

All Things

by John Lovatt



This article is in the form of a conversation¹ between two Christian friends, one more practical, whose words are in bold type, and one more theoretical. Together they follow where the truth may lead them in exploring the relationship of the Creator to all things created. This goes from an appreciation of God as creator present with us as we make things, to the nature of sin, forgiveness and grace as applied to things, finishing with some suggestions for changes in the liturgy.

Why do you think so few men go to church?

No doubt there are a number of reasons, but to me it is because they imagine church is for women and children.

Why do they think that?

I believe it is because so much of church services, hymns and sermons, and indeed any religious books they read, is to do with personal relationships, rather than things.

Things?

Technical things, manufactured things, DIY things, cars, computers, buildings, roads.

I have to confess I can't recall any sermons or hymns about these things. But isn't the Christian message about how we behave, ethics at work, personal relationships. Sin, for example, is a major theme in our services, and this has nothing to do with things.

I think you are wrong. It does. But I will explain later. As to the Christian message, what do you think of St. Paul's statement that

"through his Son God was pleased to reconcile to himself all things".²

Well, yes, I suppose Christ's work of salvation is much wider than the redemption of human beings.

I believe that Christ died for me, but I wonder if we are a little arrogant or small-minded to imagine that the creator of all things is not concerned for everything that has been created?

I can see that God as the creator of the world has committed the creation to us to look after and care for, a stewardship given to us, for which we shall be accountable. If we pollute the earth or destroy endangered species, or cause natural disasters by our greedy use of fossil fuels, we are misusing a trust given us by God. But this is to do with the Creation – the natural creation, our planet, made by God. Manufactured things are made by human beings.

But isn't our stewardship also to be creative with these natural resources – not to



- ▶▶ pollute, but instead to make things which enhance human and planet life?

Of course.

In which case, surely God is involved with our creation of new things?

I can see that God is involved in the sense of being concerned, and requiring an account, but not actively involved in the act of creation. I can't accept that God is present when I make a product or a physical material thing.

So the creator of the world is not involved in any acts of creation? This is a strange position for a believer to be in! What do you think of St. John's statement that 'All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being'³? What about the Creed, where we say 'Through him all things were made'?

Were made. God made the universe, and then left us to get on with it.

But the universe is expanding – new galaxies are coming into being all the time. Creation is continuous. Do you mean that God started the Big Bang, and the laws of the universe were set at that moment, and then he disappeared off the scene? That all that has happened since is just a rearrangement of atoms?

Something like that.

Well then, when you design and manufacture something – a table for the house, or a greenhouse, or a machine tool – are you just rearranging the atoms, or is there something creative going on?

OK, so it's creative, and in that sense the Creation is continuous, but why has God got to come into it?

Because 'all things came into being through him and without him not one thing came into being'. If you deny this, you are insulting God, because all creation comes through him, the



The Holy Spirit in the form of a goose sitting on Saint Gregory's shoulder whispering in his ear⁴

creative drive within you comes from God, and God is present wherever creativity takes place. The Holy Spirit sits on your shoulder⁴. This is what St. Paul (and St. John) were concerned about – that their readers had too narrow a view of God, their God was too small.

This morning I have been assembling the wall of a shed I designed myself last week. It has a timber frame with corrugated coated steel cladding. I have been driving in the self-tapping screws with my DeWalt electric drill. Are you really saying that such a mundane task, which I agree is creative, is one where the Lord of all creation, who made the galaxies, is present and inspiring me?

The humility of God should not surprise you.

I was not conscious of any divine presence.

That's your problem.



▶▶ What sort of prayers are appropriate then?

Well, most people ask God to interfere when things start going wrong with a job, and they can't think what to do. I don't recommend that, although it has its place. I suggest the first prayer is to acknowledge the majesty of God as the creator, who inspires your mind and your hands. A prayer of worship. There is a long Celtic tradition of committing the job to God before starting work.

And then?

To enjoy the work of making something, however frustrating the setbacks, and be thankful to God for your abilities and that joy, which also comes from him.

Do I rejoice as well when the drill slips and I cut my finger?

That is the moment for shouting at the drill and screw for not being perfect, for shouting at yourself for being so clumsy and shouting at God for the drill, screw and yourself being as they are. For God is ultimately responsible. The buck stops here⁵. Oh, and it's also the moment to go and get a sticky plaster to avoid dirt getting into the wound and avoid infection.

Shouting about things being as they are is also insulting to God.

