

St Mary's Islington 6th May 2018

Thank you for inviting me, especially on this eve of rogation-tide.

If we were meeting here, in this week a thousand years ago, spring would be burgeoning in the fields and forest all around us, and we would be acutely aware of the presence of red deer, wild boar and wolves delivering - and fiercely protecting – their young. We humans would be fasting and doing penance, appealing to God for a successful harvest and protection from natural disasters. We might also be preparing for the practice of 'beating the bounds' to reconfirm the parish boundaries. To do this, we would all get up and follow Simon round the parish, reciting litanies (while keeping a weather eye out for the boars and wolves) and pausing from time to time while he sprinkles holy water on the trees, stones, and other natural objects that serve as boundary markers, explicitly sanctifying the natural world. The young people of the parish might even be thrown into hedges or streams to impress on them the importance of place. I wonder how many of us know the boundaries of our parish, or our significant natural markers in 2018? Does rogation-tide have a place at all any more? In some places, the season is now celebrated as Soil and Water Stewardship Week. At St James's Piccadilly, where I worship, we will have a liturgy this afternoon involving seed bombs loaded with wildflower seeds which participants will be encouraged to distribute as a symbol of renewal of the natural world. I'll come back to this rogation theme in the context of where our 'bounds', or boundaries, might be today in our globalised world.

We find ourselves on the cusp of a new era in the history of our planet, which has been labelled the Anthropocene. This is an era in which the dominant force impacting the earth and its processes is no longer geology or weather or vast spans of time, but one small life-form, present in huge numbers, the human being. It's been said that when the geologists and archaeologists of the future are digging up our era, looking for clues to our civilisation, the dominant artefacts they will find are chicken bones, remnants of our culture's favourite food, and vast swathes of plastic. This is our legacy, but it is the legacy of a way of life that is harming the prospects of future generations of both humans and the many other species with whom we live and on whom we rely, a way of life that is simply unsustainable, and calls for a response from us, as church.

I know that you have taken up the challenge of Eco-Church at St Mary's – well done, that's brilliant – so I'm wondering what your individual reactions might be to words like 'sustainability' and 'eco' added as a prefix to everything from food to holidays to cleaning products. These words might signify loss of freedom, that life will be difficult and miserable, that it's all about lentils and hair shirts, and bound to be expensive – and you've got better things to spend your money on. Maybe you think it's not even very relevant to church life. After all, we are all very busy already in response to that clarion gospel call we heard again

this morning, to love one another. I would like to suggest that, yes, taking on Eco Church is about accepting responsibility, as church, for our part in restoration of our wider environment, but it is also profoundly about celebration of this astonishing planet to which we belong. Restoration and celebration, which to me sounds like repentance – a willingness to turn again, to make good, and joyfully embrace a change of mind and heart and action. Psalm 98, which I have to say is a favourite of mine, is a full-blooded invitation to celebrate, to sing a new song, make a joyful noise and sing praises; and it is clear that this injunction is for the whole earth: the roaring sea, and all that fills it; the world and those who live in it; the floods clapping their hands; and the hills singing together for joy.

So the more we think about that 'other' that we are commanded to love, the more the circles of inclusion ripple outward, and the more we have to take seriously the impact of our actions on others far away: human, other-than-human; and the non-living. To return to our rogation theme, our parish boundaries have become as wide as the planet itself as we grapple with the reality of human-induced climate change and its global impacts. 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.'

Former Archbishop of Canterbury, Rowan Williams, endorsed this at the launch of Eco Church in January 2016, welcoming the scheme as part of a 'tectonic shift' in Christian thinking, through which environmental concerns will 'embed more deeply' in church culture. Eco Church, as I'm sure you are becoming aware, challenges churches to address these themes across the whole spectrum of their activities, including personal lifestyles, and sets out a vision of a vast network of churches, shining beacons of hope for a brighter environmental future.

