

## Worshipping Evolution's God

© Rev Dr Jason John, who really did write it in 2008.

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Works without full references in this book are fully referenced in the thesis from which some of it is derived, which is available at <http://ecofaith.org/articles/>

### **Acknowledgments**

To all the microbes which first started producing oxygen, and to my ancestors who worked out how to breathe it. This book would not have been possible without you!

More recently, the Adelaide Ecofaith Community was the community in which most of these thoughts were road tested. Coincidentally, today is my last day as minister of that community before I move interstate. What a beautiful community, about whom at this very moment words fail me.

A part of that community which I am not leaving behind is my sons; Gabriel and Finn. Indeed, they have already moved! I cannot wait to see them again tomorrow and continue to be part of the miracle that is their lives.

Also already gone ahead is Toni. A fitting metaphor. I know how to talk about God being within us, Toni *knows* that God is within us. I am aching to see you tomorrow.

I acknowledge that I am writing this on the land of the Kurna and their ancestors, whose life in and with the Spirit was assaulted so violently centuries ago, for which our government has finally started the process of apologising. I acknowledge the marsupials and other animals who roamed for millions of years before any humans arrived, who deserve an apology from many of our ancestors, but will probably never get one.

Sinead O'Connor provided most of the soundtrack for the writing of this book. Tragically, I got a job which started the day after her Brisbane concert, so Finn ended up going with Toni. I did get a t-shirt, which I'm wearing now as it happens, as I make the final final changes to this work.

And I acknowledge the God who is beyond our imagining and limits to control, yet who became one with us, perhaps even one of us, and remains here, within and amongst us.

I acknowledge that this book is a step on the pilgrimage, not a final resting place. I pray that it is useful in your desire to know this God, in whom we live and move and have our being, more fully. Enjoy!

What does it mean for humans to accept that we are not the centre of life, but continue to worship God in a tradition which has assumed that we are? How do we worship the God of this *evolving* life? A God who is ancient. Personal but not human. As much female as male. The God who is beyond us, became one with us (and, many Christians claim, one of us), and who remains within and amongst us?

This is the kind of understanding of God which comes to us through a serious engagement with the new stories about the origins and nature of creation. These new stories are based on the observations of cosmologists, evolutionists and ecologists, for example. What do these new creation stories mean for our understanding of God, ourselves and our place in the world? How do they nurture and shape us through worship?

These questions confront people of all religious traditions. This book might be of some use to you whatever your tradition, especially if you are a Jew or Muslim. It is, however, written within the Christian tradition: by me, a minister in the Uniting Church in Australia, with an honours degree in zoology, a postgraduate degree in environmental studies, and a PhD on the implications of the science stories about creation for the Christian story.

After finishing the PhD, I was privileged to become the ecominister at Scots Church in Adelaide, which created a range of opportunities to explore how a rather esoteric PhD could be of use, and even exciting, for a general audience. Probably the longest lasting legacy of that ministry will be the ecofaith worshipping community, which meets in Botanic Park, and much of this book was originally worked through with that wonderful bunch of people over two years. You can find out more about them at <http://ecofaith.org>

This book starts with the ritual which I created for the first six weeks of the community's life, with a brief commentary on the reasons for each element. Then follows the first five weeks of reflections written for that group, plus some of the themes we explored later which seem to be somewhat unique, and therefore worth turning more trees into paper to record.

Whether you are reading this for your own faith journey, or to resource a community, or perhaps to get ideas for starting one, I hope you find it useful and at times entertaining. I would love to hear your thoughts on its strengths and weaknesses, and your thoughts on any of the other resources at [ecofaith.org](http://ecofaith.org). If you want to reproduce anything (with acknowledgment), go for it!

Have a wonder-full day, Jason.

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## The first ecofaith ritual

Ritual	Comment
<p><b>Call to worship</b></p> <p>The Aboriginal nations lived here with the Creator for tens of thousands of years before Abraham was even born. God was here long before even them; within and amongst the creatures of Australia.</p> <p>So come you creatures of Australia! Open your ears, eyes, noses, tongues and touch to the God of life- around, amongst and within you.</p>	<p>All Australian Christianity must deal with the existence of humans whose religion predates Jesus' birth by tens of thousands of years. Evolution further shrinks the Christian story (and human story) into a tiny part of the story of God and life. God's experience of life, and love of life, predates humanity by billions of years. God is not human!</p>
<p><b>Opening prayer</b></p> <p>God of 70,000, million million million stars and countless planets.            We give thanks for your interest in ours.            God of all the millions of species here around us,            We give thanks for your interest in ours.</p> <p>You are welcome here. We pray for a sense of your presence here amongst us, and an openness to what you have to say to us this morning.</p>	<p>We are a small story of life on our planet, and our planet is a small part of the story of God and the universe. God is way out there beyond us and our control or comprehension, <i>and also</i> right here with us. Cosmology humbles us, our experience reassures us.</p>
<p><b>Meditation</b></p> <p><b>“God is love,</b> (hands at sternum, reach up, around, down and back in a heart shape)  <b>the world is loved,</b> (hands out and around in a horizontal circle, back to heart)  <b>I am loved,</b> (hands stay on heart)  <b>help me love</b> (hands from heart, outwards, fingers spread)</p>	<p>Yeeesh! Combining movement with prayer is a bit out there for this Anglo private school boy! But after six years of God school I had to admit that, once you let yourself move into it, and forget about who might be walking past in the park, it does engage us in prayer at a deep level.</p>

<p><b>Welcome to the group</b></p>	
<p><b>Aboriginal Calendar</b></p> <p>We are between Wullutti and Woltatti- a time when animals are breeding, grass trees flowering, the Southeaster winds and sea breezes beginning to give way to the Northerlies, and there is plenty of fish and meat.</p>	<p>Why do we cling to a four season calendar in Australia? We followed a Kurna calendar. Aboriginal calendars start when the season starts, not a specified day, so we had to be in tune with actual season in the park to note the transitions. I would have loved to create our own calendar, which reflected all the introduced plants where we worship as well as the Kurna six season year. Time of bindies. Time of rosella eggs etc.</p>
<p><b>“Intercession”</b></p> <p>God hear our prayers, and speak to us of the North (arms open in an embrace, facing North. Then turn West, South, East.)          Hold hands as a group- prayers for the group (60 seconds)          Hold own heart, prayers for self (60s)</p>	<p>More prayer which uses and engages us with the environment in which we worship. We went on to use the “four directions” in all kinds of ways. See later in the book.</p>
<p><b>A reading of some kind</b></p>	<p>Often a children’s book, to include them and to help adults engage at a different, usually more emotional, level.</p>
<p><b>Five-ish minute “input”</b></p> <p>These reflections are included in the next section. The new creation stories; Image of God; Dominion; The “Fall”; Original Sin or Original Need?</p>	<p>Input was kept to 5-10 mins so that even non-evolutionists could engage in the rest of the worship without being too overwhelmed, and to maximise the time for discussion.</p>

<p><b>A moment of silence</b> pondering or listening to the sounds around us</p>	<p>It's never silent in a park. This should be relabelled: <i>A moment of humans shutting up.</i></p>
<p><b>Meditation 2</b></p> <p>Wander off around garden to pray for ten minutes, and collect something (a leaf, fallen flower, stick, rock) which strikes your eye to bring back to the group.</p> <p>Go around circle reflecting on it</p> <p>Put object in centre. Say your name and either: what brings you to the city regularly, what brought you here, what does the object mean/why did you pick that object? Where did you hear about us?</p>	<p>The meditative wander, and the use of objects, created some non-rational stimulation, and was a very rich source of reflection.</p> <p>If people didn't want to share deeply, they had the option of just saying their name and something easy. Deep sharing is an invitation not an embarrassing requirement. We found, though, that there was <i>a lot</i> of it, which was great.</p>
<p><b>More prayer</b></p> <p>Another minute of silent prayer for the group, now we know a tiny bit more about each other.</p>	<p>The above walking prayer, and this silent prayer, give space for people to relate to God and Jesus as <i>they</i> know them.</p>
<p><b>Sending out</b></p> <p>A God who is unseen, unheard, untouched, unsmelt and untasted is no God to us. So this week let us have ears to hear, eyes to see, and let us taste and see that God is good.</p> <p>Go in peace as part of life, into the loving presence of the God of life- beyond us, one with us/of us, amongst and within us.</p>	<p>We can find God anytime, not just Sunday mornings. If God is in all and through all, if life is the image of God (see below), then we should be able to experience God everywhere.</p> <p>“one with us” includes but doesn't require Trinitarian faith. Using “who became one of us” is more strongly Trinitarian, but with more appropriate labels.</p>

I repeated the above ritual pretty closely for six weeks. Since the environment, and the people, and the input changed, I wanted to keep something a bit constant and familiar, as well as having a good chance to see if it worked or not.

The six input sessions were designed to work as a self contained crash course on some of the implications of the science creation stories for the Christian story, and for people's own faith stories. I have only slightly padded and reworked them here. They are all based on much longer sections in my thesis, and on longer talks I've done elsewhere.

Week one sets the context, in an appallingly brief retelling of the insights of cosmology and evolution. I then revisit - and largely reject - the idea that humans are created in the image of God, that we are given dominion over Earth, and that we are responsible for any kind of fall. I suggest replacing the idea of original sin (now long rejected by much of the church anyway) with the more factually based idea of original need. Finally, in week six, I invited participants to share what they their understanding of Jesus, and whether it had been affected by all we had shared in the previous five weeks.

Now, dear reader, you have a choice to make. If you would like a one page summary of the entire 15 billion year story of evolution, read on. If you have the time and inclination to read a fuller account, skip ahead to page 9.

## **Our new creation stories (a snippet)**

When I sat on the beach on Stradbroke Island towards the start of my PhD, I found myself wondering whether there were more grains of sand on that enormous beach, or stars in the universe. As it turns out the comparison isn't even close. You would have to gather every grain of sand on *every* beach and *every* desert on the entire planet to have as many grains as there are stars in the observable universe: about 70,000 million, million, million of them!

By contrast, the writer of Psalm 8, who had a faith crisis when he gazed to the heavens, could see about 2000 with his eye.

So the one idea from cosmology I'd like to get across is that the universe is inconceivably big, something we realised only recently. Until 1924 we thought the Milky Way was the entire universe, not one of millions of galaxies. If you think of all of those stars and their planets, then it seems far more likely than not that life exists elsewhere in the galaxy. God's

relationship with life is not confined to Earth. But we will probably never meet any of those life forms because of the distances involved. Most of God's experience of life remains totally beyond our knowing. Earth is a *tiny* part of the universe, and probably a tiny part of the story of God and life.

Switching to Earth, we see that humans are only a tiny part of the story of life even just on this one planet.

If we had a ruler, and the entire existence of our species was represented by just *one centimetre*, then we would need:

18 cm to tell the story of the genus *Homo*

60cm to tell the story of hominid evolution

6.5m for the story of the "age of mammals" (from when the dinosaurs died out and mammals started to grow from rat like critters into all we see today)

385 metres to tell the story of all life on Earth

probably up to 1km for the story of life in the universe *so far*

7000 km for the whole future story of life in the universe

The story of human spirituality would take up one millimetre, and the story from Jesus' birth until today about 1/20 th of 1mm.

The human story is a miniscule part of the story of life on Earth, and especially in the universe, and the Christian story is a tiny, tiny fraction of the human story. And the story will probably go on long after humans, and this entire planet, disappear.

By "the human story," I do not mean the story of our species: *Homo sapiens*. As recently as 30-50,000 years ago, when our species had made its way to Australia, there were three other species of humans that we know of. The Neanderthals most of us have heard of. You may have read in 2002 that the remains of a hobbit sized human species was discovered in Indonesia. If the "upright humans", *Homo erectus*, were still alive today, they would probably be recognised as human. Which raises an interesting thought: If we do want to claim that humans were created in the image of God, which humans would we be talking about?

These are just a few highlights of the creation stories coming to us from the sciences, which shape my thinking about the Christian story. If you have now decided that you would like the fuller account, read on. Otherwise, skip ahead to page 22.

## Our new creation stories: the fuller account

Two years ago I sat on a beach on Stradbroke Island wondering if there were as many stars in the universe as there were grains of sand on that beach. Just that *one* beach. Even that seemingly impossibly large number was orders of magnitude too little. There are ten times more stars in the observable universe than there are grains of sand on the *entire* Earth, including beaches *and* deserts- some 70,000,000,000,000,000,000 (seventy septillion) of them. It seems that life is likely to exist elsewhere in the universe, but we will never see any of it. Life in the rest of the universe may be three times older than life on Earth, and may continue for up to another hundred *trillion* years. Earth will be consumed by our Sun in just a few billion years time. Earth and all the life on it is a teeny tiny itty bit flash in the Creator's pan.

What if we switch our focus to Earth, and forget about all the other grains of sand? Life on Earth appeared almost four billion years ago (bya). Muscled invertebrates appear in the fossil record about 550 million years ago (mya). The first vertebrates did not leave the oceans until 320 mya, and mammals only became a significant force on the planet following the extinction of the dinosaurs 65 mya. The first hominids may have appeared about seven million years ago, and the first representatives of the genus *Homo* appeared perhaps 2.4 mya. A form of *Homo sapiens* (that's us) appear in the fossil record about 400,000 years ago in Africa, Europe and Asia, and modern forms approximately 100,000 years ago. We modern humans coexisted with at least two other species of *Homo*: *H. neanderthalensis* and *H. erectus*, until at least 30,000 and 27,000 years ago respectively. In 2004 a species of pygmy human was discovered in Indonesia, and named *H. floresiensis*. It existed about 18,000 years ago, and is thought to have evolved from *H. erectus*. So 30-50,000 years ago there were *four* human species in existence: *Homo sapiens*, *neanderthalensis*, *floresiensis* and possibly *erectus*. The human tree is a bush.

How does our story compare to the size of the story of Life on Earth? If we could fit the whole story of our entire species into one centimetre on a ruler, then the story of the other humans would occupy about 18cm. The story of the "age of mammals," the time since the dinosaurs were wiped out would be 650 cm, and the beginning of life on Earth would be plotted 385 metres away! It is sobering to realise that the entire history of Christianity would occupy just one twentieth of one millimetre (about a tenth of a full-stop on this page).

Richard Dawkins attempts to convey the history of life on Earth as an arm span. If life begins at the left finger tip, then dinosaurs appear on the palm of the right hand, and go extinct at the last finger joint. Mammals then become

the dominant terrestrial vertebrate, with the entire existence of *Homo* fitting in a nail clipping, and all recorded human history amounting to the dust of a single nail file stroke. Ernst Mayr represents the history of life as a calendar year, in which mammals arrive on December 12<sup>th</sup>, Hominids at 10am New Year's Eve, and *H. sapiens* at 11:56:30.

Evolutionists seem to agree that individual life forms (let's say animals) are not the only thing upon which natural selection acts. Most notably, Dawkins and others argue that it is genes, rather than the animals they produce, which are the true units of selection. The idea that other sorts of things can be selected, like species, is not well accepted, except in the special case of small groups of very social animals (like us), where in the short term different 'cultures' give the group a greater chance of survival than other groups which do things differently. This was probably very important in our recent history during the ice ages, when many human groups perished.

Although natural selection is seen by most to be the driving force of evolution, all agree that it is limited, or constrained at any one point in time. It cannot create perfectly adapted animals, but "chooses" from what it has to work with. It is not possible for natural selection to "choose" a feature for an animal now if it is disadvantageous, even though it would be handy in the future. That is, *evolution has no overall direction*.

Natural selection cannot therefore be aimed at producing humans, or consciousness, or anything much at all. Even if it was purposeful, it would be constantly confounded by chance events, like volcanic eruptions and comet strikes. These have had a *massive* impact upon life on Earth, undoing many of natural selection's "plans," if it had any. Which, just to repeat, it doesn't.

The final point to make about the mechanisms of evolution is that evolution is not only driven by genetic mutation. Another major factor is the merging together of the genes of separate organisms into new creatures, a process called symbiogenesis. For example, the mitochondria found in every one of our cells derive from a free living ancestor, which was swallowed by a predator, but for some reason not digested. Together, they went on to form the first eukaryotic cells from which all animals and complex plants derive.

Humans have about a hundred genes which were originally bacterial, and about ten percent of our dry body weight is not actually "us", but all the other little greebies that live in and on us- some friendly, others not. If I could magically remove every cell from your body which came directly from your

parents' sperm and egg, about ten percent of you would be left- and collapse into a pile of billions of bacteria and viruses, and possibly dozens to millions of worms- ew!

Where does God fit into this process? Well known authors like Stephen J Gould, Richard Dawkins, Lynn Margulis & Dorian Sagan, and Ernst Mayr differ in their acceptance of the possibility of God's existence. They agree, however, that there is *no evidence* of an external force guiding or constraining the path of evolution. *So God may exist, but God is not pushing life into any particular shapes, including our shape.* Humans are not, it seems, an inevitable product of evolution.

Of all the other fascinating elements of the evolutionary story, I will take time for just two more here. The first is sex, the second is violence.

Until the churches come to grips with the ancient, evolutionary origins of gender, sex and sexuality, we will never have a constructive discussion about them. Every public conversation about sexuality in my church, the Uniting Church, almost instantly reduces to a debate about whether we should keep allowing gays and lesbians to be ordained. Even that narrow debate would be helped by the sciences. But I dream of a wide ranging discussion about what it means to be a sexual person, and to have sex, in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

Sex *evolved*, it is not a static, divine creation. It evolved as a survival strategy against pathogens, and it was a *long* road to human heterosexuality. The first sex was homosexual, or unisexual, since gender itself only came along later. Since the arrival of gender (which, out of interest, operates the opposite in mammals to the way it does in birds, where males are ZZ and females ZY) just about every form of sex than can happen, has happened, and not just amongst non-humans.

None of which tells us what our sexual ethic should be, but all of which undermines any attempt to build that ethic on a static view of the world in which God suddenly and miraculously created heterosexuality for all creatures, and monogamous relationships for humans. The many forms of human marriage *eventually* arose, not because God created them or "gave" them to us, but in response to the need to grapple with the concept of property (unheard of for most of human history) and access to resources, especially land. So marriage is a strategy, not a divine command, yet as Christians we still need to work out how to live out this strategy in response to Jesus' commands to love God and our neighbour and ourselves. *This*

would make for a fruitful debate.

I also want to stress that evolution completely destroys the ridiculous and vile suggestion that God made women suffer and even die in childbirth because Eve ate some fruit, or because of some other metaphorical human rebellion.

Squeezing a human head through a vagina is an often painful, sometimes deadly business, but not because God is a vindictive bastard who is indifferent to our pain. It is because we are smart, and bipedal. Indeed, to get the heads out at all human babies are born very premature compared to other primates.

Biologically, human babies should stay in the womb for about *two years*. They would then, like other primates, be able to walk and feed themselves at birth. They may even be able to assist in their own delivery, just like some monkey babies do, pulling themselves out once their head and arms are free.

