



Climate Change: Crisis Management or Full-Scale Repentance?

A sermon by Revd Dr Sam Wells

Readings: Jeremiah 10.11-16; Romans 8.18-27

While ecology is always among the leading concerns of our time, two events happened in 2015 to give it an especial focus. The first was the publication in June of the papal encyclical *Laudato si'*. The second was the United Nations Climate Change Conference held in Paris in December. The two events map the territory of the ecological crisis in contrasting ways. Pope Francis' encyclical offers a wide-ranging diagnosis of the human roots of the crisis, and a series of proposals for what a global and local change of heart might look like. The Paris agreement committed the signatories to limiting global warming to less than 2 degrees Celsius compared with pre-industrial levels, and to seek to bring that down to 1.5 degrees, which is likely to mean the earth as a whole achieving zero emissions sometime between 2030 and 2050.

What I want to do tonight is to dig inside both the Pope's thinking and that of the Paris delegates, and identify what the ecological debate is really about, and where we can focus our energies in responding faithfully to it. Briefly put, the ecological crisis is this: the rate of extinction of species is at around 10,000 per annum. Biodiversity has been drastically reduced by deforestation, deep sea fishing, destruction of coral reefs, and use of pesticides. Climate change is accelerating, and is especially being caused by the burning of fossil fuels for heating, transportation, and electricity production. This is leading to rising sea levels, increasing numbers of cyclones, and the melting of the Antarctic ice shelf. Pollution is widespread in oceans, rivers, air, and soil. CFC emissions have led to an expanding hole in the ozone layer and consequent skin cancers in humans and mammals, especially in countries close to the Antarctic ozone hole. Meanwhile soil erosion and desertification have been steadily increasing, linked to overgrazing, industrial tillage, and the use of inappropriate land (for example, hillsides) for arable production.

The real question is, whose problem is it? There are roughly four answers to this question, and those four answers respectively tell us what we need to know about the whole issue.

The first answer is, the problem is one for governments and corporations. This is what we might call the Paris answer. It sees the problem as largely a technological one, caused by the side effects of technological advance, and to be solved in much the same way. It's sceptical about the potential of sweeping cultural changes: in reality people are not going to abandon their addiction to the car, jet flight is not going to cease, those in developing countries notably India and China are not going to desist from desiring the same level of fossil fuel consumption that Americans and Europeans take for granted. It's pragmatic about setting timescales, identifying milestones, establishing a critical path towards a broadly similar lifestyle that has far fewer deleterious environmental consequences. The reality at Paris was that a good outcome largely depended on the US and China being persuaded acceding to ambitious carbon-emission capping targets; and in the end only one argument was persuasive: that their own long-term well-being depended upon it. While currently the enforcement mechanisms on high-polluting countries are not sufficiently binding, this approach places its confidence in the market to disinvest in carbon-reliant companies and governments to introduce policies that have an eye to long-term security. In short, the whole issue is one that can be budgeted for and managed and resolved.

The second answer is, the problem is one for the global poor. From this perspective, global warming is a cerebral and long-term issue for the rich and comfortable: it's a present and tangible issue for the world's poor. Those living in poorer countries, and those on the economic fringe of

wealthier countries, are disproportionately affected by climate change. The irony is that these are the people least responsible for causing the ecological crisis. A 2009 report claims that already 300,000 people a year are dying from the effects of climate change – and a further four billion are affected by drought, floods, crop failures, reduced agricultural yields, the loss of low-lying lands and islands, and desertification. The danger is that all the efforts of the last two generations in poverty reduction are being undone by climate change, and that bringing more people out of poverty may exacerbate climate change. From the perspective of governments and corporations, this may look simply like another management challenge. But from the point of view of the global poor, the disproportionate cost of global warming on those who've done least to bring it about is the epitome of the injustice that lies at the heart of global trade and economic relationships. Not only have the rich despoiled their lands, but they've caused ecological crisis and then retreated to leave the poor facing that crisis alone. To see this is to perceive a different kind of ethics, one that prioritises the poor and believes the rich governments and corporations don't just need to manage the crisis, they need to be held to account and face sanctions and offer concrete reparations. The issue isn't management, it's justice.

The third answer is, the problem is one for the earth itself. I vividly recall a congregation member in my first parish saying, 'You clergy aren't really the church. You'll be here for a while and then you'll move on. We, the congregation, are the real church. We'll be here long after you're forgotten.' The same could be said of humankind's relationship to the planet. We're the priests of creation, fostering and facilitating and enjoying and ordering creation. But the world was here before us, and, quite possibly, it'll be here long after we're gone. We've done more damage than any previous species. But arguably the damage has been largely to ourselves. The earth will find a way to recover from the impact we've had on it, even if it takes a billion years or two: but what we do to the planet may make it impossible for our own species to survive. It's important to keep that sense of perspective. Humanity has the ability to do a lot of damage; but the earth will win out over the long term, however much damage humanity does to it. The issue for humanity is less whether there'll be a future for the planet, than whether there'll be a future for itself.

