

Hope Rediscovered

Bishop David Atkinson calls us to find spiritual wisdom



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Many people are beginning to realize that climate change is not simply an economic, scientific or political issue; it is a moral one. Climate change, along with other forms of environmental degradation, raises difficult questions concerning our relationship to other creatures, the trust we place in technology, our duties to the poorest communities, and to future generations, and how we handle our fears and vulnerabilities. These are at root spiritual questions, and I think in addressing them, we need spiritual wisdom.

I am also concerned that many people seem to be losing any sense of our authentic humanity. In this anxious world, we are becoming more divided into the haves and the have-nots, treated more as commodities, with our value seen only in our utility. We are losing any sense of the common good, and are being driven by a model of “economic man” which is individualized and self-interested. So what counts as flourishing as a human being in God’s world?

In my book, *Hope Rediscovered: Biblical Wisdom for an Anxious World*, I have related these questions about wisdom for living, to some of the themes of John’s Gospel, which draws on the Wisdom traditions of the Hebrew Bible, and talks about human flourishing: “I am come that they might have life in all its fullness.”

Wisdom embedded in Creation

Wisdom is at the heart of God’s Creation, and holds everything together. The opening words of the Gospel “*in the beginning was the Word*”, take us back to Genesis. John assumes that God is Creator, and Nature is God’s Creation. Wisdom offers us a way to understand God’s gift of Creation, God’s joy in Creation, and our human place within it. It gives pointers to how we are to live and care for the rest of God’s Creation if we are to flourish, and how to cope when things are hard.

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Sometimes Nature fills us with anxiety and fear, and seems to be a place of inexplicable suffering. Wisdom also gives this other perspective on Nature: darker and more perplexing. There is within God's Creation that which is broken, seemingly cruel, without obvious purpose. God's Providence has somehow allowed a "deep disruption of Creation"; one aspect of which is human sin and selfishness. And behind that, the Gospel speaks of the powers of darkness and destructiveness that infect everything, and need themselves to be destroyed.

In 2012 Operation Noah published its *Ash Wednesday Declaration* on "climate change and the purposes of God". It reflected on God's joy in Creation, and our joy in God's gift; our need to repent of past stupidities and sins, on the call to love our neighbours and do justice in the world, and on the grounds for hope in God's faithfulness.

Theologian, Professor Mary Grey commented on this: "For Christians, the themes of this statement – joy, repentance, hope, justice and so on – are not optional: they are at the heart of our identity as Church. We will encounter them in the form of a question when we face God's judgement: "What did you do to cherish my creation in its hour of danger?" Hour of danger? Could it be an hour of opportunity? We need to live within limits: the physical limits of a material world, and the moral limits of God's ways of wisdom.

Wisdom embodied in Jesus

The second section of my book explores human flourishing in John's Gospel with special reference to Jesus of Nazareth, and His relationships.

No one had ever thought of the Word or Wisdom of God as being part of the material world. John's Gospel shockingly brings together matter and spirit, Earth and Heaven. The thought that God's Wisdom could become embodied in a person was a shatteringly new idea. The theological word for this is "incarnation". In Jesus, God, humanity and earth are reconnected. St Paul tells us that through Christ all things were made, and in Him all things hold together, and in Him are reconciled to God. In Hans Küng's phrase, "The Kingdom of God is Creation healed".

In Jesus we see authentic human life, life in all its fullness, looking out to those on the margins. It recognizes our place within God's creation, our freedom to make choices and exercise responsibilities, the importance of health, worship, recreation and renewal. The fulfilled life recognizes in Jesus the light of the true and liberating way, and finds a sense of

being provided for, protected, looked out for, known and loved, within an inclusive and united community. It is expressed in generous, compassionate, loving service to others, within a community that bears fruit for God's glory.

The Way of Wisdom

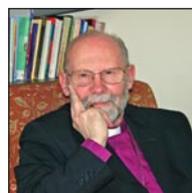
The third section of my book reflects on what living the Way of Wisdom means today. John's Gospel was written to help a struggling Church find security and hope in God amidst all their anxieties.

Let me concentrate on a word Jesus speaks several times to His anxious disciples – Shalom: Peace be with you. "Shalom" means well-being in all our relationships – with God, with others, with our environment, within ourselves. Shalom points us to human flourishing in community, of a sustainable future for the whole of God's Earth. It recognizes the interplay of social, ethical, economic and spiritual factors, and understands that human flourishing depends on, and is part of, the sustainable flourishing of all God's Creation, our "common home". Ecology, Economy and Equity belong systemically together.

Wisdom's way includes the life of Holy Spirit energising the community of Christ's people, enabling them to live hopefully in an anxious world. Hope in the New Testament is linked to the incarnation of Jesus and His resurrection – and is rooted in the redemption and healing of the whole of Creation.

Hope is not false optimism; it is hope in the faithfulness of God. Even in the midst of the forces of death, God is working out His purposes for God's Creation. Hope in the faithfulness of God empowers us to live hopefully, and to redouble our endeavours to live faithfully and urgently to recover our human calling as God's image-bearers in responsible care for God's Creation.

Can the environmental crisis of our time be a wake-up call to live differently: more safely, more healthily, with more space for the human things money cannot buy such as friendship, loyalty, communion, creativity, love. Can it provoke us into hope-filled transformative action – a different way of living, informed by God's Wisdom? Entailing a rethinking of our desires, and the costly restraint that discipleship will entail? ■



David Atkinson is Assistant Bishop in the Diocese of Southwark. He was a researcher in organic chemistry before becoming ordained. He has served on the Board of Operation Noah and is author of *Hope Rediscovered: Biblical Wisdom for an Anxious World*, Ekklesia, 2018 and *Renewing the Face of the Earth: Theological and Pastoral Responses to Climate Change*, Canterbury Press, 2009.