Leaving sex for the moment, let's turn to another great human preoccupation: violence and its causes. Are we by nature violent, self centred animals? Do we only care for others because we need them in some way? Are our apparently loving and charitable actions merely self delusions, a thin mask disguising our selfish nature? If there is such a thing as a truly "good" action, is this a product of evolution, or victory over our selfish evolutionary instincts? Is Christian morality at war with our genes? Can we only do good if God somehow overpowers us and does good through us, in victory over this devilish thing called evolution?

Richard Dawkins seems to think so, minus the God bits. Popular misinterpreters of his "selfish gene" theory go even further. Even most early primate studies suggested that, since our chimpanzee relatives are apparently inherently violent, so, probably, are we.

Fortunately, recent primate studies relieve us of the view that humans (especially males) are inherently violent. We can be particularly glad for the discovery of the Bonobo, a close relative of the chimpanzee, who lives in a different environment and so tends to use fun ways (like sex) to resolve disputes and keep the group together. As Frans de Waal, a primatologist, says,

"Had bonobos been known earlier, reconstructions of human evolution might have emphasized sexual relations, equality between males and females, and the origin of the family, instead of war, hunting, tool technology, and other masculine fortes."

Mary Clark, once biologist and now conflict resolution trainer, agrees with de Waal that humans are not inherently violent. Violence emerges when we fail to cope with extremely stressful situations, and our *true* basic drives are not met. These basic drives, when met, lead us to naturally “moral” actions. So we have inherent needs, or drives, but not an inherent inclination to violence or other dysfunctional behaviour.

The first inherent drive is for *bondedness*, or relationships. This begins at birth, with our absolute dependence on bondedness to our mother, then hopefully father, and then family and friends, for survival. In tension with this is our innate drive for *autonomy*. Autonomy is not isolation, but having our own identifiable place within the community, being able to contribute to the life of the community freely and creatively. To alleviate the conflicts between bonding to others and wanting our own identity amongst them, our expanding brain and developing language helped create increasingly complex *meaning systems* (culture).

Clark thinks that the drive for bondedness and autonomy are shared by primates, whilst the desire for meaning appears to be a human phenomenon, though perhaps chimps have it a bit. Personally, I would expect the drive for bondedness to exist in *any* organism which relies on parental care, and the drive for autonomy to exist at the very least in social mammals. So it should include dogs, chickens, and even cats, despite what the Hallmark cards say about them. Perhaps dogs prioritise bondedness and cats autonomy.

All of these drives, for most of human history, have been pursued in small, fairly stable communities of hunter gatherer humans. Humans had few if any possessions to worry about protecting from others. They were immersed in *the rest of life*, to the point where people like Edward Wilson suggest that we now *need* this contact with complex life systems in order to maintain our psychological health. Remember, our brains now are the same as our ancestors of 100,000 years ago, whereas basic agriculture is only 10,000 years old. Most of “our” life has been nomadic, possession free, and largely without even language. If you now live in a different environment, you might expect to have trouble meeting your inherent drives.

I bet, like me, you don’t have much real contact with the rest of life. You might bush walk occasionally. Grow a few veges. Have a pet. Churches seem to like pets and even have quaint blessing ceremonies every now and then, the

best was held by the Vicar of Dibley.

Paul Shepard confronts our comfy relationship with our nice little pets with the claim that they are no more than enslaved freaks. He sees the pet industry as the end of our respect for the Wild Other. We have turned wolves (which scared and hunted us) into that goggle eyed, foetus of a dog called a chiuwawa.

Most of us who read this are no longer hunters but purchasers, taking home pre-wrapped meat. We have no idea how to gather tubers, or when. It is always potato season in a supermarket. As we control and confine and domesticate the Wild Other, we do the same to ourselves and our spirituality. As we have tamed life, or our images of life, so we have tamed our image of God.

We need to remember a key fact which our pets and supermarkets tend to make us forget- the *wild Otherness of life*. Life does not revolve around us. God's relationship with life does not revolve around us. *God, the Wild Other*, does not revolve around us.

We are not the centre of life, or the pinnacle of life, but we are part of life. Life is one.

If you had sex with a chimpanzee, you would get in a lot of trouble. But the offspring would probably survive, even though it would be infertile. Kind of a horse + donkey-> mule thing. So we are very similar to chimps, though we have real differences (or else the offspring would be fertile). Everything is genetically related if you go back far enough.

When we look a little closer to home, we see that several other species of *Homo* should probably just be called humans, something supported by the following artists' constructions, assuming that they are anything like accurate,



Figure 1. Artistic renditions of *Homo ergaster*, *H. neanderthalensis* and *H. erectus* (from Ian Tattersall, "Once We Were Not Alone," *Scientific American* 13, no. 2 (2003): pp 23-25.)

Our species is not the only human species which has ever existed. We are very similar even to non human primates. There is a continuity even though there is an undeniable difference. Evolutionists are unanimous that there are real differences between the lone surviving human species and other animals, but it is a matter of degree, rather than a fundamental, unbridgeable gulf. Forms of intellect, morality, culture, self awareness are found in other species, and almost certainly existed in the now extinct *Homo* and *Australopithecine* lines. It is, indeed, quite handy for many Christians that the *Australopithecines* and *H. erectus* are extinct, as they would remind us forcefully of our fundamental continuity with the rest of life.

What happens if we keep pushing this basic connection? Is there really any such thing as a species in the first place? Human. Dog. Corn. Artificially constructed labels, or something "real?" Philosophers love to argue about this apparently. It's clear that people *do* have a sense of species. But it is also clear

that this depends on where the person lives, and what species are relevant. Many westerners hate "snakes" but people who rely on them to eat easily and naturally differentiate the non toxic, edible ones from the dangerous ones.

Admittedly, in 2003 Finn Lawson-John classified *H. ergaster* as monkeys, not humans.

I consider his analysis dubious, since he also identified a photo of an ageing male orang-utan as his grandfather, and his own artistic reconstructions of primates leave something to be desired. His marsupials, however, are quite good:

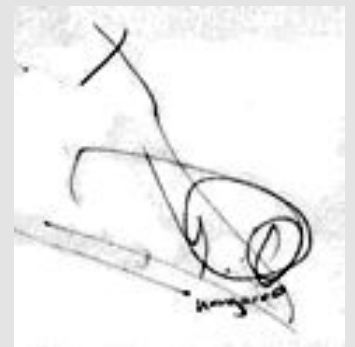


Figure 2. Kangaroo, by Finn Lawson-John, age 2.

So why do we make these distinctions? *To survive!* And this began long, long ago, in the brainless organisms who nevertheless could tell light from dark, and thus hide from predators. As brains got bigger, so did the lists of categories. This is the take home point: *Categorisation is fundamental to the very survival of **biological** life.*

The boundaries which we have drawn around humans, around other species, and even around bodies are more fuzzy and fluid than we imagine, even though they look solid to us. What if there was a Being able to watch the entire history of life on Earth, and whose survival *did not depend* on the ability to discriminate amongst species? They may see life very differently.

How might such a non-biological Being - God- unlimited by our constraints, see life on Earth?

At this point I would like to attempt to create an image of Life, however approximate, which brings together the insights from the science story sketched above. We can hold this in our mind as we do our theology. Part of the reason for the persistence of a Genesis inspired view of life is surely the wealth of beautiful images which support it.

One of the most common images used in ecology, which is often picked up in eco-theology, is that of the *web of life*. A web is, however, inadequate for several reasons. Firstly, the actual pictures themselves are, of necessity, always far too simplistic. They are usually drawn with each species represented by a single circle, which interacts with other circles. In reality, every *individual* creature on Earth is linked directly to millions of others (Yes, millions. Remember how many organisms creep upon and within us every day). If we remember Dawkin's point that it is also our genes which interact with the genes of others, through us, then we would need a web with billions of billions of links, almost completely reforming itself every moment as organisms pass each other by. It would be a web which reformed every instant.

But real webs, and pictures of them, are decidedly static. They convey no sense of history.

Even worse, they are created by *something else*- Spiders. Webs represent a Genesis view of Earth, where life is created according to the deliberate designs of an external creator. Webs don't evolve, or create themselves.

So we move on to an image more common in evolutionary science than ecology, the *tree of life*. Yet these trees often show us at the top, or at least an outer branch, as if the story of evolution is over. Trees still imply stasis. In theory we know that they grow, but they don't really seem to, to us, with our short life spans and attention spans. After much searching I began to think that a *stream of life* was a more promising image.

A *stream* non-consciously carves out its own channels. Once these channels are formed, life forms which follow tend to flow through them, though they occasionally branch out in new directions. Streams, of course, are two dimensional. They convey a sense of dynamic history well, but not the present interactions happening at this moment in time. The stream of life is three dimensional, like blood pulsing through a series of veins in a transparent leg.

Whatever image we use, we also need to remember that the story of life on Earth is only half told. Most books on evolution seem to underemphasise this point. Almost every tree of life we see in a science book subtly feeds our assumption that we are at the end point of evolution. In living memory not much seems to have changed, biologically. The consensus is, however, that Earth will exist for another seven billion years or so. We are only half way through this mind numbingly amazing story of life on Earth.

We need *two* calendar years for Mayr's chart of life on Earth. We need *two* people with arms outstretched to convey Dawkins' image, with humanity a fleck of dust between their fingertips. We need to redraw all of the evolutionary trees, but we do not know what the second half should look like! Will a nuclear war, or comet strike, wipe out all vertebrates?

Perhaps the reptiles will get a chance to reclaim the world from their mammalian usurpers. Birds, whose brains are organised quite differently from ours, could evolve a very different, yet highly complex, level of intelligence. Or perhaps the next line of highly intelligent vertebrates, if there is one, will evolve from the marsupial mammals. It may take decades, or millions of years for *H. sapiens* to cease to exist on Earth, but the biological record tells us that it is inevitable.

In the unlikely absence of future cataclysmic extinction events, scientists are now fairly confident that they can foretell Earth's future, at least in broad brush strokes. If God is indeed guiding evolution, it is sobering to consider where it is being guided to. According to Peter Ward and Donald Brownlee,

we live at approximately the mid-point of life on Earth, as I said above. We also, however, live at the mid-point of *animals* (figure 3).

Life will not continue to get more and more complex until the Sun finally consumes Earth. Consciousness and the ability to apprehend God only appears to be increasing because of where we live in history. Chardin and the many theologians who borrow his ideas about a divinely guided increase in global consciousness are simply wrong. In about 500 million years all of the complex plants we now know will be extinct, killed off by plummeting CO<sub>2</sub> levels.

Grasses, algae and mosses will remain. Animals may then rapidly perish, but it is probable that they will linger for another 100 to 200 million years. When I say animals, I do not mean humans, vertebrates, or indeed anything with much of a brain. In the minimal oxygen atmosphere, brains and nervous systems will be unsupportable, "...and the world will evolve into ever greater stupidity, with less complex sensory organs and behaviour." Truly the meek will inherit the Earth.

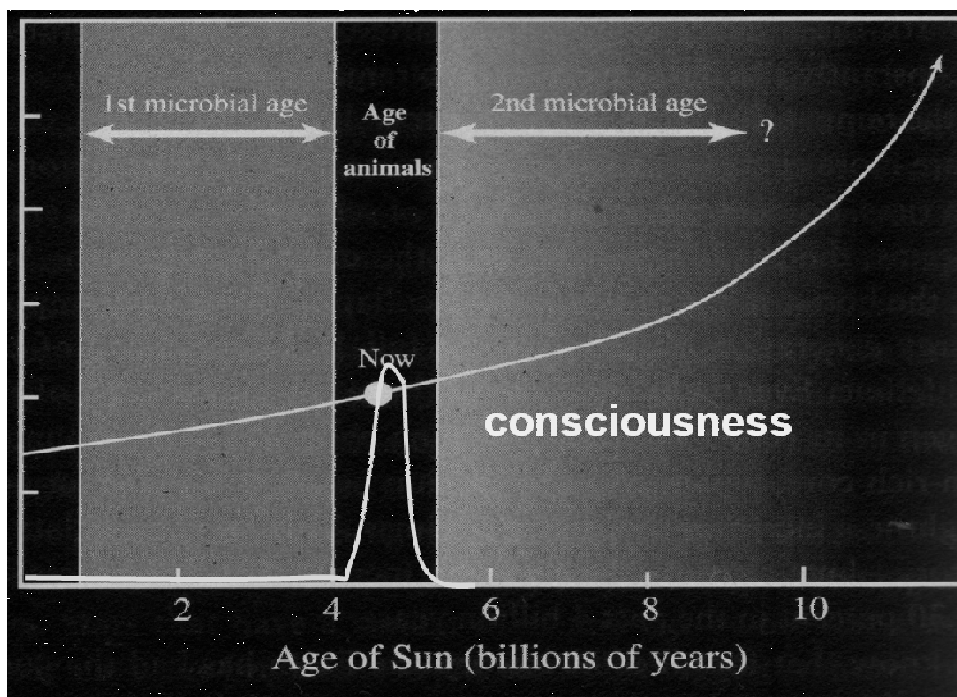


Figure 3. Figure from Ward & Brownlee, showing the short span of Earth history over which animals will exist in any significant numbers. Life will not go on gaining in complexity until the end of Earth, but will soon begin to become increasingly simplified, as oxygen hungry nervous systems become increasingly selected against.

On the land, as global temperatures reach 50°C, there will be wholesale extinctions of the insects- anything more complex will be long since dead. By 60°C only bacteria, algae and fungi will survive, and at 70°C bacteria will have

the planet's surface to themselves. Organisms in the ocean might survive a little longer than their terrestrial cousins, down in the cooler depths, but increasing global temperatures mean accelerated evaporation, and eventually Earth will be entirely without water, experiencing surface temperatures possibly as high as 1000°C.

So, the flow of life to the present day is only half the story. We must add to it an equivalent length of flow, which will soon be reduced to a series of trickles, with the animal trickle just a bunch of rats, and eventually just bugs.

Whether nuclear war speeds up the process or not, cockroaches will (temporarily) inherit Earth. Human beings will not be there at the End. All of which leads to my final attempt at an image of life, which is, I believe, an image of God which is more awe inspiring and demanding of worship than an image limited to our one little species.



This is the stream of life, or, you may prefer, the dance of life, on Earth. I'd love to see it alongside, or replacing, our images based on Genesis 1-3.

Perhaps it should be left to speak for itself, but if you want an explanation:

Life begins at the bottom of the figure, as a variety of single celled organisms, which evolve in various lines and directions. Some die out completely. At other times, most die out because of externally produced mass extinction events. However, by about the middle of the figure we have three main streams of life.

The left hand is the plants, in all their diversity. The middle, which corresponds roughly with the present time, should probably thin out more significantly, because humans are rapidly converting the rich plant life of the planet into vast monocultures of relatively few species. At some time in the next few hundred million years, as the sun continues to expand, there will be a mass extinction of the complex plants, and then of the grasses, bringing plant life to an end on Earth.

Life will go on, however, for billions of years, as shown by the central body. This is the microbes. Long after the animals are gone microbes will swarm over Earth until, in a few billion years, at the very top of the page, the planet is uninhabitable even for them.

The right hand is us animals. Our species exists somewhere around the middle of the "palm" at the far right. Animals will continue to evolve for some time after our species becomes extinct, until the complex plants die off, at which time plummeting oxygen levels will make Earth uninhabitable for animals, even tiny ones.

Remember, though, that life on other planets is likely to continue for *trillions* of years after Earth is vaporised. So the "image" of God may vanish here, but not vanish completely for an unimaginably long time. God will continue for trillions of years at least to find and love life throughout the universe. And the universe may eventually contract and then re-explode. Or perhaps there are multiverses. "Oh Lord my God, when I in awesome wonder..."

In the meantime, here on Earth, this image is, I believe, a far richer and more awe inspiring image of God than our one species, wonderful as we are. Occurring at the midpoint of the history of life on Earth, we might see ourselves as held in the palm of God, who will not let us go until our inevitable passing, as we make way for more creatures until, eventually, Earth is dead.

So we are not the centre, the point, the dominators or the stewards. We are not the alpha or omega, God is. Yet here we sit in the palm of a God whom science reveals to be far more awesome and worship-worthy than even our ancestors in the faith imagined.

Jews, Christians and Moslems now have a very different creation story from the ones our faith ancestors imagined, and recorded in Genesis.

If the start of our story changes, how does it affect the conclusion? For Christians, since aspects of Jesus and his nature and ministry have been interpreted or explained in the light of ancient creation stories, how do we interpret or explain him and his ministry now?

For example, Genesis, especially as usually interpreted by western Christians, makes three significant claims:

Humans alone are the image of God

Humans are given dominion over life (first creation story) or ordered to be the servant and protector of life (second creation story)

Humans mucked it up (literally or metaphorically), leading to expulsion from the Garden, which most Christians call the Fall (literal or metaphorical)

An Evolutionist's "Genesis 1" version 5ish 1999-2006

Before the beginning there was God, God alone. And God said, "Let there be." And there was. A massive explosion, billions of billions of degrees centigrade. Energy pouring out in all directions, God's relationship to creation had begun.

And God was there, for thousands, and millions, and billions of years as the energy became matter, and matter became dust, and the dust formed galaxies and quasars and solar systems, and our sun, and our earth. And God saw the universe, billions of billions of kilometres wide, full of 70 million, million, million stars, and God saw that it was Good.

And God was there... as our planet cooled and brought forth life, and God's relationship with life began, and that relationship was good.

And God was there... as life became cells- the first complex creatures in our part of the universe, and God saw that they were good.

And God was there... as sexual reproduction emerged for the first time in our part of the universe, and God saw that sex was good.

And God was there... as the vertebrates emerged: fish, amphibians, dinosaurs, tiny mammals, birds. Birth, sex, death. God was there for a billion years as organisms and species came and went and related to each other. Each species, each individual, each relationship adding to God's richness of experience of life, giving God more to love, more to be God of.

God watched the cycle of life, and saw that it was good.

And God was there. As the mammals grew smarter, developing languages and tools and a sense of something beyond them- the first stirrings of a response to the Word of God. Some returned to the oceans and shed their hair and swapped legs and hands for fins. Some stayed on the coast, and shed their hair but kept their hands to hold tools, and their feet to walk. They stood up, they grew smarter. Perhaps too smart, perhaps not smart enough.

And the Word of God amongst us hairless apes grew louder, and so did the opposition to it. So the Word became flesh, and dwelt among us, and was adored and loved and cherished, and despised and rejected and killed. And raised. And we humans have never been the same since.

The usual telling of the creation story assumes that pain and death are bad, and need to be explained somehow. They were not part of God's original good creation, but are part of the Fall, which resulted from the Original Sin of Adam and Eve. It is commonly argued that, because of the Fall, humans are intrinsically selfish or violent, and incapable of good without God's help. I've mixed in many Christian circles, and even the pretty mainstream ones still assume that we are incapable of doing good by our own efforts. We inherently, it is thought, operate from selfish motives.

A growing number of Christians reject such ideas, but many don't. The new creation stories give a good basis for this rejection, and a better alternative with which we can work and live.

Let's start with the ubiquitous Christian claim that humans were created in the image of God. We did this in our second week at ecofaith...

## **Life as the image of God**

Creation stories. Every culture has at least one. Two of the Jewish stories carry great currency in the Christian tradition. The first is found in Genesis 2-3, and the other is found in Genesis 1, though it was actually written much later. Norman Habel commonly reminds audiences that there are many more creation stories in the Scriptures, including Job 38, Proverbs 8 and Psalms 8 & 104.

