

Treasuring the Earth: Hope for creation



How much do we treasure the Earth? The Christian ethic is distinct- The creation is God's - willed, intended, loved, ours only in trust. However, Christians have often thought the natural world is not intrinsically of religious concern, and that saving souls is all that matters. That the world around us is a transient backdrop to our lives on route to an eternal new heaven, and new Earth, so you don't need to worry about the present creation.

But this is heresy as our destruction and damage to the natural world is directly frustrating the will of God who created and sustains the planet and the universe, and since we all depend on our interactions with the creation to sustain our lives, we cannot really love God or "love our neighbours as ourselves" if we trash this life-support system.

How we perceive and value the Earth, our responsibilities for it, and our understanding of the power of the death and resurrection of Jesus to make all things new- and giving us access to the tree of life, are vitally important. Our understanding determines our response to God, to creation, and to each other and how we respond to the unfolding environmental catastrophe of our making. Pope Francis- has written of the need for Christians to experience ecological conversion- which is when the effects of our encounter with Jesus becomes evident in our relationships with the world around us.

We have often forgotten our connections to and dependence upon the Earth, and become so psychologically distanced from soil and food production that we don't fully appreciate the importance of the Earth, or how we may be harming it.

The second account of creation in Genesis 2 reminds us of the importance of the material foundation of the creation paradise and our lives-

Gen 2: The Lord God formed the man **from the dust of the ground** and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life and the man became a living being.

And the Lord God made all kinds of trees grow **out of the ground**- trees that were pleasing to the eye and good for food.

Now the Lord God had **formed out of the ground** all the beasts of the field and all the birds of the air

We are earthlings: in common with plants and animals almost all the atoms of our bodies are borrowed from the ground – the earth- the soil. However, this intimate connection to the soil also connects us back in time to the heavens, since the physicists tell us that all the atoms heavier than carbon originated from the giant explosions of supernova stars - from before the creation of our sun and the earth itself. The Earth is made of stardust and we, along with the rest of creation, borrow this stardust for our lives. Understanding planetary and cosmic matter as an intrinsic part of humans has far-reaching implications for the meaning of the incarnation of God in Jesus. The human flesh that the Word became, involved God uniting himself with the Earth as part of the vast body of the cosmos.

