

Climate Change and the Church
Christchurch Cathedral, Sept 24th, 2017
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Ps 119:113-136

Ezek 33:23,30 - 34:10

Acts 26:1,9-25

Make thy face shine upon your servants,
and teach us your statutes.

Thank you to all of you involved in the cathedral for this invitation to preach. I feel very honoured to be here.

The invitation is now lost in the mists of time, but I think I was invited to preach on a topic, so I am coming here to speak about the Church and climate change.

You might all be sick of this topic. But it is, as Jacinda Ardern and Al Gore say, the moral predicament of our time.

As humans we are not good at change, even when it can help. And we are fearful of the huge changes in social contracts and economic systems that must happen to allow us all to survive, and even more, to survive with equity and justice.

We are not used to or skilled at the kind of problem climate change represents –seeing a few generations into the future, cooperating across state boundaries, north to south, and east to west. Delaying gratification. And retraining ourselves in multiple little ways when we are already busy and overworked.

We never were as the OT reading of today describes. We hear from an ancient prophet: Ezekiel, who remonstrates against the shepherds, those who have a duty of care towards others. His words are harsh:

The weak you have not strengthened, the sick you have not healed, the crippled you have not bound up, the strayed you have not brought back, the lost you have not sought, and with force and harshness you have ruled them

Behold, I am against the shepherds. And then he goes on to say I chapter 35, , I will stretch out my hand against

you, and I will make you a desolation and a waste. ⁴I will lay your cities waste, and you shall become a desolation; and you shall know that I am the Lord.

These words apply, as we all know, as much today as they did then, and they apply to the results of climate change which will affect the weak and poor and afflicted more than they do the rest of us. There are a variety of good and false shepherds today. Trump is a false shepherd. The governors and mayors of Cop21 cities are attempting to be good shepherds.

Yet the harshness of these judgments offend our liberal sensibilities at times

Why does God have to be so unyielding
They offend the demand to forgive.

But today as we imagine for the first time in decades the very real possibility of nuclear peril and as we are being asked to take into consideration the very real possibility of escalating warming and climate instability, the alternative is worse: That God might not care

about injustice and dominance and poverty and the threat of war and the state of the planet.

That would be far far worse than these dire prophetic judgments

If God were indifferent to tyrants who threaten nuclear devastation but have a duty of care, who keep their people in servitude, or playboys who do not take the office of leader/shepherd seriously. If god were indifferent to these, and not obviously on the side of the poor, on the side of life, we would not have a God worthy of worship.

So we know Yahweh does care and must still care today: In these strange uncompromising judgments is an essence of hope. God detests inequality, idols, hypocrisy and so on.

IF we continue, God promises a land of desolation and a waste.

In these warnings we see a God who is realistic about human nature. We are not easily budged. We need to be frightened a little to take notice. If as I think, that we are not terribly free either, then we need to see the consequences of where we are going. We need to be constantly reminded to work as much for the long term as the short

term. Well-reasoned proposals only get so far with human beings who are eager to get back to more personal and every day matters, gardening, falling in love, building a home, office gossip, making money.

Scripture stands as a testimony that there are limits to human behavior. Scripture comes from outside us as a warning, as a gift.

It seems implausible then, that Christians might have nothing to say about climate change about the proper response. WE all know, probably in this congregation, that climate change is real. Christchurch people already know the land is unstable and precarious. Christchurch people already know that we should live with a much finer ear to the ground, to ecological sensibility. We need to hold on to that image of desolation the prophets give us for moment, before moving on.

But dire threats about the stability of the future, especially related to climate change, are now so commonplace in our secular culture that children are beginning to be traumatized. They think there is no

hope, that there is no future. This is where our message of **hope** is so important.

Along with the extreme warning that haunt us in an age of climate change and the new threat of war, there is also in Scripture another stream that speaks of abundance. And the promise of restoration. Jesus who creates and the Jesus who saves.

The gospels are full of parables of healing and abundance that comes with Jesus, the Good Shepherd of the sheep: water is turned into wine.

Five thousand are fed with a few loaves and fishes. The dead are even brought back to life. The degraded and desperately sick are healed. The outcast are chosen and named. And at the end of the book of Revelation, in which horrors we can now well imagine are listed, in the end there are trees and a river for the healing of the nations. There is abundance. There is much much more than we deserve, than is just. This is an eschatological promise, but it is also hidden as a possibility in everything that surrounds us now.

And this abundance extends to nature itself, or perhaps I should say resides in nature itself: nature is sometimes terrible and sometimes

dry and the recent Hurricanes Harvey and Irma and Jose and Maria, and Florence, and the earthquakes and floods of recent times, show its dreadful power, but life also reveals everywhere that it is prolific and exaggerated, anything but dreary.

Annie Dillard says it this way, and I think you will understand this in Christchurch:

Nature is, above all, profligate. Don't believe them when they tell you how economical and thrifty nature is, whose leaves return to the soil. Wouldn't it be cheaper to leave them on the tree in the first place? This deciduous business alone is a radical scheme, the brain child of a deranged manic-depressive with limitless capital.

Extravagance! Nature will try anything once. This is what the sign of the insects says. No form is too gruesome, or behavior too grotesque. If you're dealing with organic compounds, then let them combine. If it works, if it quickens, set it clacking in the grass; there's always room for one more; This is a spendthrift economy; though nothing is lost, all is spent.

So what do we make of all of that when it comes to our response to climate change.

And what can Christians add to the mix, lagging along at the last moment, jumping on the bandwagon, asserting that it is all very Christian to be for the earth, to be green.

This year, 2017 marks the 50th Anniversary of Lynn white Jr.'s critique of Christian faith in *Science*, in 1967. A contemporary prophet. He argued that Christian attitudes to nature have been responsible for the ecological crisis. Our sense of dominion, our utilitarian approach to the natural world, our belief that this earth is just a prelude to heaven, have all been harmful. He prompted and motivated 50 years of theological ecological reflection, Christians remonstrating with, agreeing or denying the charges, and ending perhaps propitiously with *Laudato Si*. We can examine these critiques more in the session afterwards.

Lynn White Jr's critique, like Ezekiel's can seem harsh. But as Christians we can and should examine our theologies.

Is our theology making us passive in the face of this threat?

Are we taking our positions as shepherds seriously?

But as well as heeding threats, and modelling ecological living and new models of community

Christians can also be harbingers of hope

We can bear witness that nature is not against us.

That God desires the healing of the whole world, and not only of humans

That humans are not a weed species, but rather can bring interventions that work

That God is a God of hidden resources – the loaves and fishes, for instance. If we are working with Nature , we might find nature is working with us.

That salvation is not and never has been about our getting our just deserts. IT is about the abundant love of God –what theologians call the theology of excess. We live by payback mechanisms and by justice as we should, but God is a God who wants to give us abundant life.

That we have no reason to despair.

I think the two Christchurch cathedrals stand as symbols of our age, and also of the two sides of the biblical message.

The old cathedral stands like a monument to the human predicament in the 21st century.

It has a certain shocking beauty about its desolation. It can remind us of the dire warnings we find throughout Scripture. Like those

from Ezekiel. Waste it reminds us to day what has happened throughout the twentieth century, what we may be on the edge of even now.

The other cathedral, this one, looks to the future, taking up the promise of God with flexibility and innovation and creativity. Building a space for God amongst the waste.