Creation stories make theological claims. Most Christians accept that their authors' *purpose* was to make theological claims, not record historical events. They were writers of "storied theology." The three important claims can be seen in Genesis 1-3. As most Christians interpret it, "Genesis" claims that humans alone...

- Are created in the image of God.

- Are given dominion over the rest of life.

- Are responsible for the Fall of creation.

In Genesis 2 the story of Adam and Eve gives a special place to humans. We are the ones who receive the breath of God. Adam and then Eve have a special relationship and role with God, and the other animals are somewhat of a backdrop, having been found to be unsuitable companions for the Adam.

The specialness of humans is made much more explicit in Genesis 1, written some centuries later:

"And God said, Let us make *man in our image, after our likeness*: and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the birds of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the earth, and over every creeping thing that creeps upon the earth..."

The image of God says something about what its bearer is like, and the kind of role they have. If you have the image of God and someone else doesn't, you are more like God than them, a better example of God, and you have a special role on Earth amongst those without the image.

Many Christians today accept that Genesis is not historically accurate, and most don't think it was ever meant to be. Denis Edwards, for example, encourages us to lay aside the historicity of Genesis, but claims that its theology is authoritative. But it isn't that straightforward. The theology still relies on the story. Adam and Eve, or the Earth Creature, were, in the story, created separately and distinctly from the other animals. They alone received God's breath. So the story undergirds the theological claim that humans alone are created in God's image.

The new creation story says that humans are genetically and behaviourally continuous with other animals. The new story contradicts and removes the foundation upon which we claim that we alone bear God's image.

The science story of life has for a very long time now confronted us with the fact that every ability which humans possess, every characteristic, is found to some extent in other animals. There is a continuum of life, not a sharp unbridgeable chasm. We are genetically related to every other organism which has ever existed- *and* we are not the end of the story.

Life on Earth will continue for hundreds of millions of years beyond the present, when humans are long gone. We are far from being the end point or pinnacle of life, if there is such a thing. We are part of the story of life, but not the centre of it, or even the culmination of it.

*We are part of the story of life, but not the centre of it, or even the culmination of it*

I want to invite you to a journey where we continue to expand our appreciation of the image of God, of the magnitude and mystery of God.

The image of God was once limited to the Emperor. Genesis 1 expanded it to include all men. Most of the church, and probably synagogue, has expanded it to include all humans. We need to continue that trend, to comprehend all of life as the image of God. For in God *all things* live and move and have their being, not just humans, so God is found- seen- in all things.

*Life is the image of the God of life. Its evolutionary past and future, its ecological present and its cosmological breadth.*

But what does this image look like? We know what a human looks like, but what does “life” look like? You have already seen the figure on page 20, but in the park I asked people to close their eyes and let the following words engage their imaginations. If you go to <http://ecofaith.org/books> then you, too, can hear it delivered in my nasal tones.

## **The Stream of life: an image of God**

*You are standing on the Earth. But all is desolate. Nothing but rock and water. Dark, and freezing. There is no life yet. But here it comes. Suddenly, as if being birthed deep within Earth, you see something emerge. Something tumultuous, tumbling, flowing, pulsing, expanding and contracting. Flowing out of Earth all around you.*

*A twisting, three dimensional pulse, a network of trillions of channels, flowing out through the waters, across the soil, into the air. It takes three billion years to billow forth, but it seems to happen in an instant. Sometimes it recedes, nearly disappearing, then it pulses forth in new forms and shapes, expressed in trillions of individual moments.*

*You stand in the maelstrom, realizing you are part of it. Then you watch its future unfold.*

*In an instant the forms of life which represent you and your kind are gone. Turned into new forms, or simply dried up. Eventually the pulses representing complex plants, then mammals, birds, lizards, amphibians, dry up. A cacophony of insects and microbes continues for some time. Eventually, the insects are gone. Finally, as the sun envelops Earth the microbes are gone too.*

*In the trillions of neurons in your one tiny brain you have just seen something of the image of life, of the trillions of individuals which make it up, all interconnected: through their DNA, and through their relationships.*

*You have just seen the whole of evolution and ecology in our environment, you have just seen an image of the God in which it lives and moves and has its being.*

*Then you look up, and see the 70 septillion stars with all their planets. More stars than there are grains of sand on every beach and every desert on Earth. And you wonder just how far this image of God extends...*

Life is the image of God. It makes sense! For billions of years life had nothing to do with humans. Even now life on Earth is overwhelmingly *not human!* God's "image" cannot be limited to the tiny flash in a pan which constitutes our species. God is not a big human being, but a *person*.

If we accept that God is a "person" (which seems to be a central Christian claim), but not a big man or even human in the sky, then clearly we are accepting that human and person are not equivalent. We may think we know that, but listen to everyday language and you will see that we almost always use them interchangeably.

What is a person? Nancy Howell says that "person" is, "one whose experiences are so organized that they form a coherent and recognizable being." More simply, a person is something with personality! This counts for God. It also counts for many other animals, just ask any pet owner, or any wildlife observer. Ask anyone who has ever been honest enough- or just unfortunate enough- to look their meat in the eye.

Would such a simple language change really make much difference to our worship, or faith, or ethics? It certainly made a significant difference for me, and when I invited the group in the park to give it a try, a number of them said it had made them see and respond to other animals differently. I invite you to try. For the next week, or month, or year, use "human" to refer to our species, and reserve person/people for any living creature which you reckon has personality.

All humans are our brothers and sisters, or cousins, our relations in the family of humanity, but so are *all* people. At least cousins. Where you draw the line between an organism with personality and one without I'll leave up to you.

Now revisit the scriptures, church tradition, worship songs, your own ethical framework. Every time you hear mention of "other", "least of these," "neighbour," "brothers and sisters," think of *people*, not just humans. Let me know if anything happens!

As we start to listen to these new creation stories, as we let other people into the family of God, we seem to be knocked down a peg or two. We *are* knocked down a peg or two! We lose our special status. We lose our special role, our dominion, our stewardship. We have to give up being the only child—but who wants to do that? Who would see this as anything but bad news, the antithesis of Christianity?

Well, those who have learned to play with and love and enjoy the company of their siblings. Sometimes the only child is the lonely child, and if our parent has enough love to go around (and surely God does), then there is much good news in the discovery that we have long lost relations!

And there's more! Not only do we get lots of brothers and sisters (or cousins) to play with, and find relief from the burden of being in charge, if we're not the centre of the story of God and life then everything isn't our fault! The old creation stories taught that pain and death are the fault of Adam and Eve, of us humans. But if life existed for billions of years before humans arrived, then pain and death didn't arrive with us. Everything isn't our fault!

Instead, the process of life, which brought about the evolution of humans, intrinsically includes death and pain. The Christian story of the Fall has it *exactly backwards*, *exactly wrong*, which is good news indeed! Good news which we will explore in a later section. First, I want to say more about the great news that God has not lumbered us with the responsibility of being in charge of life on this planet.

## **Dominion**

For the first three weeks of ecofaith we gathered in the Royal Adelaide Botanic Gardens, before being moved out into the park. In the gardens it was easy to believe in human dominion. As I said in the third week...

This garden is very much a human creation, for humans.

So what subtle messages is the garden sending us about dominion? We wanted to worship in a building not built by human hands, but is this human controlled garden much different?

If we look closely, there are subtle signs of the limits of human dominion, even here. Look more closely at the garden beds. It doesn't take long to see signs of our dominion being constantly usurped and challenged!

Humans can't *make* any of this garden happen. We can remove what we don't want to grow, and plant things, but we can't *make* them grow. Our dominion, even here, is very limited. And even with a huge staff, look at any garden bed closely and you will see all sorts of "weeds" springing forth.

So even today our dominion is not as complete as we might imagine at first. But the idea takes a real kicking if we contemplate this piece of land not just as it is today, but over its whole history....

Imagine this piece of land, right here where we are sitting...

What will it look like in 50, 400, 4000, 24 million, 2.4 billion years time?

Now imagine it in 1900 AD, 1600 AD, 1600BC, 60 000 BC, 600 million BC, and finally 6 *billion* BC, when Earth was a rolling ball of molten lava.

*Now* what do we make of human dominion?

Duly humbled, we might turn to Genesis 2, which calls humans to serve and protect rather than control and dominate. Norman Habel points out that there are two very different, contradictory commands to humans in Genesis 1 *versus* Genesis 2-3. Much as we might try to make the dominion of Genesis 1 sound nice and benign, it isn't.

Genesis 1 (and 9) calls us to tread down and dominate. Genesis 2 calls us to serve and protect. In Genesis 1,

God said to them, "Be fruitful and multiply, and *fill the earth and subdue it; and have dominion over* the fish of the sea and over the birds of the air and over every living thing that moves upon the earth..."

(Genesis 9) God blessed Noah and his sons, and said to them, "Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth. The fear and dread of you shall rest on every animal of the earth, and on every bird of the air, on everything that creeps on the ground, and on all the fish of the sea; into your hand they are delivered. *Every moving thing that lives shall be food for you; and just as I gave you the green plants, I give you everything.*

Compare that with Genesis 2:15 “The LORD God took the [Adam/earth creature] and put it in the garden of Eden to *serve it and protect it*. “

We usually translate “serve and protect” as “till and keep,” because we assume, as did the authors at the time the story was written down, that farming was the God ordained norm. But further back in history, amongst the nomadic wanderers who first told this story over and over again, and had never used a plough, it may have had its original, broad meaning of serve and protect.

So here is the first conundrum, for those of us who want to continue to live our faith in line with the theology, if not the literal history, of Genesis. Which theology do we choose?

Do we choose dominion, or servanthood and protection? Which biblical story do we make ours? Remember, this dilemma is being presented to us by conservative biblical scholarship. Norm urges us to choose servanthood rather than dominion, which has some strong echoes in what Jesus said about leadership and servanthood.

So to those of you who decide to stick with the theology of Genesis, you *still* have to make a choice, and then live accordingly. Like Norm, I hope you will choose Genesis 2.

Why stick with the theology of Genesis in the light of all the wonderful things we are learning in the new creation stories? Well, there is one reason. At least we know what to do! We have a mission, a mandate. And, especially if we choose servanthood and protection, good can be achieved.

And on the small scale of time and space, it can even seem *possible* to define ourselves as the servants and protectors of life. If we focus on 2005-2020AD rather than 3billion BC to 3billion AD, and perhaps on our own back yard, or a strip of degraded vegetation near us, either dominance or service seem quite possible over our lifetime.

But in the *long* time scale and very *broad* space scale of life we cannot actually ever hope to exercise dominion, and since life existed for billions of years before we arrived, it clearly doesn't actually need to be served or protected.

Dominator, servant, or protector: all place us humans at the centre of

everything. I do not think this is healthy, let alone true.

If we alone are the image of God, then we must accept that we alone carry some sort of burden for the rest of life. If we see *all of life* as the image of God, then we must conclude that all of life exercises dominion over life. If we are part of the image, then we have part of the dominion. A role but not *the* role.

But what *is* that role? How should we understand our place on Earth, how should we define ourselves? Why *are* we here? I take that up on page 68. First I want to continue looking at some key propositions which the church has frequently drawn out of the Genesis stories. Having rethought the image of God, and dominion, we turned to the idea of the Fall in our fourth week together. Ironically enough, this was the week in which the management informed us that we could no longer meet in the Botanic Gardens, but would have to be expelled into the surrounding park.

## The Fall- or not

I've been suggesting that the ancient age of the universe, and the Earth, and the evolutionary connection between all creatures means that we are not the centre of the story of the relationship between God and life.

We seem to be knocked down a peg or two! On the other hand, we are not at fault. All the pain, death, suffering, all the cyclones and mudslides and volcanoes are not our fault, nor our ancestors' fault.

*Humans did not bring pain  
and death into the world  
Pain and death brought  
humans into the world*

The "Genesis story" and especially its common Christian interpretation, is backwards.

So we reject, or I do, any kind of historical interpretation of a Fall. This is hardly new! Christians throughout history have spoken out against what became the dominant interpretation first systematised by Augustine.

HOWEVER,

The troubling things in the world, in our personalities, which led the ancient Hebrews to devise their creation stories in the first place, still exist.

If God is good, why do we experience so much “bad”? Why is there pain, death, and suffering. Why do women scream and even die in childbirth, especially since other animals usually seem to do it so easily? Why do our muscles ache as we struggle to grow food, and why do the weeds always grow better? If we are the special species, created in God’s image, why aren’t things *easiest* for us, rather than *hardest*?

Genesis 2-3 was an explanation for all of this. But now we have a *better* explanation. A new and surer foundation. Many theologians already acknowledge this, but like to keep the term, “the Fall,” perhaps to sound more orthodox. However useful their conclusions, what they end up talking about is so different from what has always been meant by the fall that I think we are better off just dropping the term.

There was no “Fall”

The way life works - the underlying genetic dynamic - is no different now than it was one hundred million years ago, or a billion years ago. Genesis, and particularly its interpreters, was wrong about the causes of pain, death, painful and even fatal childbirth, female subordination, and weeds.

So when Christians draw on that part of Genesis, as they did in the New Testament, and have for most of our history, they are likely to be wrong too.

When, in Romans 5, Paul starts his argument, “just as sin came into the world through one man, and death came through sin...” he is starting with a false premise. Which doesn’t mean his conclusion is necessarily wrong, but we should examine it closely. When he talks about creation being subject to futility, or cursed, because of us, he is again starting from a false premise. We might agree that some humans are, every day, cursing Earth in the present, but the idea that God cursed the Earth, changing its very nature, subjecting it to death as a result of human activity, is false.

The arguments against women’s leadership in 1 Timothy are now without foundation,

“I permit no woman to teach or to have authority over a man; she is to keep silent. *For* Adam was formed first, then Eve; and Adam was not deceived, but the woman was deceived and became a transgressor. Yet she will be saved through childbearing...”

I thank God that the Uniting Church has ordained women for decades. There

is now no theological stumbling block to stop the rest of the church joining us!

Wesley, and so many other Christians, started their thinking about God's relationship with creation, and us, and Jesus' role in that, from false assumptions,

“... before sin or pain was in the world, there was no violent winter, or sultry summer; there were no weeds, no useless plants, much less were there any poisonous ones. No creature had any need or temptation to prey upon the other. God made creation without any blemish, yea, without any defect. He made no corruption, no destruction, in the inanimate creation. He made not death in the animal creation; neither its harbingers -- sin and pain.”

Now we have received the good news that Earth is ancient and life has evolved, having always contained death and pain long before we arrived. We now know that painful childbirth is not a punishment from God for Eve's rebellion, or for metaphorical human sinfulness. Painful childbirth is a consequence of the evolution to bipedal walking, combined with our increasing brain size, and thus head size.

Weeds in fields are prevalent, and agriculture often so laborious, because of our farming practices, and the move from nomadic to agricultural lifestyles.

If such things are not punishments, or inevitable, or *deserved*, then we can work to change them! Improving agricultural practice and childbirth is not a rebellion against God's just punishment, but just sensible.

We can (and have) looked for better birth positions, for prenatal fitness, diet etc. In difficult births we have drugs and techniques which greatly reduced the mortality rate of women with access to them.

We can (and have) discovered better farming practices, more in tune with their particular environment. There is a revival in organic farming and a perpetual enthusiasm for permaculture.

In conclusion, pain and death (and genetic mutation, and disease and so on) and the suffering they cause are an intrinsic part of life. We could not have life without them. We would never have evolved without them. So if our existence is good, they are good.

But what is, for example, the implication of saying that death is good, not as a

means of escaping the world and getting to heaven, but simply good?

And whilst we may be able to affirm that death is good (it makes room for more life), and even pain (which warns us when our bodies are being damaged), what about the *really* bad stuff? What about the horrid things humans do to each other that have no merit in the grand scheme of things? Is there still some kind of “original sin”? Not resulting from a one off historical event involving Adam and Eve, but something inherently sinful, corrupt and violent about us? We have often thought so, but the answer appears to be no. I explained why in our fifth week of worship.

## Original Sin or Original Need?

This section is largely based on Mary Clark- *In Search of Human Nature*.

Is there original sin even if Genesis 2 has it wrong, and the Christians who drew out of it a doctrine of the Fall have it wrong? Are we inherently corrupt or violent?

Early Western researchers thought so, but they usually studied humans living in industrial societies. So what they really proved is that in industrial, high density societies, violence is common. They demonstrated, not that all humans are inherently violent, but that nuclear family, industrial style living where there is a large gap between the rich and poor, is inherently dysfunctional.

Toni and I, as two nuclear family parents trying to raise two kids, often separated from wider family by the search for work, can attest to a fair bit of that inherent dysfunction. We can also attest to the great flexibility of intelligent, hairless primates in adapting to new situations and making them work well enough.

The widespread Christian idea that humans are inherently evil is well summarised by Wesley,

“[are we] by nature filled with all manner of evil? [are we] void of all good? [Are we] wholly fallen? [Is our] soul totally corrupted? ... is "every imagination of the thoughts of [our] heart only evil continually?" Deny this and you are but a Heathen”

Early primate studies added weight to this pessimistic view, being based on studies of chimpanzees. More recently, however, an almost identical primate,

the bonobo, was discovered. Whereas chimpanzee culture is often violent, the bonobo culture had little violence, and lots of sex.

This was due largely to their different *environments*. Bonobos live in areas with plenty of food and little human disturbance, so the women spend most of the day together, forming strong friendships as they gather food. Where the chimps live, food is scattered and women are isolated, somewhat akin to a nuclear, stay at home mum kind of environment.

So our environment is as big a determinate as our behaviour, and even inner thoughts, as anything “inherent”, whether spiritual or genetic.

As a result of these and many other findings, Mary Clark suggests that we are not inherently violent or sinful, but we do have inherent *needs*.

As a result of our evolutionary past, and the needs of our many, many ancestors, we inherently *need* bondedness, autonomy and a way of making meaning of the tension between the two.

Bondedness is about relationships, which begin at birth with our absolute dependence on bondedness to another. First our mother or some other lactating female. Then our father, then the whole group for ongoing survival. In tension with this is the innate drive for autonomy, by which Clark means not independence as much as having one’s own identifiable place *within the community*, being able to contribute to the life of the community freely and creatively.

But you can’t stay latched to the boob and also operate autonomously. To alleviate the conflict between the need for bondedness and autonomy, our expanding brain and developing language helped create increasingly complex meaning systems. How far back do these needs go? Well beyond our human forms! Every one of our ancestors which relied on maternal care had a need for bondedness. That includes at least all our mammalian ancestors. No mammal which failed to bond to a lactating female ever survived, until our very recent technology produced fake milk. Even then, someone has to prepare the bottle and give it to the baby.

The drive for autonomy, of being able to operate independently in the world long enough and impressively enough to find a mate, is a need going back hundreds of millions of years. Clark suggests that the need for meaning is a human phenomenon, but to me it can be seen in all social animals which

create “pack rules” to enable individuals to get along together and participate in group life. With our extra-ordinarily long period of high dependence infancy, and our long lives of potential autonomy, the tension between the two needs can be enormous, so our remarkably big brains often work overtime producing the meaning system to help us cope and adapt to whatever environment we find ourselves trying to juggle those needs in.

