

# 'Responsibility'

**A session in the 'Sustainability: Living Simply' Day**

by

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Introduce self and Luci

Our focus in this first session of the day is on what is commonly referred to as 'climate change' - an umbrella term for a global ecological crisis with many dimensions.

One semantic comment: 'Sustainability' is perhaps too narrow. Regeneration is probably what is now needed.

The shape of the session is : first, I talk – and please hold your comments and questions until I finish. [Hearing, etc]  
Then Luci will lead the second half in fully interactive style, looking at ways of responding individually and in a shared way.

## Outline

### **Current context - crisis?**

- perceived as a human being
- perceived as a Christian

### **How did we come to so misconstrue?**

- in planetary resource terms
- in theological terms

### **On what basis can we move forward?**

- How do we make ethical decisions?

In our current context:

I consider our shared human situation – what we have in common. Any global action will need to be based on an approach from a position of largely-shared understanding.

Then, as a Christian, I extend our considerations to God and some thoughts on how we consider God.

Then into the nub of the matter: how did we so misconstrue things?

I will close with some thoughts about how we might frame an ethically-based approach to move forward.

There is a list of a few resources – these slides and my text will be available.

## Current context - crisis?

- Is it a crisis?
  - Or a Chinese hoax?
- Perceived as a human being
  - Science - IPCC; politics – tricky in a democracy; food; water; population; cost burden; impact burden; mitigation; adaptation...
- Perceived as a Christian
  - Bible; theology; stewardship; discipleship; care for Creation and the neighbour...

My education and approach to life is scientific: I am not a purveyor of 'alternative facts'. I see no conflict between science and faith/belief. Science is only a way of learning and understanding more about the world that [I believe] God is creating [even as we sit here]. Science is – if you like – the 'what' and the 'when'; Faith is the 'why' and the 'how'.

I base what I say on truth – taken from both scientific evidence and from shared belief.

This certainly is a crisis, with many dimensions ... predominantly driven by human activity.

Reference the work of the International Panel on Climate Change, IPCC]

From a simply human perspective ... [from slide] The conflicts are real and are affecting many; and there are no simple answers.

And from this particular Christian's perspective ...

Our interpretation of the Bible, compounded by the theology we use to describe God in relation to humanity, our misunderstanding of God's charge to humanity to be stewards, the impact of those on our discipleship; all these have impacted severely on our care for both Creation and the neighbour. {I will say more on this in a moment.}

Although much is held in common by the churches at the national level, there is [as yet] no agreed approach at the local level. Luci will update us on that!

To state this a different way in words by Stephen Gardiner, from his book 'A Perfect Moral Storm', published in 2011, he discerns there three principal dimensions to this crisis:

- The asymmetry of power (between rich and poor – individuals, communities, nations)
- Intergenerational injustice – we are destroying (burning, exterminating, trashing) to the detriment of the generations to come
- The lack of robust general theories [by which we can take agreed common action]

## International Panel on Climate Change Report: SPM 1.2 Causes of climate change

- **Anthropogenic greenhouse gas emissions** have increased since the pre-industrial era, driven largely by economic and population growth, and are now higher than ever. This has led to atmospheric concentrations of carbon dioxide, methane and nitrous oxide that are unprecedented in at least the last 800,000 years.
- Their effects, **together with those of other anthropogenic drivers**, have been detected throughout the climate system and are extremely likely to have been the dominant cause of the observed warming since the mid-20th century. {1.2, 1.3.1}

### IPCC : Climate Change 2014 : Synthesis Report : Summary for Policymakers

#### SPM 1. Observed Changes and their Causes

Human influence on the climate system is clear, and recent anthropogenic emissions of greenhouse gases are the highest in history.

Recent climate changes have had widespread impacts on human and natural systems. {1}

#### SPM 1.1 Observed changes in the climate system

Warming of the climate system is unequivocal, and since the 1950s, many of the observed changes are unprecedented over decades to millennia. The atmosphere and ocean have warmed, the amounts of snow and ice have diminished, and sea level has risen. {1.1}

## How did we come to so misconstrue things?

- In planetary resource terms?
  - 'GDP is paramount'
  - 'Technology will find ways through'
- in theological and biblical terms?
  - Approaches to scripture
  - Understandings of God

How did we get it so wrong? [Do we believe we have?]

