

## Sermon given by Deborah Colvin at St Paul's Church Rossmore Road Marylebone London 11 December 2016

Thank you for inviting me, I'm here because I met Michael at an interfaith meeting at the mosque just down the road, some time ago. I worship at St James's Piccadilly where I am Sustainability Champion, a PCC role we invented a few years ago, and would like to share with you some of the ideas and actions we have put in place in recent years to reduce our impact on the environment.

I wonder what you think when you hear words like 'sustainability' and 'environment'? I wonder if you think you are going to be told how to live, that it will be difficult and make life miserable, that we will all have to wear hair shirts, maybe even that it's not very relevant to church life. After all, we are all very busy already in response to the gospel call to love our neighbours.

But the more we ask the question 'Who is my neighbour?' the more the circles of inclusion ripple outward, and the more we have to take seriously the impact of our actions on our neighbours far away. Pope Francis, in his 2015 encyclical 'Laudato si' underlined this by addressing his letter to all the people of the world – not just Catholics, not just Christians. And what he calls for in his letter to the world is nothing short of a wholesale eco-conversion, a plea for all people to hear the cry of the suffering earth, and the cry of the poor. Laudato si has been called 'a wake-up call to the whole of humanity to

understand and respond to the destruction that we are causing to the environment and to other people.' The Pope says 'Many things have to change course, but it is we human beings above all who need to change. We lack an awareness of our common origin, of our mutual belonging, and of a future to be shared with everyone. This basic awareness would enable the development of new convictions, attitudes and forms of life.'

The Church of England has also been speaking up. Seven years ago in 2009, an ambitious action plan, 'Church and Earth' was set in motion. This plan, in line with statutory national obligations, set targets for reducing carbon emissions across the whole church by 42% by 2020, and 80% by 2050. This is an enormous challenge. We are all effectively being asked to almost halve our energy use by 2020, and reduce it by 80% by 2050. How can churches do this and still keep warm and light?

Fortunately parishes are not alone here. I'd like to tell you about two wider initiatives which we have been engaged with at St James's. The first is Shrinking the Footprint. The footprint in question is our carbon footprint, which may sound like a piece of jargon to some of you so bear with me while I explain a little. Carbon in this context stands for carbon dioxide, that gas you might remember learning about in school which we all breathe out all the time. Plants need it to

grow and produce food for themselves, and us. It's also released into the air when we burn things, especially coal and oil and gas. In the last 200 years, since the industrial revolution began, we have burnt vast amounts of these fossil fuels, to generate electricity and heat our buildings, and so released vast amounts of carbon dioxide – and that's where the problems start. Carbon dioxide acts like a blanket, it traps heat and keeps warm air close to the earth. And so the whole planet is warming, causing problems like melting ice, rising sea levels, turbulent and unpredictable weather, habitat and species loss and crop failure. Countries like Tuvalu and Bangladesh are already losing vast areas of land and agricultural production to rising sea levels.

So our carbon footprint is a measure of the amount of energy we use, and therefore carbon dioxide that we produce. Shrinking the Footprint sets out a series of steps to help us reduce our footprint, starting with auditing energy use. We were audited at St James's about 6 years ago and were given a G rating for energy efficiency which is as bad as it gets! We are a large and busy site, open 7 days a week and often 15 hours a day, so we started with some simple behaviour changes – establishing a regular pattern for vergers in turning lights on and off; raising awareness about equipment left on standby; changing to a green energy supplier; resetting thermostats a couple of degrees lower - and facing up to complaints from people about it being too cold. These days we get very few complaints as people have adjusted to 19

degrees in the winter instead of 21. And apparently in the 1970s the average house temperature was 13 degrees, which is quite a reality check. We even built a cage round our small boiler to stop people who hire our rooms from cranking up the temperature.

Then we started spending money to save money and carbon. We installed movement sensors in toilets so lights turn themselves off. We replaced the lighting in our rectory building and courtyard market with LEDs, which use about 80% less electricity. Lighting in the church itself will be replaced as part of a bigger refurbishment in the near future. Money saved on our electricity bills paid for the LEDs within two years. We insulated the church roof, and replaced our aging main boiler with an energy efficient model. The icing on the cake is our array of solar panels which was installed on our south-facing roof over 10 years ago. These generate a small amount of electricity from sunlight, but are mainly important for showing what can be achieved on a listed building. All in all, we have reduced our energy bills by over one third, and our carbon footprint by almost 40%, so we are well on our way to the 2020 target. Of course it gets harder and harder to make savings from here on.

The second initiative is Eco Church a wide-ranging ecumenical project led by Christian conservation charity A Rocha UK in partnership with other groups including the Church of England. The Eco Church vision is to create a vast network of churches as local centres of creation care in the community – shining beacons of

hope for a brighter environmental future. Former Archbishop of Canterbury, Rowan Williams, endorsed Eco Church at its launch in St Paul's Cathedral in January this year, welcoming the new scheme as part of a 'tectonic shift' in Christian thinking, through which environmental concerns will 'embed more deeply' in church culture. Eco Church takes the form of an online questionnaire with lots of associated resources, and encourages churches to work towards bronze, silver and gold eco awards. There are 5 categories to the questionnaire: Worship and teaching; Management of church buildings; Management of church land; Community and global engagement; and Lifestyle, and churches need to build their score across all the categories to achieve an award.

At St James's we regularly preach on environmental themes, and pray for the earth and all our human and other-than-human neighbours. We hold outdoor services around a fire in our garden, inspired by Forest Church liturgies. During Lent this year we ran a course called Love for the Future, and at harvest we held an arts and sciences festival to learn about, and celebrate, planet earth. We have written Environment, Procurement and Biodiversity policies, made sure our garden is managed in a wildlife-friendly way (we even had a kestrel in Piccadilly one day), and asked people to audit their own personal carbon footprint. Over the Advent / Christmas period we will use

about 2000 disposable cups and plates, so we only buy fully biodegradable ones and send them to a local composting facility and not to landfill.

So we are making changes, although there is always more to do. There are 480 Anglican churches in London, with a large number of associated buildings, and land. Working together, we can have a significant impact. And if you are feeling overwhelmed just now, I offer you Margaret Mead's encouraging words:

'Never doubt that the actions of individuals can change the world. Indeed it is the only thing that ever has.'

I began with Pope Francis and would like to end with St Francis, that great lover of the natural world. In his beautiful poem 'Wring out my clothes' he makes us aware that we already have the inspiration we need, coming from the natural world itself. He says:

*Such love does the sky now pour, that  
whenever I stand in a field*

*I have to wring out the light when I get  
home.*

In our time, we can go to stunning outdoor places, like Regent's Park which I cycled through this morning, and receive the nourishment we need to act with love for our common home.

Deborah Colvin