

Second Sunday before Lent

A sermon preached by the Rector, the Very Revd Tim Barker, at the parish church of St Andrew Guernsey on Sunday 16 February 2020

Readings: Genesis 1 v 1 – 2 v 3 and Matthew 6 vv 25-end

It is said that when two English people meet and have nothing to talk about, they will discuss the weather. In my experience, that is true; and it seems also to be the case in Guernsey. Walking along the cliffs in Torteval in a howling gale yesterday, we met another couple. 'It's a bit blowy', they said. We agreed.

Storm Ciara last weekend caused me to leave Guernsey 36 hours early, so as to be sure to be in London for the Church of England's General Synod. I am grateful to Juliette and others for covering the services I was due to take last Sunday. And as Storm Ciara departed, so Storm Dennis has arrived.

Two of the hottest years on record were 2016 and 2019. The head of the World Meteorological Office said recently, '2020 has started out where 2019 left off, with high-impact weather and climate-related events. Unfortunately, we expect to see much extreme weather throughout 2020 and the coming decades, fuelled by record levels of heat-trapping greenhouse gases in the atmosphere.'

The Australian bushfires, unprecedented in their duration and intensity, have claimed many lives, destroyed property and complex eco-systems, and highlighted the type of disasters that scientists say the world will increasingly face due to global warming.

It is suggested that skiing may become a distant memory in parts of Europe that have seen little snowfall.

Whilst there may well have been a cyclical variation in global temperatures over the centuries, it is hard to deny the reality of climate change. There are many reasons for climate change, but the burning of fossil fuels and the combination of deforestation and tree-clearing, especially the rain forests, are human actions which are making a difference. The wrong sort of difference.

As Christians, we cannot ignore our responsibility for the world God has entrusted to us. The Old Testament reading set for today is the first chapter of Genesis, the well-known story of creation.

We read the blueprint for humanity in these verses. We depend on God for our very life and we are placed in a position of trust and responsibility in the world to enjoy it to the full, obedient to God's commands. It is a salutary lesson when we realise how far short of this responsibility we have fallen, as we compare our response to God with God's trust in us.

It is we who mar the ideal presented in Genesis. If we try to usurp the position of God, and to use or misuse God's creation in the ways we choose, then we certainly have the free choice so to do. Our ancestors have always been ready to exercise this free will – sometimes far too ready to exercise it. But the consequences of this are all around us: we bring disorder, uncertainty and alienation into the world because on our own, if we rely on ourselves and not on God, we do not have the wisdom and the knowledge and power to sustain and understand the world. And we seem to be less attuned to the needs of the earth than our ancestors. This is a salutary challenge to our pride and our self-confidence.

The Archbishop of Canterbury, Justin Welby, is quoted at the beginning of a paper on climate change considered at General Synod last week: 'It becomes ever clearer that climate change is the greatest challenge that we and future generations face. It's our sacred duty to protect the natural world we've so generously been given, as well as our neighbours around the world who will be first and worst affected. Without swift decisive action the consequences of climate change will be devastating.'

All is not lost.

The paper¹ we considered at General Synod presented various options, which I have abbreviated and adjusted to our context in Guernsey:

- It is important both to achieve net zero carbon emissions in the long term, and to make early and significant reductions in the amount of CO₂ we produce.
- To achieve a net zero target, much would need to happen, including:
 - Radical reduction in energy use for heating and lighting in our churches ... through, for example, the installation of LED lighting where not yet in place, and extensive programmes of draught-proofing and insulation.
 - Changing the heating of our churches, church halls and clergy housing to electric heating powered by green electricity.
 - The travel and transport of staff and volunteers would need to move away from petrol or diesel powered vehicles to battery powered vehicles.
 - Difficult as this is in Guernsey, we will need to think about our use of air travel.
- In addition to carbon output, we must also protect and enhance biodiversity across our land and buildings, including churchyards, glebe land, and investment assets. The Church needs to build ecological awareness into everything we do. Caring for creation is an essential element of our mission and ministry.
- The Environment Working Group, chaired by the Bishop of Salisbury, is working with other parts of the Church of England on ways to help a wide base of Christians develop environmental stewardship as part of their personal witness

We have made a little progress. Our church heating system is powered by electricity – rather better now that the cable link to France has been restored. LED lights are being fitted in parts of the Rectory. We are looking at how our relationship with the Diocese of Salisbury can be shaped in a way that reduces the need for physical travel for some meetings.

Can we consider changing the lighting system in this church? There will be capital costs, but we might end up with a system that gives us better light whilst using less electricity?

You will see an invitation to meetings at Holy Trinity Church at the end of this month, to learn about the eco-Church project.

But there is a long way to go.

Time after time we must remind ourselves of the teaching of Genesis, that the world is not, ultimately, in human control: we exercise our power only because God entrusts the world to our stewardship.

¹ GS 2159: Climate emergency and carbon reduction target

The Christian faith is about living as if we expect Christ to return tomorrow, whilst also preparing for the fact that God's timescale is not our timescale and that God has made us stewards of the earth for the very long term.

In today's gospel reading, Jesus urges us not to be worried. It is good to heed these words. But we would be wrong to read into what Jesus has said any suggestion that we need not take action on climate change or on the other social ills that beset the world and blight the lives of so many people.

Crucially, Jesus urges us to 'strive first for the kingdom of God and his righteousness.'

That means taking seriously our stewardship of God's world – because by doing that we are witnessing to the suffering love of God for his creation, which we see most clearly in Jesus.

We have a glimpse in Genesis of what God really intends for his creation, and we gain further insights through the gradual unrolling of God's revelation of himself through the pages of the Old Testament and especially in the birth and life and death and resurrection of Jesus. Our work as Christians is to live our lives in the light of God's revelation of himself to us, and so to pray and work for the realisation of God's purposes for his creation and for his world.

We cannot honestly do that if we fail to see the importance of doing what we can to counter the toxic effects of climate change, which damages God's creation.