Denying God's power and presence as creator is a lie and is insulting, but to shout at God for what you believe is the truth is honest, and no insult.



The DeWalt drill in question

The creation is damaged – not only your finger (and yes, God is concerned about such a small thing) but also the steel sheet, and perhaps the screw. As creator of all things, God is affected when the creation is damaged. This applies as much to small incidents in your working life as to big issues like the ozone layer or the effects of carbon emissions. We could say God bleeds if you bleed.

Are you implying that there is some connection with the Cross?

Yes indeed. If God takes responsibility for all the failures of creation, because he is the ultimate Creator, then he should do something about it, just as we would expect a CEO not to absent himself or herself, but to come down to the scene of the failure, experience the pain of it, and produce a fix.

I am getting concerned that you are requiring God to take action. I am thinking of St. Paul, who said “But who indeed are you, a human being, to argue with God? Will what is moulded say to the one who moulds it, ‘Why have you made me like this?’”⁶, and Isaiah who said “Does the clay say to the one who fashions it, ‘What are you making?’ or ‘Your work has no handles?’”⁷ and “Will you question me about my children, or command me concerning the work of my hands?”⁸

Fair enough. I am sorry. I accept that in the heat of the moment I tend to blame God, but expecting something from a CEO is different from commanding a CEO. We expect a good CEO with integrity to come down and be present at a crisis, and to find a way to fix things. We know God is love, and it is a form of trust to therefore expect a loving response from God. We expect the Messiah but do not require him to come. The CEO is a free agent, and can choose to come or not to come; we also do not know all the ins and outs of what the CEO has to deal with, and have to accept that our knowledge is partial, and trust his or her judgement.



►► **So it is in the nature of Love to suffer when any of the creation, not just human beings, falls short of the glory of God?**

Sometimes this is due to human fault, as when oil spills bring early and painful death to sea birds. Sometimes it is just due to the nature of things, where dinosaurs and other splendid creatures were made extinct long before humans were on the earth. Disease also predates humans: we have found evidence of arthritis in the dinosaurs⁹.

So in a sense the universe is frustrated, because it is unable to glorify God fully by being as God desires it to be?

Surely this is what St. Paul is saying in Romans 8: "For the creation was subjected to frustration, not by its own choice, but by the will of the one who subjected it, in hope that the creation itself will be liberated from its bondage to decay and brought into the glorious freedom of the children of God."¹⁰

So the 'bondage to decay' is the nature of things, from which the creation will one day be liberated?

A consequence of Paul's statement must surely be that disease in dinosaurs, or frustrations in our work, when a failure occurs which is not particularly due to human fault but is just in the nature of the universe, are part of this bondage.

So is this bondage a form of sin?

You could call it that, but if so, your comment at the beginning of our conversation needs modification: sin, a major theme in our services, appears to have a lot to do with things.

I would like to distinguish between moral sin, which human beings commit, and what I suppose could be called passive sin, which I accept pervades the universe, and is no fault of things: that's how they are. I'm reminded of Jesus comment 'An enemy has done this'¹¹, when he spoke of tares among the wheat. God intends to sow good seed, but there is a universal cussedness.



Dinosaurs suffered from arthritis

So Christ died for the whole of creation, and not just for human beings?

I am beginning to see that now, but I still have problems to relate that to the things we make. Let me recap. Things go wrong while I construct my shed. That frustration and the damage to what is being created affect Christ. I agree it must do, because he creates all things. The suffering on the cross included suffering of this sort as well as suffering for the crimes and sins of human beings, future as well as present.

How do you think this suffering on the cross redeems human beings?

We are redeemed in the sense that through that suffering we have forgiveness of our sins, and look forward to a new life, including the resurrection of our bodies.

And how do you think Christ's suffering on the cross redeems things?

I do not know how the work of the cross and resurrection can apply to things. They don't need forgiveness!

The way I feel about drills that slip and cut my finger, they do!

That's just childish.

