



## Lukas Vischer: God's creation as theme of missionary witness

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Lukas Vischer (ed.), *Witnessing in the Midst of a Suffering Creation – a Challenge for the Mission of the Church: Report and Papers from an International Consultation at the John Knox Centre, Geneva, from 17 to 21 September 2006*, Geneva: Centre International Réformé John Knox, 2007, Preface and introducing article 25-37.

### 2. Historical Context

In 2010, an international conference commemorated the 100th anniversary of the 1910 World Mission Conference in Edinburgh which is widely considered the symbolic starting point of the modern ecumenical movement. How has the understanding of mission changed since? This question had been under discussion in many parts of the oikumene. Little reference, however, had been made to one of the major challenges today: the ecological crisis. Four years before the anniversary, Lukas Vischer organised a consultation to include the ecological dimension into the missionary discourse.

### 3. Summary

#### 1. The problem

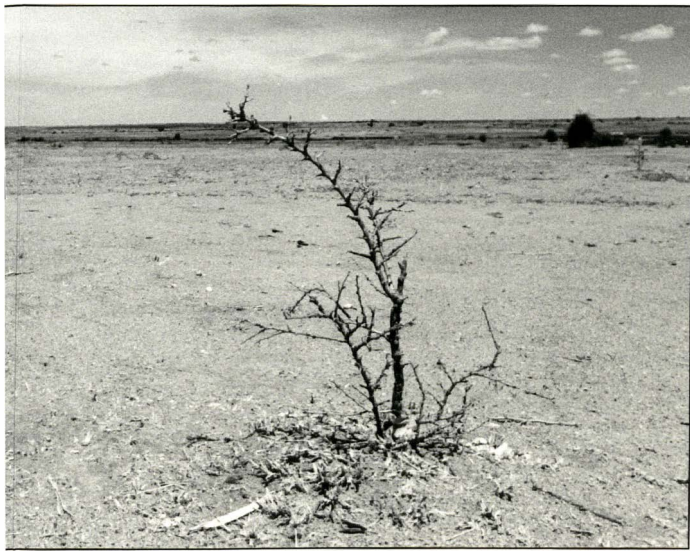
How can the missionary mandate of the Church of Jesus Christ be described today? In most declarations it is seen in a more holistic way than in the past. Even the ecological crisis is mentioned here and there. But the consequences to be drawn are rarely the object of reflection. Christian mission in recent centuries has taken place in the context of the expansion of Western civilisation which laid the intellectual foundation to the exploitation of nature and the excessive human claims on the resources of the earth. By concentrating attention on human beings and their redemption, the Christian world view led to a strange disinterest in the “rest of creation”. It was taken for granted that nature was subjected to humans. Today, the ecological crisis forces Christian mission to revisit its fundamental presuppositions. How can we remain aware of our status as creatures in a world which seems to suggest that human beings have become creators?

#### 2. Some consequences for the understanding of the missionary mandate

Creation: only as theatre of God's deeds? – Missio Dei: in the context of Trinity? – The role of humans within the whole of Creation – Biblical perspectives: Creation as the basis of life; Christ's love in face of ecological destruction; the permissible size of our ecological footprint – A worldwide missionary communion? – The encounter of religions in view of the high contribution of historically “Christian” nations to the ecological crisis– And what future?

# Witnessing in the Midst of a Suffering Creation

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# **Witnessing in the Midst of a Suffering Creation – a Challenge for the Mission of the Church**

*Report and Papers from an International Consultation  
at the John Knox Centre, Geneva,  
from 17 to 21 September, 2006*

*Edited by Lukas Vischer*

*Geneva 2007*

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# 1. God's creation as theme of missionary witness

*Lukas Vischer*

## *1. The problem*

How can the missionary mandate of the Church of Jesus Christ be described today? The question has often been raised in the course of the ecumenical movement. During the last four decades a series of declarations have been issued seeking to identify the main issues. Not only the World Council of Churches (1982, 2004), but also individual churches and Christian World Communions have come out with statements on the theme: the Roman Catholic Church, the Reformed Ecumenical Council (1992), the Lutheran World Federation (2004), the World Alliance of Reformed Churches (2004), the Disciples of Christ (1981, 2004). Several statements are also available from the Evangelical side. It is striking that all these texts refer only in passing to the challenges of the ecological crisis.