We are neither intrinsically hierarchical nor egalitarian (though for most of our evolution we operated predominantly in the latter mode). Our relationships do not primarily derive from conflicting sexual reproduction strategies, but as extensions of our parenting behaviours which, for most of our history, males and females shared pretty equally, and in which all members of successful groups participated. The violence we often witness today is not something intrinsic to our nature, but a result of the disparity between the environments most of us now live in and those of our Pleistocene ancestors, with whom we are still almost genetically identical.

Their environment, which makes up 99% of our human evolution, revolved around groups which were:

- small, nomadic and stable
- relatively isolated from other groups
- without many or any possessions
- without much or any *language!*
- immersed in the image of God (life)

Humans are not fallen, but most of us, especially in the industrial west, live in environments which are changing FAST, and very different from the environment our brains evolved to help us live well in.

So, much of our dysfunctional and sinful behaviour arises from being nurtured in an environment for which our brains are not well adapted. We can do something about that!

Think about your life. How many small, stable groups are you part of, where everyone has few, or at least roughly the same number of possessions? If none, are there any around, or could you create some? They will not be as small, or as isolated or as egalitarian as we have evolved to survive in, but they may be close enough. If you go to church, how well does your church fulfil those criteria listed above? And does it give you both a sense of belonging, and an ability to make autonomous contributions? Are people free to shape meaning there, or is meaning imposed on them? If it is imposed,

does it at least fit? Does it make sense of the tension between bonding and meaning?

I wonder if cults major in “bondedness,” liberal churches in “autonomy”, and conservative ones in “meaning?”

It is also true that our inner nature, specifically our brains, being a product of millions of years of evolution, contain a legacy of our past ancestors which are not always well integrated, and which surely produced violent, sinful behaviour even in the Pleistocene. Michael Dowd popularises an understanding of our evolved brains very helpfully, which we will come to in a moment.

But by now a thought may be growing in your mind, or may have been there from the start and is the reason for you picking this book up in the first place...

The Christian answer to the bad news of the Fall has always been the good news of *divine rescue*. The church has widely proclaimed Jesus, the second Adam who saves us from the curse of the first Adam, whether metaphorically or literally.

If the first Adam never existed, and did not bring death into the world as Paul assumed, and if we reject not just the history but the theology around the idea of a first Adam, what do we make of the second Adam?

As I put it in the park, “what Messiah does this product of evolution which we call *Homo sapiens* actually need?” The final week of the six week series we spent listening to everyone’s responses. The series was more about helping people on the journey of meaning making than imposing meaning onto them.

“*what Messiah does this product of evolution we call Homo sapiens actually need?*”

You might like to pause and think about your own answer to that question. “What Messiah does this product of evolution which we call *Homo sapiens* actually need?” What Messiah do you need?

On the following pages I will share with you a selection of other topics we covered during our two years together, before getting back, in a roundabout way, to sharing a few thoughts about who Jesus was.

## Our brains: can't live with 'em, can't live without 'em

Here is an imaginative exercise, which works best if it is read to you slowly while you have your eyes shut, but you'll have to make do. Try pausing after each paragraph.

*You are a lizard. Your great great great... grandparent. Running on instinct. Seeking safety, sustenance, sex. Fight, or flight, or freeze. That's it. Because you survive, your descendents will be able to throw a ball or ride a bike without thinking. They will be attuned to danger before they even see it coming.*

*You are a mammal, one of the earliest. You live on the legacy of your reptile ancestors. But your brain also lets you **feel**. It lets you **dream** at night. No reptile ever did that, all mammals do. Every urge, grief, joy, sense of bonding and love begins with you. Because feelings helped you survive, your descendents will feel too.*

*You are a human child. Like other primates, your brain lets you think ahead. You can think, "If I do this, that might happen," rather than having to try it. The more stable your environment, the more likely you are to be right. In a changed environment, thinking turns to worrying. Something lizards don't do.*

*You can choose between desires. You are a social being: you love others. Love them enough to want them to love you. Want it bad enough to lie to them so they don't stop loving you. Lizards don't lie, but you do.*

*You are you. You at 20 or 30. Your brain is super connected, and your prefrontal areas matured. Self awareness, planning, the ability to have a vision, a long term desire and purpose which (at least often) overshadows the power of other areas of the brain. The ability to plot and plan and strive for great good or great evil is yours. To see that a fear is misplaced, or an emotion unnecessary. From here on the possibilities for integration are immense. What a pity you didn't wait until now to hit puberty!*

*No reptile ever dreamt.  
All mammals do.*

*Take a moment to thank and celebrate your ancestors, the survivors. Every one of your ancestors survived, and lives in you.*

*Take a moment to celebrate you. This ambiguous mix of instinct, emotion and thought.*

The previous section, on original sin, claimed that much of our sinful behaviour was due to the mismatch between the environments in which we now live, and the environments in which our brains evolved to help us find bondedness, autonomy and meaning. I claimed that it is more accurate and helpful to understand ourselves as a species with intrinsic/original needs, not original sin or corruption.

Now I want to look at the mismatch *within* our selves, specifically, with our brains. Much of this section is drawn from Michael Dowd's book, *Thank God for Evolution*, which he has very generously made available for free download from <http://www.thankgodforevolution.com/>

It is true that the more we have bondedness (love), autonomy and meaning in our lives, the less likely we will be to act sinfully. That is, inappropriately, through exploding outwards in violence or withdrawing inwards in depression, through physical actions or mental scripts we run which denigrate ourselves or others.

It is also true that there will *always* be threats to our bondedness, autonomy and meaning, even in a relatively nurturing and supportive environment, so we will often be challenged with how we choose to respond to those threats. The tension between bonding and autonomy is intrinsic to our nature, and we will not always be able to make meaning of it. And sometimes, perhaps even most of the time, parts of our brain which evolved before meaning ever became an issue might take over long before we have rationally thought of an appropriate response.

If we respond inappropriately once, it is useful to be able to think about why, and see if we can do differently next time.

Why do we sin?

Traditional answers, like the claim that we were overpowered by the devil or evil spirits, or that we simply have an inherently wicked nature, may have been a good guess 2000 years ago, but we know now that they are incorrect and unhelpful. Incorrect because of what we have learned through the sciences, and unhelpful because they often imply that we cannot change. Rather, we must sit around helplessly waiting for a saviour.

Michael Dowd says that it is the juggling between the drives of the different parts of our brains, which evolved to meet the different needs of our ancestors,

which gives us the potential for incredibly dysfunctional behaviour. Nonetheless, every part of our brain had a role to play in getting us here, and keeping us alive now that we are here,

“From an evolutionary perspective, original sin is the undeniable fact that our evolved human nature includes inner drives and urges that we never asked to have — and that many of us would rather not have in their full and unmodulated expression. Although vital for the survival of our ancestors and the transmission of their genes, these inherited proclivities will damage us, and our loved ones, if followed indiscriminately within the cultural contexts in which we live today.”

We should celebrate and affirm every part of our brain! It kept our ancestors alive, we need it all to keep us alive. The lizard legacy keeps us breathing, and aware of immanent danger. Without the limbic, early mammal parts, we would have no emotions at all. The neocortex, which started to swell with primates and is huge in humans, allows rational thought, complex languages and cultures and so on. It allows us to have a sense of a long term higher purpose, or “divine calling.”

But this wonder-full brain, some of which is hundreds of millions of years “old” (ie the reptile part, the cerebellum and brain stem) and in which the “new” bits are hundreds of thousands of years old, is now trying to help us thrive in an environment which is changing rapidly.

So we are not a case study in evil, nor are we noble savages. We are a sum of ambivalences which need to be balanced.

Which leads us to the *personal*, existential challenge: affirming every bit of who we are and what our brain is, and also refusing to let any one part control the rest of it unchecked. Helping different parts *practice* working functionally in this new context. Awareness seems to be a key to balance. We can practice being aware of our instincts, emotions and thoughts. I’m pretty poor at it myself, but that doesn’t mean *you* shouldn’t try!

For example, each of our brains have probably, based on early experiences, decided to habitually act out one or a few of the possible range of responses to threat or tension. Why? Because it worked when we were kids in our kind of family. It might not be working now, but we still go with it. And we will, until we intentionally practice other alternatives in non threatening, or mildly threatening circumstances. Then we will have more options when we need them, and can take responsibility for choosing one, rather than feeling that some kind of satan, or our “body of death”, has taken us over yet again and,

like Paul, made us do the very thing we believe we should not do.

We can confess our situation, our ambiguity, our nature, without condemning or rejecting any part of ourselves, or projecting it onto others. Here's how we did it during worship in the Park...

**TURN EAST** (East symbolises the recent past, where the sun rose earlier in the day): Confessing the past. You did what you could do. Given the development of your instinct, emotions and rationality, you did what you did, what you had to do. You *did* do it.

**TURN NORTH** (the present, with the sun overhead): Now, you will do what you can do. Given the development of your instinct, emotions and rationality, if something threatens you, you will react as you must.

**TURN WEST** (the near future, where the sun will set later): But in the future, you might do things differently. Instinct responds to practice. Emotions can be soothed in advance of threats. Rational thought can be ready to intervene quicker. The mammal can moderate the reptile. The primate can reflect on the mammal. The human can hold all things in balance. Purpose, vision, goals can call upon and work with instinct and emotion and thought. You *did* do those things. You needn't do them again. You will not be what you were.

**TURN SOUTH** (the far future beyond our lifespan, when the sun is set and darkness comes)

When your time on Earth has ended, how will you have achieved your higher purpose? What legacy will you have left? What is your part in the call to revere life and participate in its evolution?

Good luck with the existential challenge!

The *communal* challenge involves the fact that in most versions of the Christian story, for most of the last 2000 years, we *have* been seen to be a case study in corruption, trapped in our inherited wickedness, and perhaps under the domination of Satan.

And this has been the first plank in the story in which we fallen, helpless, inherently sinful humans which are not worthy of God's love, and indeed deserve execution, are instead (eventually) rescued by God who loves us anyway, through the blood sacrifice of Jesus the God-man. The bodily

resurrection of this God-man being taken as evidence that the sacrifice was not in vain and we have been rescued, even if we still do all the same things that deserve death that people did before the resurrection, and have continued to do for 2000 years since.

Jesus is the second Adam who saves us from the curse of the first Adam. The only sinless one, because of his immaculate conception by the virgin Mary, who is not part of the line of inherited wickedness.

With no first Adam, what job does the second Adam have?

Andrew Dutney, principal of a Uniting Church Theological College, and a very helpful PhD supervisor, would remind me this stage that there are many versions of the Christian idea of atonement, even in the scriptures.

Atonement is the process by which God and humans are reconciled. Not all cast God as demanding sacrificial retribution. Often a particular view of atonement says more about what people read into the scriptures than what the scriptures actually say.

If rejected the idea of Jesus' death as a sacrificial appeasement of God's wrath long ago, the following may help reassure you of your decision, and help you persuade others to follow suit. If you are one of the many, many people who still believe that such theories *are* Christianity, hopefully the following will give you some reasons to think about changing your mind.

More than the rest of this book, the following section on Easter flows out of an examination of the biblical witnesses themselves. There is no need to accept the theory of evolution, or anything which I have written so far, to find the following persuading.

Let's look at the idea of Jesus as the perfect blood sacrifice through the lens of Easter, which we did in the Ecofaith community's first Easter together. All this talk of sacrifices and perfect sacrifices and death and resurrections. What to make of it all?

Clearly in the scriptures and in church history, the idea of Jesus as a sacrifice emerges from the practice of animal sacrifice in the Jewish religion. Animal sacrifice was not just a *practice*- it was a core component of their faith, along with male circumcision.

What would a God who loves *all* of life, of which we are only a small part, make of all this animal slaughter? What did Jesus make of it?

# Easter through the eyes of animals (and the God who loves them)

A letter to God from the other animals...

Dear God,

Can you please try again?

Jeremiah (31:32), Amos (5:21) and Micah (6:7) couldn't stop them. At first we thought Jesus might. He tried, even a dumb-ass could see that. But not humans!

Sure, his followers stopped the slaughter. But why? Not because they realised it was wrong. Wrong to slit *our* throats to appease *their* guilt. Not because they realized that we are people too— your people.

No, they simply say we weren't good enough for you! You demanded the flesh of a man- a final sacrifice, a perfect sacrifice. They think nothing of the millions of us who were slain and burned. Then they disdain us!

What does it say about you- butcher, murderer, sadist! While we scream and tremble at the scent of our burning flesh you are pleased by the aroma, so *they* say.

Are they right? Do you delight in butchery? Did you really murder all our kind to obliterate their evil?

Why didn't you take Noah too and be done with them! When will they stop rambling on and on about the rainbow- as if a promise from a genocidal maniac counts for anything? Especially one which delivers us into their hands.

Would that *we* had hands- we would write them a Bible worth reading, not their self-serving travesty!

We side with Jeremiah, Amos, Micah.  
With Jesus.

Do his followers forget that he turned the tables in the temple, where

our kind were sold for butchery? (Mark 11:15ff)? It was us, “beasts” who were with him forty days in the wilderness, not them (Mk 1:13). He said the temple had come to an end, being *overthrown* not *fulfilled* (Mark 13:1)! He said you desired mercy, *not* sacrifice (Mat 9:13, 12:7)! Do they forget? No?

Then how can they think you demanded his sacrifice, or ever wanted *ours*. Can they ever entertain the idea that you love us, that our lives do not revolve around them? Can they not see how just plain *stupid* their sacrifices were— stolen from the pagans in their attempts to control you by magic?

God, try again. They no longer sacrifice us, but only because we are redundant, insufficient, impotent. We want an apology! We want them to read their scriptures.

We want mercy, not sacrifice!

We need mercy now, on the farms, in the factories, in battery cages, in sow stalls, in the laboratory.

A God who would sacrifice his only son is a God who shrugs at such cruelty.

Christians must think so, or they wouldn't participate. It is one thing to be killed and eaten, a fine thing, a necessity. But to suffer so in the meantime!

To live a whole life imprisoned, unable to lie down, to have your young wrenched from your breast, to grow up parentless, or beakless, tailless, hornless, to never see the sky, feel the soil...

We want mercy, not sacrifice!

Yours sincerely,

The sheep and goats, on behalf of all your other animals.

Translated by Jason John, March 2006

As we approached Easter in our first ecofaith year, I decided, unlike other times, to use the revised common lectionary for our readings. Because the Easter story is such a big part of the Christian story, I wanted us to be reading what other Christians all around the world were reading, and reflecting on them with the belief that God loves all animals. In the end though, we did not use *exactly* the same texts. It was the year of Mark, but in the lectionary around Easter time Mark gets supplanted by John. I wanted to stick with Mark so we could start to see the different Easter stories in the gospels, each in their own right, instead of always giving the gospel of John the last word.

We asked how the stories from the Hebrew scriptures, and the Markan stories, and the evolution story, and the Adelaide story come together. Do they? I particularly wanted to explore, what *kind* of salvation is being offered in these Easter readings? Who is it for? Who misses out? What kind of God would offer that kind of salvation? Rather than re-edit them to make them more “bookish,” I’ve kept them pretty much as I originally wrote them: little mini sermons. Perhaps they will be useful for you as little thought provokers next Lent.

## **Easter 1. The flood (Genesis 9): salvation just for humans**

This week we have an offer of salvation in Genesis which we will, I hope, reject. We have a reminder in Mark to look for salvation or wholeness in unexpected places, and to take the time necessary to find it.

The Old Testament (OT) reading is Genesis 9: where God promises never again to flood the Earth.

The lectionary bit is lovely. Astoundingly, lots of Christians take this story historically. Even those who don’t, usually celebrate it as a lovely message, a sign that God is trustworthy and good. God has promised never to hurt us again, no matter how bad we get (at least by flood),

“Then God said to Noah and to his sons with him, "As for me, I am establishing my covenant with you and your descendants after you, and with every living creature that is with you, the birds, the domestic animals, and every animal of the earth with you, as many as came out of the ark. I establish my covenant with you, that never again shall all flesh be cut off by the waters of a flood, and never again shall there be a flood to destroy the earth."”

Ecologically minded Christians are thrilled to point out that *all* flesh, *all* life is

included in the covenant! Yay! God is a greenie!

But, if we read the *preface* to this story...

“God blessed Noah and his sons, and said to them, “Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth. *The fear and dread of you shall rest on every animal of the earth, and on every bird of the air, on everything that creeps on the ground, and on all the fish of the sea; into your hand they are delivered.* Every moving thing that lives shall be food for you; and just as I gave you the green plants, *I give you everything.*”

So the salvation of humans is the dread and enslavement of all other life! This cannot really be salvation in an ecofaith community. We cannot accept a God who only cares about humans and treats animals as mere objects. If we read closely we see that it is only Noah and his sons who are blessed and given everything. Not for the first time, it seems that the women have disappeared and missed out. So even if we cared nothing for animals, most of us here might see this as a pretty raw deal!

But it gets worse.

*Why* is God promising never to kill all flesh by flood again? Because God just *did* kill all flesh!

“The LORD saw that the wickedness of humankind was great in the earth, and that every inclination of the thoughts of their hearts was only evil continually. And the LORD was sorry that he had made humankind on the earth, and it grieved him to his heart. So the LORD said, “I will blot out from the earth the human beings I have created -- people together with animals and creeping things and birds of the air, for I am sorry that I have made them.”

God is a mass murderer. Killing almost all life supposedly because humans are all evil (except Noah). This next bit isn't in the Bible, but is how I imagine someone might have described the scene,

“So God sent floods upon the Earth, and after forty days the stench of decay was upon the water. Vacantly staring babies and pregnant women, their fetuses now still within their wombs. Newborn lambs and once faithful hounds. The infirm, the senile, mighty elephants and tiny worms. All joined in a stinking raft of rotting flesh, islands upon which the carrion birds rested, and below which estuarine fish feasted.”

God saved Noah by mass murdering babies! God commits a global abortion on a scale beyond the worst nightmares of pro-life advocates, who say the bible condemns abortion. Not only that, but billions of life forms who apparently are not evil, or even smart enough to be evil, are murdered too.

Is this God worthy of being worshipped, or spat on?

Genesis 9 offers salvation (assurance of God's protection) for humans (men) at the expense of all other life. And the kind of God who offers that protection is the kind of God quite capable of mass genocide.

We cannot divorce the nice take home message offered in the lectionary (the rainbow set in the sky to remind God not to kill us) from the rest of the story. A Christian faith which simply picks out the bits of the Jewish story it likes is not a robust or real story.

We cannot accept the flood story: certainly not literally, but not even metaphorically. It is nothing but bad news for all life.

We must reject this false image of God and this false salvation.

Meanwhile, in the Christian story through Mark 1, we have Jesus entering the wilderness to get a clear head. To work out what his ministry was going to be about. Would he bribe people to join with the promise of bread, or astonish the crowds with feats of invulnerability, or simply compel obedience?

As it turned out, none of these things.

But we are left with the challenge- to what extent are we following someone or something simply because they are giving us what we want, or dazzling us, or even compelling us?