No, it's more serious, and very common; certainly, it seems, in the male of our species! We need to be in a state of forgiveness ►►

►► towards the inanimate creation, as well as our human brothers and sisters. I certainly find it helpful to think of the created world around me as brothers and sisters, all in the same condition – subject to frustration, longing to be as God desires us to be, but still struggling. We're all together in this. To be continually angry with things around me is to feel that 'Life's a bitch and then you die'. In contrast, Christ's gift is peace – the Hebrew *shalom* – where you are at peace with things, though they may still annoy you. This was the vision of Isaiah – the wolf shall live with the lamb, the leopard shall lie down with the kid¹²; you shall go out in joy, and be led back in peace; the mountains and the hills before you shall burst into song, and all the trees of the field shall clap their hands. Instead of the thorn shall come up the cypress; instead of the brier shall come up the myrtle¹³. And Zechariah: there shall be a sowing of peace; the vine shall yield its fruit, the ground shall give its produce, and the skies shall give their dew¹⁴. And Job: you shall be in league with the stones of the field, and the wild animals shall be at peace with you¹⁵.

OK, forgiveness, but talk to me about the resurrection.

Firstly, forget about the immortality of the soul: that is an ancient Greek idea, and is heresy. The Christian doctrine is the resurrection of the body¹⁶. So we don't need to discuss whether animals (or drills!) have souls. The good news about the resurrection of the body is that it gives importance to physical things, like one's body. The ancient Greeks thought the body was just a useless shell to be discarded at death. They also thought physical work was demeaning. The Christian message is that all things have a value, in fact an eternal value, to God. God made them, God has a future for them.

I think nowadays many Christians are coming to accept that God has a future for our planet. They quote Revelation: 'Behold I make all things new'¹⁷, and 'a new heaven and a new earth'¹⁸. The idea of a final consummation, where the old will be cleared away, and Christ will return to

make a new world, seems to be appealing to our generation.

But presumably this applies not just to the planet, but to all things, however insignificant they seem to us?

That seems logical.

Presumably therefore, the new creation will bear a resemblance to the old, just as our new bodies will resemble our existing bodies.

You mean not a completely new creation, but a transformation of the old?

Christ's own body – 'the first-fruits'¹⁹ – still had the scars. It was almost unrecognisable, but was a transformed one, not a brand new one.



*Caravaggio - Doubting Thomas (1602-1603).
Sans-Souci Palace, Potsdam, Germany
Christ's own body still had the scars.*

What importance has that for the things we are making now – like my shed?

It means that what you are doing has eternal significance. It is not a waste of time or meaningless work. It will form part of the new world which God will create. The mistakes and imperfections which frustrate you now will be transformed: like the scars, they will still be there to remind you of the struggles you went through, but they will be changed so they are your glory not your shame. Your glory (and God's) because you went through all that hassle to try and make something useful and perhaps beautiful. The hassle is not forgotten by God.





*A machine for making pottery saucers.
This one produces 14 pieces a minute.*

▶▶ So this is holy work?

Of course, and so is every enterprise or product we make - all things.

You mean someone typing a letter, correcting grammar and spelling mistakes, and setting it out to look professional, is a work God rejoices in?

Yes.

And will this letter be in the new heaven? Along with millions of other letters? I can't believe this, nor do I need to. I also work in a factory making pottery. We turn out 2000 small saucers, all identical, every day – half a million a year. About 10% get broken during production. You're surely not suggesting that all these, including the half-made ones, will form part of the world to come? Leave me alone with my spiritual religion, I don't want all this physical material stuff in my heaven.

Remember that Christ's body was almost unrecognisable, and also St. Paul's announcement in 1 Corinthians: the new creation (though still a transformation of the old) will be as different in appearance as a grain of wheat is to the eventual plant it becomes. And don't worry about quantities. Many have asked if there will be room in heaven for all the millions who

have died. Paul thought such questions were silly²⁰, and the same applies to the millions of saucers as applies to the millions of people. And as a potter you should know that each separate saucer is not identical to another, in fact has its own characteristics, even if made on the same machine on the same day. And you do need to believe it, because otherwise all your work with things is meaningless, has no eternal significance, and you are reduced to thinking that only your 'spiritual' work, your mending of marriages at work, or the way you treat your employees, has any importance to God. That would mean that doctors, teachers and priests get to heaven, and technicians, electricians and plumbers have no place there (except insofar as they are honest and pay their bills). The grace of God could not apply to the central part of a technician's work with things.

Grace?

We talked about forgiveness being part of the *shalom* of God. In the same way, God's free grace comes on things as well as people. Christ's blood was shed for all things on the cross²¹, and they share our hope of glorious freedom from frustration²². Grace comes to things partly through Christ working through us to transform broken or damaged things, partly directly through healing processes in the natural world. As with humans, so with things, there is no merit by which they deserve such treatment, they are changed only by the grace of God freely given.