They share the concern to perceive the context in which the churches are called to witness today. In the effort of reading the signs of the times they emphasise new aspects. In most declarations the missionary vocation is seen in a more holistic way than in the past. Not only the salvation of the soul, but the new creation of the human person as a whole is stressed. The inseparable link between the liberation in the present and the full redemption in God's kingdom is underlined. The struggle for a society built on justice is seen as an integral dimension of the missionary mandate. To proclaim the Gospel authentically, the Church has to take sides with the poor, the oppressed and marginalised. The missionary proclamation does not include *diakonia* alone, but also the struggle for social justice and human rights, against AIDS, violence and other similar evils. In this connection the texts also mention the ecological crisis here and there, and in some texts even relatively extensively. The consequences to be drawn from this crisis for the life and witness of the Church and each individual Christian are, however, rarely the object of extended reflections.

A good illustration of this fact can be found in the thorough and in many respects representative study by David Bosch, *Transforming Mission: Paradigm shifts in Theology of Mission*, New York 1991. In a short chapter under the title "Beyond the Subject-Object Scheme" (355) we read: "A further disastrous consequence of the Cartesian model is found in what we today refer to as the ecological crisis. We have degraded the earth by treating it as an insensitive object: now it is dying under our very hands ... a basic reorientation is called for. One should, again, see oneself as a child of Mother Earth and as sister and brother to other human beings ... For the church's missionary existence in the world all this has profound and far-reaching consequences. It implies that nature and especially people may not be viewed as mere objects, manipulable and exploitable by others ... The reign of God stands in polemical tension with the closed system of this world." The passage raises high expectations but, strangely enough, Bosch does not go beyond this programmatic announcement. The reader does not hear any further word about the "profound and far-reaching consequences" which Bosch thinks should be drawn. Obviously for all of us the transition from the recognition of the crisis to a new orientation is difficult to make.

The relationship between Christian mission and Western colonial rule has been extensively discussed in recent decades. K. Madhu Panikkar spoke of the end of the Vasco da Gama era. In his eyes Christian mission and political dominance and exploitation were closely connected, symbolised by Vasco da Gama's ship whose sail was decorated by the cross but whose deck armed with canons.<sup>1</sup> The historical reality was no doubt more complex. Besides examples of collusion with the colonial rule many examples of independence and even resistance against the excesses of the political powers may be mentioned. Whatever the details of the picture, it remains a fact that the Christian missionary movement in recent centuries has taken place within the context of the expansion of Western civilisation. Missionaries have lived and witnessed under the shadow of a superior ideological and political power.

The ecological crisis has its origin in Western civilisation. The intellectual foundation leading to the exploitation of nature and the excessive human claims on the resources of the planet have been laid in the West. Through

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<sup>1</sup> K. Madhu Panikkar, *Asia and Western Dominance : a survey of the Vasca da Gama epoch of Asian history (1498-1945)*, London 1967



the expansion of the West, the crisis has been “exported” to other continents. A recent French dictionary defines the term *civiliser* by *faire sortir l’humanité de l’état sauvage et primitif* and adds that the characteristics of developed countries as a whole are called *les bienfaits de la civilisation*.<sup>2</sup> In face of the worldwide ecological crisis this definition must be called into question. Scientific and technological progress have no doubt contributed to raising the quality of life in many respects but have also been accompanied by disruption of societies, poverty, violence, ecological destruction and reduction to misery. The assessment of the effects of Western civilisation have become more reserved and realistic in recent years.

The decisive question arising in the context of our theme concerns the part played by Christian missions in this historical process. What was the impact of the concept of Christian mission in recent centuries on the countries concerned? The share of responsibility was no doubt considerable. Scholars have often pointed out that Western civilisation has broken up the cultures of other continents. It has introduced a new relationship between human beings and nature. To a much larger extent human beings were now seen as “historical” beings, equipped with the capacity to dominate and transform nature. History was interpreted as a development towards a higher goal. Western civilisation has messianic traits: it considers itself as the driving force of history. On the basis of this vision the texture of existing societies was overrun and disrupted.