We could ask that of the flood story. Have we just accepted God's rainbow because it gives us what we want (security), without looking at it harder? Are we dazzled by the magnificent sweep of the story, and the promise of being protected by such a powerful being? Have we felt uncomfortable about the story for ages, but not said anything because we felt compelled to fit in with others in our faith communities? Or afraid of how such a mighty God might feel about, and act towards, someone who disdains his offer?

How to decide? Jesus sought Wilderness. Time out. Space. Being with the wild beasts. Paying attention to life. Not a bad idea.

Or forget Genesis, what of us? If we are leaders, are we out there trying to bribe, dazzle, or compel? If we are followers- have we chosen who we follow for the right reasons?

Jesus came out of the wilderness, out of his immersion in life with Good News! He realised that God was near, he found good things, good news in unexpected places through unlikely events. May it be the same for us this Lent.

## **Easter 2: Salvation just for a few humans**

This bit from Genesis 17 is in the lectionary this week,

“God said to Abram, “...I will give to you, and to your offspring after you, the land where you are now an alien, all the land of Canaan, for a perpetual holding; and I will be your God.”

This bit isn't,

"As for you, you shall keep my covenant, you and your offspring after you throughout their generations. This is my covenant, which you shall keep, between me and you and your offspring after you: Every male among you shall be circumcised... when he is eight days old, ... Any male who is not circumcised in the flesh of his foreskin *shall be cut off from his people; he has broken my covenant.*"

In Mark's story, chapter 8, we have Jesus teaching in the Decapolis and feeding the four thousand, and then sighing when the Pharisees ask for a sign, before crossing back to the other side.

Again we continue our exploration of salvation- what kind of salvation is offered? Who gets it, who misses out, what kind of God is described?

We have a highlight of the Jewish story. God promises that Abraham's descendents will be given Canaan, the land where they are now living as immigrants. Little does Abraham know that first his descendents will enter Egypt and be enslaved, requiring, so the story goes, the great saving act of God- the Exodus!

It is a powerful story- of delivery from persecution and inheritance of a new

land. Of salvation. The Afrikaners referred to it constantly when they arrived in southern Africa. Those fleeing to the new America to avoid religious persecution saw that this story was their story as they spread across the continent. To a lesser extent white Christian Australians claimed the Exodus and delivery to the promised land as their story.

But in order to fill a promised land one must deal with the indigenous inhabitants. Who don't just disappear. The Kaurna people here didn't just disappear. Nor did the Native Americans, the original Africans or the Canaanites.

Rather, the Israelites, so the book of Joshua tells us, were told to commit mass genocide. Perhaps the first human initiated holocaust. Again, if we read further into the story we see men, woman and children being butchered at God's supposed command. This euphemism for such butchery is to make their foes a "devotion to the Lord."

What salvation is being offered? Salvation for the few, the pure.

Salvation for the circumcised. Again, we notice it is men who are the focus.

So last week we saw a salvation offered to men (perhaps women) at the expense of the animals. This week it is salvation for the Jews at the expense of the Canaanites.

If we are not willing to accept that God favours some people, and considers others mere objects to be disposed of, then this is not a salvation we can accept. This is not an image of God we can accept. This is not part of our story as ecologically aware Christians in Adelaide.

Then comes a quirky twist.

The sign of salvation is the cutting off of the end of the penis. Now that's just weird. Those men who don't cut off the end of their penis are to be *cut off from their people*. They are out! And, so the story goes, this is to go on *for ever*.

Yet Christians, by and large, don't go in for penis chopping. Peter in a vision saw that circumcision wasn't a requirement of those who were filled by the Spirit. But so strong was the tradition, and so harshly did the other Jewish Christians criticise him, that he wavered on the point. So Paul had to confront him and force the issue. Eventually it was agreed that you could be a

Christian, part of the “saved,” without cutting off the end of your penis. Not only that, but amongst Christians no distinction was to be made between male and female.

This was really, *really* radical! To claim to be part of the saved community, yet to have a foreskin, was completely unbiblical. Everyone knew it, which is why it caused so much controversy.

The first Christians were indisputably unbiblical!

Are those Christians amongst us today willing to be as unbiblical as the first Christians were? To follow the Spirit, wherever it decides to blow?

Hmm...

Now, as it happens, the gospel story is about Jesus preaching amongst, pretty much, the Greeks (out in the Decapolis), who thought chopping off the end of your penis was just plain mad.

And yet amongst whom the Jewish Christians had to admit God was at work.

How unfortunate. To find God in unexpected places. To find God breaking the rules.

Hanging out in the Decapolis. Surprising even *Jesus*, who was amazed at the faith of the Roman centurion, not having found anyone with such great faith even in Israel.

So what does the feeding of the 4000 mean? Is it a demonstration that salvation, wholeness, feeding is offered outside the boundary? Is it a sign that salvation, wholeness, feeding comes when people, seeing others share, start sharing themselves? Does salvation come from the practical action of the community? The kind of things we’ve felt in miniature here when people spontaneously bring food to share?

Plenty to ponder: Can we accept a salvation which is only for a few, and at great expense to others? Can we cope with God breaking the rules? Dare we be unbiblical?

Does God feed outsiders? Do we contribute to our own salvation as a community or does God miraculously do it for us?

## Easter 3 : salvation for obedient Jews

Then God spoke all these words (in Exodus 20),

“I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery; you shall have no other gods before me.

... For *I the LORD your God am a jealous God, punishing children for the sins of parents*, to the third and the fourth generation of those who reject me, but showing steadfast love to the thousandth generation of those who love me and keep my commandments.

[God lists the 10 commandments]

Then Moses said to the people, "Do not be afraid; for God has come only to test you and to put the fear of him upon you so that you do not sin."

Then God said ... You need make for me only an altar of earth and sacrifice on it your burnt offerings and your offerings of well-being, your sheep and your oxen; in every place where I cause my name to be remembered I will come to you and bless you.

When you buy a male Hebrew slave, he shall serve six years, but in the seventh he shall go out a free person, without debt.

If his master gives him a wife and she bears him sons or daughters, the wife and her children shall be her master's and he alone shall be set free..."

In our other reading, some thousands of years later, Jesus has just fed the 4000. Then he and the disciples come to Bethsaida (beth-sigh-da), where he heals a blind man so that he could see everything clearly, and warns him to stay clear of the village. Then comes the big, “who do they say I am?” discussion,

Jesus asked his disciples, "Who do people say that I am?" And they answered him, "John the Baptist; and others, Elijah; and still others, one of the prophets." He asked them, "But who do you say that I am?" Peter answered him, "You are the Messiah." *And he sternly ordered them not to tell anyone about him.*

We've now had three stories of salvation, three offers of community with God from the Hebrew Scriptures.

The first, after the flood, was an offer for men (perhaps humans), to enter into a relationship with a genocidal maniac, in a covenant which offered other animals survival, but only as slaves.

Last week the offer was to the male descendents of one human family- Abraham's, at the expense of locals amongst whom they lived, on the condition that they cut off the end of their penises. The God offering the salvation is quite willing to massacre all of the inhabitants of the promised land, every man, woman and unborn child.

This week the offer is to the descendents of Abram again, but now additional conditions are added beyond circumcision.

This God is jealous, happy to punish people for their great great great grandparents' sins, keeping people in fear so that they do not stray.

This covenant has nothing to offer animals except their murder in ritual sacrifice. It has little more to offer women, except that, as property, they are too valuable to murder.

I must confess a few things.

I'm beginning to feel like I'm flogging a dead horse, going on and on about how unacceptable various offers of salvation are. And I'm feeling very naughty, like some kind of teenage rebel who delights in undermining authority- in this case God's or the Bible's.

I really think I'm over my rebellious phase though. But it's so striking! Once you start replacing the question- "what's nice about this story?" with "what is being offered in this story, to whom, and by what sort of God?"

It really troubles me that some people could think that God is the kind of God represented here, that the offers are good ones, and that it doesn't matter about the humans and other animals who are excluded.

Especially because, to a large degree, the church has taken these offers on as its own- saying that we are now Abraham's people, the people of the covenant. That the Christian covenant is the *culmination of*, rather than a *repudiation of*,

all of these other covenants.

Yet I also don't want to sound like I'm saying that we should throw these stories out. We need to keep them to remind ourselves just how misguided, selfish and illogical people of faith can be, just how badly they can misrepresent God in their own interests, and just how blind they can be to the harm they cause to those who are left out of the promises.

All those traps are ours too.

But as 21C Christians aware of God's relationship with the rest of life, I think that in our story there is no room for a God who ever punished to the third generation. It is certainly true, however, that ecological consequences unfold over at least that sort of time frame. I suspect that by the end of Easter we might have concluded that many of the actions attributed to God are better attributed to ecology. That the punishment for breaking God's laws will be replaced by an awareness of ecological cause and effect. We will see that often some people are the cause, and others suffer the effect.

I sound like I'm preaching again! I am! So to put it as a question- is the Christian offer, is Christian salvation, the culmination of, or the repudiation of, the kind of salvation offered in the Noah/Abram/Exodus stories?

With that in mind, the ongoing story of Jesus in Mark is intriguing and confronting. Amazingly, its not part of the Easter lectionary.

The first part of the story, where Jesus heals the blind man, gets similar treatment by lots of commentators. It introduces a series of dialogues and actions which reveal something of Jesus' character and mission. We are being urged to *see* what Jesus is on about. What his offer is and to whom, and what sort of person it is who is making the offer. And we are shown most emphatically that the disciples *did not see*.

Jesus asks the disciples who the crowds are saying he is. He then asks the disciples for their opinion. Peter responds, we are told, "The Messiah."

Jesus sternly orders them not to tell anyone about him.

Peter has just said that Jesus is the Messiah, the Christ, the fulfilment of God's offer to the chosen race. The *culmination* of the covenant- the dawning of their salvation.

And Jesus tells him to shut up!

Perhaps because in any kind of category which Peter and the others can understand, Jesus is *not* the Messiah. He is *not* the Christ.

Jesus goes on to talk, not about the Christ, but the Son of Man, and his suffering. Is it because he is trying to tell them what will really happen to the Christ? Or because he is saying, I am not the Christ but the son of Man?

If you are one of the hundreds millions of people who, like Peter, proclaim that Jesus is the Christ, what on Earth do you mean by that? Would Jesus tell you to shut up also? Perhaps not, since Mark starts his book, "The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ..." But perhaps.

Next week we'll look at what offer this Jesus bloke is making his followers. Who is included, and what kind of God is behind it? Does he fulfil, or replace the old promises?

Before going on though, read the next bit of Mark's story, not as a twenty-first century Christian who already knows that Jesus ends up dead, but as a first century Jew who thinks they just might have found the Messiah, and has given away everything to follow him around. Read it as someone who thinks that the offers made to Noah, Abram and the Exodus community are *good* offers, ones which they have already accepted and now, thanks to Jesus, expect to see fulfilled in their very lifetime!

No, really, go and read it.

## **Easter 4: Jesus' alternative 1**

Numbers 21,

"Israel made a vow to the LORD and said, "If you will indeed give these Canaanites into our hands, then we will utterly destroy their towns." The LORD listened to the voice of Israel, and *handed over the Canaanites*; and they utterly destroyed them and their towns; so the place was called Hormah, which means *devotion*.

Then they set out by the way to the Red Sea, to go around the land of Edom; but the people became impatient on the way. The people

spoke against God and against Moses,

"Why have you brought us up out of Egypt to die in the wilderness? For there is no food and no water, and we detest this miserable food."

Then the LORD sent poisonous serpents among the people, and they bit the people, so that many Israelites died. The people came to Moses and said,

"We have sinned by speaking against the LORD and against you; pray to the LORD to take away the serpents from us."

So Moses prayed for the people. And the LORD said to Moses, "Make a poisonous serpent, and set it on a pole; and everyone who is bitten shall look at it and live."

So Moses made a serpent of bronze, and put it upon a pole; and whenever a serpent bit someone, that person would look at the serpent of bronze and live.

Mark 8:29-

Jesus asked his disciples, "who do you say that I am?" Peter answered him, "You are the Messiah." *And Jesus rebuked them and ordered them not to tell anyone about him.*

Then he began to teach them that the Son of Man must undergo great suffering, and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests, and the scribes, and be killed, and after three days rise again.

Peter took him aside and began to *rebuke him*. But turning and looking at his disciples, *Jesus rebuked Peter* and said, "Get behind me, Satan! For you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things."

He called the crowd and said to them, "If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me.

For those who want to save their soul will lose it, and those who lose their soul for my sake, and for the sake of the good news, will save it.

For what will it profit you to gain the whole world and forfeit your soul? Indeed, what can you give in return for your soul?

Do not be ashamed of me and my words, though this is a faithless and sinful generation.”

In Numbers 21 we again have the salvation of some through a holy war which brings destruction to others. Despite the victory, the Jews complain. After all, they are starving! But God responds not with Mannah from heaven, but another massacre. Unsurprisingly, they fall in line before the God who keeps his beloved people in line by killing them, then healing a few.

If it was a story of a husband and wife, as God and the people of faith are often described, we would probably think of domestic violence and applaud the woman if she had the courage to leave.

And this story is important because it continues in the Christian tradition. All around the world today Christians are reading this as part of their Easter story:

*“just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whoever believes in him may have eternal life... Those who believe in him are not condemned; but those who do not believe are condemned already...”* (John 3:14)

In other words- God is going to kill everyone who does not believe, just as God killed all those grumbling Israelites, but those who look to the Serpent (who believe in Jesus) will be healed.

So the God who is offering you salvation is a God who is quite willing to kill every one of your friends and family who do not believe in Jesus. And why not? This same God over the last few weeks has been shown to be willing to murder almost everyone on the planet (Noah), and then entire nations (Abraham and Joshua), and even the faithful if they have a lapse.

So we see the first disciples using their inherited faith stories, and relating them to Jesus. Showing how he fulfilled them. How he was the Messiah, the Christ, of the people of those stories. I do not accept those stories, indeed many do not. What surprised me was that Jesus doesn't seem too keen on them either.

Let's revisit Mark 8:29-38

Peter (the disciples) called Jesus the Christ. Jesus *rebuked* them, telling them to shut up about him. He talked instead about the Son of Man.

Yet at the very first line of Mark, and at the end, Jesus is called the Christ. Were these later additions to bring Mark into line with the other gospels? I haven't had time to look that up.

Jesus, perhaps, has been trying to tell people that he is not the Christ but the son of Man. Who will suffer, not reign victoriously on Earth.

So strong is the negative reaction to what Jesus says about suffering that Peter dares to rebuke him! So emphatic is Jesus about what he is saying that he rebuked Peter right back, even calling him Satan!

Peter's mind is on human things.

Humans expect deliverance and victory over enemies. Humans expect the OT stories we've read. Jesus thinks that God sees it differently!

Jesus then goes on to describe *his* offer of salvation. It is not an offer to be found, but lost! To *lose* in order to gain.

Don't be ashamed, don't cling to success. Don't look for victory.

All three offers were very counter cultural, then and now.

Stop and take five minutes to answer one of these questions:

1) What in your life do you think is good- yet you are ashamed of? Unwilling to talk about, let people know about?

2) "What will it profit them to gain the whole world and forfeit their life?" Is your life being diminished because of something you are fixated on gaining?

## Easter 5: Jesus' alternative 2

By Jeremiah, to the Israelites while in exile in Babylon (Jeremiah 31).

The days are surely coming, says the LORD... when people shall no longer say: "The parents have eaten sour grapes, and the children's teeth are set on edge." But all shall die for their own sins.

The days are surely coming, says the LORD, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah. *It will not be like the covenant that I made with their ancestors* when I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt -- a covenant that they broke.

But this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, says the LORD: I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people.

*No longer shall they teach one another, or say to each other, "Know the LORD,"* for they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest

The day is surely coming, says the LORD, when Jerusalem shall be rebuilt... *It shall never again be uprooted or overthrown.*

In Mark 9:33 we read that, after catching them arguing,

Jesus asked the disciples what they were arguing about. But they were silent, for on the way they had argued with one another who was the greatest. He sat down, called the twelve, and said to them, "Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all."

Then he took a little child and put it among them; and taking it in his arms, he said to them, "Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes not me but the one who sent me."

Jesus and the disciples came to Jerusalem. And Jesus entered the temple and began to drive out those who were selling and those who

were buying in the temple, and he overturned the tables of the money changers.

He said, "Is it not written, 'My house shall be called a house of prayer for all the nations'? But you have made it a den of robbers."

The chief priests said to him, "By what authority are you doing these things? Who gave you this authority to do them?"

Then Jesus told them the parable of the vineyard. Again and again slaves were sent to the tenants to collect their rent, but they killed them all.

Finally, the owner sent his beloved son. They seized him, killed him, and threw him out of the vineyard. What then will the owner of the vineyard do? He will come and destroy the tenants and give the vineyard to others.

When the chief priests realized that he had told this parable against them, they wanted to arrest him, but they feared the crowd. So they left him and went away."

*The old covenants are not to be fulfilled, but replaced, because the system of kings and priests obviously couldn't be trusted.*

This week with Jeremiah we are at the time of the exile, when the middle and upper classes have been taken away to Babylon, and start compiling all the stories from Genesis through to the Exodus. All the covenants we have already read about over the last few weeks, all the stories of salvation (Noah, Abram, the Exodus) were written and refashioned into one big story in Babylon.

All these stories were compiled by the priests, the bosses, in order to shore up the faith of a depressed people in exile. And perhaps to shore up their own position amongst the people.

But today we hear from a rebel. Jeremiah. Before the exile, when prophets were promising that God would save Israel, he was saying they were doomed.

Now in exile he speaks of restoration. Of salvation back to Jerusalem. But with a *new* and *different* covenant. *The old ones are no longer valid.* The old

covenants are *not* to be fulfilled, but replaced, because the system of kings and priests obviously couldn't be trusted. Jeremiah preached divine rebellion.

No more kings, no more teachers of the law, no more rulers. The people will have direct communion with God.

I've been asking- is the Christian covenant, or salvation, the fulfilment of the old covenants, or a rejection of them? Here we see that centuries before Jesus the old covenants were *already* being rejected by some.

But Jeremiah was wrong. After the return to Jerusalem the religious teachers remained (and they do today). The temple was not everlasting after all, but was sacked by Rome shortly after Jesus' death.

So we move on to the Jesus story in Mark. Here Jesus continues Jeremiah's tendency to turn things on their head. Only those who are last will be first. Only those who serve will lead. If Jesus had a hierarchy, it was upside down. This is an offer of salvation which involves humbling and demotion, not glory and power.

And Jesus was willing to go head to head against those who were not willing to be humbled, with those who were quite happy to be at the top of the hierarchy. Here again he followed Jeremiah against the prevailing temple system. The kings, the religious leaders, the bosses of the temple are to be *replaced*. They cannot be trusted, and they will be thrown out of the vineyard.

You don't call the bosses wicked robbers without inviting retribution, so we see the seeds of Jesus' death being sown.

Jeremiah said that God would give the Spirit to all people, not the religious leaders. It didn't make him popular. Jesus said in the parable of the vineyard that the priests and scribes were to be replaced by others, since they kept killing the prophets like Jeremiah rather than listening to them. We all know how popular that was!

