

REALITYBITES

The Big Story of the Bible

Mark Roques

Janet, a 12 year-old girl, was asked what she thought the Bible was all about. Her answer went like this: “The Bible tells me about Jesus and how I can get to heaven when I die.” Was she right? Had she understood the story that God wants us to understand? Is this the story that He wants us to live in?

Think for a few moments - how would you summarise the biblical story? Would you agree with Janet or has she missed something out?

The Bible can be understood as a drama in six acts:

- Act 1:** Creation – God establishes His kingdom
- Act 2:** Fall – Rebellion in the kingdom
- Act 3:** Redemption initiated – The King chooses Israel
- Act 4:** Redemption accomplished – The King himself comes
- Act 5:** Redemption proclaimed – Spreading the kingdom
- Act 6:** Glorious renewal – The return of the King

Take your seats, ladies and gentlemen – the curtain is about to rise...

Act 1: God Establishes his Kingdom

The first chapter of the book of Genesis states emphatically that the world that God has made is good. God made the land and God saw that it was good. God made the stars, the planets and the sun and God saw that they were good. God made whales, leopards and ferrets and God saw that they were good. This repeated refrain sets the scene for the biblical way of understanding the world.

Again and again we are reminded of the glory and beauty of God’s good creation. It is not junk – the creation is precious to the Creator.

God created men and women and placed them on the earth for a specific purpose. He gave them a task...a purpose...a *raison d’être*...a commission.

God blessed them 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 over every living creature that moves on the ground.’

Genesis 1:28

This was God's first word to Adam and Eve. It is sometimes referred to as the cultural mandate and it is a vital part of the drama. Don't forget it!

Humans are creatures who exercise enormous power. We can build huge bridges. Men tunnel through the hardest rock in search of hidden jewels. With impressive ingenuity, humans fashion necklaces, crowns and tiaras. All this takes power and intelligence; an ability to rule, direct and unfold.

God's wonderful earth invites us, beckons us to explore and unfold its rich potential. It's a bobbydazzler crying out for human craft and development. Consider this passage in Deuteronomy:

Observe the commands of the Lord your God, walking in his ways and revering him. For the Lord your God is bringing you into a good land – a land with streams and pools of water, with springs flowing in the valleys and hills; a land with wheat and barley, vines and fig-trees, pomegranates, olive oil and honey; a land where bread will not be scarce and you will lack nothing; a land where bread will not be scarce and you will lack nothing; a land where the rocks are iron and you can dig copper out of the hills.

Deuteronomy 8:6-9

The Bible story delights in the richness of creation. And the author of the story (and the world) invites us to dig copper and other minerals out of the hills. Notice how practical and down to earth this is. God wants us to discover new things about the earth. He wants us to unfold the rich potential of the garden. This task is enjoyable and gives life meaning and purpose.

Humans discover oil and in time they develop plastic. A tree becomes a chair. Snow becomes an igloo. A waterfall can be transformed into electrical power. Iron ore can be heated, banged, wacked and attacked and a few hours later becomes a knife to cut bread with.

Words can become poems about ferrets and musical notes can bring forth elaborate and sophisticated symphonies. Beethoven cracked out some great tunes. Dickens popped out some cracking yarns. CS Lewis crafted some stunning stories about wardrobes, lions and dwarves!

Such is the power and glory of humankind.

The Bible teaches that this power is given to us by God. And in using this power we are like God. We resemble God by ruling, unfolding and developing. We are the image of God reflecting His goodness to the rest of creation. The world is filled with secret treasures and hidden surprises waiting to be unveiled, discovered and enjoyed.

But this is only half the story. In Genesis chapter 2 we discover something new.

The Lord God took the man and put him in the Garden of Eden to work it and take care of it (Genesis 2:15).

As humans unfold the rich potential of the earth, they are also commissioned by God to look after the world. Our task is to nurture and protect the garden from destruction and ruin. Humans are called by God to look after the ferrets, the weasels and the stoats, the land, the mountains etc. For we are stewards and not conquerors. Servants and not tyrants.

The Lord God loves His wonderful creation (John 3:16). He calls humans, His image bearers to steward it and to unfold it to His praise and glory. He loves all that brings abundant life. This includes fine wine, dancing and writing poems. The Lord God has created us in His image and likeness and we have important and fascinating work to do as we tend and enhance the garden.