What shall we say to our children and grandchildren when they ask the question posed in the film 'The Age of Stupid' by Pete Postlethwaite as an archivist in the devastated world of the future, asking the question: "Given that we knew the problem and the solutions, why didn't we stop climate change when we still had the chance?"

The work and publications of the IPCC prevent any claim that we do not know, that scientists have withheld information.

There are those who contest the science. I am not bold enough, nor knowledgeable enough to contest 197 scientists using openly published papers subject to the peer review process.

As far as I am concerned – I speak as a chartered engineer - the science is incontestable.

And we are cautioned in no uncertain terms by Archbishops (++Justin, and ++Rowan), by Pope Francis (and Benedict before him), and by Patriarch Bartholomew: this is sin, causing division from God, causing and exacerbating, poverty.

We are all complicit, individually, as communities, as a nation, and corporately as Church. The Church is not immune from these.

Our sense of self, of community and purpose under God – the common good - has been skewed. Even our interpretation of scripture is skewed, our entire view has been skewed by the cultural forces of neo-liberalism.

I suggest [and many support this approach] that our context through the latter end of the 20<sup>th</sup> and in this 21<sup>st</sup> century, in this capitalist, globalised, individualised, commoditised, marketised world: GROWTH is paramount; GDP is king. We still remember the statement: ‘There is no such thing as society.’ But, in these strange days, even Margaret Thatcher’s extremes look mild against the dramas of Trump and Brexit where the matter of the planet gets no attention – and even recent good is being determinedly undone.

Some describe it as greed. It is greed, but not just individual greed that the word implies. Rather it is carefully embedded greed, built into structures of economics and politics in away that drives injustice, by embedding selfish ambition masquerading until corporate good.

That commoditisation has reduced everything to a monetary value: even the Creation of God.

Further, our politics is failing us. Democracy - as we know and practice it - has no means of addressing these long-term, but immediate global issues: more frequent extreme weather events; species wipe-outs; industrial deforestation; inter-national water wars; and with food wars to come.

‘Technology’, say some – and I recognise this within myself as a subconscious paradigm – ‘technology will see us through’. I hasten to make clear: I DO NOT BELIEVE THAT!

Although technology can help a great deal, the human vision, human intention, human action are paramount.

It gets worse ... in the Christian-formed cultures of the west (and wherever the imperial stamp had printed itself):

The understanding adopted from scripture of the relationship between God and Humanity is charged with the might and power and dominion derived from Genesis 1:

<sup>28</sup> God blessed them and said to them, “Be fruitful and increase in number; fill the earth and subdue it. Rule over the fish in the sea and the birds in the sky and over every living creature that moves on the ground.”

This is put more gently in [Genesis 2.15]:

<sup>15</sup> The LORD God took the man and put him in the Garden of Eden to till it and take care of it.

We forget to quickly that the word Adam comes from *Adamah* - soil. {Dust O man, thou art and to dust thou shalt return – BCP Burial Service}.

In arriving at this point, we have completely ignored much of the rest of the Old Testament which sets far more demanding strictures over the relationship between humanity and the rest of the world. [Reference Lucy’s List of Bible passages]. We have forgotten our place AMONG creation. It is CREATION, not just humanity that is God’s plan for salvation.

In Genesis 9, Noah and the covenant made 6 times 'with every living creature'. God leaves out 'to subdue', says to be fruitful and multiply but 'dominion' remains.

Isaiah has the theme of broken Covenant, 'The earth withers' if defiled by its people. But also 'Look. I am doing a new thing ..... ' [Isaiah 43.19] In Isaiah 11.6-9, a vision of harmony. 'The wolf shall live with the lamb ... '

And in Isaiah 24.4 'The earth dries up and withers ... the earth lies polluted under its inhabitants, for they have transgressed laws ... broken the everlasting covenant... 24.19 the earth is utterly broken .... it staggers like a drunkard.'



Somehow, our view of God has become inherently anthropocentric. My guess is that the ‘-isms’ and ‘-ations’ I cited earlier carry a high proportion of responsibility. The principal relationship [we assume] is God—Humanity; some would even say God—Man (and mean just that!)

Yet scripture shows us God—Creation [including humanity, in loco Dei] We have elevated ourselves to the detriment of the whole of the rest of Creation.

The Bible isn’t a book to read and put down’, says Jonathan Sacks. ‘It’s God’s invitation to join the conversation between heaven and earth’.

