope for a 'new creation' is linked to the life and ministry of Jesus Christ (*cf 2 Corinthians 5: 14-17*)? What does this suggest about the relationship between the Old Testament and the New?
3. What does it mean for you to read these biblical passages as Anglicans in your contemporary context?
4. What do you think about the comment made by Anglicans in Sudan – that biblical commentators who exclude the possibility of miracles should not be trusted?



Sharing our Insights

What do you want to share with fellow Anglicans as a result of your study and discussion?



Are there comments you wish to feed back into the Bible project? You may wish to do this directly via the Anglican Communion website or email them to the Bible project coordinator. For further details turn to this section in Week Five.

Closing Prayer

Let us encourage our hearts in the hope of God
Who once breathed the breath of life into the human body.
God's ears are open to prayers;
The Creator of humankind is watching;
The Lord reigns from his high place, seeing the souls of those who die.
Turn your ears to us: upon whom else can we call?
Is it not you alone, O God? Let us be branches of your Son.

*(Mary Alueel Garang,
Episcopalian Christian of the Diocese of Bor, Sudan)*

