



'Reaching Zero Carbon: why this is a theological imperative'.

presented by

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1. Introduction

'Fate', 'sin' and 'meaning'. If battling with 'fate', as determined by the pagan gods of ancient Europe, was a hallmark of the religion of the people of that time, battling with 'sin' - failing in their relationship with God and people - has been a hallmark of Jewish and Christian faith down the centuries. It's been suggested, however, that a driving force among believers today is 'meaning' – that we are more struggling with what the meaning of life is than with our personal sins. I thought of this at church: it was the day of our annual 'renewal' service for recently baptised children, their parents and godparents. It was a beautiful and moving occasion. But no one mentioned the climate change developing on God's earth.



Baptism of a child

2. Creation

First, we recall, in the tradition of our faith and that of Judaism and Islam, that the word 'creation' enfolds us and the whole universe. Its meaning is broader than that of the word 'Nature', for 'Nature' is a system which we can study, understand and control. But Creation is more than just an account of 'how things got here'. 'Creation' is, as Pope Francis writes, "a gift from the outstretched hand of the Father of all, and a reality illuminated by the love which calls us together into *universal communion*¹". Every creature, even one which exists for only a few seconds, is enfolded in God's affection. Do not these words refresh and restore us? Are they not something beyond understanding 'nature', good though that is? And were these words not acted out in the beauty of the service I mentioned? For

¹ *Laudato Si'*, encyclical letter of the Holy Father Francis: "On Care for our Common Home", May 2015, pp.55,56

Christians, Baptism is an act of God the Holy Trinity, an entry into the love of God in 'Creation', not just entry into the Christian Church. Creation and redemption are both equally sacred; they are where we begin our struggle for 'meaning'.

That said, it's regrettably arguable that the Christian vision of 'universal communion in Creation' is not as well expressed - notably in Reformed churches and especially so in conservative ones² - as it is in the Roman Catholic and Orthodox traditions. Orthodox churches, which most of us see rarely and hear little about, are playing a major role in climate change action^{3,4}. Orthodox Patriarch Bartholomew has written: *"It is our humble conviction that the divine and the human meet in the slightest detail of the seamless garment of God's creation, in the least speck of dust of our planet"*⁵



*Saint Francis of Assisi
- crow, deer & dove, 2009*

Refreshing though the words of Pope and Patriarch are, there is one person who is regarded, more than any others, as having lived the reality of 'universal communion' - St Francis of Assisi, whose name the present Pope took on his election as Bishop of Rome and says of him, *"he is the example par excellence of care for the vulnerable and of an integral ecology lived out joyfully and authentically"*⁶. He continues: *"Just as happens when we fall in love with someone, whenever Francis would gaze at the sun, the moon or the smallest of animals, he burst into song, drawing all other creatures into his praise. He communed with all creation, even preaching to the flowers, inviting them "to praise the Lord, just as if they were endowed with reason". His response to the world around him was so*

²"An analysis of resolutions and campaigns by evangelicals over the past 40 years shows that anti-environmentalism within conservative Christianity stems from fears that Stewardship of God's creation is drifting toward neo-pagan nature worship, and from apocalyptic beliefs about 'end times that make it pointless to worry about global warming.'" From *Why conservative Christians don't believe in climate change*, Bernard Daley Zaleha and Andrew Szasz, *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists*, 2015, Vol. 71(5) 19–30

³*Faith and Science Working Together on Climate Change*, Bingham, S. G. (2016), *Eos*, 97, doi:10.1029/2016EO050243, 14 April 2016.

⁴ See also *Laudato Si*, pp. 6,7.

⁵*Global Responsibility and Ecological Sustainability*, Closing Remarks, Halki Summit I, Istanbul, 20 June 2012.

⁶*Laudato Si*, p 9

much more than intellectual appreciation or economic calculus, for to him each and every creature was a sister united to him by bonds of affection⁷.”