Have you understood Act 1? It is an important part of the play and not to be forgotten. In this act we learn that God wants us to live on the earth and find joy in understanding and looking after the world that God loves so much.

Act 2: Rebellion in the Kingdom

We are bright and we are alert. We know that things aren't what they should be. What went wrong? The Old Testament teaches that early in human history, human beings rebelled against the Lord and became ensnared by evil, deceiving powers. The covenant or treaty between God and humankind was broken and a curse began to consume the earth. This is how the prophet Isaiah understood the fall:

The earth dries up and withers,
The world languishes and withers,
The exalted of the earth languish.
The earth is defiled by its people;
They have disobeyed the laws,
violated the statutes
and broken the everlasting covenant.
Therefore a curse consumes the earth;
Its people must bear their guilt.
Isaiah 24:4-6

It is vital to notice the all-pervading and radical nature of this curse. Turning our backs on the Lord God affects the entire created order. The ravages of sin and rebellion are spectacular and catastrophic. Let us investigate six crucial relationships that have become twisted and ruined by the Fall.

- 1) God's relationship to humans has become fraught with pain and conflict. Before the rebellion, the Lord God had strolled about the garden in the cool of the day (Genesis 3:8). In some sense God's presence on the earth was visible, tangible and magnetic. Adam and Eve could chat and joke with the Almighty in a stress-free environment; the channels of communication were open and relaxed. But after the rebellion, God withdrew from the earth and retreated to heaven. Humans, from their side, can now experience God as distant and remote. Communication with God becomes a struggle and some people can feel abandoned by God. Some people turn to rat worship. Others turn to the powerful and popular money god. Some replace God with football. Dangerous things to do.
- 2) The relationship between humans can be consumed with loathing, hatred and envy (see Genesis 4). Consider for a few moments the appalling acts of torture that are practised in hundreds of countries every year. Amnesty International has bravely alerted us to the savage brutality that befouls this planet. Recall the dreadful concentration camps at Auschwitz, Treblinka and Dachau where SS soldiers perpetrated unspeakable crimes against Jews, Gypsies and other undesirables.
- 3) The relationship between women and men can be violent and abusive (starting from Genesis 3:12, 16). There is rape and sexual harassment; domestic violence and adultery. There are even stories of brothers who kill their sisters because they have flirted with unsuitable men. Men can sometimes bully women and women, in their turn, can become subservient, passive and manipulative. Prostitution is another part of this broken relationship. In Thailand there are tragic stories of fathers who sell their daughters to brothels for as little as the price of a fridge.
- 4) Rebellion against God has also affected our relationship with ourselves (see Genesis 3:10). This feature of the fall is often ignored and unexamined. But it is very easy in a consumer-orientated society to dislike or even hate oneself. As we admire the beauty and grace of gorgeous film stars we can become intensely irritated by our own physical imperfections and flaws. Despite the fact that famous and talented footballers appear to have everything going for them, we still hear stories of alcoholism, drug-addiction and other forms of self-destructive behaviour. This insecurity has led to the enrichment of hundreds of plastic surgeons as they reshape and remodel cheeks, buttocks, noses and breasts. Numerous neuroses affect the human race.
- 5) The relationship between humans and animals has been spoiled and corrupted by the fall (Genesis 3:15 and 9:2-5). In the biblical story humans were supposed to look after the animals, birds and insects. We can catch glimpses of this even now as we watch a film like *Free Willy* which depicts the friendly and tender relationship between a young boy and a whale. But

the film also exposes the sheer greed that can captivate the human heart and the ruthless destruction of many sea creatures as humans sniff the smell of hard currency. At the same time crocodiles, lions and sharks take their revenge as they pounce on unsuspecting human-beings. Although animals do not sin, they have been affected by the Fall.

- 6) Finally the relationship between humans and the earth has been ravaged by sin and human mismanagement (Genesis 3:17-18). Humans were supposed to lovingly cultivate the earth and enhance the superb garden that God had made. We were commanded to be stewards and friends of the earth but in our rebellion we have become violent and greedy polluters of the planet. Acid rain, pollution in our lakes and seas, the greenhouse effect – all these disturbing phenomena bear witness to our rebellion against God.

