

Bath and Wells Mission Forum Spring 2015

Climate change and Gospel.

Did you see the opening ceremony of the 2012 London Olympics – with England's green and pleasant land transformed by the industrial revolution? There is so much to be grateful to God for in science and technology. I spent some years as a research chemist (X rays!), and am grateful for all the benefits science and technology have given us. But one of the things the early industrialists did not know is that by burning fossil fuels, by cutting down rain forests, by some aspects of industrial agriculture, we are putting a blanket around the earth, which is changing the climate. My grandfather did not know this, nor did my mother and father. But we do.

Some science

All through the time of human civilization, the earth has had a relatively stable climate. To go back further, for several hundred thousand years, the average earth surface temperature has gone up and down a bit, in the ice ages and in the warm periods in between, partly because of the earth's axis in relation to the sun, partly because of volcanic activity and so on - and the amount of carbon dioxide in the atmosphere has gone up and down as well. The highest concentration CO₂ reached in 600,000 years was 280 parts per million. However, since the industrial revolution, and especially during our lifetime, that concentration has gone up and up - and in 2013 reached 400 parts per million for the first time. And carbon dioxide stays in the atmosphere for a very long time – many decades or more. If we keep putting CO₂ into the atmosphere at this rate, it has been calculated, the average surface temperature of the earth will very likely go up by 3 or 4 or even 6 degrees. This may not sound much, but when you think that the temperature difference between an ice age and the warm period in between is only about 6 – 7 degrees, we are talking about roughly half an ice age change in a matter of decades. The earth has never had to adapt so quickly before. And that will create a very unstable climate especially for our grandchildren. And the people most affected will not be

here, but in Sub-Saharan Africa and South East Asia - people who have done the least to cause the damage, and are the least able to adapt. Add to this the fact that at the moment the earth's population is growing at the rate of a city the size of Birmingham every five days.

Climate disruption is already happening.

The sea levels are rising, as people in the Solomon Islands, Bangladesh and The Maldives know. The oceans are getting more acidic, which affects coral reefs and plankton, and that affects fish, and that affects the food chain. Some of the deserts are growing, which means that food and fresh water will become much more scarce in some parts of the world. Some creatures are becoming extinct. In fact some people think that we are already in the Sixth Great Extinction - the last one happened about 65 million years ago when the dinosaurs disappeared. This time it is caused by us. This last year it was reported that summer sea ice in the Arctic is likely soon to disappear for the first time in 2 million years. It also seems that as the earth warms, methane trapped in the ocean floor, and in the permafrost in Siberia, is likely to start leaking out - and methane is a much more damaging greenhouse gas than carbon dioxide.

What sort of world will my young grandchildren find when they are my age?

Through ignorance or selfishness, we human beings are doing things that devastate the natural environment. Why does this matter? One way into that question for Christian people is to remember that 'The earth is the Lord's and all that is in it'. (Ps 24.1). All that we have, life and the means of life come to us as gift of God's love. So we need to ask what God is asking of us to take care of God's world.

Questions for Christians

I think climate change puts a lot of questions to Christians.

What sort of trust should we place in technology? If technology has caused our problems, is it technology that can provide solutions?

What are our responsibilities to the parts of the world that are poorer and have done little to cause the damage to our atmosphere?

How do we let future generations speak to us of their needs? (It is *our* carbon emissions that will still be around in *their* world.) This is a call to justice and neighbour love.

Why do we maintain our dependence on fossil fuels, when we know that burning fossil fuels - which energises the industrial world and underpins our economic growth - is a major cause of damage to the planet?

This is a call to truth, and to live in the truth.

What are we to do about the unfair trade rules that frequently hamper attempts to curb dependence on fossil fuels?

How do we handle our fears and vulnerabilities and anxieties about the future?

These are all moral and spiritual questions.

If the earth is the Lord's and God has compassion on all that he has made,- what is our responsibility to non-human creatures? Does loss of biodiversity matter?