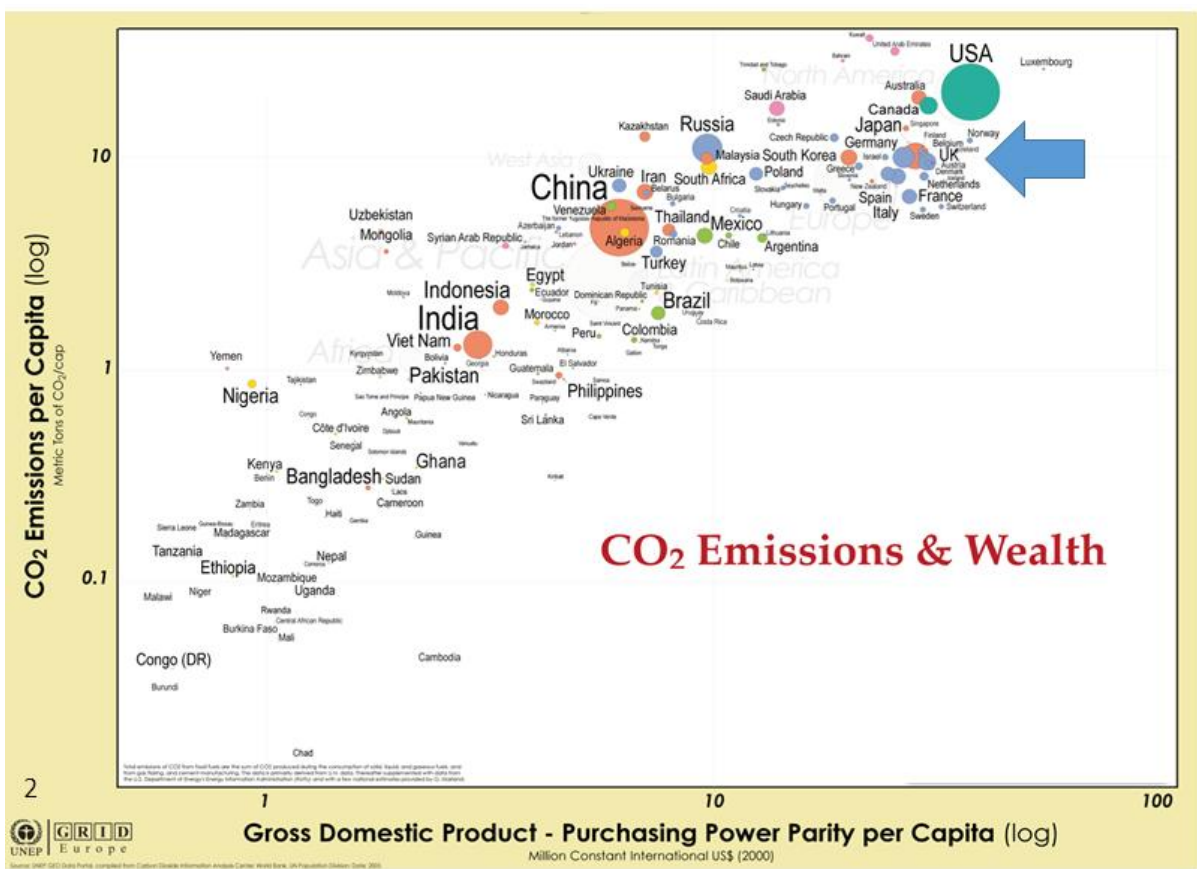
In *John 3:16-17* the cosmic significance of Christ saving power is revealed: *For God so Loved the **World** (Cosmos) that he gave his one and only son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have everlasting life. For God did not send his Son into the **World** to condemn the **World**, but to save the **World** through him* – the word for World here is Cosmos in the original Greek. Jesus came to save the Cosmos- people, the planet and the Universe.

Our hope for us and the creation lies in the power of the resurrection of Jesus to transform our lives and make all things new. But we also need to understand our responsibilities as Christ's ambassadors of this good news- and what it means theologically and practically when our collective impacts on the planet are causing devastation to the creation and increasingly on our neighbours both at home and overseas. To understand how we have messed things up so much we need to -look back to the original creation paradise.