When we read such profound wording, it is hard not to regret how hidden it now is in the world, absent from contemporary culture, and scarce even in many churches. To find the theological imperative of ‘reaching Carbon zero’, which is the title of this address, we should not start with bad news such as that which probably awaits those children at the baptism, and we cannot regard only ‘intellectual appreciation and economic calculus’ as the end of our search. We should start from “universal communion”, that is that every creature is enfolded in God’s affection, and we will then find that this is also where our search ends.

3. Our Relationship with the Earth

Brought up on the *Book of Common Prayer*, I decided the other day to look up old familiar words and find how God was referred to as Creator in the Eucharist. Well, he isn’t really, if you discount the Nicene Creed, an inherited text, and a very brief mention in the Confession⁸. So not much ‘universal communion’ there! By contrast, all except one of the eight Eucharistic Prayers in the Anglican *Common Worship* book begin with affirming God as Creator⁹. We are struggling with the whole meaning of life, not only our personal sins.

How are we related to the Earth, the planet on which we live? Well, the impact of climate change was first noted in 1799, much longer ago than is commonly realised. The famous German naturalist, Alexander von Humboldt, whilst travelling in Venezuela, was the first to realise the effects of monoculture, deforestation and the harmful, human-induced climate change.

There’s no need for me to describe the abuse of the planet since then, which has brought about the climate change crisis: just 2 degrees Celsius - or is it 1.5? - and the release of



Glacier melting from the bottom

⁷*Laudato Si*, p.10

⁸ “Maker of all things”.

⁹ Prayer C is the exception. It is based on the Eucharistic Prayer of the *Book of Common Prayer*, but in modern English.

carbon from Arctic permafrost back into the atmosphere as carbon dioxide, or worse still, methane, will not be reversible. Once the ice of the North and South Poles melts, the sea will rise somewhere between 26 and 77 centimetres, displacing millions of people¹⁰. Some changes, such as our severe rain storms, are already obvious here, whilst Zimbabwe farmers are being impoverished by drought and Australian forest fires have brought destruction and death. And we must note in addition that Climate Change has nasty relatives: food waste, air pollution, sea pollution, acidifying of the sea, soil erosion, plastic waste, overpopulation, extreme wealth and vicious poverty...



Caked mud before a small patch of water during a prolonged drought at a dam near Bulawayo, Zimbabwe.

Of course abuse of the planet is not new. By the year 2000 BC people in the Middle East were already facing agricultural collapse, not because of climate change but because the empires of the day were destroying small farms and then over-using the soil they took. 1,400 years later the prophet Jeremiah was facing the issue of the misuse of land¹¹: “the lowing of cattle is not heard,” he writes, “both the birds of the air and the beasts have fled and are gone”¹². He gives God’s judgement on this, but also advocates repentance, changing practices and recovering fidelity to the spiritual foundations of the nation and of the earth.¹³

What the powerful failed to see and honour, Pope Francis reminds us of: it was not so with Jesus, who, in talking with his disciples, would invite them to recognize the paternal relationship God has with all his creatures. *With moving tenderness he would remind them that each one of them is important in God’s eyes: “Are not five sparrows sold for two pennies? And not one of them is forgotten before God” (Lk 12:6). “Look at the birds of the air: they neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns, and yet your heavenly*

¹⁰ recent report of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change.

¹¹ “When the people of God allowed their work on the land to displace the worship of God, and when they enslaved one another and the land to serve the greed of the rich, the land lost its fertility and the rich and poor alike were exiled from the land”. *A Moral Climate*, Michael Northcott, Darton Longman and Todd, 2007, p.12

¹² Jeremiah 9:10.

¹³ *A Moral Climate*, ibid.

Father feeds them” (Mt 6:26)¹⁴.

4. The Rise of Technology

On the north side of the chancel in Canterbury Cathedral is a wonderful group of mediaeval windows erected by the guilds of various trades. They express something of Jesus in this link between faith and work. The link is eroded in most countries now, partly because of the rise of early capitalism and in England also as a consequence of the Reformation.

Science and technology have developed their own independence and in many ways this was necessary. With regard to science, many Christians have been slow to understand and accept discoveries, notably the relationship of the sun to the Earth and the evolution of human beings from earlier forms of life. With regard to technology, we benefit much from two centuries of inventions and change: from the telegraph and steam engines, via motor cars and modern medicine, to the digital revolution. But there are also nuclear bombs and the array of technology which totalitarian regimes have employed to kill millions of people, and the slow chemical poisoning of the planet.