In 2012 Operation Noah published the *Ash Wednesday Declaration* on climate change and the purposes of God. On it, Professor Mary Grey commented:

‘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?*”

Our opportunity

Hour of danger? But it could be the hour of opportunity. Just suppose we had a world in which we were not all trying to consume as much as we could to keep GDP growing and growing as though there were no boundaries, or in which we could significantly reduce our dependency on coal, oil and gas, and satisfy our energy needs in other ways. We would not be extracting so many resources from the earth, and the earth could be more sustainable; the air would be cleaner and we could breathe more

easily; the water would be fresher and there would not be wars fought over clean water; the land would be more fertile and our food security would be stronger; people who live in London or New York or Shanghai – not to mention the Solomon Islands - would not be afraid that their cities will flood. We could build a cleaner and healthier and better-fed world that is more just, with less poverty, and less anxiety about what the future will hold. That is within our reach, but the time available to us is diminishing.

How have we got to this point?

I think we have lost the biblical sense that there is a wonderful triangle of relationships between God, the earth and humanity - and that we humans are part of Nature, and dependent on Nature for our well-being, but we also have responsibility under God to care for God's creation on God's behalf. Instead of this rich triangle of relationships, we have tended to displace God, and think only of our human relationship to the earth. Then we either think of ourselves as the Masters of Nature - using the world to provide for all our wants, so we exploit it, and extract it, and damage it without thought of the future; or we think that Nature is some great power which we cannot control, nothing we do can make any difference, so let us eat and drink for tomorrow we die - a sort of fatalism. Christians need to recover that triangle: God's earth is resilient, but we are called to exercise responsibility for it, and the decisions we make have a great effect on God's earth for good or bad.

Contradictions

The point we have got to is full of contradictions.

Many climate scientists use apocalyptic language about dangerous global warming, yet climate change is such a low political priority, despite recent encouraging noises from the USA and China.

Burning coal is such a threat to life, and reduction in fossil fuel dependency is so urgent, yet we are planning globally to build another 2000 coal fired power stations over the next few years.

The G20 agreed in 1999 to end fossil fuels subsidies, and nothing has yet happened.

The UK Parliamentary Committee on Climate Change says that carbon emissions in this country need to peak about 2020, and fall back quickly thereafter, and yet just this week in the House of Lords, Baroness Verma (Under Secretary of State, DECC), said ‘The carbon plan has shown that Britain will still need significant oil and gas supplies over the next decades while we decarbonize our economy and make a transition to a low carbon one; projections show that in 2030 oil and gas will still be a vital part of the energy mix, providing around 70% of the UK’s primary energy requirements as we seek that transition.’ Are different Government departments talking to each other?

Michael Northcott (*A Political Theology of Climate Change SPCK 2014*) discusses these contradictions in terms of the ‘pulling apart’ which happened at the Enlightenment. With the displacement of God, nature is pulled apart from culture, body from spirit, science from ethics, facts from values. There is a separation between humanity and the rest of the natural order, which drives us towards exploitation – and makes human action the primary cause of damage to the planet on which all life depends.

Climate change also shows up the illusion that human flourishing can be achieved by the assumption of limitless industrial growth, when the major cause of environmental catastrophe is burning fossil fuels. Fossil fuels need to stay in the ground, and low carbon energy developed instead.

Northcott: ‘Nature is calling time on the freedom of the wealthy to raid the planet for resources to sustain industrial civilisation, while forcing increasing numbers into poverty of diminishing food and water.’

I’d like to reflect that in the New Testament, the concept of pulling apart, dividing, separating, setting at variance, is called ‘diabolical’. Fragmentation is the strategy of the prince of this world. The ministry of Jesus, on the other hand, is predominantly, healing, gathering up fragments, restoring, putting back together.