Act 2 is not an easy part of the play. Let's be frank about that. Should we avert our eyes and pretend evil doesn't happen? Things will get better in Act 3.

Act 3: The King Chooses Israel

But God could not stand idly by. The pain, suffering and desperation of the human race moved the Lord God to tears of grief (Genesis 6:6). The Bible teaches that God longed to heal and rescue His broken but still beautiful world. This passionate loving God would begin a divine project of rescue. He would raise up a holy people, a covenant people, and through this people God would bring salvation and healing to the world.

This process of rescue, of redemption, began with one man – enter Abraham. God revealed Himself to this man and made him an outrageous promise:

I will make you into a great nation
and I will bless you;
I will make your name great,
and you will be a blessing.
I will bless those who bless you,
and whoever curses you I will curse;
and all peoples on earth
will be blessed through you.

Genesis 12:2-3

Abraham had a son named Isaac. Isaac had a son named Jacob. Jacob had twelve sons who became in time the founders of the nation of Israel.

This is the promise. This is the covenant. God is declaring to this man that He is beginning to put things right. He will work through Abraham's descendents and

bring His kingdom to all the peoples of the world. This kingdom will bring forgiveness, reconciliation, restoration and hope for people and the groaning world. God is promising to overcome all the evil and misery that Act 2 had brought into the world. The plot thickens!

God wanted His people Israel to be like a doctor. When you are ill you go to a doctor and she sorts you out – restores you to health. Israel had this calling to the world.

Through Moses, God gave His Torah or instruction to his people. This law showed the covenant people how to live. This law covered every conceivable issue and situation in that culture.

“If a fellow Hebrew, a man or a woman, sells himself to you and serves you six years, in the seventh year you must let him go free. And when you release him, do not send him away empty-handed. Supply him liberally from your flock, your threshing-floor and your winepress. Give to him as the LORD your God has blessed you. Remember that you were slaves in Egypt and the LORD your God redeemed you. That is why I give you this command today.”

Deuteronomy 15:12-15

Again we need to notice how ordinary and down to earth this really is. God wanted His covenant people to set each other free from the miseries of sin, exploitation and slavery. The seventh year or Sabbath year was a time of restoration and healing. It was good news for poor people, slaves, foreigners and even the wild animals (Exodus 23:10-12). The land itself was to be rested. Relaxation and refreshment for everybody and everything – human, beast, land and soil.

This theme is deepened in Leviticus 25. In the fiftieth year (the Jubilee), land was given back to all those who had lost it. This was the great year of restoration and freedom. Picture it – you are a destitute person and the trumpet blows. What happens next? Your debts are cancelled and you get your land back.

Study Deuteronomy 24:17-22 and we catch wonderful glimpses of God’s kingdom coming down to earth. The biblical practice of gleaning is good news for farmers and the destitute. Gleaning encouraged landowners to leave a substantial part of their harvest for the poor and the needy. This meant that the farmer had less work to do as the poor neighbour gathered the gleanings. It’s good news for everyone. A win/win scenario. Again we need to notice just how down to earth this is.

Sometimes Christians misunderstand the true nature of the Mosaic law and they contend that faith is in opposition to the law of God. This perspective suggests that the New Testament focuses on grace and faith whereas the Old Testament focuses on works and law. This is profoundly wrong. It required huge faith in Yahweh to obey the law. It called for a radical kind of love and generosity rooted

in faith. Cancelling debts, giving land back to strangers and allowing foreigners to glean in your fields demanded a deep and personal trust in the Lord. If you didn't trust God then you would never do such things!

The story of Ruth and Boaz illustrates this theme perfectly. Boaz understood God's good purposes for the world and so he encouraged Ruth the Moabitess to glean in his fields. His faith in God was manifested in his kindness and generosity to this foreign woman. He also shows Ruth extraordinary sensitivity and courtesy.

As Ruth got up to glean, Boaz gave orders to his men, "Even if she gathers among the sheaves, don't embarrass her. Rather, pull out some stalks for her from the bundles and leave them for her to pick up, and don't rebuke her."

Ruth 2:15-16

In this vignette we see Boaz displaying both his faith in Yahweh and his superb understanding of the biblical story. He wanted Ruth to know something about God's love and mercy. He wanted her to taste and see that the Lord is good (Psalm 34:8). For a woman accustomed to violent pagan rites (sacrificing children to Chemosh) in her home country, this kindness of Boaz would have been received as wonderful news.