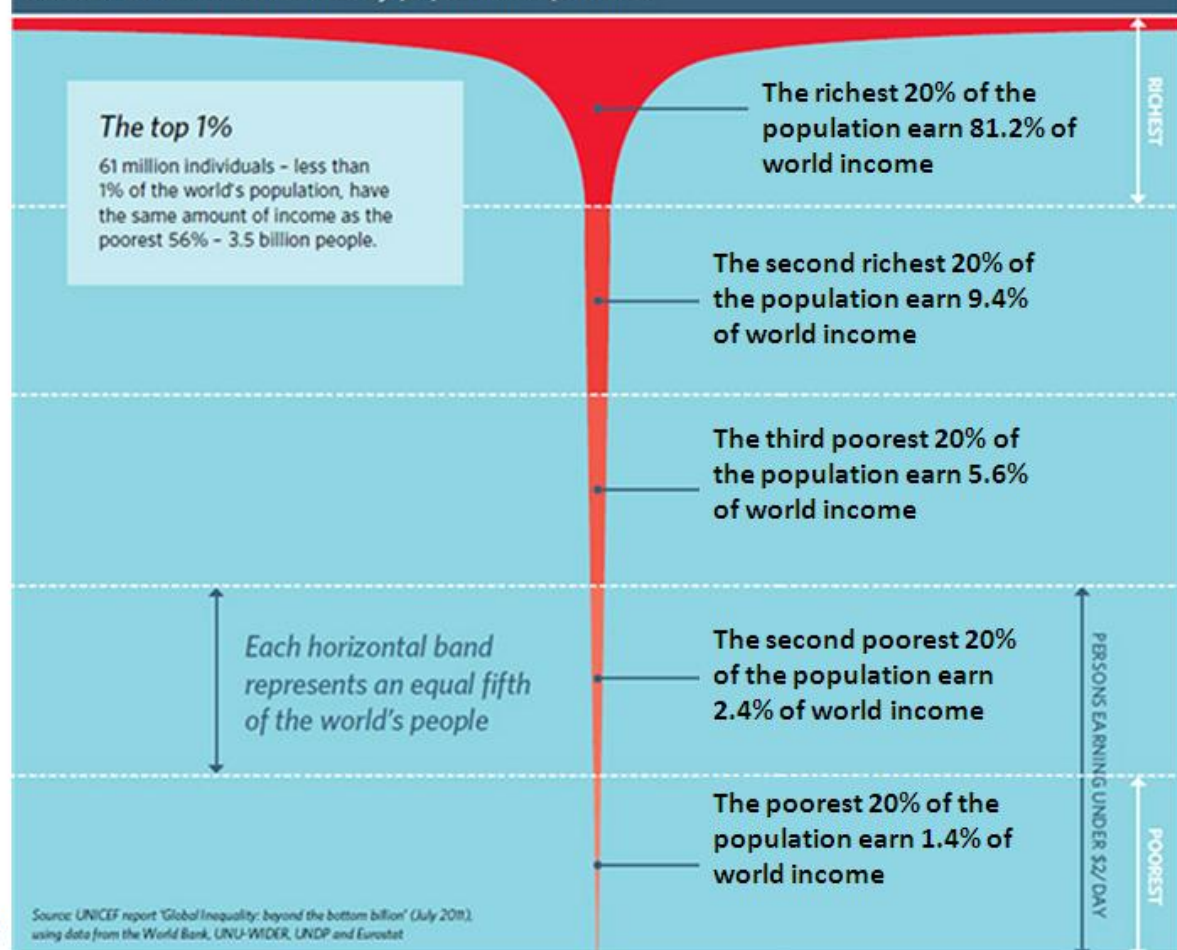
Eden was full of 'all kinds of trees... that were **pleasing to the eye and good for food**' Vs 9. It was well-watered, very fruitful, with cool shade from trees, where the Lord himself walked, enjoying his creation. Central to it all was the tree of life it symbolises abundance, fruitfulness, security, peace and freedom.

In the first of the two creation narratives, in Genesis 1:28 it says: *God blessed them [men and women] and said to them "be fruitful and increase in number: fill the earth and subdue it. Rule over the fish of the sea and the birds of the air and every living creature that moves on the ground"*.

Filling the Earth with people, and for them to bring nature under control was God's plan. We are entrusted with dominion-over creation. But with all this privilege comes responsibility- in Genesis 2 Adam and Eve were to *work the garden and take care of it*. The present environmental crisis is often portrayed as a problem of population growth, but the real problem is over-consumption and inequality – harming ourselves and the planet.



