

Whitley Bay Baptist Church, 'Climate Sunday', 11th April 2021

A Call for Commitment to Creation Care

"May the words of my mouth, and the mediation of all our hearts, be acceptable to you, Oh Lord, our strength and our Redeemer, Amen!"

Believing that mere nominal assent to creation care will count for very little in the long run, I hope to provide you with a solid foundation for this principle so that we can build on it and take it forward. Our aim should be that the life and teaching of our church should faithfully reflect what the Apostle Paul described as *"The whole counsel of God"*.

So first I will ask, *"What is the Mission of the Church?"*, in broad terms; Second, I will insist that 'Matters of first importance' for the Gospel should remain just that; and Third, I will consider the application of Christian discipleship to creation care.

So first, what is the mission of the Christian church?

Surely it is to continue, expand and implement Christ's mission during his earthly ministry – to be his hands, feet and tongue throughout the world. But what was and is that mission? It's to proclaim, explain and commend the message of personal salvation by faith in Christ.

Well, no, actually that isn't the gospel! Now before you switch off in disgust, as the American evangelical climate scientist, Professor Katharine Hayhoe, put it in her article in the New York Times, *"Hear me out!"*

The Gospel, according to Matthew 4, 23, is *"the good news of THE KINGDOM"* – the good news that, by his coming, Jesus inaugurated God's rule on earth. This was fleshed out by Jesus in his first public address, in the synagogue in Nazareth, recorded in Luke 4, which was read earlier:

"The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because he has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor. He has sent me to bind up the broken hearted, to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to set the oppressed free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour."

Tim Keller, in his book 'The Prodigal God', is spot on: *"The ultimate purpose of Jesus is not only individual salvation, but also the renewal of the world, the end of disease, poverty, injustice, suffering and death. The ministry of Jesus demonstrated this fact."* And, I would add, Jesus confronted and denounced blatant injustice. This position is what theologians call *"The holistic Gospel"*.

Earlier I said that the message of salvation by faith in Christ isn't the gospel – but what I actually meant was that it isn't the gospel **in its totality**.

The good news is not, as Keller says, *"only individual salvation and pardon for sins but also the renewal of the world, etc."*

Second, so where does this leave *"the message of salvation by faith in Christ"*?

In 1 Corinthians 15, Paul says, *"What I received I passed on to you as of first importance: that Christ died for our sins and that he was raised on the third day."* So the message of salvation by faith is that aspect of the Good News which is of supreme importance – it is at the very heart of the Gospel.

And how should we respond to this good news? Paul again: *"Everyone, everywhere should turn to God in repentance and have faith in our Lord Jesus."* (Acts 20) And I'm sure Paul would say that's also a matter **as of the first importance!**

Third, Application of Christian discipleship to creation care:

What will result, when repentance and faith are sincere? This is Titus 2.13-14 in The Message: *"This new life is starting right now.. He offered himself as a sacrifice to free us from a dark, rebellious life into this good, pure life, making us a people he can be proud of, energetic in goodness"*. This *"good, pure life... energetic in goodness"* – in other words, a life of vigorous discipleship – will, of course, show itself in many and varied ways.

One way should be by obedience to God's command to humanity in Genesis 2, 15, to *"take care of the earth"*.

We should do all we can to avoid damaging God's good creation and do all we can to call on our government to do the things which only it can do. As my personal 'mantra' puts it, *"Climate Change? I'll have no readily avoidable part in it, nor will it happen with my meek acquiescence. So help me God!"*

In contrast, as the Secretary General of the United Nations, Antonio Guterres, warned just recently, *"Humanity is waging war on nature and this is suicidal. Nature always strikes back, and is doing so with gathering force and fury."*

Repentance and faith will also show itself in care for the poor and vulnerable. Paul says that, *"The only thing the Apostles asked of us was that we should continue to remember the poor, the very thing I was eager to do"* (Galatians 2). And remember that this is addressed to Paul, the great theologian of grace and missionary pioneer!

"Zewdie Abayie's eyes were swollen shut through malnutrition and her delicate skin was no longer able to mask the skeleton beneath..."

Brushing away flies from her face with a small twig, the little girl stood quietly as, in 2000, her father explained how three years of crop failure in Ethiopia had left his family facing starvation...

Pitiably, she attempted a smile for the cameraman." (Text by Keith Ewing, image by Jim Loring, Tearfund)

Some images remain in the mind and little Zewdie's was one such and helped keep me going with debt and trade campaigning for the first few barren years of the millennium. However, it came like a bolt from the blue when, reading up on climate science early in 2006, I read the statement by Lord Robert May, President of the Royal Society, that global heating is *"probably responsible for the drop in rainfall in Ethiopia since 1996"*. In other words, rich country pollution was *already*, back then, doing terrible damage to the world's poor.

