

Sermon by Rev. Dr Michael Bailey on 13 January, 2019

Apocalypse?

The readings from both Daniel and Mark are examples of apocalyptic writing. They foretell the future, generally predicting that those who are oppressing you will have a really bad time in the future and things will get much better for you. The book of Daniel was written to bring comfort to the Jews during terrible times of persecution in the early 2nd century BC.

Mark 13 could be described as an apocalyptic warning that the end times may be coming. The 1st 2 verses appear to predict the destruction of the Temple which the Romans carried out in A.D. 70. It is most likely that Mark was written after this date. The message of the chapter is that Christians should be on their guard. It finishes: "Watch therefore... lest he comes suddenly and find you asleep. And what I say to you I say to all: Watch." (13:35–37)

Throughout history there have been constant predictions of an apocalyptic future. The 1st millennium provoked an apocalyptic frenzy but the end has frequently been predicted in apocalyptic terms throughout the centuries, but while plenty of dreadful things have happened we have not yet had the full works.

In our day the most serious warnings come, not from weird religious enthusiasts, but the calm, careful and measured judgement of scientists. The latest report of the International Panel on Climate Change shows us what we need to do to keep the rise in temperature to no more than 1.5° C. It also shows us how it is possible to do it but it will be hugely challenging. The report notes that emissions need to be cut by 45% by 2030 in order to keep warming no higher than 1.5° C. That implies cuts of nearly 4% a year. This is not the place to go into details but the report is tough but basically hopeful given the moral and political will.

This is the view of the Church Times which had an excellent special issue on 12 October. Rowan Williams, however, takes a graver view of the situation and is one of 94 signatories who signed a letter in the Guardian headed "Facts about our ecological crisis are incontrovertible. We must take action." One paragraph reads: "When a government wilfully abdicates its responsibility to protect its citizens from harm and to secure the future for generations to come, it has failed in its most essential duty of stewardship. The 'social contract' has been broken, and it is therefore not only our right, but our moral duty to bypass the governments inaction and fragrant dereliction of duty, and to rebel to defend life itself. We therefore declare our support for Extinction Rebellion, launching on 31 October 2018." Strong words indeed for a man as thoughtful, scholarly, careful and holy as Rowan Williams to sign up to. Extinction Revolution sum up their mission in these words: "We act in peace with ferocious love of these lands in our hearts. We act on behalf of life."

Subsequently Extinction Rebellion has been publicly supported by Bishop Pete Wilcox, the Bishop of Sheffield, Malcolm Chamberlain, the Archdeacon of Sheffield, the chair of the Methodist district, Gill Newton and many others from academia and the professions and beyond. There will always be different opinions about what action it is right to take in support of a cause but this is an indication of how a number of highly responsible people have been prepared to indicate the level of their concern for the well-being of our planet.

But the point remains. How *do* you persuade people at large and politicians in particular to address climate change with the firm purpose and decisive action that it demands? Do we have to use apocalyptic language about the appalling consequences that are all too likely to follow a rise in temperature of over 1.5°? Do we have to scare people into taking action?

The simple answer is no because it simply does not work. People react by a switching off and ignoring the issue because it is too much to face. How then do we respond? How do we enable people to face the issue honestly? How do we enable ourselves and our fellow Christians to face the issue honestly?
In

A good place to start is looking at what Jesus did. He wanted people to face themselves and the world and God honestly and without pretence. How did he do it? He was not afraid to face up to those in power and to warn them bluntly, but Jesus' way was essentially the power of compassion. Consider how he responded people, for example Blind Bartimeus or the woman who anointed his feet with oil, or the tax gatherer Zaccheus or his parables especially the parable of the good Samaritan or parable of the prodigal son,, most radically "Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you" as we heard second gospel reading. Jesus certainly had the power to change people's lives. What we see in Jesus is indeed a display of power, but it is not power exercised by frightening people of terrors to come, but rather the power of compassion and I think this is the route that we need to go down.

We need the careful, scientific work of people like the International Panel on Climate Change and I'm grateful to them for the immense amount of work they put into producing their invaluable report. But in addition to that I think we also need to be aware of the way in which climate change is already devastating lives of so many people across the world, especially poor people now because that can unleash our compassion.

Mary Robinson, former president of Ireland and UN special envoy on climate change has written of her experience visiting people, especially women, all over the world whose lives have been deeply affected by climate change. One of these was Constance Okollet from eastern Uganda. She recounted how her tiny village had been devastated since 2000 by drought, flash flooding, and erratic seasons. She said: "In eastern Uganda, there are no seasons any more. Agriculture is a gamble." For nearly 7 years, Constance had noted dramatic changes in the weather that withered her maize, sorghum, and millet crippling her yields. The unpredictable weather, Constance worried, was a warning that the villagers of Asinget had done something calamitous to incur

God's displeasure. Then came a particularly calamitous flood. Constance said, "After the floods, we had no rain for six months, not even a single drop. The topsoil was very thin after the floods, but it was further eroded by the drought. The plants, particularly the cassava, all dried up. People started to die of famine. Things were completely turned round. People began to ask themselves, 'why is this happening?'" Reluctantly Constance and the rest of her village had to approach the local government to help. It was a humiliating moment for a woman who had never asked for government assistance. "Now we are beggars," she said.

In the spring of 2009 Constance heard that Oxfam was holding a meeting about food insecurity in the nearby town of Tororo and for the first time she heard the words *climate change*. "I learned that over pollution from developed countries had caused real changes to the climate. I wanted to know whether the people in developed countries could reduce their emissions so we could have our normal seasons back."

However she also used information from the meeting to urge her neighbours to consider their own impact on the environment. "Now everyone is planting trees," Constance says, "lots of mango, avocado, and orange trees. Every Sunday I travel to different parishes and speak after mass. I stand up and tell the people that climate change has come to stay but we can overcome it by planting trees. For those who don't want to plant, I tell them to simply think of their grandchildren." But of course they can't overcome it by themselves: it is we who have the greater responsibility.

I believe the power which will enable us to discharge that responsibility is not the power of apocalyptic and scare stories, but the power of careful science and powerful compassion.

Two prayers which I find helpful to face up to this honestly and realistically but without being overwhelmed. First the phrases from the Lord's prayer, "Your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as in heaven."

Second a prayer from Jim Cotter:

Be with us, O God, as we struggle for a more just and sustainable world, yet remind us that our actions so often tighten the mesh that binds the oppressed. Keep us from pride in our own strength, and keep us from despair when evil seems entrenched. Renew our trust in your good purposes for us all. Give us the gift of discernment, that we may know when to strive in the power of your spirit, and when to be still and wait for your deliverance. Come in your good time, but come soon.