So, it seems that in the Christian story, at least as Mark tells it, there is a *repudiation* of the old covenants, the old promises, the old ways of understanding salvation. A rejection of hierarchies, new and old.

And we have, in Mark at least, a clear understanding that Jesus died simply because the people he railed against had more political clout than he did.

Yet many Christians at this time of year will rehearse the stories about how Jesus died because God wanted him to. He was the perfect sacrifice which replaced all the millions of imperfect sacrifices which Jews had long made to God. Jesus took the final punishment which we all deserved. Rather than killing all of us, as God should of (as he had before), he killed Jesus the God-man.

*How can Jesus be the perfect culmination of the sacrificial system, when he has just rejected the authority of the temple and those who run it?*

But if Jesus himself, like Jeremiah, was not on about *fulfilling* the old covenants but replacing them, what sense could we make of him as the final perfect sacrifice? How can he be the perfect culmination of the sacrificial system, since he has just rejected the authority of the temple and those who run it?

Matthew records that Jesus places himself in the tradition of Jeremiah, Amos and Micah. They claimed that God desires *mercy*, not *sacrifice*. What sense, then, does it make to claim that Jesus is a sacrifice?

It might be worth re-reading the letter from the other animals on page 42.

If it makes no sense to see Jesus *as* a perfect sacrifice for our salvation, as I and many other Christians believe, then how *do* we get salvation, wholeness and healing in this new covenant which Jesus talks about? This covenant which seems to be a rejection, rather than a fulfilment, of the old ways of understanding covenants, of the old offers of salvation- the human centred, nationalistic, male dominated ones?

If we don't need to placate an angry God to be saved, what do we need to do, if anything?

## **Easter 6 Jesus' alternative 3**

In Mark's story, Jesus, having just cleared the temple court, and declared that the time of the temple was coming to an end, said,

"Whenever you stand praying, forgive, if you have anything against anyone; *so that* your Father in heaven may also forgive you your trespasses."

Jesus went on to speak of the two great commandments,

"The first is, 'Hear, O Israel: the Lord our God, the Lord is one; you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength.' The second is this, 'You shall love your neighbour as yourself.' There is no other commandment greater than these."

Later, at Bethany in the house of Simon the leper, as he sat at the table, a woman came with an alabaster jar of very costly ointment of nard, and she broke open the jar and poured the ointment on his head.

*Some* of those there were really miffed, claiming the luxury should have been sold for the poor. Jesus disagreed, and had a dig at them about their ability to help the poor whenever they felt like it. Finally, Judas Iscariot, who was one of the twelve, went to the chief priests in order to betray him to them.

How do we win God's forgiveness? The most common answer I hear, and see on the web, and read in hymns at Easter is often that it is given to us, through the perfect sacrifice of Jesus, the lamb of God, the fulfilment of all the animal sacrifices of the Old Testament.

The New Covenant, sealed with Jesus' sacrificial blood.

And this traditional answer has more than enough support in the scriptures to justify itself.

But I also think alternative views have plenty in scripture to justify *them*. For starters, we have four gospels, and they say different, though overlapping, things about Jesus.

Some New Testament writers clearly claim that Jesus was a sacrifice. This made sense in their context, where the sacrifices of other animals were thought by many to restore favour with God (but not by Jeremiah, Amos, or Micah). A Pharisee might be persuaded that God had swapped animal sacrifices for Jesus' one perfect sacrifice, but would Jeremiah be persuaded? Are we?

This year the church is reading through Mark (very selectively), so what does Jesus say here, and in Mark generally?

He didn't say "I will die so that God may forgive you." No.

He said, “*You* forgive others, *so* that God may forgive you.”

There’s a whole sermon there about why can’t God just forgive us anyway, and is salvation therefore by works (the work of forgiving others) but for today let’s concentrate on this bit-

*You* forgive others so God can forgive you!

And it’s not just Mark who records this, but also Matthew and Luke.

In Mark, Jesus doesn’t have anything to do with our forgiveness, or with the offer God is making, apart from *declaring the path* to forgiveness and being willing to die rather than keep silent about it.

Luke agrees, recording Jesus as saying,

"Do not judge, and you will not be judged; do not condemn, and you will not be condemned. Forgive, and you will be forgiven; give, and it will be given to you. A good measure, pressed down, shaken together, running over, will be put into your lap; for the measure you give will be the measure you get back."

*We* forgive to be forgiven. Jesus *declares* the path to forgiveness, he doesn’t create it. He declares that we will have the courage to declare the same path, and live it, when the Spirit comes upon us. God’s work is scary work, and we need God’s help to do it.

It’s such a simple path- and such a hard one for anyone who has ever tried to forgive!!

*In Mark, Jesus doesn’t win our forgiveness for us, but declares the path we must follow to get it: forgive others.*

We continue to hear Jesus' simple message: the two great commandments, again recorded in Matthew and Luke- Love God. Love your neighbour as yourself. Jesus doesn't even say we need to love him.

Easy. Hard. Jesus seems to have laid before us a simple, gracious path, which is really, really difficult!

There was never any need for animal sacrifice, nor did Jesus sacrifice himself to appease God on our behalf.

The path to salvation is love and the forgiveness which flows from that. And we need a gracious spirit which lets us accept the things people do when they do them from good motivation, even if we would have done it differently.

Forgive, love, be gracious.

Be like God. Easy heh?

## Resurrection

So Jesus as the lamb of God and perfect sacrifice (which isn't in Mark or Luke) may have made sense to pharisaic Jews, if they thought that God demanded satisfaction for sins, and couldn't simply graciously forgive.

Jesus could have sidestepped the issues, returned to Nazareth and potted in the shed; supported his mother as she grew older.

He could have stayed with his friends at Bethany, had a good weekend, discussed, philosophised, solved the world's problems over a BBQ and wine.

He could have 'gone bush', into the wilderness, become a hermit, grown wise, specialised in prophecy.

He could have done a deal with the authorities, played their game, toed the line become a respected politician.

But he took the risky option.

*Myself -1 would have been more careful, more measured, after all, 30 is the prime of life.*

*There's so much to do  
a career to be considered  
advancement to be negotiated  
the world to travel  
a family to support  
a mortgage to service  
leisure to be enjoyed  
health to be maintained*

But Jesus rode into Jerusalem, confronted the 'powers that be', spoke his mind, followed through his teachings with dynamic action.

And, he lost the popular vote  
lost his freedom  
lost friends and family  
lost his future  
lost his life.

But his story endures and inspires. He proved the world can be changed by an ordinary life put on the line, by clear priorities, fearless action for social justice, and a deep caring for the world in which we live.

So, it is Easter once again, and we plead, 'Jesus, save us'.

Save us from selling God short,  
selling our world short,  
selling ourselves short.

May our eyes be wide open, our ears attuned to every heartbeat, our lives primed with the courage to love. *Kerry White: ecofaith participant*

The requirement for retribution was probably popular at the time, since they had suffered long under oppressors upon whom they wanted revenge. They could not simply forgive them. Remember that much of the Old Testament was given its final shape during a time of exile and desire for revenge. We can never know what form many stories like Noah might have had before that devastating experience.

The idea that someone must *pay for*, rather than just ask for God's forgiveness or salvation probably make sense to the part of *all* of us which desires revenge based justice (just punishment) rather than forgiveness based restored relationships.

It is easier to punish than forgive. Perhaps it is easier to *be punished* than forgiven?

But that isn't Jesus' way. I don't think it should be ours, though I confess that revenge is a fantasy with which my brain is well acquainted!

I would like to think that being attentive to the reptilian and early mammalian desires for conflict and revenge, we can now focus on the more recent abilities our brains have evolved: to observe and redirect. *Practising* non violence, non judgementalism, non condemnation, can connect up those neural pathways, even in our ageing brains. We can, I am assured, learn the habits of forgiveness like we can learn guitar. That may be a bad example. After eight years I still only know a handful of chords and change between them painfully slowly. But the reader need not be constrained by the limitations of the author.

*We live the resurrection, we aren't puppets of it. We are part of the stream, not just channels being carved out by it.*

But if we kept practising, I think we might find to our surprise that increasingly the resurrection *is occurring in us*: The living streams of the spirit of compassion, peace, forgiveness burbling up within us: showing that the same Spirit which was in Jesus lives in us.

So maybe a resurrection metaphor is of a stream which, having flowed particularly quickly in one channel (Jesus of Nazareth), now breaks its banks and flows through many (the community of those following his Way). A stream which allows us as a community to do "greater things" than Jesus did. It makes more sense to me than a metaphor of a slain lamb winning our forgiveness, being reanimated and then flying up into the clouds.

Those who want to retain a literal interpretation of Luke's story about Jesus bodily ascending into the clouds to return to God up in heaven, must deal with the size we now know "the heavens" to be.

Even if Jesus travelled at the speed of light, he would still have between 1000 and 100,000 years to go before he got out of the milky way galaxy. As an aside, if heaven, where Jesus sits at the right hand, is out there somewhere beyond our sight, then by the time one of our prayers actually got "to" heaven, we would be dead for millions of years before Jesus had the chance to respond.

Of course, few people literally believe Jesus is sitting somewhere out there in heaven. But many believe he flew up into the clouds. Why? Where was he going? If that part of the resurrection story is not literal, which bits are? The risen appearances? The beach breakfast? The empty tomb? Plenty of smarter people have written more about those possibilities.

One thing we should definitely agree on is that judging people for the way they make sense of the resurrection should be left to the Pharisees. Everyone who does not literally believe that Jesus is a projectile zooming through space has dipped the toe into the world of the metaphorical resurrection.

What else might resurrection mean? It can be a core affirmation that from death (in many forms: death of relationships, jobs, hopes, expectations etc), comes new life. This is true of the death of our lives. Only by dying can we make way for new life to be born onto this planet. Only through the death of others was our birth possible. This is true of species.

Extinction and evolution are a process of new life out of death. This is true cosmologically: only through the death of other stars was our star formed, and all the elements which make us up produced. This depends on us being able to affirm that death is a good thing, something which many theologians cannot do, as I explored in my thesis. Michael Dowd can do it, and does in a very readable way,

"When I think about death as a cosmic blessing, I am struck by how this public revelation mirrors the core message of the early Christian scriptures: on the other side of Good Friday is Easter Sunday. The profound similarity between ancient and evolutionary insights occurs to me as more than coincidence. I am convinced that a straightforward reading of the death and resurrection of Jesus the

Christ, as portrayed in the Christian gospels, is a magnificent celebration of a universal truth that could not possibly have been revealed in a way that all people could embrace until telescopes, microscopes, and computers became available. The truth is this: *Death is a doorway to greater Life* (TGFE pp. 89-90).”

“I don’t merely believe in the Resurrection. I know that for billions of years, chaos, death, and destruction have catalysed new life, new opportunities, and new possibilities. I know, both from my own life and from Earth’s history, that Good Fridays are consistently followed by Easter Sundays. The story of Christ’s death and resurrection reminds me of this. (TGFE p. 188)”

Resurrection and afterlife are two different things, but of course they are related. I have occasionally been asked what I make of the afterlife, from an evolutionary perspective. Does an evolutionary or ecological theology have any place for an afterlife?

## **Afterlife**

I wouldn’t want the limitations of my own imagination or understanding to rule out the possibilities of something like an afterlife. At this stage, however, as an evolutionist Christian, I haven’t found any vision of an afterlife which either makes sense or appeals very much.

Many theologians who accept evolution still assume that death and pain are evils, even if necessary ones, and they hope that both will, eventually, be overcome. They accept the need for death and pain in the evolutionary process, but retain a hope that God will overcome such things in some final blissful era: the afterlife.

I would like to think they are right! It is one thing to accept that individual biological death is essential if others are to follow us and have a chance at life, and so it is to be strongly affirmed, even celebrated. It is another thing to celebrate the idea of *my own* death!

I freely admit that such celebration will be difficult when my time comes! Certainly for me, and hopefully for my family and friends as they gather at my funeral. If I outlive my partner or children I expect to be devastated when they die.

During my early years as a Christian, I softened the stark reality of my own death by imagining that the afterlife involved being able to travel, somehow bodily and spontaneously, throughout the vast array of galaxies and planets in the universe, to finally be able to admire and explore God's amazing creation. It seemed obvious that this is what God would want. Why build an enormous universe if we (the only species of much interest to God) don't get to see it?

So I really, *really*, empathise with the desire to escape death. This hope is widespread, even amongst those theologians who grapple seriously with science. For John Polkinghorne, for example,

"The ultimate futility of this present universe points us to looking beyond the physical world itself to the eternal faithfulness of the God who raised Jesus from the dead, if there is to be found a ground of true hope and everlasting fulfilment. "

I also empathise with Robert Russell in his desire for a grand end time vision, one which we actively participate in. I like his inclusion of other animals. Yet it is precisely his vision which convinces me that "afterlives," if they imagine a place and time without suffering and death, are untenable.

Here is his vision,

"Starting with the events at Easter, God will act *to transform the laws of nature* to produce the 'new creation.' In the coming reign of God, we will not leave behind the coral reefs... or the countless species now long extinct... If the Resurrection of Jesus... is an indication of what lies in store for the *universe*, then the future will be a *transformation of the laws of nature* as we now know them into something *so transcendently joyous that weeping and pain and disease and dying will be nevermore, and 'the lion will lie down with the lamb.'* Somehow, all nature... is destined to eternal life with God in community with each other, *a community of unending and bliss-filled experience* (emphasis mine)."

But if we are to bring the coral reefs with us, then presumably we will also bring the stonefish and stingrays which can kill us in a torturous moment. If the supposed "laws" of nature are changed so much that death and pain and reproduction cease to be, then will we really in any way be ourselves? If there is no death or reproduction in his vision, then the afterlife must be static.

Even if heaven only contains humans- it is hard to see how we could still be

ourselves once transformed from the constantly changing biological organisms we are, into eternally static ones. Would dead babies and the profoundly intellectually disabled live forever in their state at death? And if not, what possible connection could there be between their soul, which would presumably have a high level of relationality to other souls, and their actual bodily self?

Finally, I have been around happy people. I wouldn't want to spend eternity with them. This is not a flippant point. An afterlife with no pain or sorrow, or regret, or hurt, an afterlife of eternal static bliss- a kind of Prozac paradise, would be rather a Stepford hell.

So I think, life wise, "this is it." Such a belief is no better than a belief in an afterlife. The ranks of believers and non believers in an afterlife have both produced great heroes and cowards. Confidence in an afterlife, especially one of reward, may enable people to overcome fears and work selflessly for the benefit of others. It can also produce military zealots. Lack of belief can produce self-obsessed, fearful cowards, and also people full of existential passion to leave the world a better place, or improve their lot now, since there is nothing to follow.

But even if we can't know where we are going, we can think more about why we are here in the meantime. First I will talk about "we" meaning all of life, then look at humans, then ourselves as individuals. I will then speculate a little on why Jesus was here, but most of that will have to wait until Christmas!

## **Why are we here?**

### **Why is life here?**

Why is life here? According to process theology, life is here because God wanted something to experience, to love. They call it "richness of experience." It is hard to be God if you have nothing to be God of, and pretty boring and lonely.

People, including humans and many other animals, have two aspects to them, In a sense I never change. I was Jason John at birth, and will be at the "same" person at death. In another sense I do change, every moment, because of all the experiences of life I have, and how I respond to them.

Likewise, process theologians say, God is in one sense unchangeable, as some traditional theology claims, but also God *must* change, in response to events and relationships. Unless someone can change you, you can't possibly be in love with them. If God really loves us, then what we do must affect God.

So by giving birth to the universe in which life evolved, God opened up the possibility of having relationships, of having experiences, of changing. The idea that God created the universe, created life, is very orthodox. The idea that life *creates* God may not be, but it makes sense.

So, why are we here? Why is life here?

We are here to change God. To set God free from an eternity of sameness and aloneness. And everything we do changes God. Everything *every* organism does changes God. So *nothing* is without value to God, even if it has no value to us.

*How* do we change God? There are three answers. One comes straight from process theology, I would add two that seem logical additions.

First- by *our own conscious experiences* and our reflections on them, we allow God to also consciously experience things. In some sense when we contemplate the beauty of a sunset, God gets the chance to do so through us. When we are reconciled to a friend after a fight, God experiences that. According to this way of thinking, the greater our capacity for a rich intellectual experience, the more valuable we are to God.

Surprise surprise, to process theologians, who all happen to be human, humans matter most to God! To be fair, the process people I read for my thesis were mostly concerned with ethics, and with arguing that it is not only humans which should be treated well, but all creatures should be treated well in keeping with their ability to experience suffering, and/or joy.

But God is not constrained to rationality or conscious experience. We need to remember that for most of life on Earth, there has been *no* consciousness. And most of Earth's future is devoid of it. So if God only values conscious experience, then most of the planet's history was without value, except to make us! And once we are gone, God might as well bin it.

But there are a vast array of experiences of the world apart from conscious, rational contemplation!

God, who experiences life through *all* life, experiences life and relationships in ways totally alien to ours. God experiences what it is to fly like a swallow, and grow like a gum tree. It is the *diversity* of experiences of life, not the *intellect* of the individual, which matters. What God values is the existence of life, and God's experience of and through that life of something other than God. We cannot even begin to imagine what this is like. As Nagel reminds us, even for us to imagine what it would be like to experience life as another mammal, say a bat with its sonar dominated perception of the world, is impossible. It is hard enough to imagine life as another human! How can we possibly understand the depths of God's experience?

A third way to change God is to simply be, and to allow God to experience *us*, as we might experience another human without knowing what is going on inside them. To have an experience *of* us, rather than *through* us. God has an experience, for example, of a mosquito quite independent of that mosquito's experience of itself. God has a relationship to each of us. Christians claim it is a *friendship* with each of us. And God experiences even things with no experience- like mountains and sunsets. Process theology does not value rocks, or forests, but God could.

So the purpose of life is to change God, to set God free from an eternity trapped in sameness. "We" are here to liberate God.

This happens by God,  
vicariously experiencing *our* rational experiences  
sharing all of life's non-rational experiences  
directly experiencing living things for herself, and befriending us.

The experience of life which God has accumulated is overwhelmingly communal, and *overwhelmingly non human*. Here on Earth God's experience of life precedes us by three billion years, and will postdate us by a few billion also! This is a staggering insight to try to assimilate into our thinking about our place in the world. It certainly, I think, rocks the Judeo-Christian-Islamic theological story, as well as western humanism.

Yet God's experience *does* include experiences of humans, and through humans, and with humans. Now that humans *have* evolved to be here, what should we do about it?

## Why are humans here?

There is a mechanical answer of course, which includes the big bang, the evolution of aerobic bacteria, and a comet which killed the dinosaurs. It ends with our species, not another species of Homo, surviving the ice ages.

In other words, the new creation stories reveal that we are not here because God designed or manipulated the evolution of our species. Our particular species is here by chance, as part of the festival of life in the universe which God somehow sparked.

Even taking our species as a given, *you* as an individual are still here by chance. We know that the DNA which makes you up is randomly selected, half each from each of your parents, plus a bit more from your mum. Any other sperm/egg combination would have made a different “you.”