To what extent are these fundamental perspectives part of the Christian tradition? To what extent was Christian mission needed to pave the way for them? Their affinity to the Christian message is obvious, and for a long time certain theologians proudly maintained that Christian mission had prepared the ground for modernity. The missionary message helped to loosen, and ultimately to put an end to, the dependence of humans on the divine powers of nature. But does this not at the same time mean that Christian mission created the spiritual presupposition for manipulating nature? The question must be faced. Was Christian mission sufficiently critical towards Western civilisation to counteract its negative impact on

<sup>2</sup> Petit Larousse, Edition 1980

existing cultures? Did it provide the churches which resulted from its missionary efforts with an understanding of God's Creation which allowed them to resist the unreasonableness inherent in modernity? Christian preaching and Western civilisation have historically been closely connected and have functioned hand in hand. On the one hand, Christian mission laid the spiritual ground for a freedom from nature, and on the other hand the benefits of Western civilisation were often interpreted as an additional proof for the credibility of the Gospel.

These questions have far-reaching implications for the attitude of Christian mission to "indigenous" cultures. To what extent can traditional cultures be recognized and accepted? On the one hand, Christian mission always sought to communicate within the framework of the cultures it came in touch with. The Bible was translated into other languages, and missionaries sought to interpret the Biblical message in terms accessible to people within their cultural context. Increasingly, the cultural heritage of peoples is finding expression in the life and worship of the churches. On the other hand, the Gospel inevitably calls into question certain aspects and eventually the coherence of existing cultures. The message of Christ sets new priorities and leads to new perspectives. But how can missionaries be sure to convey the true message of Christ rather than the values of Western civilisation to which they belong?

The ecological crisis is more than an additional "evil" which needs to be combated. Bosch is right in this respect. It raises fundamental questions. It calls into question both the content and the praxis of the prevailing missionary concept. In recent decades Christianity, especially Western Christianity, has often been under attack. A wide range of historians and philosophers holds that the Christian world view has decisively contributed to today's ecological crisis. By concentrating attention on human beings and their redemption, it led to a strange disinterest in the "rest of creation". Instead of focussing on creation as a whole, Christianity focussed on humans and their history. Nature was subjected to them. It can easily be shown that the accusation does not apply to the Bible of both the Old and the New Testaments. But it can hardly be denied that the care for creation has played only a subordinate role in Christian teaching during the past centuries. And

does this not also apply to Christian mission? What was the place of God the Creator in the Christian missionary message? What concept of the human person was communicated? How was salvation in Christ described? To what extent was creation included in the story of God's great deeds?

As the ecological crisis imposes on theology as a whole a comprehensive re-orientation, it forces Christian mission to revisit its fundamental presuppositions. In contrast to other new historical phenomena, such as the spiral of violence or AIDS, the response to the challenges of the ecological crisis cannot be given within the framework of existing theological premises but calls instead for a far-reaching rethinking of many aspects of the Christian tradition.

In recent years many efforts towards a re-orientation of theological thinking have been made. A vast literature on creation theology is today available. Much work has, in particular, been done in the field of Old Testament exegesis. But numerous attempts have also been made to address in new ways the relationship between creation and redemption. Trinitarian theology has been revived. A survey on the state of the debate can be found in the volume *Listening to Creation Groaning* published by the John Knox International Reformed Centre (Series, n° 16). The publication resulted from an international exchange on the subject.

But most of the recent attempts to define or re-define the *missionary* mandate of the Church avoid the challenge. This applies also to David Bosch. His book is based on the assumption that a change of paradigm has taken place. The modern paradigm of the Enlightenment is exhausted. The world has entered post-modernity. By avoiding any consideration of the consequences of the ecological crisis, Bosch remains, in fact, within the prevailing paradigm of modernity. The concept of "paradigm" and "paradigm changes" is anyway highly problematic. But if authors choose to work with it, they should at least include a reflection on the ecological crisis and its consequences. Hans Sloterdijk's remark is no doubt to the point: Most people who speak of post-modernity (Nach-Moderne) still continue as prisoners of modernity (Noch-Moderne).

Clearly, we cannot return to past times. We are living in a world transformed by scientific and technological developments. They cannot be undone. A

nostalgic discourse about nature and the place of human beings in the whole of creation holds no future. The question is how to remain aware of our status as “creatures” in a world which seems to suggest that human beings have become creators.

