

Lenten reflection from Greg Hughson

Ecological Repentance

Lent is a good time to evaluate and assess the quality of our inner lives, our outer lives and the health and well-being of our planet. During Lent we seek to identify and address those sins and behaviours which are holding us back from becoming the people and the planetary nations that God created us to be.

The main obstruction to creative and life-giving change is human denial.

Both in our individual lives and in our national policies we experience varying degrees of denial. As humans we tend to deny that we need to address and change individual destructive behaviours. We humans are also in denial as a species, in relation to our responsibility to address climate change. During Lent we journey towards the cross, praying for strength from God to change our hearts, our minds and our behaviours so that we can live healthier lives of love and goodness and work together to “save” our planet. Salvation now has far more than an individual human significance. Our planetary ecological systems, upon which human and all life depends, are disintegrating.

An appropriate hymn to sing during Lent, and throughout the year is “Touch the Earth lightly”. The music is by Colin Gibson and words by Shirley Erena Murray (Alleluia Aotearoa 143).

“Touch the earth lightly, use the earth gently, nourish the life of the world in our care: gift of great wonder, ours to surrender, trust for the children tomorrow will bear. We who endanger, who create hunger, agents of death for all creatures that live, we who would foster clouds of disaster, God of our planet, forestall and forgive”

To forestall something is to prevent or obstruct it, to take action in advance to prevent a disaster. When we sing Shirley’s and Colin’s hymn we are asking God to forgive us our ecological sins. As people of God we can help forestall ecological disaster through taking action to reduce greenhouse gas emissions. Also, very importantly we can advocate for national and international policies to prevent catastrophic disintegration of our planetary ecosystems. Will we be agents of death, or agents of life? Will we work for ecological resurrection and healing or allow the disintegration to continue with disastrous consequences.

In Colossians 1: 16-17 we read that “For by Christ were all things created, both seen and unseen”. Christ’s creativity and healing action is ongoing in

creation. Christian people can co-operate with this divine impulse and help restore creation at all levels (See <https://www.arocha.org.nz/>)

David Wallace-Wells has devoted his life to waking people up to the threat of climate change. He is deputy editor of the *New York* magazine. According to a recent *Listener* article (March 9-15 2019) David came to be more and more alarmed by climate change - initially by reading, then writing about the subject. David writes that with no action to cut greenhouse-gas emissions, a worse case scenario predicted by the United Nations is an increased global temperature of 8 degrees by 2100. This would result in many of the world's cities being underwater as result of substantial sea level rise. Tropical diseases would reach as far as the Arctic. At the equator and in the tropics even to walk outside would be to risk death. Fires and hurricanes would, meanwhile continue to ravage forests and coasts. David has just released a book entitled "The Uninhabitable Earth" which reads like a passionate call to arms. The UN's special climate report, released last October states that to prevent catastrophic warming, a global mobilisation not seen since World War 2 is necessary. David writes "We have reached the end of normal, in terms of climate stability and predictability. We have exited the window of environmental conditions that allowed humans to evolve. The climate system that raised us is now dead" Climate change is already here and is unstoppable. A warming planet will lead to melting ice in the Arctic and Antarctic. The whiteness of ice causes the sun's rays to reflect back into the sky (the albedo effect). When ice melts and becomes dark ocean, it absorbs heat rather than reflects it so the planet warms faster still.

A warming planet will also melt Arctic ice permafrost, which contains 1.8 trillion tonnes of carbon, more than twice as much as is currently suspended in the earth's atmosphere, some of which when it is thawed and released, may evaporate as methane, which is 34 times more powerful a greenhouse gas warming blanket than carbon dioxide. A hotter planet is bad for plant life, which results in forest dieback, resulting in a dramatic reduction of our planet's ability to absorb carbon and turn it into oxygen, which means still hotter temperatures and more dieback – and so on. Higher temperatures mean more fires and fewer trees, which means less carbon absorption. More carbon in the atmosphere means a hotter planet still – and so on.

A warmer planet means more vapour in the atmosphere, and water vapour being a greenhouse gas, brings higher temperatures. Warmer oceans can absorb less heat, which means more heat stays in the air. The oceans contain

less oxygen which leads to the death of phytoplankton, which normally does for the ocean what plants do on land i.e. consuming carbon and producing oxygen. This results in more carbon in the oceans. There are many, many other feedback loops of cause and effect. What is driving all of this is anthropocentric (human) initiated fossil fuel consumption.

NZ's gross green-house gas emissions increased by 20 % between 1996 and 2016. Methane from dairy cattle and carbon dioxide generated from road transport were the main causes of the increase. 2018 set a record of warmth for NZ with average temperatures up by 0.94 degrees. November 2017 saw record sea surface temperatures in the Tasman sea. NZ's sea level rise aligns with the global average so far. Globally, sea level is projected to rise 20-40 cm by 2060.

China, which has the world's largest carbon footprint grew its emissions 3% in the first half of 2018. Globally, coal-fired power has nearly doubled since 2000.

We need, David suggests, to operate at the level of advocating strongly for policy changes. School students in NZ went out on strike (Friday 15th March) out of a frustration with the slow rate of policy change. We, in NZ need to urgently reduce the number of ruminants (especially dairy cows) in this country and move away from petrol-driven vehicles. Public transport and electric powered cars need to be subsidised so as to be attractive options to the current planet-destroying methane producing animals and carbon dioxide emitting vehicles. We need to plant more trees (underway) and prohibit any further oil exploration, which is already NZ Government policy.

We, via our Government, need to advocate for policy changes to be made by the big polluters who are literally destroying our planet i.e. China, the USA, India and Russia. There needs to be an urgent change of mindset if our planet is to remain habitable. Already, climate change is the most serious issue facing Pacific nations. More affluent countries, including our own, are to some extent still in denial.

“Let there be greening, birth from the burning, water that blesses and air that is sweet, health in God's garden, hope in God's children, regeneration that peace will complete” (Shirley Murray). During Lent and on into the future, may we all pray for and work together for “resurrection” from the multifaceted ecological deaths and processes currently happening as a result of inherently selfish human-caused (anthropogenic) climate change. May we, as a species, transition from being agents of death to agents of life and healing.

One idea for Palm Sunday and Holy week is to prayerfully plant as many trees as possible in your area, as a sign of commitment to caring for God's earth leading up to Good Friday and Easter.

May our goal be the restoration of creation. May all we do, contribute to the healing not only of our own local ecosystems but to the healing of the nations. The death and resurrection of Jesus reminds us that when all appeared to be lost, that a new beginning was miraculously possible. Let's apply this theology to help motivate us to forestall death and to preserve life on this tiny but precious planet.

Revelation 22:1-2 Eden restored

22 Then the angel showed me the river of the water of life, as clear as crystal, flowing from the throne of God and of the Lamb ² down the middle of the great street of the city. On each side of the river stood the tree of life, bearing twelve crops of fruit, yielding its fruit every month. And the leaves of the tree are for the healing of the nations.

A highly recommended book :

“Creation and Hope Reflections on Ecological Anticipation and Action from Aotearoa-NZ” 2018

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