Part of our work in Christian mission must include a repair of the breach between body and spirit, nature and culture, science and ethics. This needs collaboration between those engaged in the mission agenda, and the ecological and the developmental agendas, as part of the Mission of God to make all things new.

And with this in mind, I now offer a few reflections from the Prologue of St John's Gospel.

Four themes:

(a) *In the beginning was the Word; all things were made through him.*

This takes us back to Genesis 1, - the whole of creation leading to the worship of the Sabbath; humanity, God's image bearer, very late on the scene after God has enjoyed creating all other creatures, now charged with responsibility of creation care.

It takes us back also to the Wisdom literature - themes picked up also in Colossians 1, where we are told that in Christ 'all things in heaven and earth hold together'.

In 1961, Joseph Sittler spoke from Col. 1 in his address to the World Council of Churches. He was talking about Christian unity. It is the vision of the Cosmic Christ in whom all things hold together which provides Sittler with what he calls a 'life-affirming Christology of nature'. The triad of **God, humanity and nature**, is the basis, he says, for our calling to unity with one another and with all creation.

(b) *The world was made through him, yet the world knew him not.*

I think this means that it is possible to be alive in God's world but not be alive to God. And many of the stories we tell each other about nature, about climate change, illustrate the displacement of God from the world, which is the primary factor in the *separation* between humanity and nature.

(i) There is a story about Management and Control.

From Francis Bacon onwards there is a view of nature as a mechanism which we can manipulate, exploit for our own benefit. You get this in Nigel Lawson's book about global warming: 'The earth is very resilient; technological discovery has always come to our rescue in the past; we can manage the world for our benefit; there is no need to worry.' How does a Christian respond to such complacency?

(ii) At the opposite extreme, there is a story of doom. 'The earth system is very fragile and sensitive to climate change; we are seriously damaging the environment: Be afraid - be very afraid.' In his book 'Ten Billion', Stephen Emmott's verdict is "I think we're stuffed" - well, he actually uses a rather stronger Anglo-Saxon word. How does a Christian respond to overwhelming despair?

(iii) There is a third sort of story that seems to be about greed. We are a 'market-led' economy in which something called The Market rules; finance trumps every other consideration; everything, including the environment becomes a commodity to be desired, or given a price tag.

Lesslie Newbigin (*Truth to Tell*) gave his response to that:

'When the free market is made into an absolute, outside of rational control in the light of ethical principles, it becomes a power that enslaves human beings....The idea that if economic life is detached from all moral consideration and left to operate by its own laws all will be well, is simply an abdication of human responsibility.. If Christ's sovereignty is not recognized in the world of economics, then demonic powers take control.'

These are some stories from 'the world'. But John's Gospel gives us a different narrative about God's Messiah:

- instead of management: a story of interdependence, cooperation and fellowship;
- instead of despair: a story of compassionate love and mercy leading to hope;
- instead of greed: a story of generosity and of self-giving restraint and service.

All in all, a story about love: God's love for the world; God's call to us to love our neighbours and do justice in all our human affairs.

How are we to find ways of telling this different story?

Archbishop Rowan said in his Operation Noah lecture:

'The church's contribution has to consist not primarily or exclusively in public lobbying, though that is important, but in its showing forth of a different myth - the truth of creation's relation with the Creator and especially the role of human work and thought within that. This is what is exhibited every time the Eucharist is celebrated'.

(c) ***The Word was made flesh and dwelt among us, and we saw his glory.***

Michael Polanyi depicts reality as multi-levelled, each level with its own mode of interpretation, from physics and chemistry, then biology, psychology, sociology, ethics, and theology. Each 'level' so to speak depends on but is not reducible to lower levels.

The incarnation of Christ is then the Word becoming flesh right down to the level of our genes, our molecules. The incarnation is what Thomas Torrance calls 'the intersecting vertical coordinate' which gives all the other levels their coherence and meaning.

