

Spiritual change in a time of climate crisis: becoming a truly Eco-Conscious Church.

Sermon preached at St Peter De Beauvoir

July 18, 2021

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Jeremiah 23:1-6

Ephesians 2:11-22

Mark 6: 30-34, 53-56

Thank you for inviting me to speak to you this morning, I bring greetings from Revd Fraser Dyer - who served a curacy with you a few years back and from St Anne and All Saints in Vauxhall. Fraser often speaks about his time with you, in fact he often says the words 'When I was St Peter De Beauvoir...' to demonstrate a correct course of action!

I like the wording on your website about being an eco-conscious church and I want to speak this morning about what a journey into eco-consciousness might involve, what a journey of deeper change of heart and mind might mean for us as regards the climate and ecological crisis.

First a few words about myself, I am a pioneer curate - which means a calling to open up new pathways to faith and spirituality, especially to those outside the church, who might not relate to traditional expressions of Christian faith. My journey starts with a long standing love of the natural world but, like many, the wave of climate protests in 2019, woke me up to both the urgency and scale of the challenges we face across every area of our lives. I had to admit that I had been asleep to the dangers we were facing and also, with the Black Lives Matter protests, I had not made the connections with the climate and ecological crisis and the economic, social and racial injustices that are embedded in the global economy - how we in the global north live at the expense of so many brown and black lives in the global south. The flooding in Germany makes our news headlines in ways that the loss of home and lives in the Global South over the past decade has not.

In my own journey as I prayed for direction and guidance, I felt the Holy Spirit saying to me that my pioneering was going to be about the deeper journey of change that we need to make as a church and as a society. How this issue of climate breakdown touches into every other issue of systemic greed, injustice and wickedness in our world. How at its heart this crisis in our disordered relationship with God's creation and each other is a spiritual crisis, a crisis of our mindset, what I call the 'mindset of modernity' - of all the assumptions and ways of thinking about progress and economic growth and prosperity that have underpinned our society for the past 300 plus years, the unquestioned assumptions that underpin all our news and media.

The climate crisis - as we head towards 3-4° of global heating by the end of this century - is a flashing warning light that says something is deeply wrong in the way we are living, and we need to question these underlying assumptions. Covid is another warning, as the human species relentlessly presses in and reduces every last space of natural habitat, we are told

that we are at increasing risk of zoonotic diseases - viruses and bacteria that pass from animals to humans. Covid and the Climate crisis are both warnings about the way we are living and to the fact that we are unavoidably interconnected as a planet and as a human species, that we are part of the web of life, we don't exist separate from it. We are all dependent on a finely tuned balance of relationship with all other living beings.

The climate and ecological crisis does not sit in one box - it isn't just about changing from carbon to renewable energy sources - though that is very important. I am not going to give you a load of climate science and predictions this morning, not because I don't believe the science is important, it is very important and incredibly we have ignored this science for over 30 years, but it seems that science and facts are not enough to change our behaviour. Even the Covid Pandemic seems not to be enough for our politicians to embrace the level of re-thinking and planning that is now needed across every area of our lives, and I think this applies to politicians of both left and right. This issue goes beyond party politics.

In the past being green or 'eco' has been seen as a niche interest, the lentils and sandals brigade, the eco warriors, but now it can no longer be seen as niche, being green is for all of us, but what does that actually mean?

I liked the phrase on your website 'An Eco-Conscious Church' because I believe our current perilous state calls for no less than a change of consciousness - a change of mindset - what the bible calls metanoia - the Greek word for repentance, a turning around, a fundamental change in the way we think and live.

So, the big question is how do we do this? How do we turn around the enormous juggernaut of global capitalism? Answers on a postcard in the back of church please! All of us are part of a system of economics that is based on exploiting, polluting and wasting the earth's resources, as well as heating up our planet. This is beyond any of our individual actions to sort out. All the small changers we might make as individuals, or even you as a church community, are not going to be enough. We need a huge global re-think in how we do everything. We particularly need a re-think in how our economics works, so that the true cost of everything is built in. We are going to have to learn to live within the limits of our planet's resources. Trusting in technology alone is not going to sort this out for us, because the mindset that created the problem is not going to fix it. And we have to do this together - all of us - all the nations and peoples across this planet, and particularly those of us who kick started the industrial revolution powered by the burning of fossil fuels.

Part of the journey we need to take is waking up to the urgency and seriousness of where we are, breaking out of the numbness, denial and quiet despair we have been in. At one level this crisis is another re-iteration of all the catastrophes that have been part of our human story since the dawn of time, it is the latest outworking of humanities rebellion against the creator, our long journey of exile from the garden.

So, am I coming to you this morning as a prophet of doom? Am I saying don't bother with your plans for becoming an eco-church - it's a waste of time, it won't make much difference? No, every small action counts, and particularly, as Christians, this is an integral part of right worship and witness to our Saviour, Sustainer and Creator. We need to make

all the changes we can, and become much more active in politics and in the public square to advocate for the system changes we so desperately need.