## ***2. Some consequences for the understanding of the missionary mandate.***

### *1. Creation as theatre of God's deeds?*

You shall be my witnesses in Jerusalem, Judea and Samaria and to the ends of the earth! The disciples are sent out to proclaim the good news. In a certain sense they are the actors of the last period of human history. Having experienced communion with the risen Lord they receive the summons to announce the fulfilment of God's kingdom at the end of times. Their message is addressed to humankind as a whole.

This description of the missionary mandate leaves God the Creator in the background. Creation is hardly more than the arena of God's action. Attention focuses on the events which God sets in motion through the power of the Spirit. Missiological writings often use the image of the world as the arena or stage on which God's deeds take place. But does this image really do justice to the witness of the Bible? If all attention concentrates on the interaction between God and humanity, God's presence in the creation as a whole tends to be neglected, and in particular the insight is lost that human beings are creatures among creatures. They are not simply actors on the stage of creation; they are themselves part of the stage. The disciples are sent out within the fabric of the whole creation.

The declaration of the Lutheran World Federation contains a beautiful passage on “God's mission as Creator” (2.1.1). It emphasises the dependence of the world on God, “who as the source of life, sustains, replenishes, transforms and renews life in the world”. Human beings are described as “created co-creators” and a reference is made even to the “responsible use of the earth's resources”. But the passage as a whole almost exclusively emphasises the social and economic responsibility of the Church.

## 2. *Missio Dei*?

The notion of the *missio Dei* recurs in almost all recent statements. It is of central importance in today's missiological discourse. The intention of its use is obvious. The notion serves to underline that the initiative for mission is ultimately not with the Church but with God himself. The Church is the servant of a mission which emanates from God. The Church does not "invent" its missionary efforts, but seeks to give room in this world to God's own 'mission'. The notion of the *missio Dei* underlines the subordinate role of the Church.

However, the notion also has its problematic aspects, especially when it is used outside the immediate context of its original intention. In what sense can we speak of a mission of God? Who is the subject in this formula? Is it God himself sending himself? Christ says that he has been sent by the Father, and as he was sent, he is sending the disciples. God sends the Holy Spirit to guide and protect the Church. Within Trinitarian theology the verb "send" fulfils specific functions. It develops in more detail how God's love, the very essence of God, is to be understood. But are these nuances not lost if God is simply described as "mission"? The term subsumes all God's activities under the notion of mission. The use of the term almost inevitably results in the image of an activist God. God is constantly engaged in mission. The distortions which are associated today with the term "mission" are projected into the understanding of God himself.

The declaration of the Lutheran World Federation makes an attempt to explain the notion in Trinitarian terms. Under the general title *The mission of God* we find the following statement: "Trinity is a communion *in mission*, empowering and accompanying the One who is *sent*, the beloved, to impact the world with transformation, reconciliation, and empowerment." To protect the notion of *missio Dei* from misunderstandings, the reflection would, indeed, need to be pursued along these lines. In what sense does the *missio Dei* include God, the Father and Creator of all things? The doctrine of the Trinity, but also the concept of God's covenants with Noah and all creatures on the one hand, and with Abraham on the other provide the framework for a comprehensive description of the missionary mandate of the Church.

### 3. *The role of humans in the whole of creation*

The missionary message is addressed to human beings. The salvation which appeared in Christ is offered to them. They are invited to accept God's gift and to follow Christ.

Communion with Christ brings freedom. In him we are safe and no power, "angels nor principalities, things present nor things to come, height nor depth, nor anything else in *creation* will be able to separate us from him (Rom. 8:38)". The Gospel liberates from the powers of nature. With a view to the world Paul can even say: "All is yours" though he adds immediately: "You are Christ's and Christ is God's" (I Cor. 3:22). Clearly, for Paul, human beings hold the centre stage of creation. Faith means freedom from the fetters of nature.

In Western Christianity this freedom has been emphasised, even over-emphasised. Human beings are not only seen as the crown of God's creation, but it is commonly affirmed that the whole of creation has been created for their sake and is subjected to them. True, exceptions can be cited. Throughout the whole Western tradition there is also a line of respect for God's creation. Not only the Irish monks, Hildegard of Bingen and Francis of Assisi, but many more witnesses may be mentioned. But there can hardly be any doubt that in the message of the Western churches the concern for creation as a whole is not central. The proclamation is anthropocentric.

