

Singing the Climate Crisis— In Grief and Mourning

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In 2019, ordinand, doctoral researcher, and activist Hannah Malcolm won the *Church Times* newspaper's theology slam competition with her exhortation that "all of us can experience a form of unnamed melancholy when places we love get destroyed ... This is solastalgia, and climate chaos will create unavoidable homesickness for all of us."¹ Malcolm's presentation clearly struck a chord, tapping into something that many of us have felt at some point over recent years. The climate crisis demands that we act to create a better future, but it also confronts us with the realities of loss. We are increasingly faced with the question of what to do with ecological sorrow, anxiety, and anger. How can we come to terms with a world where so much is being lost and where we often seem to be continuing on a path of destruction? What tools do we have for processing these emotions? And where might they be able to lead us?

It is very easy to think of grief as an internal process, whereby we deal with our own feelings and seek slowly to enter a place of acceptance, slowly working our way through the five stages of grief. If this is the case, then sorrow for nature might be necessary for us as individuals, but it's something that has little potential to reshape the world in more productive ways. However, as a number of recent authors have made clear, grief can often be much more than this.² Grief is a form of relationship, and potentially also of kinship and solidarity. In choosing what and whom to grieve, we signal both what is worth grieving and what we ourselves are connected to and have empathy for. This, in turn, has the potential to become a signal of resistance against particular forms of death and destruction. Through grieving, we can resist the ability to simply say that this loss is okay, and we can take up some responsibility to counteract other ways of seeing and acting. Extending our grief and mourning beyond the human realm can help to connect us with the wider community of creation

whilst, at the same time, signalling a desire for a less-destructive future.

Ecological Requiems

There is not an easy one-to-one correspondence between a traditional requiem—which is said or sung for departed human lives—and the work that needs to be done in processing ecological destruction. However, there are many different points where some resonance can occur: In warnings of judgment and destruction; in reflecting on and cherishing that which has been lost; in repentance and pleas for mercy; and in the imagination of a world where everything is put to rights. It is partly this juxtaposition of different moments and perspectives which makes the requiem such a powerful cultural form. It doesn't seek to reduce a complex experience and process to a single facet, but rather juxtaposes a range of different dynamics alongside one another, giving room for remembrance, fear, peace, and petition, one after the other. It is not just in these individual moments that the requiem format provides resources for ecological sorrow, however. One important feature of the requiem, as with liturgy more generally, is its ability to take the listener on a journey. Whilst the standard requiem mass has a particular form, taking those present from requests for peace and rest through repentance and pleas for deliverance to worship, the day of judgment, and eventually to paradise, this journey can undergo something of a reworking in relation to ecological grief. This grief is not a matter of simply commending a departed soul into God's hands, but of trying to wrestle with the past, present, and future of a planet going through myriad different losses, where the shape of its future journey is very much uncertain and open to a range of different possibilities.

1. Hannah Malcolm, "Theology Slam: Hannah Malcolm on Theology and the Environment," Hymns Ancient & Modern, March 11, 2019, video, 7:51, <https://youtu.be/GknXxsvqToU>.

2. Ashlee Cunsolo and Karen Landman, *Mourning Nature: Hope at the Heart of Ecological Loss and Grief*, (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2017).

What Do Ecological Requiems Look Like?

Cecilia Damström's *Requiem for our Earth*, one example of an ecological requiem, does not follow the traditional requiem format. Rather, it juxtaposes a range of different sounds, projected visuals, and recorded speeches alongside elements taken from the requiem mass.³ Speeches from Greta Thunberg, Pope Francis, and the Finnish Minister of Defence sit alongside the squealing of pigs, evocations of ice caps and corals, and mining laws. We are presented with images of burning, exploitation, destruction, inaction, problematic systems, and calls for change before entering a meditative space as we observe different parts of the world slowly die. In many ways this is a highly political understanding of what a requiem can do, but in speaking directly to politics it nevertheless continues to attend to spirituality, to grief, and to the voice of religious traditions amidst the wider storms of events and actors. The requiem text itself momentarily appears within the composition as a sacred call, pointing to a different way of seeing and being, asking us to see the world around us through this sacred lens.

Other performances offer different dynamics. Requiem performances can become part of climate protest events as a political signal of the tragedies that are being created, they can commemorate the species lost from a local area, or they can become parts of events to raise awareness and support for the suffering of human communities. Some of these possibilities tie in closely to some of the liturgical structure of traditional requiems, whilst others adopt new formats and narratives. An orchestral requiem commission by Christian Aid adopted a four-movement structure focussing on dynamics of Creation, Ruin, Recovery, and Redemption.⁴ An unfinished composition project within Canterbury Diocese, on the other hand, drew on a variety of different sources of inspiration, moving from a set of reproaches through a song of sadness to a reworking of a traditional hymn.⁵ At a local level, a parish event in the village of Chaldon moved between poetry readings, meditation, reflective music, and creative liturgical texts alongside collective ritual actions and movements.⁶ At the other end of the spectrum, requiem-based protests by Extinction Rebellion have ranged from the performance of existing

requiem movements on the streets through to ritual marches of mourning featuring over-sized animatronic puppets of endangered animals.⁷

Processing Loss in Our Own Contexts

Whilst most of our Sunday worship services typically centre to a greater or lesser extent around dynamics of praise, the requiem format shows us a way of building our liturgies according to a different logic which can take people on a different emotional journey. Requiems can recraft our story of the world in different ways, asking what the losses around us mean in the context of our faith, and bringing us together into solidarity with other creatures around us so that we can then ask together how we are going to take this story forward into the future. Relatively few congregations are equipped to commission and perform new ecological requiems, but the abundance of recent performances suggests that Christian musical and liturgical traditions can provide resources for ecological grief and mourning, and that it is sometimes possible to harness this potential even using minimal resources. Because they tap into a sense of grief and anxiety which many different people have in common, and because they tap into a cultural form that has achieved recognition beyond the walls of our churches, ecological requiems can help to form bridges between church communities and the wider public around them. They provide us with emotional resources and stories that help us to mourn in appropriate ways, that help turn this mourning into new bonds of solidarity, and that can shape our future actions to fight against the loss of animals, plants, lives, and ecosystems with whom we share a common kinship through the gift of creation.



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3. Cecilia Damström, "Akademiska Damkören Lyran - Requiem for Our Earth by Cecilia Damström," Akademiska Damkören Lyran, March 23, 2021, video, 29:35, <https://youtu.be/-qgzZMPQKAo>.
 4. Christian Aid, "Songs of the Prophets," thisischristianaid, June 9, 2021, video, 43:43, <https://youtu.be/y6LcVKEPTog>.
 5. "Requiem Penned by Two Canterbury Artists and Musicians to Explore Climate Change," *Hawkinge Gazette*, December 9, 2021, <https://localrags.co.uk/2021/12/09/cry-of-the-earth-a-new-requiem-from-canterbury/>.
 6. Helen Burnett, "Requiem for Lost Species," November 30, 2019, <https://www.facebook.com/events/741790066322737/>.
 7. "Dies Irae - XR Musicians at the AI2," Extinction Rebellion Nederland, September 17, 2023, video, <https://youtu.be/hXecgWkO3eY>; "ANIMAL REQUIEM," Extinction Rebellion South Australia, March 10, 2022, video, 4:40, <https://fb.watch/trAO8ICQZLI>.