Solomon and Sheba

Israel is called to be the light of the world and for the world.

We catch a glimpse of God's purposes for His creation during the reign of David's son Solomon, the third king of Israel. What was it like to live in Israel during the early reign of Solomon? The book of Kings gives us some helpful information about this historical period. Solomon's banquets and feasts were famous for their exotic cuisine of deer, gazelles, roebucks and choice fowl (1 Kings 4:23). Solomon's yearly income was huge; he pulled in more than 22 tons of gold every year! (1 Kings 10:14)

So often in the modern world, great luxury comes at the cost of human squalor and degradation. We live in a world of stark contrasts. Rich people are pampered and spoilt with their expensive Gucci adornments while the poor and the needy suffer enormous pain and privation. In Brazil it is estimated that there are between seven million and eleven million homeless people! It was not like this at the court of Solomon.

The book of Kings tells us that the Israelites lived comfortably and safely; each family enjoyed its inheritance from God. Everyone possessed land, vineyards and fig-trees (1 Kings 4:25). Further we are told that people ate and drank and were happy. There were no landless peasants who could be bought and sold at the drop of a hat. Peace and justice (shalom) filled the land and happiness did not come at someone else's expense.

We are also told that Solomon possessed great wisdom and understanding. This is how the Jewish record puts it:

He was wiser than any other man, including Ethan the Ezrahite – wiser than Heman, Calcol and Darda, the sons of Mahol. And his fame spread to all the surrounding nations. He spoke three thousand proverbs and his songs numbered a thousand and five. He described plant life, from the cedar of Lebanon to the hyssop that grows out of walls. He also taught about animals and birds, reptiles and fish. Men of all nations came to listen to Solomon's wisdom, sent by all the kings of the world, who had heard of his wisdom.

1 Kings 4:31-34

The early reign of Solomon was distinctive and impressive. Solomon was responding to the cultural mandate (major theme in Act 1) with real style and creativity. Not for him the life of the idle hedonist – loafing around the palace, loitering with intent, on the prowl for sordid pleasures.

Solomon was a cultured and godly man. He understood God's call to develop and enhance the palace garden. He spent time writing songs and proverbs. He studied all kinds of fascinating creatures - trees, reptiles, birds and insects. He was perhaps the first world-famous Educationalist, Composer, Botanist and Zoologist all rolled into one. People from all over the world heard about this dazzling king and his amazing kingdom and they wanted to meet him.

The Queen of Sheba had heard about the fame of Solomon and decided to pay him a visit. We are told that she brought camels carrying spices, large quantities of gold, and precious stones (1 Kings 10:2).

Sheba was overwhelmed on meeting Solomon. She was deeply impressed by the wisdom and magnificence that pervaded his court and kingdom. Her keen eye had alerted her to the dramatic contrast between Solomon's kingdom and all the other kingdoms she had visited as a young princess.

Here there was no obvious misery, cruelty and slavery. There were no gaudy idols! Nobody worshipped crocodiles or frogs! Here there was wealth and stylish living but it was enjoyed by all the cheerful citizens. Here everybody seemed important and valued. It wasn't like Egypt where only members of the royal family and priests were valued. Wisdom, human flourishing and festive celebration were ubiquitous. Sheba gasped and gulped in fresh supplies of oxygen. "What a corker!" she must have concluded.

Don't forget that Solomon talked to Sheba about everything! This included plants, animals and insects. Perhaps Solomon explained to her that it was far better studying crocodiles than worshipping them. (In Egypt people worshipped crocodiles and frogs!) He might have dazzled her with his songs and proverbs.

And of course Solomon would have mentioned the Lord God and His covenant with His human image bearers. This covenant teaches people how to approach the Lord God (sacrifices etc) and how to live in ways that please Him (ten commandments, Sabbath year, gleaning etc).

It is a big mistake to reduce Solomon's wisdom to political astuteness and personal morality. His wisdom was also expressed in his cultural, artistic and scientific activities. This is what we mean by the cultural mandate.

