

## Sermon from Sunday 1<sup>st</sup> October 2023 Harvest festival

### Psalm 104: 1, 10-28 and 1 John 3: 16-end

There was a time not long ago when celebrating the harvest seemed a bit of a throwback to a more rural time. We wondered what the relevance was to us in our urban society, with food available all year round at the supermarket. But today all that has changed. The interest in where our food comes from and how it is produced is greater than ever. We are realising that our lifestyles and choices have had a huge negative impact on our world. The consumption of fossil fuels leading to global warming; pollution of rivers and streams and air; the curse of plastic waste; deforestation, intensive farming; the loss of habitats and species. So many issues are now major concerns for all of us, and particularly the younger generations. When, as a student, I got involved with Friends of the Earth they were seen as a few doom mongering extremists. Now it is main stream.

So today as we celebrate the harvest and give thanks for all that we have to eat, let's focus on this environmental crisis and ask is climate change something we should be

concerned about not just as human beings but as Christians? What can we bring to the table of the climate change debate?

I choose our first reading today, psalm 104, as it is just one of many psalms that sings of God's wonderful provision for us in creation. This psalm tells not just that God made the world, but that he sustains it. It is a picture of perfect balance and harmony. He waters the mountains, he makes the grass grow, he made the cycle of the seasons and of days and nights, and there is a place for all. It says:

*All creatures look to you to give them their food at the proper time; when you give it to them they gather it up; when you open your hand they are satisfied with good things.*

As Christians we believe that this world is not ours, but God's. Made by him, sustained by him. We were created, as it says in Genesis 2, to tend the garden and take care of it. But sadly we have too often treated it as ours to use as we like, to plunder and destroy, and we're surprised when we suffer as a result. Maybe we saw ourselves as separate from the rest of creation - but I don't think the Genesis stories were meant to give us that impression.

The ancient peoples who wrote them lived in balance and harmony with their environment. If they did not they suffered famine and hardship. Maybe we misunderstood the words of Genesis 1 where it says God made us in his image, to rule over the fish and the birds and livestock. But surely a good ruler cares for the wellbeing of those they have responsibility for? They do not exploit and destroy it. And ultimately God is ruler of all and we answer to him.

As Christians I think we can contribute a view of the world as God's handiwork that we respect and protect. It is not ours to do with as we wish. We can talk as the psalmist does, of the perfect balance that God has planned, where every creature has its place and can thrive. An appreciation of the connectedness of ecology, of its harmony and balance, and mutual interdependence, which might seem very new and modern but we know is actually very ancient and God given.

The second thing I think we as Christians can contribute to the debate on climate change is the biblical message of care for the poor. For it is the poorest who are being most impacted by climate change and environmental damage. If the shop runs out of potatoes we can always eat pasta.

But if you depend on your crop to feed your family, if the coast of staple foods go through the roof because of drought or floods, the poorest have no other choices and they starve. It is those already on the margins who are the first to bear the impact of climate change. Those in low lying islands in the Indian Ocean who face their whole country disappearing under rising sea levels. Those whose farms are turning to desert in front of their eyes.

The Bible is quite clear. We have a responsibility towards the poor, the orphan, the widow, the stranger. The rules of the harvest in biblical times required the deliberate leaving of gleanings so the poor and landless could gather enough to survive. In the letter I read from the apostle John he reminds his church of this duty of care:

*if anyone has material possessions and sees a brother or sister in need, but has no pity on them, how can the love of God be in that person'?*

What a challenge to us in the west as we watch the poorer parts of the world struggle.

We have brothers and sisters on the front line of climate change right now and we should listen to them and get their voice heard in the world. Christian aid, Tear fund,

Cafod, and many other Christian charities are doing great work highlighting the impact of climate change on the poor. John challenges us to be people of actions not just words, so how are we going to join in and ensure the poor are given priority in the decisions that are made?

The third thing I think we as Christians have to contribute to the topic of climate change is more subtle perhaps – it is about hope. It is easy to despair and become fatalistic when you see the dangers we are facing. I hear that many young people are feeling hopeless: that we have left it too late to stop the changes, that there will be no future for them and their children and grandchildren.

I think as Christians we can offer hope for the future. We have a vision of the world in which ultimately it does not all end badly. We believe that one day God will remake this damaged world and it will be truly perfect as he intended it to be. That should surely give us hope.

But it doesn't mean that we shouldn't care what happens in the meantime. We don't stop caring for the sick because we believe that one day they will rise to new life. I think the same applies to our world. Believing that this is God's world, that he created it and sustains it and loves it

and will one day fix it – should inspire us to join in his work to make it a better place for everyone to live in.

As Christians we are used to being hopeful in apparently hopeless situations. To putting our trust in a God who can do more than we can possibly imagine. So let's apply that to environmental issues too, and bring some hope to those who are feeling like it is all hopeless. God can do amazing things and we can be part of that. We're going to hear a little later from our fantastic eco team about what we can all do to play our part.

So to recap, what can we as Christians bring to the climate change debate: –

An understanding that the world is God's, not ours, and our role is to care for it

That throughout the Bible, in Jesus teaching and later, the care of the poor is so important, they are our brothers and sisters and we must look out for them.

And lastly we can bring a message of hope. Now is not the time to feel defeated and give up. We can have hope for the future.

And if you are feeling that what you do will make no difference, the problem is just too big. I want to finish with a statement I saw on the wall of a zero waste shop.

It said:

‘We don’t need one person to do zero waste perfectly – we need thousands of people to do it imperfectly.’

Thousands of Christians making small changes adds up to a lot of change. So what change, big or small, are you going to make this harvest time as we give thanks to God for his world and his provision for us, and acknowledge the huge challenges we all face. We’ve brought our gifts this morning – but what change in our lifestyle and consumption, can we give as a gift to the world and to God?

Questions:

1. Find out what Christian Aid are saying about the impact of climate change.
2. What one action are you going to take after today?