Perhaps the most difficult cause of climate change is the result of our good actions, *overpopulation*. Modern medicine has saved and extended the lives of millions. When I was born, the world’s population was about 1.5 billion. It is now 7.6 billion and, at the present rate, is likely to peak at about 10 billion by the end of the century. At this point, premature death by starvation and disease may well balance the birth rate¹⁵. There are suggestions that the number of limiting the number of children is necessary. There is also a small movement advocating that the planet and its millions of species can be saved only by the human species having no children and so dying out¹⁶.

New technology gives tremendous power, but it is mainly those with the knowledge, and the economic resources, who now use it to develop dominance over the whole of humanity and the entire world. As Pope

¹⁴*Laudato Si*, p. 72

¹⁵ See <http://theconversation.com/7-5-billion-and-counting-how-many-humans-can-the-earth-support-98797>

¹⁶ See <https://www.theguardian.com/lifeandstyle/2020/jan/10/i-campaign-for-the-extinction-of-the-human-race-les-knight>

Francis writes: “Never has humanity had such power over itself, yet nothing ensures that it will be used wisely, particularly when we consider how it is currently being used.”¹⁷ Clearly our immense technological development has not been accompanied by a development in human responsibility, values and conscience.

5. The struggle to save the balance of the earth

“Fall in solar power expected after ministers announced a sudden 65% cut to the Feed-in Tariff. Size of drop-off will dismay green campaigners” –a heading in the Guardian in April 2016. It’s good that *Power for Good* exists, and that many other community organisations are also at work to combat climate change. But even the Guardian was calling us “green campaigners”, as if we were just an ‘interest group’. The reality was that the big six electricity companies were blaming rising electricity prices on Feed-in Tariffs. The policy of slowly reducing tariffs as the price of panels also decreased was destroyed overnight, as were many solar panel companies, including the excellent firm which put solar panels on St Andrew’s, West Bromwich for Power for Good.

Behind such moves is what Pope Francis calls *the technocratic paradigm* (a paradigm is a conceptual framework in which theories are constructed) in which major transnational companies develop their power internationally. He explains it in these words: “*This paradigm exalts the concept of a subject who, using logical and rational procedures, progressively approaches and gains control over an external object... It is as if the subject were to find itself in the presence of a formless object which is completely open to manipulation*¹⁸”.

BP is one such ‘subject’. It tries to hide behind donations to good causes. For example at the British Museum BP was at one point about to support an exhibition about the Arctic whilst it was extracting oil there! In the end it did not do so, but it the Museum still allows BP to support it¹⁹. Last year an article in The National Geographic about extraction of fossil fuels in the

¹⁷Laudato Si, p.77

¹⁸Laudato Si, p.79

¹⁹ See <https://www.cityam.com/british-museum-cools-on-bp-ahead-of-arctic-exhibition/>

north of Canada (not all BP) was headed “*This is the world's most destructive oil operation—and it's growing*”²⁰. The refusals of corporations to act against climate change *are matters of politics and economics*, not science. In the last few



Oil Sands refinery Canada

years, the struggle against climate change has intensified. The leadership of the young prophet Greta Thunberg has led to international demonstrations. But the response of those who most need to change, the big corporations and the leaders of government who support them, as in Brazil, the United States and Australia, has been poor. Whilst for us the danger of going over the 2-degree limit now seems a likely disaster, in so many key places preventing climate change remains a marginal concern and worthy of, at best, just token support.

6. Visions of the end of time: from lament to extinction

Australia has recently undergone a vicious and well-publicised encounter with the burning effects of climate change. Until now, the present Australian government has acted like one of the international corporations mentioned above. Australia is the world’s largest coal exporter and was planning to double its coal exports²¹.