This also applies to the missionary discourse. The preaching of the Gospel led almost inescapably to a confrontation with "primitive" religions and their understanding of nature. The appropriation of the Gospel required the rejection of the false divinities of nature. For the sake of the freedom provided by the Gospel the religious intercourse with nature had to be discontinued. Again and again, in the course of centuries, "oaks of Donar" were felled! This meant at the same time that in many cases an order of society built on the respect for the divine forces of nature was destroyed or got lost. Nature lost its mysterious character in favour of human beings and their projects. The missionary proclamation created the presupposition for the participation in Western civilisation and its in many respects ruthless anthropocentrism.

The question is therefore how we have to understand Christian freedom within the whole of creation. Even as new creatures human beings remain creatures among creatures. Their life remains indissolubly linked to the communion of God's creatures. They will find fulfilment only by freely accepting their place within this communion. The missionary praxis will not be characterised by the rejection of the forces of nature but rather by a free and responsible dealing with them.

#### 4. *Biblical perspectives*

Only slowly churches begin to realise that today's neglect of creation is in contradiction with the witness of the Bible both in the Old and the New Testament. The approach to creation cannot be exhaustively described by the two sentences of Gen. 1:28 and I Cor. 3:22. There is much more to be said about the relationship between human beings to the whole of creation. The two sentences must therefore not be considered in isolation from the whole Biblical witness. Throughout the Bible God is affirmed as the Creator of all things. And more: The Old Testament does not refer to "creation" as an abstract principle but as the basis of life. Even before the Bible points to God as Creator of all things, we hear that he promised a land to Israel. God attributes to Israel a piece of the creation. It must be cultivated and preserved. The people have the duty to take care of it and to preserve it from decay. In the Old Testament the responsibility for creation is bound to the land. Adam, the earthing, is responsible for the *adamah*, the earth.

The promise of land is no longer prominent in the New Testament. The expectation of the new creation occupies the foreground. This does not mean that the care for the gifts of God's creation has lost its relevance. There are apocalyptic circles drawing this erroneous conclusion. Jesus affirms God as a loving father who cares even for the smallest of his creatures.

The laws of the Old Testament aiming at the preservation of the land have lost their binding force in the Christian Church. In Christ, the law was not abolished but subsumed under, and interpreted by, the double commandment of love. The disciples are driven in their lives by the love of Christ. The question is therefore how this double commandment is to be interpreted in

face of the present situation. What does it mean to be driven by Christ's love in face of the ecological destruction in many parts of the world? The commandments concerning the cultivation of the land cannot directly be applied today. But they can serve as models. What is the appropriate relationship with animals, in light of the Old Testament witness? Or what guidance can we deduce from the preservation of natural resources? What does wisdom mean, in light of the wisdom literature of the Old Testament?

Of particular importance is the Sabbath. It plays a central role in the Old Testament. No other law is repeated as often as the commandment to respect the seventh day. What is its present day meaning? The fact that Jesus rejected the legalistic interpretation of the Sabbath rest does not mean that the institution has lost its meaning. For him the Sabbath is a day of healing and life and, in a certain sense, every day of the week can claim to be a Sabbath day. The Old Testament established an explicit link to creation. The week of six days of work followed by the Sabbath represents a rhythm followed by God himself. The Sabbath is an invitation for rediscovering the true measure of our interference with nature.

Such considerations establish a bridge between the Biblical witness and the requirements arising from the ecological crisis. In face of the dwindling resources and the increasing amounts of waste polluting the planet, we are forced to establish limits of exploitation. If we are to survive in this world in justice and peace, scales of consumption must be respected. The 'footprint' of each individual person and of each community and nation must not be allowed to exceed a certain size. To determine and to respect the permissible size of the footprint is a requirement of love.

##### *5. A worldwide missionary communion?*

For a long time the idea prevailed that mission meant a departure "from here to there", from Christian countries into nations and areas so far untouched. This geographical understanding of mission has become largely obsolete. In all parts of the world churches have come into existence. They have all received the same summons and form one worldwide missionary community. They bear witness in their own context and seek to support churches in other



parts of the world in their witness. Situations are connected. What a church says and lives in its own context may have consequences for the witness of the churches in other contexts. The witness of one church can confirm the witness of another church, but it also can hinder or discredit it.