Would you include intellectual products such as computer programs as 'things'?

Of course. In fact I have had the privilege of writing computer programs, including machine code, and the excitement and creativity in making something which is perfect. If the logic is not perfect the program simply does not work. It made me more aware of the presence of the Holy Spirit close to me than most other work I have done. I used to have conversations with God about the neatness and elegance of the routines²³, which are hidden from human beings – all the user knows is that the program works. But God sees. ▶▶

►► **So ‘products’ such as insurance deals or bankers’ credit card offers are also creations which qualify as ‘things’?**

They are as much a creation of the human mind as a computer program, and as such the Holy Spirit is inspiring the creators of these products.

Presumably the Spirit is inspiring only the good bits?

The tragedy is that God’s creativity, because it is freely given without strings, is easily misused for exploitative ends. God is I am afraid inspiring the creativity which leads also to the bad bits. That is why we have the cross.

So although we do this holy work, it can be and is used for evil ends.

We have examples of both in scripture. Manufacturing which is clearly used to glorify God is seen in Bezalel and Oholiab who worked on the tabernacle and the ark, and were ‘filled with divine spirit’²⁴. We also have examples where it is used to degrade God: the Golden Calf²⁵ is one example. Another is the condemnation of idols as the work of human hands²⁶.

Does this not show an ambivalent view in scripture of the work of human hands?

Not at all. It is the turning of God-given talent to making offensive objects which is condemned, not the act of manufacture itself. Skilled craftsmanship is still respected in these passages: ‘Goldsmiths are all put to shame by their idols; for their images are false, and there is no breath in them. They are worthless, a

work of delusion’²⁷. It is the delusion which is condemned, not the creation.

So making things with the aim of using them for something which is not for God’s glory is shameful.

If we appreciated better how involved Christ is with the things we make, we would perhaps be more reverent and careful as we create.

Reverent? You sound like one of those Old Testament goldsmiths, or some of the modern environmentalists, who appear to think of trees, stones or other objects in the natural world as having an animate being! Isn’t this the delusion we see in idol worship?

I can see my danger. No, the reverence should be for God alone and the creative power of the Spirit. As we manufacture, we should seek only to bring God greater glory by making things well and cheaply.

Why cheaply?

We have many constraints in addition to labour cost while we manufacture, not least raw materials. We have to beware of thinking that only craftsmanship, as opposed to mass production, can glorify God. Mass production at its best makes good things available not just to the rich (which is often the only market for craftsmanship) but to the poor. Often, mass-produced articles are more reliable as well, due to manufacturing faults having to be ironed out early in the life of the product. I know the medieval craftsmen built the cathedrals to the glory of God, but I think that mass-produced cheap toys made in China are glorifying God too²⁸.



The goldsmith



Mass produced toys



God whose farm is all creation

So the sermons could change, but it will be like wading through treacle. What about the hymns?

Most men do like singing. There are plenty of hymns about things, but whoever chooses the hymns needs also to appreciate the theology of things. Most hymn choosers are people-people not things-people. In rural areas, John Arlott's 'God whose farm is all creation' is suitable, and of course 'Angel voices' is good for craftsmanship and music. Unfortunately, most new modern hymns are definitely from people-people.

▶▶ **You started by suggesting that few men go to church because the services contain little about their ministry to things. Do you have any suggestions about how we might correct that?**

There is a fundamental and serious problem: almost every pastor comes into his or her ministry because of their pastoral gifts in terms of personal relationships rather than things. And the fact is that congregations are still very subject to the leadership of their pastors. So until pastors begin to explore the theology of things as we have explored this morning, and until theological colleges and courses change their curricula to embrace such theology, there is little hope of vocations to being a pastor coming from people who minister to things. That is a mammoth task.

But church congregations are often interested in repairs and improvements to church buildings and facilities. In fact, this area seems to be the one of most interest to any men in the congregation!

I hadn't thought of that. It would need the pastor to inspire them with right thinking about the work being to the glory of God, as you and I have explored it, rather than maintenance of the local shrine. Congregations have been told for a century that the church consists of people not the building. Such thinking needs a turnaround.

What about the liturgy itself?

One of the problems with ecumenism is that there is a tendency towards uniformity. Any changes can take decades. One is tempted to despair.

What about readings from the bible?

The bible is full of references to things, so new readings are easy to find. However, the lectionaries²⁹ outside the free churches are now more or less uniform, so any changes are unlikely for half a century.