And that brings us to the fourth answer, which is, the problem is in the end about God. Not a problem *for* God: if humanity destroys the planet, or makes it uninhabitable, God is perfectly capable of creating a new planet, or a new species to be in special, incarnate relationship with. Instead, a problem that arises as an almost inevitable result of seeking a world without God. St Augustine makes a distinction between what we use and what we enjoy. Augustine says that what we use is of limited value, and serves mainly to enable us to reach what we enjoy. It quickly runs out, and is largely a means to an end. By contrast what we enjoy is an end in itself. It never runs out. It is of value for its own sake. The ecological crisis, in Augustine's terms, is simply expressed: we have used what should be enjoyed. How do we learn to enjoy, and not simply to use? The principal place is in worship. In worship we reorder the world so as to enjoy that which otherwise we would simply use. Every created thing has a source and a destiny: it may be a gift to us, but we should never assume that gift is our possession; rather it's a reminder of where it came from and what purpose it serves in the kingdom. Wine comes from the grape and exists to embody Christ's blood in the Eucharist; bread comes from grain and exists to convey Christ's body.

To dwell in the world in such a spirit of worship means to exult in the sheer abundance of the world and the universe beyond. It is a form of resistance to the pragmatic, bureaucratic, utilitarian culture widespread in so much human society and a celebration of the existence of things for their own sake. This should be the spirit of every act of worship: it is a joy to be alive, to be redeemed, to be a child of God, to be placed in such a great story, to live among such glorious dimensions of God's creation. The seventeenth-century poet Thomas Traherne captures this vocation to enjoy creation. He says, 'When things are ours in their proper places, nothing is needful but ... to enjoy them. God therefore hath made it infinitely easy to enjoy, by making everything ours Everything is ours that serves us in its place. The Sun serves us as much as is possible, and more than we could imagine. The Clouds and Stars minister unto us, the World surrounds us with beauty, the Air refresheth us, the Sea revives the earth and us. The Earth itself is better than gold because it produceth fruits and

flowers. ... By making one, and not a multitude, God evidently shewed one alone to be the end of the World and every one its enjoyer. For every one may enjoy it as much as he.' (1.14) Thus the goal of dwelling with the creation is to enjoy the world as God enjoys it.

Traherne articulates perfectly the state of mind that's missing in humanity's maltreatment of creation. Pope Francis' encyclical has plenty of lament for how humankind has lapsed into the habits that have brought about the ecological crisis. But the Pope never comes close to Traherne's ability to convey what a right relationship might feel like. This is how Traherne expresses it. 'Your enjoyment of the world is never right,' he says, 'till every morning you awake in Heaven; see yourself in your Father's Palace; and look upon the skies, the earth, and the air as Celestial Joys: having such a reverend esteem of all, as if you were among the Angels.' (1.28) He goes on, 'You never enjoy the world aright, till the Sea itself floweth in your veins, till you are clothed with the heavens, and crowned with the stars: and perceive yourself to be the sole heir of the whole world Till you can sing and rejoice and delight in God, as misers do in gold, and Kings in sceptres ...' (1.29) Traherne prescribes what qualities are required to be a person who can so take delight and give thanks in all things: he says, 'You never enjoy the World aright, till you see all things in it so perfectly yours, that you cannot desire them any other way: and till you are convinced that all things serve you best in their proper places. ... you must have Glorious Principles implanted in your nature; a clear eye able to see afar off, a great and generous heart, apt to enjoy at any distance: a good and liberal Soul prone to delight in the felicity of all, and an infinite delight to be their Treasure.' (1.38) And this is not simply about appreciating the creation around us. It is about one another and the ways of God. Traherne goes on, 'Your enjoyment is never right, till you esteem every Soul so great a treasure as our Saviour doth: and that the laws of God are sweeter than the honey and honeycomb because they command you to love them all in such perfect manner. ... God commandeth you to love all like Him, because He would have you to be His Son, all them to be your riches, you to be glorious before them, and all the creatures in serving them to be your treasures, while you are His delight, like Him in beauty, and the darling of His bosom.' (1.39)

I've outlined four ways of perceiving the issue of climate change. The Paris approach is full of confidence in the first model – that global warming is something that can be managed, slowed, and eventually halted, although probably not reversed. Pope Francis, while he speaks a good deal about the second model, that of global justice and the rights of the poor, is fundamentally oriented to the fourth model. For him, climate change isn't an issue that can be addressed in isolation: it epitomises humanity's alienation from true living, deep relationship, and worship of the living God. Hearing the Pope's denunciations of the way we live now, and missing the affirmation of contemporary culture his predecessors tended to include, some have seen this as the most anti-modern encyclical since the notorious Syllabus of Errors in 1864.

The truth is, Christians can't afford to ignore any of these four models. We simply need to work our way through them backwards. I believe we should begin, in the spirit of Traherne, with the sheer overwhelming joy of God and abundant delight of creation, and seek to embody that joy and delight in our life of discipleship and ministry, with all the repentance and change of life that involves. We should then take a sober estimate of our place in the 8 billion years of the earth's history, and neither exaggerate nor downplay the significance of this moment. Then we should attend to the egregious injustice that those who've done least to bring the ecological crisis about are bearing its most pressing effects. And finally, neither deterred by the purity of our worship nor overcome by the anger of our perception of injustice, we must participate in the political process of managing cultural and social change, accepting that the only argument that will prevail is that we are all doing this for our own good.