A worldwide communion? Occasionally it has been described as a worldwide *eucharistic* communion: Christians of all nations gathered around the same table! A communion sharing in the same way and to the same extent the gifts of God's creation. The image provides evidence that Christian witness includes the will to struggle for a just order of society.

But it also suggests a common responsibility for the preservation of God's gift of creation. The worldwide missionary communion has the common task to protect and preserve acceptable living conditions for *all*. The ecological crisis has increased the vulnerability of humanity and its habitat on the earth. A growing number of countries are exposed to destruction. We are confronted not only with the gap of rich and poor but have to reckon with the possibility that whole populations will be wiped out or lose their homes. Therefore, the ecological crisis calls for a new quality of solidarity.

The responsible use of the gifts of God's creation is today part of the missionary witness in all places. The requirements, however, differ from continent to continent and country to country, and each church has to bear witness according to the conditions prevailing in its own context. The churches in industrialised countries cannot today bear a missionary witness without being aware of the role played in the ecological crisis, directly or indirectly, by the nations they represent. They must work towards a world society of equal claims on the gifts of creation. The reduction of consumption, a responsible way of life, and a committed stand on economic and political measures are today an integral part of the missionary witness.

## 6. *The encounter of religions*

From decade to decade the call for inter-religious dialogue becomes more insistent. The objection that dialogue with people of other religions is incompatible with confessing Jesus Christ as the one redeemer is steadily

loosing ground. In a world exposed to conflicts and an apparently endless spiral of violence, the peaceful encounter of religions with their respective insights and claims is simply a necessity. So far the praxis of dialogue is still in its early stages, and in many parts of the world the experience is discouraging.

As a rule attention concentrates on the question how much religions hold in common and in how far they are in a position to bear a common witness in this world. Many are of the opinion that they share an ethos which is ultimately comparable and draw the conclusion that they represent a potential of peace despite all differences and conflicts which separate them. Others have a more realistic approach: in their eyes the dialogue is above all an instrument to counter-act the threat of a clash between the religions.

In the area of human responsibility for God's creation the Christian Church has every reason to seek an encounter with the representatives of other religions. Given the contribution of the historically "Christian" nations to the ecological crisis, the Church must present itself and its message in modesty. A personal memory may serve as illustration: Several times, I had opportunities to act as an observer at the negotiations on the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change. To keep the amount of greenhouse gases in the atmosphere within tolerable boundaries the Convention requires the industrialised nations of the West to reduce drastically their excessive emissions of CO<sub>2</sub> emissions. But who are these nations? Any observer soon discovers that they are – with the exception of Japan – historically Christian nations. For representatives of the Church the situation is embarrassing. Clearly, we have no reason to speak with too much assurance. The Christian share in the crisis can and must not be passed over in silence.

The question of our common responsibility towards God's creation must therefore be placed high on the agenda of the inter-religious dialogue. The churches have evidently much to learn from at least some of the other religions in this respect. Sometimes I try to imagine what it would mean if Buddha and Jesus met to comment on today's ecological crisis – how a conversation between them on the respect for the natural world would proceed.

### *7. And what future?*

The ecological crisis is already far advanced. We continue to speak about threats as if the crisis was still awaiting us in a distant future. In fact the destructive forces are already at work. But despite all signs, no new orientation is in sight. Even in the churches the concern is not excessive.

The missionary witness must therefore take the form of resistance. Visions of an ideal order of society where justice, peace and harmony with creation prevail have little plausibility. The missionary witness is a counter-witness against the unreasonableness of a civilisation to which Christianity itself has decisively contributed. The protest is nourished by the Biblical witness, yet at the same time it requires our confession that we Christians live in a glass house. We have to confess that we were too late in recognizing the signs of the time and especially in responding by returning to the Biblical witness.

The certainty on which we rely is God's faithfulness to his creation – and the promise of the new creation in God's kingdom. God has not simply called this world into existence – he remains present and at work throughout all times. He does not abandon it to destruction and decay. His creation is included in his design of redemption. The Church celebrates this God. It praises him through the signs of creation – bread and wine – and its praise is borne by the prayer that God's new creation may soon become reality.