But this morning I am not going to speak to all of these vital and important actions. I want to speak about the spiritual journey that is needed to underpin, and sustain these actions, the spiritual change without which we won't see the outer changes we hope for.

The word crisis contains in its roots both challenge and opportunity - and what I want to speak to you is about the opportunities this crisis is bringing to our awareness and what this offers to us in the church. It is so often the case with human nature that we don't change our behaviour unless we absolutely have to. When the bank balance goes so far into the red, when our doctor says that lifestyle change is no longer optional for us. That is the situation for us today - both church and society - we are being given the choice of life and death, it's becoming more urgent, more stark.

But the other side of death is the promise of life, the heart of this crisis is calling us to greater life and connection - it's calling us in the church to a recovery and renewal of our spiritual traditions, to reading the bible with fresh eyes, to rediscovering the relevance of our faith and witness to a dying world, its calling us to much deeper connections with each other and with all the other creatures on this beautiful and devastated planet.

I am going to share with you some of the steps that might be involved for us in making this journey together... our journey of inner conversion and change.

Step one: Looking and listening, paying attention, slowing down. For some Covid has meant they have been forced to slow down, to connect with the life on their doorstep, with their neighbours, with the birdsong, with the trees and plants and animal life on their doorstep. We have noticed what before we rushed past. I have learned to love my local park, to notice all the varieties of trees and plants, to enjoy watching all my neighbours exercising and enjoying this precious communal space.

Paying attention means paying attention to both the beauty and suffering of our world. It means deeper listening to ourselves, to the pain and trauma we carry in our bodies, the trauma of past generations uprooted from the land, of forced migrations and slavery, of the deep disconnection with ourselves that modern life has brought about. We need to listen together, not just alone, but to go on this journey of paying greater attention with others, so we can learn to hear the groans of creation and the cries of our brothers and sisters across the world. This is the first step, to listen and look at a deeper level than we have done.

Step two: is to grieve together. We need to allow the grief that we feel, to not suppress or deny it, but to find ways for us to express together the grief, trauma and loss that we are going through, both of Covid but also of all the other losses - of so many of the species that are going to be become extinct through our actions, the famines, migrations and suffering that is to come. We need to grieve, to lament, to feel this in our guts, not to be afraid of the emotions we carry, because Godly grief leads to salvation, to life not death.

Step three: is repentance. Grief is the door that will lead us to renewed hope, because grief is the doorway to repentance, to metanoia, to the deeper change we need in our minds and hearts. Grief is the door to our waking up as a church, to allowing the gospel to interrogate all the assumptions of our age, the other gospel of prosperity and progress, that we have gone along with.

Step Four: is the recognise that this will be a long, slow journey, there are no quick fixes (unfortunately). To realise that changing our behaviour will only come from this deeper change of heart and mind, and that despite the urgency of the crisis, we know that this takes time, that it will be a long, slow journey in the mercy and grace of God. We cannot change ourselves. We throw ourselves on God and cry out for mercy. We confess our sins and our inability to change, our need for the love, mercy and forgiveness of Christ. We understand that we need to change the way we see our world and our place in it at the most fundamental level. And we acknowledge that if we in the church don't go on this journey of inner change and repentance, we will have nothing to say to our society, our words and actions will ring hollow.

Step Five: finally, this is journey into humility and mystery, a journey of into who we are called be in the image of God, as the earth keepers and shepherds of God's creation, a journey into the humility and serving of Christ, a journey into shalom, peace, wholeness and integrity. It is our gospel calling, our gospel journey.

It's the journey that is deeply woven in all of our scriptures, in the words we heard this morning in our readings.

I will finish by tracing this journey in the reading we heard from the prophet Jeremiah - concerning the bad shepherds and what characterised them.

They were those who were not listening and looking, they were not attending to the flock. And the outcome of that lack of attention is the destruction, the fragmenting, the scattering and exile of the sheep.

The good shepherds, who are they? They are those who really pay attention, who gather and restore and heal what has been lost.

Jesus is our model of what the good shepherd is, the one who brings healing and restoration. In the Hebrew scriptures the image of the shepherd is the image of good governance, of good leadership, of David as Shepherd King. The word takes us back into that word in Genesis that we translate as dominion - where human beings are seemingly fatally given dominion over Creation. That Hebrew word has its roots in the understanding of good rule and kingship - an understand of what it means to be a good shepherd, as one who attends, listens, looks, gathers, heals and restores.

The Good Shepherd is calling us this morning, as both sheep and shepherds to follow him, to be willing to change, to be open to the opportunity as well as challenge of these days in which we live. And we know that as we follow, he will be with us walking both behind and ahead of us.

Amen.