Global wealth distribution by population quintiles



The Spirit Level

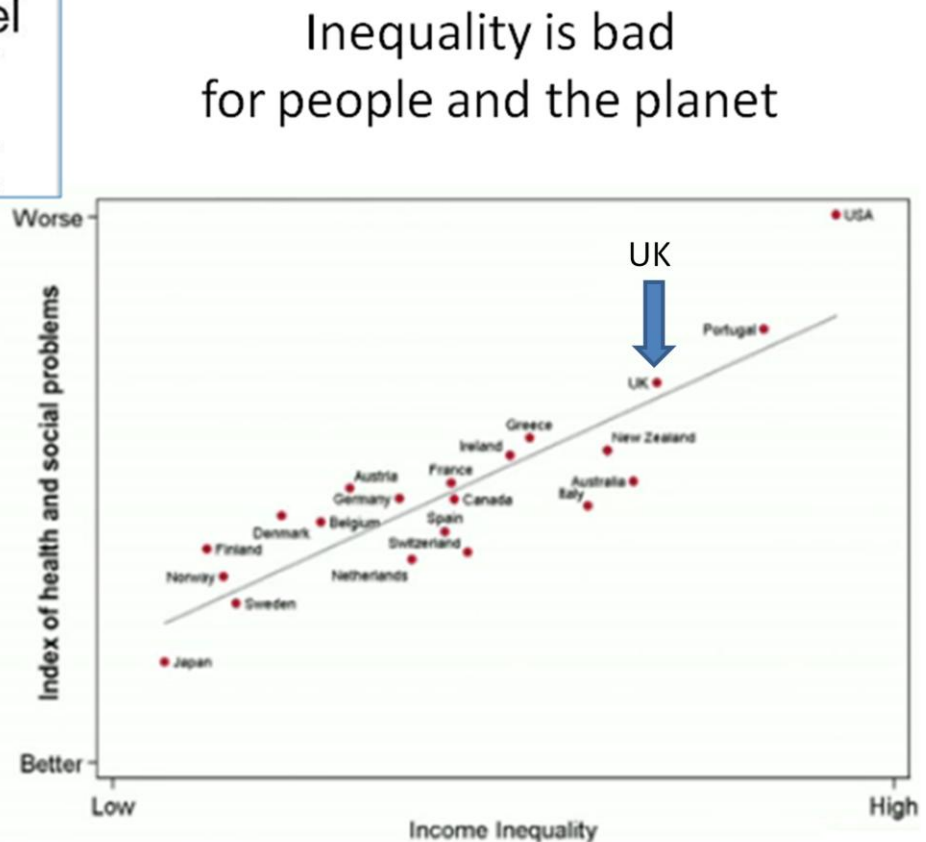
Why Equality
is Better for Everyone

Richard Wilkinson and Kate Pickett

Index of:

- Life expectancy
- Math & Literacy
- Infant mortality
- Homicides
- Imprisonment
- Teenage births
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addiction
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The Garden metaphor provides a picture of God's desire to work with us, to be creative together and then walk and talk together in the cool of the day. However, beside the tree of life was the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, the fruit of which was strictly forbidden, with the clear warning that the consequence of eating it was certain death. Metaphorically, these two key trees stand side-by-side as a reminder that at the heart of our relationship with God and with creation is freedom and choice. On the one hand he has promised to provide all we need and seeks a relationship with us based on complete trust. On the other hand, he desires that we choose to enter that relationship of our own free will, and not because there is no alternative. In the Garden of Eden, God provided everything needed for a wonderful life and relationship with himself, and delighting in the aesthetics of creation- the trees that are pleasing to the eye, and in the naming the animals which God would have watched with delight- but rather than being satisfied with this perfection, Adam and Eve wanted more than they had- their greed in taking and eating the forbidden fruit in disobedience to God, and ignoring his unambiguous warning resulted in banishment from access to the tree of life, changed their work to toil, put them in conflict with creation and brought death and destruction.

Genesis 3:19 "By the sweat of your brow you will eat your food until you **return to the ground** since **from it** you were taken; for **dust you are and to dust you will return**"

Ernst (E.F.) Schumacher 1973. *Small is Beautiful: 'Modern man does not experience himself as a part of nature but as an outside force destined to dominate and conquer it. He even talks of a battle with nature, forgetting that, if he won the battle, he would find himself on the losing side'.*

Greed, selfishness and huge inequality is a major contributor to the unfolding environmental catastrophe that now is facing us through the over-exploitation of the earth's resources and the creation itself. We are part of an idolatrous economic system with a primary goal to make money, failing to properly value creation or people but in so doing is destroying the planet that we depend upon and that has been entrusted to us by God to look after.

