

Talk for Climate Sunday Service – 9th May 2021

In the name of God Creator, Word, Spirit

Scientists have known since the 1980s that the burning of fossil fuels was affecting the balances of our climate. It would have been easier to address these things then. We are now at a time when many of the intractable problems of our world are linked to our neglect of the planet God has gifted us with – pollution, biodiversity loss, the increasing numbers of refugees, conflicts, floods, drought, coronavirus. Our situation is perilous. I think that wherever Jesus draws near in our world today he must weep and say, “If you, even you, had only recognized on this day the things that make for peace!”

Last week I was listening to Brother Samuel as part of a Franciscan study course about the environment. Sam was asked how we could start to face the reality of where we all are. He said, “Pay attention, inwardly and outwardly”, and that there is an urgent need to see differently so that we are ready for what he called eco penitence and radical change.

Paying attention, inwardly and outwardly is about letting conversations happen which begin within us and stretch out to look beyond ourselves and our own concerns in a continuous inward and outward process. For example, giving attention to the earth requires us to attend in wonder and praise to the natural world but also to listen to the words of the Ethiopian woman just read to us, to take those words into our heart and to ponder them, respond to them, face them. As we begin to do this over and over again in different ways we do indeed learn to “see differently”. What are forest fires, melting glaciers, polluted beaches telling us? Can we sense God’s tears?

Sam then spoke of eco penitence and radical change ---- this reminded me of a recent magazine article where an environmentalist remarked that 30 years ago he believed that science would solve the climate crisis but that he now thought that, “The top environmental problems are selfishness, greed and apathy, and to deal with these we need a spiritual and cultural transformation”. (*James Gustave Speth*).

In January 2017 two scientists from the UN Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change invited representatives of different faith traditions to a meeting at Imperial College in London. The scientists stressed the urgency of the problems we are facing and then said, “And that is why we are speaking with you as members of faith communities because you speak to hearts as well as minds”. These scientists were asking for our help.

They are expecting a lot from people of faith but the task is not new to us. We have resources for attentive prayer and we know about learning to see differently. These things are embedded in our faith journey. To turn from selfishness, greed and apathy is something the Bible already calls us to and the beatitudes clearly show us a very radical way of living. Christians are familiar with these things and so the task is surely to allow the urgency of the climate crisis into what we already do.

We cannot go on pursuing ceaseless growth within a finite and fragile planet. But necessary

change should not be seen as gloomy and restrictive. St Francis is a good person to mention here; we sang a hymn based on his Canticle of the Creatures at the beginning of our service. Francis treasured the created world seeing it as a place of encounter with God, a place where we can learn to see “God’s footprints”. Francis’ life was a life of focused prayer, of deep penitence and of radical discipleship and though it was eccentric and sometimes contradictory it overflowed with joy and was always full of gratitude for what is, for creation’s gift. To continually realign ourselves with our Creator to repair and reverence the natural world is surely a way of working joyfully alongside the God who made us -- and maybe even learning to dry God’s tears.