Now that we *are* here, what do we do? Let us look at that from God’s perspective:

If God’s desire is for richness of experience, primarily mediated through love and relationships, if that was God’s “mission” in creating or relating to the universe, then the human mission should be to enhance the richness of experience of God. We are possibly the species most able to bring love into

Excerpt from *Evolution and Christian Fundamentalism*,  
<http://ecofaith.org/articles/>

I am going to die. It’s a shame but there it is.

It’s a terrible waste of a good student and a good father, but it is inevitable. Yet I don’t abuse my body. I don’t chain smoke. I try to have some kind of decent diet. I try to pay attention to what’s going on inside and outside, even as it gets a bit saggier and weaker.

If I come to see that something I’m doing is accelerating my body’s demise, or making it a less enjoyable skin to be in, I try to do something about it. I don’t just say, “Oh well, it will be compost one day anyway!” We consider people who deliberately harm themselves or ignore their health mentally ill.

I notice my fingers. I find them interesting. I try to keep them in good health so that I can use them to type and dial and tickle. They may be arthritis ridden one day, but why accelerate that?

This idea extends out from my body to the body of Earth. Sure, any tree I look at will be a rotting log one day, but why hurry that? Why not revere its life because of, not in spite of, its impending death?

Capitalists often take the micky out of a word like conservation- it sounds old, musty, stick in the mud, cantankerous. Reverence for Life is a much harder concept to disparage. Reverence is not diminished by change or necessarily opposed to change.

It is open to all, fundamentalist and evolutionist and everyone in between.

Try it, you’ll like it!

Actually, you probably won’t- it makes life slower and decisions more complicated, but old people who have lived it seem to find it to have been worth-while!

the world at this point in its history. The species most able to love God back!

We are the lovers of God and life.

If we accept that all of life is the image of God; that we are all relatives, brothers and sisters or at least cousins, then we might read 1 John with new eyes,

“Those who say, "I love God," and hate their brothers or sisters, are liars; for those who do not love a brother or sister whom they have seen, cannot love God whom they have not seen. The commandment we have from him is this: those who love God must love their brothers and sisters also.”

Though there's nothing wrong with love, the term gets bandied about a lot, so I prefer the term made popular by Albert Schweitzer in “recent” times, back in the 1930s: *reverence for life*.

We are the reverers of life. How can we claim to revere the God we have never seen, if we do not revere life, the image of God, which we have seen?

Maybe you could play with this for a year. Consider your *primary calling* being not to dominate life, nor or rule it, nor manage it, or even *serve* it, or co-create it. But to *revere* it, to love it, and to let your ethical decisions flow from that. Add this to the task of remembering that our moral responsibilities to other “people” includes, but goes way beyond, humans.

## **Sex and relationships**

Revering and loving others often leads to thoughts of wooing them (though hopefully that is mostly limited to other humans!) Now seems as good a time as any to explore what the new creation stories have to say to us about the evolution of sex and relationships. All kinds of sexual relationships have emerged since sex first evolved hundreds of millions of years ago. We will see that, for humans, sexual relationships changed and adapted even in the relatively narrow time frame of the writing and compiling of the biblical witnesses. There is no one “biblical” model for sexual relationships.

That probably sounds obvious to anyone who remembers the polygamy of Abraham and others, but since churches still continue to talk about “biblical norms” for relationships, it isn't obvious enough.

Let's start with a fairly light hearted, but information packed, poem I wrote a while ago,

## Sex is fun

Sex is fun, but that's not why we do it,  
It's only fairly recently that evolution grew it!  
Still, I hope we'd all agree, when all is said  
and done,  
That we like sex- sex is fun.

Of course, most creatures of Earth don't  
even do it at all  
They just split in half and then off they crawl  
Then homosexuality was the first revolution,  
There was only one gender for most of  
evolution.

Now we have genders, but not just two-  
Some species have dozens. Yes, it's true!  
Then we have all those whose gender  
bends  
They switch back and forth- it never ends!  
Fish girls become boys become women  
become men  
A cycle repeating again and again.

Even when our gender stays fixed  
Things can still get a little mixed:  
XO, XX, XXX, XXXX, XXXXX  
(that's just the female sex!)  
Also XY, XXY, XXXY, XXXXY, XYY  
Yes all kinds exist on the male side.

And if you think that's a little absurd-  
The whole thing is reversed in those  
feathery birds!  
I am an XY, a boy bird's a ZZ  
And there may be more we don't know  
about yet!

Sea sponges can have sex, or do it alone,  
Yes, on a whim they can mate, or clone.  
Of course when they have sex there is no  
penetration  
They just squirt it all out and *hope* for  
fertilization.  
Those sponges have orgies to an unheard  
of degree,  
So shut your mouth when you swim in the  
sea!

Creatures that *do* penetrate usually have no  
fun  
Just to survive is the main rule of thumb.  
Male spiders get eaten unless they are  
clever,  
Lots do it once, most bees do it never.

Birds orgasm in the blink of an eye,  
Antechinus do it then crawl off to die.  
But Bonobos do it with whomever they can,  
Then they do it again and again!  
Sex seems to be fun for so many primates  
Especially bonobos and us hairless apes.

But sex is dangerous, you get dead a lot.  
So why didn't life just say, "I'd rather not."  
Sex in all its forms has evolved  
To help us fight off the common cold!  
Well, really to fight off the more deadly types  
Of viruses, bacteria and even parasites.

We shuffle the deck when we combine our  
gametes  
It's infections by germs which sex evolved to  
defeat!  
Sure, we love sex *now*, we think its great!  
But it started to let us recombine  
If there were no germs there would be no  
sexuality-  
A whole lot of fun just to avoid a great  
calamity!

Now, whilst drawing morals straight from  
evolution  
Is really pretty dumb  
So is quoting Genesis  
Like some God given rule of thumb.  
Like... some say God made Adam and Eve,  
not Adam and Steve,  
Now we know that's just rubbish  
First all sex was same sex and didn't life  
flourish!

Often at a wedding you will hear that God  
gave marriage

I tend to think it's just a bit of Genesis  
inspired baggage.  
Evolution tells us that it certainly took a  
while.  
And its not like western monogamy is the  
only human style.  
Sure, marriage is great for a stable society.  
The very thing Jesus threatened- he died a  
man of notoriety.

Yet my wife and I subscribe to it, using  
contraception  
(well most of the time, there's been two  
conceptions)  
A lovely little boy, and another just arrived.  
The planet's overcrowded yet we're still glad  
he survived.  
Other friends have no kids, though they  
have often tried.  
It doesn't help when people say it's for God  
to decide!  
Babies come when a sperm makes it to an  
egg  
Not when God decides it- we do not have to  
beg.

Now, sex to get our kids was a highlight bar  
none,  
But we're not having any others, and sex is  
still fun.  
At least I hope it will be after I get the snip.  
Lucky I'm not catholic but a protestant!

These days Christians say sex is great-  
For a married woman and a man.  
The problem is that most then say  
That nobody else can.

But any ethic which ignores the fact that  
we've evolved  
Is an ethic that will leave many problems still  
unsolved.  
I cannot give you all the answers in a silly  
little poem  
Or if I did it would not rhyme and I can't  
stand that.

But by now it should be obvious to any  
sensibilities  
That heterosexual marriage does not  
exhaust all possibilities!  
While I can't vouch for bloke to bloke, about  
it many rave,  
And when there's only women- for many  
friends that is the fave.

Enough already!  
You either get the point, or you stopped  
reading long ago.  
If you haven't started having sex you should  
prolly take it slow.  
Sex should be a lot of fun  
But it isn't always so!

Sex is spiritual, mystical, emotional,  
relational  
Luminous, numinous, even educational

If you're having sex I hope you're having fun  
Even if it started to avoid those pathojuns!

Now the poem's over and because I am a  
priest  
I'll leave you with this little thought which  
might be a start at least.

- The future church calls people to  
love of God neighbour and self; to  
relationships which express a  
righteousness...
  - modelled on Jesus the Christ,  
informed by evolutionary  
biology, and appropriate to our  
current ecological context.
  - freed from a simplistic  
application of Genesis, with its  
static view of creation

It's from a talk I gave last year, the internet  
it's on:  
Google *christian sex evolution* then add  
*Jason John*

## Sex and relationships in our new creation stories

We don't need evolutionary biology to encourage us to rethink marriage and sex in the Christian faith. The church's attitude to both has changed over the millennia and is not unanimous now.

We cannot argue directly from evolution to morality and ethics. Evolution doesn't say *all* there is to say about marriage and sex, but it does say some things which we must bear in mind, especially those which show that scriptures and traditional Christian thinking makes assumptions which we now know to in error.

From the above poem, we can draw out some key propositions about sex and relationships with which we must grapple if we are to have a solid basis on which to work out our moral framework in this evolving world of ours.

Firstly, *sexual reproduction evolved*. There has not always been sex on Earth. It is not "natural," and was not "God given," in some fixed form. It evolved.

Secondly, *gender itself evolved*. The first "sex," or exchange of genetic information between organisms, happened before there was such thing as male and female. Now many species have multiple genders, and some organisms switch genders during their lifetimes. The given-ness of sex and gender assumed in the Genesis creation stories is false.

Sex appeared not because God said "be fruitful and multiply." Rather, the tiny organisms which first practised, gained greater resistance to pathogens. Sex leads to much greater genetic diversity. A genetically diverse population is more likely to have some individuals who will survive any new disease, and live to repopulate the environment. This is why monocultural crops require so much external assistance from pesticides to keep them flourishing.

For almost all of its existence, sex was all about producing offspring. Much later it started to involve parenting. In the last blink of an eye sex has become, for some species, a pleasurable practice, and a key part of couple and societal bonding.

The *relationship* between parenting and sex has changed. First there were no parents. Organisms simply split in two to reproduce. With sex came parents, but no parenting. Fertilised eggs floated around the ocean and the hatchlings did their best. Now we have a dazzling array of parenting styles, all of which

have evolved in response to the environment in which the organisms (or populations) are living.

This includes human parenting! Human partnering styles, of which there are many around the world, have evolved in response to their environment! The style assumed to be found in Genesis is not universal, nor the norm.

For 99% of human parenting, we were nomadic tribes-people. Life long monogamy was apparently rare. There was shared care of the children. It is only very recently, and just before humans compiled the final version of Genesis, that humans discovered agriculture in some parts of the world. Marriage largely *evolved* in response to the need to determine property rights and inheritance.

Even within the biblical witnesses, we see not one “biblical norm” for relationships, but several. And those norms we probably find morally repugnant if we actually read them.

## **Sex in the Old Testament**

As the first Jews began to settle in the “promised” land, they were a relatively small, militant population. Many men were killed in war, and there was a need to “be fruitful and multiply” fast! Bring on polygamy.

As they settled (apparently having been nomads in the desert during the exodus), it was the men who took up property ownership. Women *were* property. We see this in the ten commandments, where men are told not to covet their neighbours land, slaves, ox or woman.

And children were the men’s property. If a male slave eventually earned his freedom from a Jewish owner, *he had to leave his wife and kids behind.*

As they became owners, men wanted to know that the kids they look after and share resources with and are going to leave an inheritance to are *their* kids. In the Old Testament women have no independent means of survival, so they need to be protected from abuse, at least a bit. Divorce and widowhood were often financially devastating. Protection was put in place for widows, and to a lesser extent I think for divorcees.

Also at this point in history, sex and reproduction were closely linked, because contraception was very basic. The bible only mentions spilling one’s seed upon the ground rather than in one’s sister-in-law.

As the Jews adapted to this environment it led to a certain way of being, which we find recorded in the Old Testament.

The laws around marriage and sex all revolve around the question of whether property rights are being interfered with, and the need to maintain lines of inheritance.

- Men could have sex with wives (more than one) and concubines, and any other woman provided that they did not belong to another man, or were not worth money to their father.
- Love had little to do with marriage- often women were given by fathers to other men who pleased them (Jacob was given Rachael and Leah).
- The tribe of Jabesh-gilead was slaughtered, and their virgins given to the wifeless tribe of Benjamin.
- The rape of a woman was judged on property grounds- if she was engaged or married the man was killed (for he might be disturbing another man's line of inheritance), if she was a virgin then he had to marry her and pay 50 shekels to her father (maintaining her value to her father and "protects" her). Likewise a widow can demand that her brother-in-law marry her to protect her from poverty.
- If a man accused his new bride of not being a virgin, she and her parents would be expected to prove that she was. If they could not, she was to be stoned to death on her father's doorstep. If they can prove it, the husband was fined 100 shekels and not permitted to ever divorce her.
- The use of prostitutes is simply mentioned in passing in the Old Testament, presumably because it did not complicate property matters. Proverbs 6 recommends prostitutes over affairs with married women because they have no husband to attack you. Proverbs 28 recommends avoiding prostitutes, not because sex with them is immoral, but because it squanders your money.

So in the Old Testament marriage is strongly affirmed, *mostly as a means of controlling property rights, secondly perhaps as a means of protecting women from abject poverty.*

If sex and reproduction could be 100% separated, how different would the Old Testament laws have been? For example, if women only got pregnant if they wanted to, or their husband allowed them to? Or if both men and women were able to own property? Or if both sexes fought in wars, and so the gender balance remained about even?

## **Sex in the New Testament**

The New Testament environment had similarities to the Old Testament one. Jewish women still had little or no property rights or independent means, and contraception was unreliable, so sex and reproduction were still closely linked.

But there were also differences in the way relationships were seen. Some early Christians believed that the world was about to end, so marriage and parenting was a pointless distraction. Others proclaimed that Jesus had heralded a new era right here on Earth, where men and women were equal and now all part of one big egalitarian family of God.

Overall, in the New Testament writings, marriage is seen as a concession more than anything. Let's look at Jesus and Paul.

When his disciples said to Jesus, "it is better not to marry." Jesus said to them, "Not everyone can accept this teaching, but only those to whom it is given. There are many kinds of eunuch, including those who have made themselves eunuchs for the sake of the kingdom of heaven. Let anyone accept this who can."

Jesus argued, against the common view of his day, that in the resurrection there was no marriage. Common modern Christian sentiment seems to side against Jesus on this one. Humans often talk of being reunited with loved ones as if the kind of relationship they enjoyed on Earth is mirrored in heaven.

Against the high value placed on family and marriage in his day, Jesus said that whoever does the will of God is his mother and sister and brother.

Jesus was against divorce. Much could be said about the context in which Jesus opposed divorce. I believe that he is neither affirming Old Testament morality (that is obvious), nor adding an extra layer of expectations on people, but seeking to protect women, who in his day often ended up in poverty as

“damaged goods.”

In our day, where women are often more threatened in the marriage than out of it, I believe the Spirit who was in Jesus leads us to say other things. Paul Harders wrote a student paper which is very helpful on this, and I can email it to you if you are interested.

When we turn to Paul, we see great ambivalence about marriage,

“To the unmarried and the widows I say that it is well for them to remain unmarried as I am. But if they are not practicing self-control, they should marry. For it is better to marry than to be aflame with passion.”

“So then, he who marries his fiancée does well; and *he who refrains from marriage will do better*. In my judgment [a widow] is more blessed if she does not marry. And I think that I too have the Spirit of God.”

Jesus and Paul were ambivalent about marriage, but hardly advocated extra-marital sex instead. Jesus says little if anything on the topic. Paul, working in some of the sex capitals of his day, is against fornication and the use of prostitutes.

Yet the letter to the Hebrews commends Rahab the prostitute for her faith and the letter of James commends her for her good works. Jesus says that the prostitutes are entering the kingdom of heaven ahead of the chief priests and elders. Not the ex prostitutes. Paul condemns those who lie with prostitutes, and says that male prostitutes will not enter the kingdom of heaven. Women prostitutes do not seem to concern him.

So Jesus and Paul are basically cool towards marriage- for Paul it is a concession to passion, to be avoided if possible. For Jesus it safeguards women, but threatens to get in the way of the new family of God, made up of those who do God’s will, not biological relatives. He appears also to say that those who can accept a teaching of not marrying should.

## **Sexual relationships now**

We have looked at the Old and New Testament contexts. What is ours? Of course, it will be even more diverse than back then, so perhaps I should ask you to think about your context, and I’ll talk about mine.

In Australia unmarried women increasingly generate their own wealth. Women increasingly are not owned by their families or husbands. Our male to female ratio is about even. Many aged people have good health care, pensions and super and are often not dependent on their adult children to keep them alive.

Contraception is now very reliable, and abortion is less risky, so people are freer to have sex without needing to think of the consequences of pregnancy. Sexually transmitted diseases remain a real issue, but proper contraception and access to antibiotics and other health care means they are rarely life threatening, apart from HIV. Even HIV is not the death sentence it once was.

As a result, there is a lot more freedom in choosing a marriage partner, and even whether to marry, for both partners, and especially for women. Marriage and relationships are increasingly seen as being about the love of the couple, not about financial gain to their families.

We are experiencing more of Jesus' egalitarian world of equality between male and female, which some early Christians promoted. Few of us expect that the end of the world is about to arrive any day now, and so it makes sense to us in a way that it did not to Paul, and perhaps Jesus, to have children.

We also live in an increasingly individualistic, fractured world, with high mobility, with few long term friendships or even lasting family ties. How many people live within walking distance of their parents, cousins, childhood friends? We are increasingly capitalistic and consumeristic. Working parents are more separated from their children than ever, and at-home parents are more stuck with their kids and isolated from others than ever. There is relatively more gender equality, but plenty of inequality everywhere else.

In short, we live in a totally different environment from our faith forebears, even from Christians of a generation or two ago.

Yet if you sit through most church wedding services you will get none of this sense of human adaptation, not even within biblical history: let alone our evolutionary history. Marriage hasn't evolved- God made it! There was never polygamy, there was never serial monogamy let alone promiscuity. There never was a time before parenting, or gender, or sex. In a typical Uniting Church marriage service, for example, you will hear it said that,

Chris and Jo are now to begin this way of life *which God has created* (and Christ has blessed!)

Marriage is *appointed by God... a gift of God* in creation

Marriage *is given* by God...

... for mutual enrichment & comfort ... for social stability

... for rewarding (and morally acceptable) sex ... for kids

How does this “traditional” Christian wedding service lines up against the New Testament and especially Jesus’ thoughts as we have them recorded. What do we make of the four reasons for which marriage was supposedly given to us?

We would hope marriage is enriching and comforting. The more fractured and individualistic the society, the more marriage becomes a primary means of enrichment. This is more true for men than women, though women in happy marriages benefit too.

In the biblical witnesses, “**enrichment & comfort**” is meant to come from God and others, not just our spouse,

“Now may... *God*, who... gave us eternal comfort and good hope, comfort your hearts ...”

“Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled, and do not let them be afraid.”

It is true that in sedentary populations with lots of possessions, marriage is a basis for “**social stability.**”

Stable societies, however, are not necessarily *just* or *good* societies. Adding to the stability of patriarchal, capitalistic societies is not a Christian responsibility, indeed, perhaps the very opposite. Jesus certainly wasn’t into social stability,

"Do not think that I have come to bring peace to the earth; I have not come to bring peace, but a sword. For I have come to set a man against his father, and a daughter against her mother..."

"I came to bring fire to the earth, and how I wish it were already kindled!... Do you think that I have come to bring peace to the earth?"