EF Schumacher (1973). *"The modern industrial system, with all its intellectual sophistication, consumes the very basis on which it has been erected. To use the language of the economist, it lives on irreplaceable capital which it cheerfully treats as income. I specified three categories of such capital: fossil fuels, the sustainability of nature, and the human substance."*

Miss-management and over-exploitation exemplified in our soils is symptomatic of the wider unsustainable impacts of exploitation of the Earth and Creation. As Caroline Lucas of the Green Party said: *Everything we do to the planet, we do to ourselves. Soil degradation, biodiversity loss and the climate emergency are destroying the Earth's ability to provide food for us all.*

For every person on the planet two trees are lost through deforestation and more than 4 tonnes of soil is eroded every year (UN Desertification Report 2018). Most of this soil loss is caused by agriculture and land use change. The major problem for soil protection and indeed protection of the rest of creation is an economic issue not just in the UK but globally- the price paid to farmers is so low that they are forced to exploit the land beyond its long-term sustainability. Our farmers comprise about 1% of the population and supply more than half of our food (Defra 2016 data) but receive less than 0.5% of GDP for this. The annual cost to the economy of soil degradation in the UK (Graves et al., 2015) is about a third of what farmers get paid for the food they produce. Indeed, shockingly, the inclusion of Illegal drugs and prostitution in UK GDP has boosted the economy by approximately double what farmers earn from the food they produce. [this is an approximation]. This reflects an economic system that is deeply flawed- morally and practically, failing to properly value the sustainability of nature- yet without soil and food production we will don't have a viable economy.

The resting of the land for its rejuvenation ordained by God and mentioned in Roger's sermon two weeks ago is not happening – instead most arable fields in the UK, and in many other developed countries have been cropped every year for decades now, and are badly degraded as a result- losing carbon to the atmosphere causing climate change- and not holding water or nutrients effectively so needing large inputs of chemical like fertilizers that use fossil fuels for their production and then wash out causing pollution. We need to properly recognize the infinite intrinsic value of creation including its uncharismatic components like soils.

Wendell Berry, (1977) The Unsettling of America: Culture and Agriculture. *'Soil is the great connector of lives, the source and destination of all. It is the healer and restorer and resurrector, by which disease passes into health, age into youth, death into life. Without proper care for it we can have no community, because without proper care for it we can have no life.'*

The challenge we face is that we can easily be drawn into being the cause of the problems rather than part of the solution. There is a modern day parable written by Garrett Hardin 1968 that shows this- called the Tragedy of the Commons.

The tragedy of the commons develops in this way. Picture a pasture open to all. As a rational being, each herdsman seeks to maximize his gain. And asks, "What is the value to me of adding one more animal to my herd?" This value has one negative and one positive component. Since the herdsman receives all the proceeds from the sale of an additional animal, the positive value is nearly +1. The negative component is a function of the additional overgrazing created by one more animal. Since, however, the effects of overgrazing are shared by all the herdsmen, the negative value is only a fraction of -1.

Adding together the component values, the rational herdsman concludes that the only sensible course for him to pursue is to add another animal to his herd. And another; and another... But this is the conclusion reached by each and every rational herdsman sharing a commons. Therein is the tragedy. Each man is locked into a system that compels him to increase his herd without limit--in a world that is limited. Ruin is the destination toward which all men rush, each pursuing his own best interest in a society that believes in the freedom of the commons. Freedom in a commons brings ruin to all.

There is increasing evidence that we have the technical means to care for the soil and the rest of creation. People increasingly understand the problems and want to change the system that has treated people and the planet unfairly and irresponsibly. Mike-Berners Lee- Author of **There is No Planet B** (2019): has said *"The problems are solvable. What is stopping us is ourselves- our economics and values. It is a values debate".*

This is a spiritual battle, and we need to engage with it.

In the Global System represented by the Tragedy of the Commons, most of us are like herdsmen who already have thousands more animals than their poor neighbours- where we are seeking to gain more can make them have even less. Jesus identifies with the poor and calls us to especially love and care for them.