What resources of scripture and tradition do we, as church, have for making this tectonic shift in our thinking and behaviour, as individuals and church? Well, lots! There has been much emphasis for many centuries in Christianity on the transcendence and otherness of God, with its accompanying language of father, lord, protector, and king. But Christianity is also the religion of the immanent God, the one who empties Godself entirely into the turbulence, materiality, life and death and life of the cosmos. Christianity, the religion of

incarnation, took root in rural, agricultural communities where people were entirely dependent on the rhythm of the seasons, and has always responded to this radical dependence. In some ways, things are really not so different now. Even in the midst of our hyper-urban lives we are still entirely dependent on the sun, soil, and water cycle for our food, never mind how far it travels, or how processed and packaged it is by the time we receive it. And so there is other language, other ways of thinking about God, other modes of worship, which are equally our heritage and resource, and are ripe for reclamation, some straight from the forested middle ages, and some theology being written right now which we can call on. Here are 3 examples:

Hildegard of Bingen, saint, doctor of the church and medieval mystic who bequeathed us the idea of *viriditas*, or the greening power of God has this prayer:

God of the land and of the people, Be the running sap of our lives, Clothe us in greening power, Bind us together with the vines of compassion. Hildegard sees no distinction between love for people and love for planet, and prays that God will be intimately present with us, running through and greening our lives.

Theologian Anne Primavesi says: 'Our descriptions matter. How we express our relationships reveals more than we can say, and the effectiveness of those expressions correlates in some way with our impact on the material environment.' Expressing our understanding of earth and self as symbiotic, rather than the more usual understanding where the human is dominant, and the earth provides resources brings with it a sense of participation. Participation is empowering, it implies creativity and the ability to make anew.

And finally, American theologian Sallie McFague writes about the world as the body of God. Consequently desecration of world is desecration of God. She critiques the traditional focus of Christianity on the big 'why' questions, and persuades us to turn our eyes to the beauty, everyday details, processes and uniqueness of our home, planet Earth. She maintains that global warming occurs because we lack an appropriate understanding of ourselves as inextricably bound to the planet and its systems, and argues for an alternative economic order and for our relational identity as part of an unfolding universe that expresses divine love. This line of thinking foregrounds God's love over God's power.

So what might all this mean, practically speaking in Islington in 2018? In 2009, the Church of England launched an ambitious action plan, 'Church and Earth'. 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, and I would like to commend the Church of England's Shrinking the Footprint programme to you. 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 unpack this 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, a product of the incessant activity of all our cells. 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, heat our buildings, transport our goods and ourselves - 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, ocean acidification, coral bleaching, turbulent and unpredictable weather, habitat and species loss, and crop failure. Countries like Tuvalu and Bangladesh, our neighbours far away, 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 reduce this footprint, starting with auditing energy use. It's really good to measure things, because you can see progress, and it helps you understand the truth without kidding yourself. We were audited at St James's about 8 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 and small spaces. 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 later this year. 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 grade 1 listed building. All in all, we have reduced our energy

bills by about 40%, and our carbon footprint by almost 50%, so we are well on our way to the 2020 target and now have an A++ rating from Shrinking the Footprint, once the very heavy usage of the site is taken into account. 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.

Under the Eco Church framework, worship, teaching, community and lifestyle are just as important as energy saving. Monthly outdoor gatherings with a contemplative focus bring us together under the sky, as part of the natural world in Piccadilly. Sometimes we gather round a fire in our garden for worship inspired by Forest Church or other creation-tide liturgies. We mark harvest, rogation, creation-tide, St Francis' Day, as well as looking at how the rhythm of our regular Sunday liturgy can reflect our understanding and commitment. We joined the Fun Palace movement for our last two harvest Sundays, hosting festivals of art and science to learn about, and celebrate, planet earth. This year, as we work towards the Eco Church Gold Award, we are hosting a series of events and talks on theology and practical action.

So for churches everywhere, with scripture, theology, science and vibrant community behind us, we are well resourced as individuals for making some of the personal lifestyle changes that signify our love for one another, and especially our neighbours far away. Whether we choose to eat less meat, walk and cycle more, reduce the tide of single use plastic flowing through all our homes, switch our energy supplier, or pay to offset the carbon dioxide produced as a result of our holidays abroad, all of us can make an actual difference, literally be the change we want to see, and in Hildegard's words be those *Holy persons (that) draw to themselves all that is earthly*.

DC, May 2018