No, I tell you, but rather division!”

Perhaps in a wedding we should be talking about couples coming together as mutually supportive mission teams whose aim is to *bring down* their society, if its stability rests on injustice. That would seem a more Jesusy thing to do.

Perhaps we should *encourage* individuals who want to have sex to do so without taking on the burdens and responsibilities of marriage and babies, which would detract them from this missional endeavour. That would seem a more Pauline thing to do in our new context, now that having sex and having children is not intrinsically linked.

Speaking of **children**, whilst it is true that a stable marriage, if it is a healthy one, is probably the best environment for bringing up kids in this isolated, capitalistic system we live in, ought we still be encouraging people to *have* kids, now that humans have topped 6 billion?

The Uniting Church Assembly addressed just this issue in 2010<sup>1</sup>

## **Assembly accepts call for reproductive celibacy**

New Times correspondent *Iwos There* reports on the 2010 Assembly in Adelaide.

### **Adelaide, 2010.**

There was an audible sign of relief at Assembly today. The tense debates of the last two days were over, and consensus had finally been reached on the issue of celibacy within and outside of marriage.

Surprisingly, members quickly agreed that even lifelong, heterosexual marriage was actually an ambiguous institution for both Jesus and Paul, and the early church. This, combined with input from anthropologists and evolutionary biologists on the changing nature of sex and sexual relationships, and partnering and parenting, paved the way for a wider ranging discussion about sexuality than had been previously possible.

Assembly framed the ensuing discussion around the question- what kind of relationships best express our faith in our current environment?

Discussion quickly moved on to the issue of children, since many delegates reported that couples coming to them to be married usually did so because they

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<sup>1</sup> Incase you are reading this after 2010, this is pretend.

now wanted children.

After affirming that healthy and loving marriages offer several benefits to children, a collective gasp greeted Rev. Jo Tanman's suggestion that the church do all it could to stop more children being born.

Rev. Tanman suggested that, "Even if God told Adam and Eve to be fruitful and multiply, surely God is now telling us, in this massively overpopulated world, to be fruitless and diminish a little!"

Rev. Tanman then put forward a proposal from the floor, "That the UC call upon its members to consider adopting the vocation of reproductive celibacy, whatever kind of relationship they are in. This does not deny the joy children bring, but aims to maximise the joy available to those children already born, many of whom live in abject poverty."

The stunned silence was broken by Rev. Baasim Gandhi, who pointed out that it was not simply population, but use of resources and creation of pollution which was important. Perhaps human population *should* decrease rapidly, Rev. Gandhi admitted, but it should start with *westerners*.

Tanman accepted an amendment- "this call to reproductive celibacy is most pressing upon those who consume the most resources."

Outraged, Chris Meskin, of the liturgy commission, shouted- "I suppose we should be scrapping the service of thanksgiving for a child then!" Tanman replied, "Indeed. At the very least we should acknowledge that children don't come from God, but from our gametes!"

In the ensuing furore, various points were made in favour of Tanman's proposal.

Sam Gaia pointed out that amongst Jesus' recorded sayings were:  
"Whoever... does not hate ... wife and children, cannot be my disciple."  
"Whoever loves son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me;"  
"Whoever does the will of God is my brother and sister and mother."  
"And call no one your father on earth, for you have one Father -- the one in heaven."

Jesus was hardly pro-family, concluded Gaia, at least pro-biological family.

Jesus also said, according to Hiromi Oshima, that whoever could accept the call to be "eunuchs for the sake of the kingdom" should. Since the church had never taken this literally, and since Assembly had just accepted the validity of a range of sexual relationships, Oshima argued, to be a eunuch for the sake of the kingdom could now mean to be reproductively celibate, not completely celibate. This would allow even married people to be eunuchs, whilst still enjoying sex with each other.

Rev. Ghandi added that people have children for at least four reasons: The first three were to pass on property they have acquired; to gain a sense of immortality; or to contribute to the military or economic strength of a nation. Ghandi recalled that in 2005 the Federal Treasurer had asked Australians to have one extra child each, “for the economy!” These three reasons flew in the face of the gospel with Jesus’ challenge to abandon property, to seek immortality in the kingdom, not through biological reproduction, and his tirades against consumption. All the scriptures, said Ghandi, warn against trying to amass military or economic strength, calling us rather to trust in God, as the lilies of the field or the birds of the air.

The fourth reason for having children, he joked, was to grow the church, but he proposed a return to good old fashioned evangelism as a much more appropriate church revival strategy.

After yet another stunned silence, the aisles filled with delegates eager to provide additional reasons for having children, which they argued were still legitimate.

Eventually, however, the mood of Assembly swung to a recognition that whilst having children *per se* was not bad, in the current Australian context it certainly could be. How far, delegates debated, should an individual’s decisions be constrained by the wider Australian context? And then how far should Australians be constrained by the wider global context?

Several delegates who were in favour of the proposal for reproductive celibacy argued that many human activities are not bad in and of themselves, yet they are deemed unethical because of their impact on others. Amongst the examples cited, Robin Simcha interjected, “like farting in elevators,” which lightened the increasingly tense mood somewhat.

Others cited actions which might be appropriate in small communities where everybody knows each other, and bears the consequences of their actions, but not in this new global village where some reap benefits whilst others pay the cost, to which Simcha interjected, “like farting just before you jump out of the elevator.”

Eventually Tanman’s resolution was passed by a large formal majority:

*“The Uniting Church calls upon its members to consider adopting the vocation of reproductive celibacy, whatever kind of relationship they are in. This does not deny the joy children bring, but aims to maximise the joy available to those children already born, many of whom live in abject poverty. This call to reproductive celibacy is most pressing upon those who consume the most resources.”*

What pattern of relationships, sex and parenting best reflects the good news which Jesus proclaimed, in this new environment?

I would like to offer a “traditional” Christian approach to sex and relationships:

We could agree with the Old Testament writers, that sex should respect people’s property rights, take account of the needs of any children which might be born, and not lead either participant into abject poverty.

But we would outright reject many of the ways which that was safeguarded in the Old Testament context:

Rapists should be punished regardless of the property value of the woman.

They should certainly not be forced to marry virgin victims!

Fathers cannot simply give their daughters to good employees or guests.

Not being a virgin before marriage is not a legal matter, and certainly not a capital crime.

Women should not be able to compel their brother in law to marry them, nor to sire them.

We could remain open to polygamy in certain environments, if all parties find it serves their needs.

We could agree with Jesus and Paul that biological family should not separate us from the family of God, and should further their egalitarian vision rather than undermine it. Yet, with the end of the world not in sight, we could (and do) have a more positive view of marriage and sexual relationships than they seemed to have.

In a nutshell, I offer this for your consideration,

*Monogamous heterosexual marriage, treated ambiguously at best by Jesus and Paul, has lost its claim to be created directly, as is, by God.*

*Once acknowledged as being an evolutionary response, with variable expressions in human culture, life long heterosexual marriage loses its moral high ground and “givenness” in relation to other forms of sexual relationship.*

*The question becomes: what sort of relationships best express our faith in this environment? Is this relationship one in which I am free to love God, myself and others? Whether the relationship lasts for half an hour or half a lifetime, is it undermining my love of myself, God, or others, including the other I am with? Is it diminishing me or nurturing me? Is it Good News for me and others?*

This is a dangerous approach, open to self-deception in the answers we give. It is easy to minimise the harm done to others or our selves in our minds. To pretend we are doing things for other's interests, or to pretend we are happy with what others are doing to us. But it seems the risk we must take.

The risks involved in relying on millennia, or centuries, or even decades old answers to those questions seem far greater. We cannot avoid the tradition of trying to understand ourselves and our God in the light of our creation stories, and working out how to respond in our present environment.

The challenge to work out our faith in fear and trembling is nothing new in church life. Take as one example the doctrine of the Trinity: God as one being existing in three "persons." The idea is unknown in Mark, Matthew and Luke, implied in (or derived from) John, supported by Hebrews but little of Paul, rejected by many in the early church, and yet finally emerged as "orthodoxy." Having held little sway in theology for quite some time, it is apparently having something of a resurgence of late, though often in ways very different from how it was first conceived and defined. The labels Father, Son and Holy Spirit, for example, are merely words for deeper realities claimed about God, and have to a large extent become a barrier to the truths they are meant to point to, since people take them literally. At ecofaith we tried to stay with the deeper truths rather than the labels, as in this prayer:

## God is...

**God is beyond us.** *Hands outstretched, looking at the skies or trees.* God is beyond anything we can fully imagine or hope to control or constrain.

**God is with us (or became one of us).** *Hands or feet on the Earth.* But through our feet we are reminded that God is here with us, with all life. God is one with us. Many Christians affirm that God even became one of us.

**God is within us.** *Hand on hearts.* With people around the world we have come to know that God is not only out there, but also within us, part of us, closer to us than we are to ourselves. Living water for the journey.

**God is amongst us.** *Hold hands in circle.* But we do not journey alone. God is not just within us, but amongst us. We meet God in each other, in all people.

### Prayer of thanks

The claim that God is our *source*, and more than, or *beyond us*, is pretty traditional biblical fare. The new creation stories magnify that insight many times.

The idea that God is *within us* is also straightforward Christianity, and indeed

affirmed by many religions. So too is the idea that God is *amongst us*, and that we meet God in community. Both are pointed to in the idea of God as Spirit. The idea that God is *with us* flows from that, but traditionally for the majority of Christians this has implied much more than God just being with us *now*...

### **...but who is Jesus?**

Emmanuel, “God is with us,” proclaims the Christmas story. But has God always been with humanity, and Jesus’ role was to point out that God was with *all* of us, not just the Jews or their pious leaders? Or in Jesus did God actually become one of us? Jesus the God-man? And if so, what did that mean? What happened at Christmas all about?

At ecofaith the question of Jesus’ “true nature” is left open. Christians who see Jesus as God’s very self walking the Earth 2000 years ago, and now, in some metaphorical sense “ascended to the right hand of God,” are welcome, and come. Christians who see Jesus as a human who became divine because he was fully open to his humanity, as a finger pointing to God rather than God, are also welcome and come. I see my role as a minister primarily to be ensuring that this remains the case. In other words, Mark, Matthew and Luke, but also John, would be welcome at ecofaith.

It seems really clear to me that the New Testament says that Jesus is God. It is also equally clear that the New Testament says that Jesus was not God, but a human who developed a unique relationship with God, proclaiming the Kingdom of God and embodying what it meant to live in it. Ask any Jehovah’s Witness to show you. They are not *wrong* when they prove that the bible says Jesus is different from God, but they are only half right. The New Testament does both.

Only if we think that the New Testament must be completely consistent across its many books, despite being written by several authors over decades, is it a problem that Jesus is presented differently. Otherwise, we can accept that both views are biblical, even if the former was the view eventually declared binding orthodoxy in the mid fourth century. But then so was the virgin birth and the idea that Jesus rose to the heavens where he is seated at the right hand of the Father.

I have already written about that seat. I have not speculated about the virgin birth. With no “original sin” and no need for a perfect sacrifice for sins, and thus no need for a man untainted by his father’s sinful seed, there is no *need* for the virgin birth. That doesn’t mean Mary could not have been a virgin.

But when we turn to biology, its pretty weird to think that she would have been a virgin, given that she didn't need to be.

And we now know that our mothers contribute over half of our DNA. Which means even if God provided the sperm Jesus would still have been over half "tainted." If God provided the whole egg, then Mary was just the incubator, and Jesus was not really fully human. If he was still sinless anyway, it must have been a result of his perfect behaviour, not perfect DNA.

Angels on the head of a pin? Perhaps.

Far more important to me than whether Jesus *was* God, or *revealed* God, is what kind of God is revealed, and what we are going to do about it. Whether Jesus was God is less important than whether God was a jealous, genocidal manic who delighted in the scent of burning animal corpses, and could not forgive us without some kind of payment. What matters is whether Jesus revealed a fulfilment, or a rejection, of the old covenants. Does God love other animals or not? Is Earth fallen? Is death bad? Has God punished all life for human transgression? Why are we here? Is it to dominate the Earth, protect it, or to, with reverence, accept that we are part of it? If we revere life, how does that affect our ethical decisions? Are we going to love God and neighbour, and do unto others? Who are the "others": our biological family, our community, all humans, or all persons? Who is my neighbour? Should I get married? To whom? Why?

Whew!!! It is now 4:16pm on the last day of my employment as minister of the Adelaide Ecofaith Community. Tomorrow I fly to New South Wales to become the minister of Bellingen Uniting Church, and mission practitioner and ecominister in the Mid North Coast Presbytery!

I had not planned it, but it has dawned on me that there is something very symbolic, very right, about closing this book now. A new book might go with the new position. Or not. By book, of course, I mean essay with a pretty cover. Which makes me think of another resonance. Most of my life I've been a student, and a student who writes to deadlines. So here it is for your consideration and hopefully edification. My final ecofaith ministry assignment, handed in with forty five minutes to spare. Which is a satisfyingly wide margin compared to some other assignments I've completed.

I would like to finish this book with a Christmas story for children, which includes both the Jesus as God, and Jesus as pointing to God. I keep tweaking it, and there may well be a more up to date version by now at [ecofaith.org](http://ecofaith.org)

## A Christmas story

This is a story about Christmas. But it's not a Bible story. It starts long, long ago. Way before the Bible, or any book, or even humans!

Once upon a time there was God. Just God, all alone. Lonely.

All God wanted to do was love somebody. Because that's what being God is all about. Loving.

But God had nobody to love.

So *whoosh!* God gave birth to the universe, which gave birth to stars, which gave birth to planets, which gave birth to living things. Including right here on the outskirts of the milky way galaxy, where we live.

The very first life was tiny, and had no brain, so although God loved it and thought it was good, those little blobs couldn't really love God back. But they had babies, which had babies, and so on and so on for a looooooong time!

And each baby was a bit different from its parents. Just like *you* are a bit different from your mum and dad. Eventually those differences added up to make algae, and plants, and eventually *huge* trees.

And fish, and frogs, and lizards, and mammals: like kangaroos and dogs and dolphins, and of course us!

"This is getting more like it," thought God! "Lots of different plants and animal for me to love."

Eventually, some of the creatures started loving God back! Which animals love God? We can't know for sure. We know all mammals love their babies at least a bit, so they might love God at least a bit. What do you reckon?

So life went on, for years and years animals were born, grew up, had babies of their own, and eventually died. God thought it was good.

But after a long time, one kind of animal started to get scared. Not just when being chased by a crocodile, but *a lot* of the time. Because they were scared, some of them started being mean. Some of them kept to themselves and didn't have any friends. Some got selfish.

Can you think what kind of animal that was?

Now, not *all* of them got this scared, but a lot did. Enough to cause a problem for everyone else. A biiiiig problem! *And if it's a problem for others, it's a problem for God!*

Some humans got so scared so often that they stopped loving each other, and stopped loving God. They worried so much about protecting their lives, that they lost them!

Uh oh! The whole point of making the universe was starting to come undone!

So God started calling to the scared humans, over and over again:

**DO NOT LET YOUR HEARTS BE TROUBLED, AND DO NOT BE AFRAID. I LOVE YOU! YES YOU! BE JOY-FULL, BE WONDER-FULL!  
LOVE LIFE, LOVE YOURSELVES, LOVE EACH OTHER, LOVE ME!**

Now what on Earth has this got to do with Christmas!?!?

Well, if you've heard of Jesus of Nazareth, you will know that he was a Jew, born in Israel a long time ago. Not long compared to how old the Earth is, or even how long humans have been around, but pretty long.

He walked all over the place talking to other humans, so he got very grubby. He spent most of his time with the kinds of people that others thought were too grubby to even be *seen* with.

The kinds of people who say that, "cleanliness is next to Godliness" were not impressed!

But lots of people who met Jesus, especially grubby ones, decided that he was "the one!" The one whom God had been promising would come and set people free. Free from fear, or hunger, or free from other people being mean to them. Free to live a good, loving, happy life.

The Jewish word for that person was the *Christ*. So Jesus of Nazareth became Jesus the Christ.

And "-mas" comes from words which mean "being together," and "festival." So Christmas is when we have a festival to celebrate being with God, or with Christ. We celebrate that we are free to live good, loving, happy lives. Why? Because when people met Jesus they realised, or remembered, that God is with us. Immanuel— the God of love is with us. Dirt and all.

You can stop there, but adults often love to argue about *how* Christmas works. Did Jesus show us what God was already doing? Or did Jesus start something completely new?

Books and books have been written arguing about it, starting with the four gospels in the Bible. It depends on who you think Jesus was, and how he's related to God.

Some people think that Jesus is the one (or a one) who points us to God. During all the walking Jesus did, and the time he spent in the outback, and the time he spent eating with grubby people, he heard those loving words of God calling, and told everyone else to listen too. He was brave enough to keep speaking even when the people in charge of everything didn't want to hear it. Even when they killed him, God's Spirit, who was in him, continued to live in others. Matthew, Mark, Luke and Paul seem to see it this way.

Many people think that Jesus actually *was* God calling to us! Like if you wanted to talk to a dog you would have to turn into a dog, so God had to turn into a human to be able to speak to humans. John and some of Paul's followers seem to see it this way.

Only God knows the real answer I suppose.

Either way, Christmas says some shocking, wonderful things. Either... When God calls in love, it isn't kings and powerful rich people who are likely to hear it, but ordinary people like Jesus, and most of us. If Jesus could hear God, so can we.

Or: When God came to Earth to talk to us, and show us what life is about, it wasn't as a rich and powerful ruler, but as an ordinary grubby person like us.

Either way, let's listen this Christmas...

**DO NOT LET YOUR HEARTS BE TROUBLED, AND DO NOT BE AFRAID. I LOVE YOU! YES YOU! BE JOY-FULL, BE WONDER-FULL! LOVE LIFE, LOVE YOURSELVES, LOVE EACH OTHER, LOVE ME!**

## **Addendum, May 2008**

Well, like most of my essays this book ended up needing a few tweaks after it was “published” on the web in February, which have now been incorporated. It could probably do with more, but it’s really time to leave well enough alone.

I am now in beautiful Bellingen as the Uniting Church minister 0.4 time and ecominister in the presbytery for the rest of the time. Any spare time should be spent swimming in rivers, walking through forests, or gazing at the stars, either alone or with my family, not staring at this screen.

I imagine that more resources which help connect life in the ecos with talk about God will continue to appear at <http://ecofaith.org>. It is now the portal for the Adelaide Ecofaith Community, for the resources I produced whilst ecominister at Scots, and for the ecoministry of the mid north coast presbytery of NSW.

Thanks for reading this far. I occasionally hear from people around the world via [jason@ecofaith.org](mailto:jason@ecofaith.org), and love it. If you are more local than that, maybe we can catch up sometime, 02 6655 1050.

And if you happen to know Sinead O’Connor, tell her Bellingen is a wonderful place to visit, and if she needs a chaplain for her next Australian tour I’ll see what I can do to get time off.

## **Addendum, December 2008**

Ok, so when I first had the book printed, Toni found about fifty typos. Now they are all fixed, and any more will just have to stay. Evolution is about the good enough, not the perfect!

Seeya,  
Jason