Sheba must have sensed that all this rich culture and glory did not emanate from Solomon alone. Behind the throne stood someone else. This is how Sheba put it herself:

“The report I heard in my own country about your achievements and your wisdom is true. But I did not believe these things until I came and saw with my own eyes. Indeed, not even half was told me; in wisdom and wealth you have far exceeded the report I heard. How happy your men must be! How happy your officials, who continually stand before you and hear your wisdom! Praise be to the Lord your God, who has delighted in you and placed you on the throne of Israel. Because of the Lord's eternal love for Israel, he has made you king, to maintain justice and righteousness.”

1 Kings 10:6-9

We could say that Sheba glimpsed God's kingdom as she observed the life of Israel. God was no longer invisible, unapproachable and intangible. She sensed the reality and goodness of God as she enjoyed the rich blessings of Solomon's kingdom. For perhaps the first time in her life, this pagan queen caught a glimpse of the kingdom of God and it elicited her praise and worship.

Notice that both Ruth and Sheba came to know and worship the true God by seeing His kingdom coming to the earth.

Tragically in later life Solomon betrayed the God who had brought him so much fame, wealth and honour. In his old age Solomon became a seedy and sordid monarch, obsessed by the size of his harem and the strength of his armies. The book of Kings tells us that he had seven hundred wives of royal birth and three hundred concubines. We are also told that his wives encouraged him to worship the pagan gods Chemosh, Molech and Ashtoreth. There is even the possibility that Solomon attended pagan festivals where human beings were sacrificed to these gods.

Evil hides the kingdom of God and Sheba would have been aghast to have encountered Solomon in his twilight years. A just and wise king had become a leering, aging playboy. Something very good had become something very bad. Exit Solomon.

Manasseh (696-642 BC)

Just as the young Solomon was the high point of the life of Israel, the reign of King Manasseh of Judah was the lowest point. He completely betrayed God and confused anybody who wanted to know more about God's kingdom. Instead of bearing witness to the one true God, he and his kingdom imaged a plethora of false and ugly pagan gods.

He built altars to all the starry hosts. He sacrificed his own son in the fire, practised sorcery and divination, and consulted mediums and spiritists... Moreover Manasseh also shed so much innocent blood that he filled Jerusalem from end to end.

2 Kings 21: 5, 6 & 16

One of the prophets, Micah, painted a stark picture of corruption and conspiracy at every level of Israelite society. Rulers were supposed to love justice and protect the poor and needy (Psalm 72). They weren't doing this. Judges were supposed to administer justice. They were taking bribes. And powerful people were just doing whatever they liked. Each of these positions of power and authority (the political, the legal and the economic) were radically rejecting God's covenant and wreaking havoc.

What misery is mine! I am like one who gathers summer fruit at the gleaning of the vineyard; there is no cluster of grapes to eat, none of the early figs I crave. The godly have been swept from the land; not one upright man remains. All men lie in wait to shed blood; each hunts his brother with a net. Both hands are skilled in doing evil; the ruler demands gifts, the judge accepts bribes, the powerful dictate what they desire – they all conspire together.

Micah 7:1-3

What a tragedy. Israel in 587 BC was no longer the light of the world. Exile was just around the corner. In 587 BC the Babylonian army invaded the land of Judah and the people of Israel were taken into exile.

As the curtain falls on Act 3, we have a bloody, nasty and difficult situation. Murder, corruption and idol worship have taken over. All the good things of Boaz and early Solomon have vanished. How will the plot be resolved? How will God bring His kingdom to the world? Israel had failed. Miserably.

Act 4: The King Himself Comes

Jesus of Nazareth comes on stage with a simple message which we need to hear carefully.

“The time has come,” he said. “The kingdom of God is near. Repent and believe the good news!”

Mark 1:15

Now that we have some solid Old Testament background to the kingdom of God we must beware of a strong tendency among many Christians to identify the kingdom of God with ‘going to heaven when I die’. If you remember, this was the view of young Janet. But the normal Christian understanding of ‘kingdom’ is simply mistaken.

Christians do have hope in the resurrection of the body and enjoying the future age to come, but this is about heaven and earth being united – very different from souls slipping off to a kind of spiritual theme park in the sky.

