

Sermon at the Climate Justice Ecumenical Service at St Anne's Cathedral, Belfast.

Sunday 29th November 2015

Whose idea was it? Says our cynical friend. Whose idea to protest global warming in November. In Belfast. Whose idea was it to have an outside service? Thank you to those who brought us into St Anne's. Those who brought us in from the cold.

What were you thinking? That's what our cynical friend would say: Global warming? You realise it's six degrees out there? It's baltic. You're foundered. And you're talking about global warming?

We are talking today about global warming. We are talking about climate change.

It's not about us. It's not all about us.

We are witnesses today. We gather to worship and to witness for our brothers and sisters around the world. Trocaire and Christian Aid, we give a voice to those clinging to the edges. We give a voice to those whose lives have been shattered by climate change. Maybe we think we don't see it yet in our society but climate change is a constant reality. A devastating reality for the poorest of our world.

The headlines around extreme weather events slip into and quickly out of our consciousness. In 2013 Typhoon Haiyan, the most powerful storm on record flattens the coastal communities in the Philippines. Four point one million Filipinos losing their homes. The Republic of Ireland has a total population of four point five million. Fourteen million people affected altogether. That's what a "fast moving extreme weather event" will do.

Those are the headline grabbing numbers. But that is only part of the story.

In 2011 El Salvador is engulfed in a massive storm. In ten days 1.5 metres of rain falls. Ten percent of the country is flooded. This was "extreme weather". But this was the new normal. Concepcion Martinez, a farmer from El Salvador used these words: "At the beginning we didn't realise what was happening. The dry season was longer but the rain lasted for longer. There was more flooding. Something was changing. Climate change is happening all over the world. Poor communities like ours are effected the most."

Climate change is happening now. It is impacting the lives of the poorest communities and it is damaging those least able to protect themselves from its effects. That is the message that Christian Aid needs people to hear. That is the message that Trocaire needs people to hear today.

But climate change will come for us. We will not remain unaffected.

We worship today inside this historic St Anne's Cathedral. But this whole area used to be the docks. We are close to the sea in this city. We are close to the sea and the sea level is rising. Contingency planning for flooding in this city must be our new reality. We might look to our politicians, to "the folks on the hill" for solutions. The "folks on the hill" need to act. If they wait until the water reaches them before they pursue environmentally responsible policies Belfast will be... sunk.

Climate change is now impacting our world. But it is effecting the poorest first. Climate shock and human induced climate change, they know what that looks like in Malawi. It's not quite a year ago when that country experienced massive flooding. With two hundred and thirty thousand people displaced and on the move. In a country of subsistence farming harvests of maize were destroyed, and a weak infrastructure battered. In a country where forty seven percent of children suffer stunted growth already - there was devastation.

They didn't know what hit them. But we know. We know what hit them. Because for over thirty years and more climatologists have been telling us. Telling us in increasingly shrill and desperate tones.

It's the carbon dioxide. It's the CO₂ in our atmosphere. A blanket of CO₂ in our atmosphere. More solar energy in, and thanks to the blanket - less going out. There is an imbalance. So global warming occurs. We face what former President Mary Robinson called "an existential threat to our planet."

What we need is climate justice. What we have is climate injustice. What does that mean?

We are called to be on the side of those most effected by climate change. Those least able to protect themselves from it. The poorest in our world. Those producing the least amounts of CO₂ and yet these are the people who are bearing the brunt of what rising CO₂ levels do.

We are Trocaire. We are Christian Aid. We are the voice of the poorest in our world. We are the voice of those who wait for the rains that do not come. We are the voice of those whose communities are flattened by storms of overwhelming ferocity. We are the voice of all those in our world who are refugees from the land, a land that will no longer support them. That will no longer feed their children.

In 2011 Audrey Quinn wrote a cartoon explaining the conflict in Syria. She called it "Syria's Climate Conflict". In our minds Syria is a place consumed by war. But that was not the beginning of it's troubles. That war was the outcome of something else. From 2006 until 2011 over half that country suffered drought. A "slow moving extreme weather event". Eighty-five percent of livestock in that country died. Some say a million. Some say one and a half million, rural villagers lost their farms to the drought. And they started moving. Desperate, they were drawn to the cities. But water was hard to come by and desperate things started to happen. We know the rest.

Is Syria a nation shattered by climate change? Was climate change the trigger? At the heart of all that pain and suffering? Was climate change the trigger?

Hans Kung said that "God's kingdom is creation healed."

"Creation healed". We are far from that place.

What is ours to do?

Proverbs 15 verse 3: "The Lord sees what happens everywhere; he is watching us, whether we do good or evil."

The world needs to be at a level of zero carbon emissions by 2050 if we are going to stay below two degrees of global warming. That means we are going to have to leave about two thirds of known fossil fuels in the ground. It's a big ask.

Globally CO₂ levels sit at three hundred and ninety one parts per million. To shift the CO₂ blanket off the planet we need three hundred and fifty one parts per million. This century we are already looking at increases in sea level of between one and five metres. We are currently on course for a four degree centigrade increase in global temperature. Our target needs to be two degrees. Our limit needs to be two degrees.

We in the developed world - It is us who are generating the vast bulk of CO₂. It is us.

I watched a meteorologist, a climate scientist speak on this. He opened with this line : "What would you do if you knew what I know?"

We are Trocaire. We are Christian Aid.

What do we do knowing what we know?

We campaign. We campaign like our lives depended on it. We listen to our brothers and sisters in the Philippines, in Malawi, in Syria, in El Salvador. We campaign like their lives depended on it.

Paris follows Copenhagen, follows Kyoto. This week's Paris conference is the twenty first meeting of the C.O.P.. We keep campaigning to reduce CO2, to inform our politicians, our government. To tell the story of those who bear the burden, the impact, the cost of global warming. We demand a fundamental shift. A move towards renewable energy sources.

What do we do knowing what we know?

We commit ourselves as individuals to bring all our energy, all our purpose, to the task of minimising CO2 emissions. To combating global warming.

We commit ourselves to prayerful and reflective lives. Lives that remember our brothers and sisters struggling to exist in a world that has been changed. We speak for them. We hold them up so that they are heard and seen by those who shape policy without urgency.

We adopt a politician. Don't worry, I'm not asking you to take them out for dinner. You could do that. I guess it depends who it is! We adopt a politician and human to human we tell them what we know. We encourage. We cajole. We cyber stalk. Whatever it takes. We inform. We share. We demand. We teach them what we know. What we have learned.

What do we do knowing what we know?

We make good choices. We reflect on what 2050 means and what we can do. For better, for worse. 2050 - what does that look like in your life?

Let us pray.

Take from us O God, the complexity and thoughts that belong to this world. Give to us the heart of a child, that in simple love we may hear your voice, and that in hearing we may come to you.

Hear our prayers this day for all who suffer through drought, through famine, through thirst.

Hear our prayers for all who are burdened by poverty and injustice in our world.

Your kingdom is creation healed.

Strengthen each of us as we strive to serve your purpose in our lives.
Keep us mindful of our impact on your world. Keep us determined to work for a sustainable future.

Guide us by your spirit, renew and strengthen us as we work to your glory.

Now and forever more. Amen.

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