

Talk for Sevenoaks St Nicholas 5 July 2015

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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, 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 we are putting a blanket around the earth, which is changing the climate. My grandfather did not know this, nor did my 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 that 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.

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. 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. Then we need to ask what God is asking of us to take care of God’s world.

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 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 seems to be 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 early in 2014 in the House of Lords, The 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?

Why does all this matter for Christians? Because, as the psalm says ‘The earth is the Lord’s’, and all we have is gift of God’s love.

Questions for Christians

I think climate change puts a lot of questions to Christians. What sort of trust should we place in technology - isn’t the issue as much moral and spiritual as technical? 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.) Why do we keep fostering the illusion that growth in GDP is the most important thing? Why do we maintain our dependence on fossil fuels, when we know that burning fossil fuels - which energises the industrial world that underpins our GDP - is a major cause of damage to the planet? 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 at base, I believe, moral and spiritual questions. We need to underline the text: the earth is the Lord’s - and work out what that means in the way we relate to God and to other creatures.

Covenant

I find the theology of covenant very illuminating. We often think of covenant as between God and people: God, Israel and their land. But that is a symbol of a deeper cosmic covenant: the triangle of relationships between God, humanity and the earth. We find that cosmic covenant in the Genesis story: God says that his covenant is with Noah and his family and every living thing. This is God’s ‘Yes!’ to creation.

It is that cosmic covenant the breaking of which is referred to in Isaiah 24.4f.:

‘The earth dries up and withers, the world languishes and withers...the earth lies polluted under its inhabitants; for they have transgressed laws, violated the statutes, broken the everlasting covenant.’

I believe we need to get back to that triangular covenant between God, humanity and the earth.

Here are three big covenant words:

(i) Sabbath: this is the rhythm of the days of the weeks; the rhythm of work and rest - a reminder that there is more to life than working and making money; a reminder of spiritual values; a reminder that the earth itself needs its rhythm of life in order to be replenished and sustained. And you will recall the Jubilee provisions in Leviticus 25, which are a Sabbath of Sabbaths - recognizing the earth’s need for refreshment, and also ensuring that capital does not accumulate in the hands only of the few.

(ii) Justice: this is the social expression of what Jesus called neighbour-love. Justice, especially for the poorest and most disadvantaged people, who have done least to cause climate change and are least able to adapt. Climate change calls us to love and justice for our neighbours - including those overseas and those not yet born.

What do we do about this? At a *personal* level, we try to restrain our consumer lifestyles; we try to become more energy efficient, and reduce our own dependence on fossil-fuel energy. This is all part of discipleship.

At a *social* level, we work with others in our neighbourhood, or with the local council, perhaps with farmers markets, or community energy schemes, or managing waste disposal, or arguing for better local public transport and safer cycle lanes. We could develop more local democracy and local accountability – instead of being bound so much by the power of global corporations.

At the *national* level, we hold our governments and corporations to account - and to the legal obligations of the UK Climate Change Act (2008). We think about how our money is invested, how to create an economy which is not based on the assumption of unlimited growth, but on human values. We think about what can be done to help us reduce our corporate dependency on fossil fuels, and work for energy efficiency and a low carbon economy.

(iii) Hope: this is a big covenant word, linked in the New Testament to the resurrection of Jesus from the dead - which is linked also the redemption and healing of the whole of creation. As Hans Kung put it: ‘the Kingdom of God is creation healed’. If that is so, then the invitation – indeed command – to us, is to live now, justly and healthily and sustainably, in the light of the coming of God’s Kingdom. God’s Kingdom is centred on Christ the King.

In a wonderful paragraph, the New Testament tells us that in Christ all things hold together (Col. 1.15 – 20):

‘He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation; for in him all things in heaven and on earth were created, things visible and invisible...all things have been created through him and for him. He himself is before all things, and in him all things hold together.’

‘In him, all things were created’: presumably cockroaches and giraffes, the moon and the comets, you and me. And, then, amazingly,

‘God reconciles to himself all things, ‘making peace through the blood of Christ’s Cross’.

Far from being a nice hobby for those who like that sort of thing, the New Testament underlines the need for care of God’s creation as foundational for the Gospel centred in Christ. He is the one who taught us to pray ‘Your Kingdom come...on earth as it is in heaven.’ This, I think, is a reflection of the thought of another psalm (Ps 85), which tells us that when God’s Future comes, justice and peace will embrace, and God’s glory will dwell in our land.

O God, who set before us the great hope that your Kingdom shall come on earth and taught us to pray for its coming: give us grace to discern the signs of its dawning and to work for the perfect day when the whole world shall reflect your glory; through Jesus Christ our Lord. (*A Prayer of Percy Dearmer, used by Operation Noah in the Ash Wednesday Declaration* www.operationnoah.org)

[See Operation Noah website (www.operationnoah.org) for the text of the Ash Wednesday Declaration, and also (in theological resources) for David Atkinson’s longer paper: ‘Climate Change and the Gospel.’]