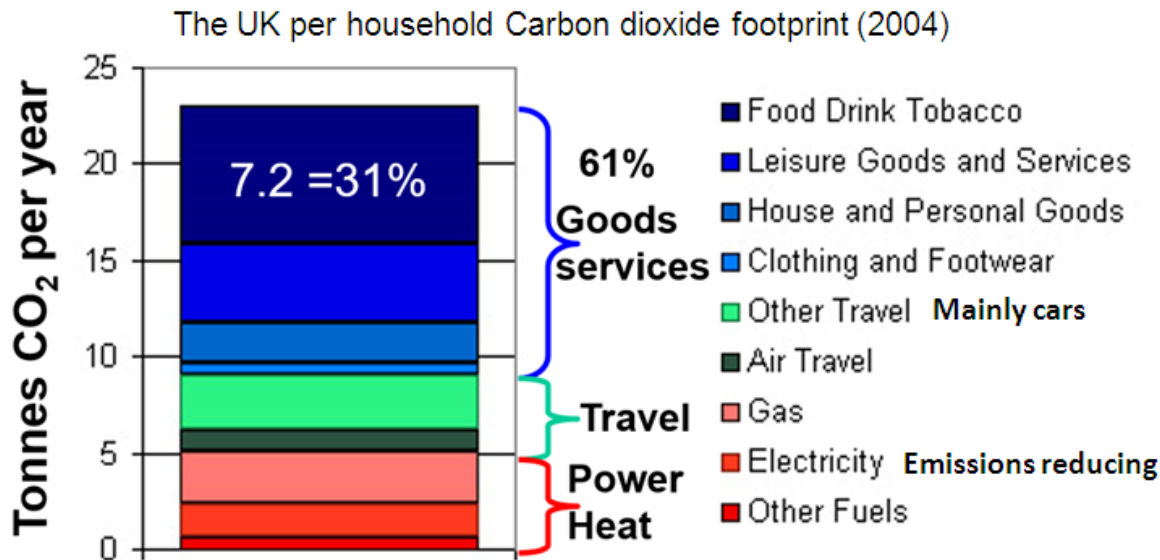
Matthew 25:40 *'Truly I tell you, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me.'*

As Roger mentioned two weeks ago the consumption of Earth's resources in rich countries like ours equates to needing 2.8 Earth's if everyone else in the world lives like us. Our individual responses to this are vitally important- they determine our relationships with God, other people and the planet- and the quality of life for us all. The less we personally consume, the fewer emissions. The more we care about others and their well-being, the better for our relationships with God, other people and the planet and our own health and well-being.

Our personal climate-change footprint and what can we do about it?

Between a quarter and a third of greenhouse gas emissions causing climate change come from food production, distribution, and waste. Buying and eating the right amount of food, with more fruit and vegetables, less meat and dairy products, can improve our health- together with reducing waste, can reduce emissions and pressure on soil- as well as save us money so we can afford to pay farmers to rest the land and better look after the planet. But this goes beyond food to all our consumption of resources and spending of money and is not just about CO₂, it applies to all unsustainable use of finite material resources (metals, fossil hydrocarbons etc), and unsustainable impacts of pollution or extinctions of organisms. These are often inter-linked consequences of the same actions- e.g. cutting down and burning rainforests and causing soil erosion growing Palm Oil.

How we spend our money matters for creation



Note this includes estimated emissions from products imported from overseas- including manufacturing, transport etc. as well as emissions from wastes (e.g. from landfills). Food waste is a particular problem. While these data are a bit out of date with substantial recent falls in emissions from electricity generation due to solar and windfarms replacing coal, the emissions due to transport, gas heating, travel and goods and services remain similar today. Recent detailed analyses by the Ellen McArthur foundation indicate that the contribution of clothing is probably underestimated here.

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EF Schumacher (1977): *I have talked about the religion of economics, the idol worship of material possessions, of consumption and the so-called standard of living, and the fateful propensity that rejoices in the fact that 'what were luxuries to our fathers have become necessities for us.'*

We are increasingly weighed down with possessions- Professor Danny Dorling, University of Oxford :
 "We've got, by weight six times as much stuff as the previous generation"

The UK now has over 1,500 self-storage facilities, which is more than there are McDonalds in the UK, and this business type has a turnover of £750 million per year. We buy more clothes per person than any other European country – and most of these end up in landfill or incinerated rather than recycled.

Jesus tells us how to escape from the deception and trap of the Tragedy of the Commons and its materialistic consumerism.