‘God’s kingdom’ and ‘kingdom of heaven’ mean the same thing: the sovereign rule of God which according to Jesus was and is breaking into the present world – the whole universe. So God wants to reclaim and restore His kingdom on the earth. He wants men and women to be busy doing His will on earth. In all kinds of ways. Consider the prayer Jesus gave us:

Our Father in heaven,
hallowed be your name,
your kingdom come,
your will be done on earth as it is in heaven.
Give us today our daily bread.
Forgive us our debts,
as we also have forgiven our debtors.
And lead us not into temptation,
but deliver us from the evil one.

Matthew 6:9-13

The focus here is not on us going up to heaven when we die but on God’s kingdom coming down to earth even while we live – the firstfruits of redemption. God wants His people to be a burning light in a dark world.

When Jesus spoke again to the people, he said, “I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness, but will have the light of life.”

John 8:12

What Jesus did next is the key to understanding the whole drama. Fully aware that the religious authorities wanted rid of him, he took his ministry into the heart of Jerusalem at the Passover festival. The expectant cheers that greeted his

arrival on the donkey gave way to jeers and hatred a few days later as he turned from hero into scapegoat, refusing to follow anyone's script but the one he claimed from his Father. The restless masses, the religious authorities, the temple traders and the Roman governor alike all thought the world would be better off without this enigmatic rabbi. And as we know, events conspired very quickly to bring about Jesus' execution. On the Cross we see a rejected king lifted up against the dark sky, hanging between earth and heaven – and speaking forgiveness in his dying breath. What a climax as the lights fade on Act 4, Scene 1!

Scene 2 begins on the third day of Jesus' death, and we're in another world. Birds chirp, polishing off insects in the shrubs of a wild garden. Lizards dart about on the lichen-covered rock. The warm spring sun is glinting into an empty tomb – and some women arrive with embalming spices.

Jesus' resurrection was as incredible then as it is now. It shakes our view of the world – of the laws of nature, even. But it also makes sense of the Bible's big story – not just because Jesus had prophesied his own resurrection but because God had always promised a human king who would reign forever, putting Adam, Abraham, Moses, Solomon and the rest of the Old Testament crowd into the shade. Jesus' resurrection can make sense of our own life stories too... how we see good reborn from the jaws of evil, how we seek to overcome our own failings, how we pursue real beauty, how we yearn for harmony and a happy ending. It's another world – but it's the real one. A world where death turns out to be temporary and life is the norm!

So King Jesus isn't some kind of *deus ex machina*, dropping down to give mortals a helping hand. No – he comes to restore and heal His broken world. He comes to offer sinners forgiveness and grace. He comes to put everything right. He comes to bring His wonderful healing kingdom into every area of life. Consider this story:

On a Sabbath Jesus was teaching in one of the synagogues, and a woman was there who had been crippled by a spirit for 18 years. She was bent over and could not straighten up at all. When Jesus saw her, he called her forward and said to her, 'Woman, you are set free from your infirmity.' Then he put his hands on her, and immediately she straightened up and praised God.

Luke 13:10-13

In this vignette we see something of God's kingdom breaking in. A woman's life is transformed and healed. Both Satan and the curse of the fall are being undone and defeated. Act 2 is being dealt with by Jesus. This kingdom is launched by His death and resurrection.

We find a brilliant perspective on Jesus in the book of Colossians:

He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn over all creation. For by him all things were created: things in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible,

whether thrones or powers or rulers or authorities; all things were created by him and for him...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.

Colossians 1:15-19

Even the seasoned critics are choking on their mints at this piece.

Act 5: Spreading the Kingdom

Before the resurrected Jesus disappears in theatrical fog, what does he urge his followers to do?

Go into all the world and preach the good news to all creation.

Mark 16:15

Disciples of King Jesus are now called to live in Act 5. All of us are called to improvise faithfully as we bring the gospel of the kingdom to our broken, groaning world. In all sorts of ways we are called to be witnesses to the resurrection of Christ and the breaking in of God's kingdom rule. We know the play so far but now we have to fill in the missing lines.

Here is one way that the early church improvised:

Everyone was filled with awe, and many wonders and miraculous signs were done by the apostles. All the believers were together and had everything in common. Selling their possessions and goods, they gave to anyone as he had need... And the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved.

Acts 2:43-47

This is surely a faithful form of improvisation. Taking the wisdom in Jubilee, the Sabbath year, gleaning, etc and making it come alive. Many rich Christians were setting their slaves free! Very subversive in the Roman Empire.