What about the confessions, in the light of our shared weakness with all created things?

The confessions, particularly for Holy Communion, need completely rewriting. Confession of moral sin is much toned down since the Reformation, when we referred to ourselves as miserable sinners provoking mostly justly God's wrath. Even today, moral sin confession is perhaps now better reserved for private confession, and I am suggesting that simple acknowledgement of weakness (passive sin) is more effective in public, and that absolution is also made private. Public prayers might evoke more genuine repentance if our common weakness with all created things is acknowledged and if the prayers asked for God's help in changing us rather than pleaded for mercy. Unfortunately, such



►► modifications have as yet no place within the Common Worship strictures of the Church of England, so there is no way these can be improved for the foreseeable future.

Surely the prayer of consecration of the bread and wine, the things of the liturgy, can be improved?

The prayer of consecration in the Holy Communion is a place where the theology we have discussed ought especially to be found. None of the prayers of consecration in the C of E liturgy as permitted by Common Worship bear any relation to the work of Christ with all things as discussed this morning. They do nearly all refer to God as the creator of all things, but that’s all. There is no word of the work of Christ on the cross for all things.

Is there no way we can do something temporarily? Isn’t some latitude given for ‘small changes’ in the preface in the prayer of consecration?

That is true. I will send you³⁰ a possible usage, which was tried out during the run up to ‘Common Worship’ in Lichfield Diocese, but was rejected. I was never told why, but my guess is that it went the way of many ideas in such exercises in ‘consultation’ – the suggestion was too distant from received thought.

So we have a big mountain to climb.

I don’t expect to have men back in our churches in any numbers for at least a century.

I need a cup of tea.

Bless you, let us create a new cup of tea. ■

1 Pioneered by Socrates, so sometimes called a Socratic Dialogue
 2 Colossians 1:20
 3 John 1:3
 4 Early pictures of St. Gregory writing his treatise show the Holy Spirit as a dove sitting on his shoulder, whispering in his ear, although it is more likely this is a goose, which was an early way of picturing the Holy Spirit. See the picture above: Pope Gregory the Great depicted in a carved ivory book cover, c. 980, in the Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna.
 5 US President Harry S Truman, who authorised the dropping of the atom bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki, had a plaque on his desk that said ‘The Buck Stops Here’.
 6 Romans 9:20
 7 Isaiah 45:9
 8 Isaiah 45:11
 9 Karen Wright, “Dinosaur Doctors: Tracing Modern Disease to the Ancient Reptiles”, *Discover* (Nov. 1991): 46–51.
 10 Romans 8:20-22 (NIV)
 11 Matthew 13:28
 12 Isaiah 11:6
 13 Isaiah 55:12-13
 14 Zechariah 8:12
 15 Job 5:23
 16 1 Corinthians 15:42
 17 Revelation 21:5
 18 Revelation 21:1
 19 1 Corinthians 15:20
 20 1 Corinthians 15:36
 21 Colossians 1:20
 22 Romans 8:21
 23 In computer programs, routines are sequences of logical code which perform a function in the program.

24 Exodus 31:1-11
 25 Exodus 32:8
 26 Psalm 115:4: ‘Their idols are silver and gold, the work of human hands’.
 27 Jeremiah 10:14
 28 See the article in this issue *Making Toys in China*.
 29 Lectionaries are a list of readings for each Sunday and also other holy days, which are set by central authority
 30 Here is what was sent. The section looks long, but for clarity it was necessary to include almost the whole of the proper preface so as to provide the context. The additions which were proposed are in italics: “...your living Word through whom you have created all things; *and who works with us in the creation of new things*, Who was sent ...He opened wide his arms for us *and all creation on the cross; For God was pleased to have all his fullness dwell in him, and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether things on earth or things in heaven, by making peace through his blood, shed on the cross*; he put an end to death by dying for us and *all of his creation*, and revealed the resurrection by rising to new life; so he fulfilled your will and won for you a holy people, *and the glorious hope for the creation itself, that it will be liberated from its bondage to decay and brought into the glorious freedom of the children of God*. And now we give you thanks because all things are of your making, all times and seasons obey your laws, but you have chosen to create us in your own image, setting us over the whole world in all its wonder. You have made us stewards of your creation, to praise you day by day for the marvels of your wisdom and power: so earth unites with heaven to sing the new song of creation:...” [note, this last section is from *Patterns for Worship*, based on the Roman Missal of 1970]

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