Luke 9: 23-25 *"Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross daily and follow me. For whoever wants to save their life will lose it, but whoever loses their life for me will save it. What good is it for someone to gain the whole world, and yet lose or forfeit their very self?"*

Luke 16:13

"No one can serve two masters. Either you will hate the one and love the other, or you will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve both God and money."

Luke 12:15

"Watch out! Be on your guard against all kinds of greed; life does not consist in an abundance of possessions."

Luke 6:20

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Through the death and resurrection of Jesus, we can gain access to the Tree of Life, and eternal life, but we still have the freedom each day to choose to pick the forbidden fruit – greed and materialistic selfishness that harms our relationships with God, each other and the planet- and which cause inequality and social harms. Every day we make choices that can involve denying ourselves or indulging ourselves.

Every day we can come back to God for forgiveness when we get this wrong. John 3:17 *For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him*

Richard Wilkinson and Kate Pickett **The inner Level** (2019): *If the world is to move towards an environmentally sustainable way of life, it means acting on the basis of the common good as never before, indeed acting for the good of humanity as a whole. Greater equality is not only consistent with moving towards sustainability, but a precondition for doing so. It is the key to moving society from the pursuit of false, and environmentally damaging sources of well-being based in selfish consumerism, to genuine social ones. Moving towards sustainability requires that we improve the real quality of modern life in ways that higher incomes and consumerism cannot.*

Jesus 's teaching is extremely radical and challenging to us – living in one of the richest countries in the world, but in a country in which inequalities between rich and poor are rapidly widening. We are called to be salt and light. We are called to love each other and care for the world and share the good news of the power of the resurrection of Jesus to transform lives. The effects of our encounter with Jesus needs to become even more evident in our relationships with both people and how we treat the world around us, and use our money. We need to find joy in living simply – denying ourselves for God and others – so that we are no longer trapped in the rat-race of consumerism represented in the Tragedy of the Commons metaphor.

As Mahatma Ghandi said: *“Earth provides enough to satisfy every man's needs, but not every man's greed.”*
“Live simply so others may simply live,”

In the environmental crisis we face it is to Christ we need to turn, for forgiveness and inspiration to pass on the good news he brings to help others be released to a fullness of life that is not a slave to the sin of materialism. In 2 Corinthians we read: *God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ, not counting people's sins against them. And he has committed to us the message of reconciliation. We are therefore Christ's ambassadors, as though God were making his appeal through us. Since, then, we know what it is to fear the Lord, we try to persuade others.*

The book of Revelation makes clear that the end times of the present World will be difficult, and there will be excessive greed, all kinds of turmoil, and the present creation will not last forever in its present form. We cannot “save the Earth” ourselves, but our actions now can bring greater blessings to others and honour to God.

In Revelation 21 and 22, God's masterplan worked out through Jesus, promises a cosmic rebirth of the whole of creation *a new heaven and a new earth* restoring to us a new garden of Eden flowing with the water of life where we are able to freely partake of the fruit of the tree of life. This sustains eternal life, with its leaves being for the healing of the nations. There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain because we will dwell with God.

Questions for us to respond to:

- How far have we individually progressed in “ecological conversion”- which is when the effects of our encounter with Jesus becomes evident in our relationships with the world around us?

- Does our following of Jesus provide us with a *real quality of modern life in ways that higher incomes and consumerism cannot?* Or are we still trying to serve two masters, and in so doing missing out of the peace and contentment that Jesus offers?
- How should we respond practically to the Tragedy of the Commons? For example, if we have more than our fair share of resources (animals in the parable) we would need to give our excess directly to the poor or else someone rich might add them to their herd, making the poor poorer.
- What do we need to do to *live simply so that others may simply live?*
- What should we do with all the excess “stuff” our lives and homes are filled with?
- Does our love of God, our neighbours and creation itself motivate us in the spiritual battle to live more simply and sustainably, share the good news of Jesus, and challenge the destructive deceptions of *the pursuit of false, and environmentally damaging sources of well-being based in selfish consumerism?*