In this context Barbara Rossing, Professor of New Testament at the Lutheran School of Theology, Chicago, has responded to the question, “How do you see God involved in the climate crisis?” Around the world, those who had been hardest hit — victims of climate change in Asia, Africa, the Arctic and other regions — asked in response: “Why is God punishing us?” The international corporations, the “subjects”, will not mind this haunting question from these supposed “formless objects open to manipulation”.

²⁰ See <https://www.nationalgeographic.co.uk/environment/2019/04/worlds-most-destructive-oil-operation-and-its-growing>

²¹ See <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2019/aug/21/when-it-comes-to-coal-australia-has-transitioned-away-from-economics-and-common-sense>

Rossing rejects it. Instead her first response is *lament*:

*As we face rising waters, hunger, and displacement,
God suffers with us.*

*As we mourn the distress and wounds of God's creation,
God weeps with us²².*

Seeing the Amazon basin and much of south-east Australia on fire had me looking at Revelation, the book of this Bible with all its apocalyptic prophecies. Rossing also goes to Revelation, though I don't know how she decided to do that. She has four steps in investigating the book:

First: the word often translated as 'Woe!', sounding like a curse on the cities the book mentions, is better translated as 'Alas!', or 'How awful!' - God's lament.

Second: God is not against the earth. God is outraged that lands and seas have been taken over by Satan's emissary, the Roman Empire. God is lamenting its violent conquests, predatory economic system and enslaving of both people and nature.

Third: Revelation is based on a very important precedent, the exodus of the Israelites from slavery in Egypt. "The Lord brought you out of the iron furnace, out of the land of Egypt", writes the author of Deuteronomy²³. "Egypt was the "biblical archetype of the industrial society: burning, ceaseless in its demand for slave labour."²⁴The Exodus liberated God's people and healed them from all the "diseases" of Egypt (Ex. 15:26). The Exodus has since inspired enslaved and oppressed Christians to escape, as notably recorded in the Black American spiritual: *Go down Moses*. In Revelation, the author applies this understanding of Egypt to diagnose the sickness of the Roman imperial economic system of his day. Those dramatic plagues in the book are warnings to oppressors. They are wake-up calls, warning of the consequences of Rome's unjust actions, a bit like the nightmarish visions that

²² Barbara Rossing, *God Laments with Us: Climate Change, Apocalypse and the Urgent Kairos Moment*, World Council of Churches, 2010.

²³ Deuteronomy 4:20.

²⁴ Ellen Davis, *Scripture, Culture, and Agriculture*, Cambridge University Press 2010, p. 69.

Ebenezer Scrooge experiences in Charles Dickens' *A Christmas Carol*²⁵.

Fourth: There is hope. Revelation's focus on the urgency of the present moment, and its vision for New Jerusalem, writes Rossing, are two hopeful aspects of the book that can help us face the crisis of global climate change. As the Israelites arrived from Egypt and moved into the 'land of milk and honey' (and later returned from a second captivity in Babylon), so Revelation describes the vision of the New Jerusalem: *Then the angel showed me the river of the water of life, bright as crystal, flowing from the throne of God and of the Lamb through the middle of the street of the city. On either side of the river is the tree of life, with its twelve kinds of fruit, producing its fruit each month; and the leaves of the tree are for the healing of the nations*²⁶.

This vision is what we need today as a model of hope for our world. We need those healing leaves today²⁷. Our world is ill — very ill, as it is in the hands of ruthless transnational companies, aided by governments which have not yet realised that the world is on fire.

Governments dally with *chronos*, the Greek word for consecutive time, doing a bit here and after that something else — “we aim to do x and y by 2050”. But in reality, it must be for us as if war has been declared. The battles must be fought now if we are to get free of those who treat the mass of human beings as “*a formless object which is completely open to manipulation*”. We are in the hands of the exploitation and slavery of modern equivalents of Egypt, Babylon and the Roman Empire. We need the Greek word for concurrent time, *kairos*, in which everything needs doing now. Few governments have acted as needed, and few major companies. This is *kairos*, the urgent right moment, by the grace of God, for action by the 'objects' from below.



²⁵Ellen Davis, *ibid*, p.125.

²⁶Rev. 22:1-2.

²⁷ Rossing, *ibid*, p.129.