There are many fantastic stories of God's kingdom breaking in. Now, here is an unexpected one that may help us to understand our role in the drama. It's happening right now!

The Story of A Rocha

Is it possible to serve God as a bird-watcher? Picture it – a dazzling kingfisher suddenly appears; you praise God and immerse yourself for a few minutes in the

little fellow's beauty. How does God feel about that? Just remember for a moment that this colourful creature has been made by and for Jesus Christ (Colossians 1:16).

It is so easy for Christians to divide life into two different compartments. On the one hand there is the 'spiritual' world of church, evangelism and pastoral care and on the other there is the 'unspiritual' world of football, banking, building bridges, making chocolate and watching robins and owls. Is it possible to honour God in everything we do or must we restrict God to the local church and its busy programmes?

Peter and Miranda Harris were considering missionary work in Tanzania but they felt strongly that God was leading them into a very different area of service. They were both passionate birders and ecologists. In 1983 they moved to the Algarve in Portugal and set up A Rocha ('the Rock'), a Christian field study centre.

The Algarve has been a magnet to golfers and tourists for about three decades. Portugal's southernmost province is famous for its spectacular scenery along a fabulous coastline... and we are now sounding like a holiday commercial. But the reality is quite different. Consumerist faith and lifestyles have spoiled the fragile habitats and ecosystems of this glorious landscape. They need to be protected (Genesis 2:15) from thoughtless, casual plunderers.

A Rocha has focused upon the Alvor estuary in the Algarve since it is an important stopping point for large numbers of migrating birds. The Harrises and their successors, now a committed team of ecologists, have done valuable work to learn about migration patterns, to count birds and to survey other endangered species in the area. Their stewardly care has produced copious fruit: the government of Portugal has now granted environmental protection to the Alvor estuary.

A Rocha has also helped many birds to nest safely and brought about environmental healing and restoration in places as diverse as the Aammig wetland in Lebanon's Bekaa Valley, the forests of Kenya and a country park in Southall, London. A Rocha is now working in at least 20 different countries.

Sometimes Christians are perplexed by Christian involvement in environmental projects. A Rocha in Kenya shows a superb way of understanding the relevance and kingdom significance of this labour of love.

In the south of Kenya about 70 miles north of Mombasa there is a charming and delightful inlet known as Mida Creek. This is the largest mangrove bay in East Africa and it is surrounded by the Arabuko-Sokoke forest. The area is well-known for its waders, kingfishers, pelicans and crab plovers. It is a fabulous place for bird-watching and birders are enraptured gazing at our colourful and noisy feathered friends.

The area had already witnessed a number of well-intentioned attempts to help poor people that had taken little account of local environmental conditions and pressures. In biblical language these projects had lacked wisdom. Money had been poured down the drain and in some cases the situations had worsened.

The A Rocha team was determined to understand the complex relationships between people, trees, birds, reptiles and the land itself. Patiently they studied and probed the local environment from a Christian perspective. The team became aware that the plunder of the forest was intimately connected to school fees! Even modest fees were out of reach for many families and so trees were felled and the wood sold. Those school fees had to be paid!

In response to this challenge the A Rocha team began a programme called ASSETS, the Arabuko-Sokoke Schools and Eco-Tourism Scheme. The programme is training local guides to work with the local hotels so that tourists can visit the forest for a small fee. In addition to this there has been the construction of a spectacular 260 metre suspended walkway that meanders through the mangrove forest at Mida to a bird-hide which looks out over Mida Creek. This attraction is pulling in the tourists. Many of them are enthusiastic birders.

The boardwalk was launched in July 2003 and, to date, over 1,000 international and local tourists have paid to use it. The proceeds from visitors have contributed to the ASSETS bursaries which have so far enabled hundreds of local children to attend secondary school.

The mangrove forest is no longer viewed as a resource to plunder but as a treasure which generates sustainable income. Further to this the A Rocha team are educating local people and their children in the ways of environmental sustainability. This education involves instruction in the Bible. The stories of Adam and Eve in the garden. The many passages in the Mosaic law which concern the stewardship of land and the husbandry of animals. The biblical story is coming alive as image-bearers of Yahweh preserve and protect this garden...our home...the planet earth which was declared very good in the beginning (Genesis 1:31).

Kingdom activity prods and pokes. Do you want to live in Act 5 of the biblical drama? Or do you want to live in another story?

