

Looking Forward to COP26

It is now over thirty years since Margaret Thatcher addressed the United Nations:

'What we are now doing to the world, by degrading the land surfaces, by polluting the waters and by adding greenhouse gases to the air at an unprecedented rate - all this is new in the experience of the earth'. ([speech to UN 1989](#)). Thirty years on, as David Attenborough's recent film "[Extinction: The Facts](#)" made painfully clear, we now know much more about biodiversity loss, extinction of species, and human-induced climate change.

It is five years since the [UN Conference in Paris](#) brought 196 Parties together, who agreed to set the world on a course of sustainable development, aiming to strengthen the global response to climate change by limiting global temperature rise to 1.5-2.0°C above pre-industrial levels. All Parties agreed to at least:

- a major shift to renewable energy
- a plan to decarbonise buildings and infrastructure
- to reduce transport emission
- to reduce deforestation
- to reduce emissions from heavy industry
- to provide \$1bn a year for adaptation to climate change for the poorest countries.

How are we getting on? We are presently on course for a 3-4°C rise, probably higher. And that equates to more frequent and more severe weather events; growing areas of flooding and wild-fires; acidification of the oceans; growing species extinction; more loss of biodiversity; rising sea-levels; more food insecurity; much more migration.

This November, the UK was due to host the crucial follow-up Conference - now postponed to 2021. Earlier our Government had [announced](#) that 2020 would be a critical year for the future of our planet: 'We have an opportunity to make changes to stop the activities which are polluting our land, water and skies, impacting people's lives, and making parts of our planet uninhabitable. ... to build a cleaner, greener, brighter future for our children, grandchildren, wildlife and our planet.' So they launched 2020 to be 'a Year of Climate Action to inspire positive action and engagement on climate change across the UK'. Did anything happen?

Of course, both Brexit and coronavirus have stolen the headlines. In their [Progress Report](#) to Parliament in June 2020, the UK Committee on Climate Change were able to say: 'There were important new announcements on transport, buildings, industry, energy supply,

agriculture and land use'. *However*, they go on: 'But these steps do not yet measure up to meet the size of the Net Zero challenge [the law requiring the UK to reduce net emissions of greenhouse gases to zero by 2050]; *We are not making adequate progress in preparing for climate change*'. We need a substantial decrease in CO₂ emissions now. CO₂ stays in the atmosphere for decades. It is the gradual accumulation year on year that is so dangerous. So what needs to happen? The political focus will be on [COP26: Glasgow, November 2021](#), when 30,000 delegates will meet - hopefully including the USA - and decisions and action are essential.

As well as prayers for our leaders, what should be the role of the churches? If, as Hans Kung once put it, 'The Kingdom of God is creation healed', what is our role as Christians and churches in that healing? How do we address the complacent stories being told of the inevitability of progress, technofixes, unstoppable globalisation? Or the contrary stories of doom and Near-Term-Human-Extinction? Or the usual story of retreating into our ghettos and hoping it will all go away?

The New Testament tells a different story. The whole universe, as Calvin put it, is 'the theatre of God's glory':

- It is primarily a story rooted in the worship of God: 'the earth is the Lord's and all that is in it'. 'The Lord has compassion on all that he has made'. The whole universe is 'the theatre of God's glory'. It is a story about God, the fountain and source of all things; about Christ, the Logos and Wisdom of God in whom all things hold together; about the Spirit, the Life-giver, who brings all things to their perfection in God.
- It tells a different story about the earth system: not a mechanism which we can manipulate to feed unlimited consumption, but God's living creation of which we are an interdependent part, and are its servants. We are not independent of all other God's creatures. How we treat other animals and all God's earth matters. All that we have, life and the means of life, come to us as gift to be cherished responsibly.
- The New Testament story gives us a vision of community, a 'fellowship of the Holy Spirit', with a shared commitment to the common good.
- The Christian story is not about 'the acquisitive society' but rather about a cooperative society, which implies a different approach to economics based not on the assumption of individual self-interest, but on living within God-given limits, on shared human values and the welfare of all God's creation.

- Our story bears witness to God's priority for the poor and disadvantaged, to the obscenity and injustice of gross and growing inequalities, and to the importance of working for sustainability, equity, and for bringing ecology and economy together. In global terms it requires a commitment from the rich West to enable the flourishing of the poorer parts of the world.
- It is a story concerned to bear witness to truth: to call out untruth and deceit. It tells the truth about humanity's sins and disorders, and our need for redeeming grace. It values the truth disclosed in consensus science, and works for the deepening of community in which respectful and gracious disagreement and debate enables us to learn God's truth together.
- It is a story of hope, not the false optimism of the myth of inevitable progress, but hope rooted in compassion, in self-giving love, in the redeeming, re-ordering grace and faithfulness of God.

What might this mean for the Church living out this story?

- at the *global* level: at the least to pray for our leaders, for wisdom, peace and justice.; to be aware of the wider world, and support development and aid agencies;
- at the *national* level: to hold our government to account for its part in the Paris agreement, and in chairing COP26.
- as *churches*; [Eco Church](#) is a discipleship programme that begins with a helpful questionnaire about: our worship and teaching; our church buildings and land; our energy use; our finances; where we invest money; and the meaning of discipleship;
- at the *community* level: our engagement with local leaders on environmental issues;
- at the *personal* level: our life-style choices: what we eat; how we travel; how often we fly; what we do with our money.

As Mrs Thatcher made clear thirty years ago, there is something shockingly contemporary about climate change. It concerns *now*. My grandparents did not know anything about this. Nor did my parents. But we do.

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