The incarnation is the repair for our cultural splits between body and spirit, nature and culture, science and ethics. Whereas the poet John's Donne is sad at what the new science produced, and wrote "Tis all in pieces, all coherence gone", the Incarnation is 'coherence restored': God, humanity and nature reconnected.

And new philosophy calls all in doubt,
The element of fire is quite put out;
The sun is lost, and the earth, and no man's wit,
Can well direct him where to look for it.
And freely men confess that this
world's spent,
When in the planets, and the firmament
They seek all in pieces, all coherence gone;
All just supply, and all relation:
Prince, subject, Father, Son,
are things forgot.

An Anatomy of the World, The First Anniversary

And Incarnation leads to the Cross. “We saw his glory” is mostly a reference to the Passion, suffering and death of Christ. It is through Christ that God reconciles all things to himself, making peace through the blood of the Cross. It is through Christ entering into the depths of disintegration, even to death, that reintegration, new coherence, healing and resurrection are possible, and the vision becomes one of creation restored - or, as Hans Kung puts it, ‘The Kingdom of God is creation healed’.

(d) *Of his fullness have we all received grace.* I want to draw from this an outline of what is involved in human flourishing. Climate change is not all doom: it can be a wake up call to live differently, more safely, more healthily, better fed, better governed, with more space for the human things money cannot buy: friendship, loyalty, communion, creativity, love.

The famous quote from Irenaeus is about Jesus: ‘the glory of God is a human being fully alive.’

Although the primary purpose John’s Gospel was written, so it tells us, is that you may believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the subtext is that in Christ we see an authentic human being, fully alive - alive to God, to others and to the world.

I take ‘fulness’ to mean blessing, flourishing of all creation on which human flourishing depends; human well-being – a grace-filled life close to the Father’s heart - lived out in terms of love and justice.

‘That is the distinction between the children of God and the children of the devil: Anyone who does not do justice is not of God, nor is anyone who does not love his brother. (1 Jn 3.10).

‘This is his commandment, that we should believe in the name of his Son Jesus Christ and love one another, just as he has commanded us.’ (1 John 3.23).

Flourishing is captured by that wonderful word ‘shalom’, which must be in Jesus’ mind when he says “Peace I leave with you, peace I give to you.”.

Interestingly, most of the 'I Am' sayings reflect references in the Wisdom literature: Bread, Light, Shepherd, Life, Vine. The practical side of Wisdom is enabling people to live well in the world. So we can take the I Am sayings of the Fourth Gospel to what makes for human flourishing within God's natural world:

I am the Bread – a sufficiency of food and water;

I am the Light - in the context of healing the blind man: health;

I am the Gate of the sheep - security;

I am the Good Shepherd – knowing and being known; inclusiveness of other sheep; having our voice heard;

I am the True and Living Way: a sense of direction and purpose;

I am the Resurrection and Life –sharing the life of God's spirit;

I am the Vine: community, belonging, fellowship: 'I have called you friends'.

Many of these are not far from the Sustainable Development Goals, reminding us again that environmental, developmental and mission agendas belong together.

Human well-being depends on nature's well-being.

However, incarnation includes self-emptying restraint - and so must our discipleship; new life is by way of the Cross.

So the Gospel takes us to Incarnation, to self-denial, to loving service, to the Cross, to Resurrection and the Gift of the Spirit. And also to Mary in the Easter Garden thinking that Jesus was the Gardener. She was not so far wrong.

As Tom Wright comments on John 20:

“Here he is: the new Adam, the gardener, charged with bringing the chaos of God's creation into new order, into flower, into fruitfulness. He has come to uproot the thorns and thistles and replace them with blossoms and harvests”.

Can climate change provoke us into transformative action –a different way of living, informed by God's Wisdom? a rethinking of our desires? the costly discipleship that will entail? Can climate change provoke us into recovering our human calling under God as bearers of God's image in responsible care for God's creation? In helping one another become more fully alive?