But it's not just scattered individuals who are now being impacted. Vast swathes of the world are being ravaged. So in September 2019, for example, the International Red Cross stated that *"The climate crisis is leaving 2 million people a week needing emergency aid"*. Its president, Francesco Rocca, said this is *"intolerable"*.

And the UN's Secretary General has warned that 'business as usual' will lead to *"irreversible impacts which would be absolutely devastating for the world economy and for human life"* – and the poorest of the poor are suffering right now, but without urgent and vigorous action, it will eventually engulf us all.

The final point I want to make is that repentance and discipleship will show itself in care for our children, grandchildren and generations yet unborn.

Micah 4 says, *"He will turn the hearts of the parents to their children, and the hearts of the children to their parents - or else I will come and strike the land with total destruction."*

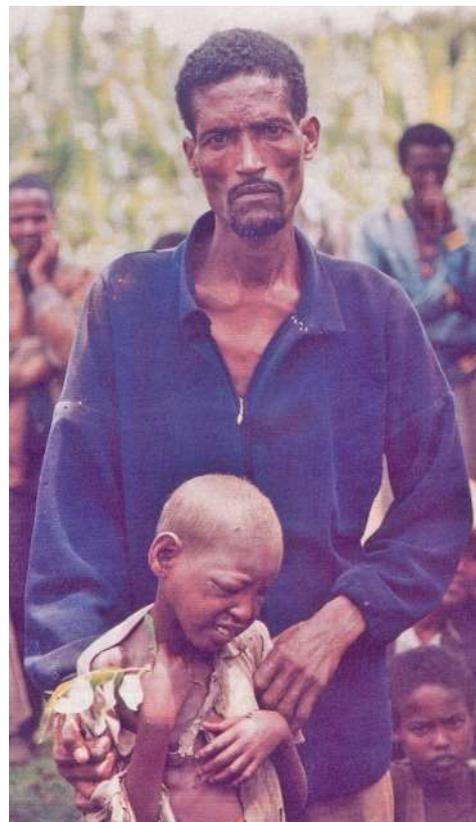
This is perhaps the strongest argument of all, given that, *"What we do over the next 10 years will determine the future of humanity for the next 10,000 years."* (Professor Sir David King, former Chief Scientific Adviser to the UK government)

So what can we all do?

We can all pray and act and we should all do both! I'll give you two 'easy to do' things, before telling you about someone who has inspired me by her response to this issue:

First, to make sure you get your electricity, and ideally your gas also, from a supplier of genuinely renewable energy, go to "Big Clean Switch" and take it from there.

By doing so, you'll slash your carbon footprint and the damage you're doing to creation. And you'll do so at little or no cost – and you may even save money!



Second, you can sign the 'Climate Declaration' by going to "Tearfund – Reboot Campaign" – it's 'Motherhood & Apple Pie', but like apple pie, it's really good!

Now my example: This is Philippa Strikett, a Tearfund supporter and her son. I use her image with her permission. She says:

"Four years ago being Christians changed our eating habits! Our family has eaten a lot less meat, wanting to reduce the impact our lives were having on God's creation and therefore also on those living in poverty.

We considered what else we could do [they gave it some thought!] and now drive less, have written to our MP, turned our thermostat down and switched to a 100% renewable energy provider."

But the 'icing on the cake' for me were her final words: *"We certainly fail sometimes, but step by step, with a spirit of generosity and grace, we're trying to follow Jesus with our whole lives."*



What an example of joyful Christian discipleship in action! Does that sound like some 'hair-shirt, miserable-as-sin' existence? Not to my ears it doesn't! And what a witness!

You'll notice that Philippa said, *"We considered what else we could do"*, and giving this matter some serious, prayerful thought is absolutely essential.

The other priority is to speak up, as Philippa did – to add our voices to the clamour for urgent and effective action on this. The late Professor Sir John Houghton FRS, the greatest climate scientist of his generation (and a strong supporter of Tearfund) put it like this:

"To relax the pressure on governments is absolutely the wrong thing to do... Any amount of action by individuals is not going to solve the problem without government doing the things that only it can do".

So to conclude our service I've chosen the song we've used several times over the years – *"I will speak out, for those who have no voices"*, and I ask you to join in, wherever you are, and make it your commitment not just for this year, but for as long as God gives you breath. So help us, God!