Act 6: The Return of the King

We have a preview of Act 6, and it's important that we make sense of it. We're improvising in Act 5 with our whole lives – and we're not just filling time.

One of the great themes of the apostle Paul is the tension between now and the future. One day we will enjoy a magnificent banquet of aged wines and rich food in the age to come (Isaiah 25:6–9). Now we are merely nibbling at the glories of the kingdom. Sometimes our lives are like a finger buffet where we gaze lethargically at lonely porkpies and our sleeves are stained with grease and lard as we wearily search for the missing sausage rolls. Pals barge into us and spill our cheap plonk. Babies scream and yowl as Auntie Muriel rescues the cocktail sausages from the snapping poodles. Wasps irritate us as uncle Bob bores us with his endless yarns about life in the Royal Navy. Valerie, the fifteen year old daughter of auntie Kath suddenly tells us that she is pregnant; our faces contort with surprise and indignation as we choke on our mini Melton Mowbrays. The dandelion and burdock has gone flat and Emile the whippersnapper has blocked up the lavatory with vast quantities of pink toilet paper. Such is the present age.

The apostle Paul communicated this finger buffet incompleteness and frustration of life in his finely crafted letter to the Romans.

I consider that our present sufferings are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us. The creation waits in eager expectation for the sons of God to be revealed. 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. We know that the whole creation has been groaning as in the pain of childbirth right up to the present time. Not only so but we who have the first fruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly as we wait eagerly for our adoption as sons, the redemption of our bodies.

Romans 8:18-23

We would do well to notice that Paul does not restrict salvation merely to people or immortal souls. In this passage he accosts us with the staggering claim that God will one day liberate the entire creation from its bondage to decay, disease and suffering. Paul is speaking here about the resurrection of the body and the resurrection of the world.

But did Jesus ever speak in such terms? Yes he did. In Matthew chapter 5 he declared that the meek would inherit the earth and later on in that gospel he referred clearly to the resurrection of the world when he replied to a question from Peter:

Peter answered him, "We have left everything to follow you! What then will there be for us?" Jesus said to them, "I tell you the truth, at the renewal of all things, when the Son of Man sits on his glorious throne, you who have followed me will also sit on twelve thrones, judging the twelve tribes of Israel.

And everyone who has left houses or brothers or sisters or father or mother or children or fields for my sake will receive a hundred times as much and will inherit eternal life.

Matthew 19:28-29

Renewal of All Things

When Jesus spoke about the *renewal of all things* he was referring to the restoration of both heaven and earth. First century Jewish people had absolutely no concept of going to heaven or slipping off to some ethereal theme park in the bright blue sky. The apostle Paul did speak about being caught up into the third heaven (2 Corinthians 12:2) and this has encouraged some Christians to dismiss the earth as evil and worthless. In response to this Gnostic error we must stress that both heaven and earth will one day be liberated from sin and evil. Heaven cries out for redemption in just the same way that the earth longs for release.

When Christ does finally return to the earth, the dead will be raised as resurrected embodied people and there will be the final judgement. Then this is what we will see:

Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and there was no longer any sea. I saw the Holy City, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride beautifully dressed for her husband. And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, "Now the dwelling of God is with men, and he will live with them. They will be his people, and God himself will be with them and be their God. He will wipe away every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away."

Rev 21:1-4

It is not only humans who will be judged. When humans obediently shape and develop the earth (cultural mandate) their artefacts, paintings, deeds etc will also come into the New Jerusalem. This is how John put it:

The city does not need the sun or the moon to shine on it, for the glory of God gives it light, and the Lamb is its lamp. The nations will walk by its light, and the kings of the earth will bring their splendour into it. On no day will its gates ever be shut, for there will be no night there. The glory and honour of the nations will be brought into it. Nothing impure will ever enter it, nor will anyone who does what is shameful or deceitful, but only those whose names are written in the book of life.

Rev 21: 23-27

Summary of the Drama

At the beginning of the essay we found out how Janet understood the biblical story. For her it was all about going to heaven when you die. Would you agree with her?

Here is my summary of the drama:

The true God who loves His good creation is busy healing, restoring and reconciling all things through His Son, Jesus Christ. This is good news for sinners but also good news for God's creation project. Even birds are being blessed!

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Who are we?

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