We are that salvation is the exclusive domain of that God—Humanity relationship. We forget humility: that humanity, of all Creation, needs to remember its humility. We are one species among many. We have got above ourselves.

In the New Testament, Lucy Larkin\* offers here the Kingdom of God which offers a vision for salvation that includes restoration, renewal, and re-creation of the entire universe.

\* See Resources: **Windows into EcoTheology**; six-part course by Revd Dr Lucy Larkin; Truro; 9 Jan–13 Feb 2017

For example: **Mark** 16.15: 'go into all the world (cosmos) and proclaim the good news to the whole of creation.'

And in the Church, history formed into tradition – Constantine and his like [Victoria?] have confused the boundaries of Faith and Empire. And even Empire and Business [East India Company] Not by chance, at the height of empire, when the world map had a great deal of red, was the zenith of Church missionary movements.

We are all intricately implicated as nation and individuals, believers and non-believers alike. It will be a hard thing to kick this obsession. Admitting our wrong is the necessary start.

## On what basis can we move forward?

### How do we make ethical decisions?

- **Shared Sources** – of valued, trusted messages
- **Documented Tradition** – of interpretation; and confidence in development of new: trusted messengers
- **Human Experience** – articulated, affirmed, codified into wisdom that is shared in stories that we tell with joy

How do we go about forming ethical decisions?

I suggest in the slide a 'genericised' approach, based on the Christian's standard approach of:

Scripture, Tradition, Experience

So that is the approach advocated by many. For Anglicans, Richard Hooker wrote of the importance of considering 'Scripture, Reason and Tradition' at the end of the 16<sup>th</sup> century.

More recently (and accessibly) Richard Rohr, a Roman Catholic Franciscan monk, describes it this way:

We will move forward on our "tricycle" of faith only with three good wheels: Tradition, Scripture, and Experience. If we leave off any of these three wheels, our interpretations of Scripture and reality will be unstable and biased according to our

egotist need of the moment.

Christians who say “only Scripture” end up being unconsciously dishonest and inconsistent, because they are relying on their own “tradition” of interpreting those Scriptures (without acknowledging it). Even more importantly, we must recognize that we cannot not rely upon our own experience. There is no such thing as a completely unbiased opinion! Since we all use tradition and experience anyway, why not admit it and thereby hold ourselves accountable?

‘Whatever is received is received according to the manner of the receiver’. [Richard Rohr]

We each, unavoidably, approach scripture through our individual lens of personal context.

Across the churches, the faith communities, across our multi-faith, multi-cultural Britain, we need to develop the shared basis for action in response to this crisis.

The churches – I suggest – are, uniquely, well-placed to lead in this. We have people in all communities. We understand – or claim to! – the work of engaging in God’s mission, for the common good. We understand the need to care for neighbour – or claim to! – even when that neighbour does not share creed or colour or our wealth or our nationality.

The need is now. This is a kairos moment.

## Some Resources

**Encyclical Letter: Laudato 'Si – on care for our common home;** Pope Francis; June 2015

**Windows into EcoTheology;** six-part course by Revd Dr Lucy Larkin; Truro Cathedral, Pearson Room; 9 Jan – 13 Feb 2017;

**Bible and Ecology;** Richard Baukham; DLT; 2010

**'L' is for Lifestyle;** Ruth Valerio; IVP; 2008

**Just Living;** Ruth Valerio; Hodder & Stoughton; 2016

**This Changes Everything;** Naomi Klein; Allen Lane; 2014

**How Can One Sell the Air? – Chief Seattle's Vision;** Native Voices, Summertown, Tennessee; 2005

**Richard Rohr;** <https://cac.org/richard-rohr/richard-rohr-ofm/>

**Diocese of Truro, Environment:** <http://www.trurodiocese.org.uk/resource-collection/green-church-kernow/>

Some resources

I will take comments and questions now – and then I will hand over to Luci who will prepare us for action

I make grateful acknowledgement here to another Lucy – the Revd Dr Lucy Larkin – who has written and is running a course in the Cathedral Offices called 'Windows into EcoTheology'. Three repeated session each week, starting at 10.00am, 2.00pm and 7.00pm

I have draw from Lucy's helpful 5-page long extracts from the Bible, as well as other references. The course is half way through, but I'm sure late joiners would not be turned away! Details are in the Resources list at the end of my slides.

I commend the course – I'm sure it will run again if you miss this first occasion