



Christian Vegetarian Association UK

Working towards a violence-free world

Book Review

Jesus and the Earth

by Rt Rev. James Jones, Bishop of Liverpool.
ISBN 0-281-15623-4, 102 pages, paperback. Price: £6.99.

The environmental concerns of young people and the books 'What is Mission' by Andrew Kirk and 'Soul and Soil' by Alistair MacIntosh, convinced James Jones that our care of the environment is essential to the mission of God *'What I saw through these young people is that we need to be concerned about the future of the earth because it is a theological, a Biblical and a moral imperative.'*

He then asked himself *'If the environment was so central to the mission of God, why, when Christians write about it, did they refer so little to the New Testament? Why do Christians plant themselves almost exclusively in the pages of the Old Testament?'* He further stated *'We [the clergy] bring to the Gospels all sorts of cultural baggage, we bring to the text things that are not there and that blinds us to things that are actually in the text.'*

James Jones quotes the words of Jesus 'BUT I SAY' and comments *'but on that 'BUT I SAY' is predicated the authority of Jesus to challenge our old understandings and previous concepts. 'BUT I SAY' radicalises the teaching of the Old Testament, applying it not just to the deed but also to the heart.'*

James Jones sets out to answer these questions *'What was Jesus' attitude to the earth? What if anything, did he say about the environment? Is there a divine 'earth-ethic' to be found in the Gospel?'* James Jones demonstrates that in the past, an anthropocentric church has failed to recognise the need to ask, let alone answer, these questions. James Jones argues clearly and passionately that *'Jesus is the saviour, not only of humanity, but also the saviour of the planet and the whole cosmos, which came into being through him and for him.'*

The church has in the past, been too preoccupied with an anthropocentric understanding of the bible, an interpretation that elevates humanity above all other creatures, and reflects the imperfect image of man rather than the perfect image of God. Christianity is a personal relationship with God, who through his Holy Spirit gives us the gift of faith, a faith in a perfect God. Surely, we should reject any understanding of the bible that contradicts that faith. A faith confirmed by Jesus, who told His disciples that it is not a great faith that you need, it is faith in a great God (Luke 17 v 5,6), a perfect God *'be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect'* (Mat.5 v 48).

By demonstrating through scripture that God has undivided love, mercy and compassion for all of his creation, James Jones has confirmed my faith in a perfect God. I could not worship a God who was not perfect, and find it very difficult to have empathy with a church that refuses to promote a sustainable future for all God's creatures, through the adoption of a sacrificial lifestyle. A church that is indifferent to the suffering we inflict on billions of God's creatures. James Jones writes *'You cannot*

be in a right relationship with the God of justice and be indifferent to the injustice that is in the world. That is a contradiction of terms. You cannot say you love a God of justice and at the same time turn a blind eye to the injustices that are an offence to his character.'

When it comes to our attitude towards the rest of God's creatures, James Jones quotes a poem by Wordsworth 'To a Butterfly' were *'one child sees the butterfly as a challenge, an object to hunt and capture, while the other reveres it, knowing that even to touch it would be to risk damaging it. These two polarised attitudes of self-indulgence and reverence characterize the attitude of the human family to creation'*. James Jones then quotes Edward Echlin *'When we question the human place, our role and duties within the earth community we discover that, as his image, we are God's responsible representatives within the earth community. Far from being vertically above the creatures, as Aristotle, the Stoics, and many Christian writers would have us, we are within the created community.'*

James Jones then goes on to say that Edward Echlin *'shows the flaw in humanity elevating itself above and apart from the rest of creation. He points how God displaces the arrogance of humanity when he places Job firmly within creaturehood 'Where were you when I laid the foundations of the earth?'* (Job 38 v 4). James Jones also quotes Psalm 148, were humanity, the rest of God's creatures and the earth, are members of one great choir praising God, and comments *'Psalm 148 offers no parts to soloists'*.

There is plenty in this book to satisfy those who care for animals, James Jones points out that in Matthew's Gospel, Jesus on 27 separate occasions introduces us to animals. Jesus enlists animals to tell the good news *'they tell us of God's providence, presence and peace (Matthew 6 v 26,27), not one of them falls to the earth without the Father (Matthew 10 v 28,29). According to Richard Bauckham in his paper 'Jesus and the Animals', Mark speaks of 'a sense of association or friendship'. Here is Jesus 'enjoying the peaceable harmony with wild animals which had been God's original intention' (Mark 1 v 13).*

There is something for ethical vegetarians also, when discussing the way poultry are treated, James Jones comments *'they live life in conditions conveniently hidden behind closed doors which, if seen, heard and smelt, would make vegetarians of us all. The cruelty to which these animals are subjected does not sit comfortably alongside pretensions to be civilised, let alone a Christian society'*.

Each chapter has a series of questions to stimulate individual reflection and discussion within a group, there are also guidelines at the back of the book on how a parish might become more environmentally responsible. James Jones' book has introduced a breath of fresh air into our traditional understanding of the Gospel; he has shown that 'God's will' continues to be revealed, through His word to an enlightened generation, to those willing to listen and learn. To know more, you must read 'Jesus and the Earth' or better still; use the book as a Lent study.

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