

St Edmundsbury Cathedral



Climate Justice

Sunday 25 June 2023

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Sermon by the Rt Rev'd Dr Mike Harrison, Bishop of Dunwich

Scripture Text: Mark 4:35-41 – Jesus stills the storm.

“Are you angry with him?” The aid worker was asking a woman in South Madagascar this question after learning that the woman’s husband had left saying he was going to look for work elsewhere because the soil didn’t yield crops any more. He never got in touch again. Now she lives with their 3 children in a refugee camp near the market in the city of Ambovombe. ‘Camp’ makes it sound like Centre Parcs – it’s not. There is a parking lot for ox carts around which 70 families have pitched their tents. I say tents, they’re nothing but a couple of poles draped at waist height with plastic sheeting from used rice sacks. When there’s no market the children play football in the square. Well they try....many of the children are sick; coughs, headaches, diarrhoea, rashes – on wonder living in a paddock.

The woman says “no I’m not angry with him. If he loved me I would show him some anger, but as it is I don’t waste my time on him. Collecting wood every day with the children, selling it at the market and buying my mother something to eat – she is too old to go with us to the woods – I don’t have the strength to be angry.”

Her income is about 50 pence a day – enough for a little bit of noodles or a bit of rice with practically nothing else. At least there’s a water tap here – just one for the 70 households and the livestock. Twice a year some organisation brings a few sacks of rice. Most of the aid organisations that hurried to south Madagascar in autumn 2021 after the UN declared the world’s first climate caused famine have cut back their work or moved it to the eastern coast, where a series of cyclones hit in Feb 2022.

The forest she is cutting down for wood isn’t going to last. She wants to cut only as many trees as she can replant, but she hasn’t got the money for saplings, only enough for the rice.

If you ask her why it doesn’t rain she says “I don’t know; it must be God’s will”. Most of the people in South Madagascar haven’t heard of climate change. The UK produces 100 times more greenhouse gas emissions than Madagascar, which emits just 0.01% of the world’s emissions – did you hear that stat, just 0.01%.

I’m not trying to depress you. I’m just reminding us of the concrete impacts of climate change on those who have done nothing to cause it.

Our reading today would have put the first hearers of it in mind of those OT stories about the primeval waters of chaos and how God confined and restrained the waters of chaos so there could be a stable environment for living things. A storm on Lake Galilee would have been enough to raise thoughts of ancient chaos. So when Jesus cries out “peace, be still!” this echoes God’s call in Ps 104.7 “at your rebuke the waters flee” and Job 26.12 “By his power he stills the sea” and so on – which is why the disciples ask “WHO is this that even the wind and the sea obey him?” Only God fits the description. What the gospel is inviting us to conclude is that In Jesus we see ahead of time God’s action in establishing harmony in creation, bringing peace to a disordered world.

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So what's this to do with climate change? Well the story reminds us that if we would share in God's purposes for creation then it's about bringing a rich harmony and stability to our world, not plundering our forests, emptying the seas of fish, melting the icecaps out of greed for profit, addiction to consumption and self-centred acquisition that kills the environment. And we learn elsewhere that sharing in God's purposes is to love our neighbours as ourselves. And the neighbour is not defined except as one completely unlike ourselves – a man beaten up in the ditch or a Good Samaritan in Lk 15, a prisoner, someone famished, thirsty, a stranger, a sick person, or otherwise different from us in Mt 25, even our enemy in Mt 5 and the poorest of the poor as in Luke 4. Indeed someone like that woman in South Madagascar abandoned by her husband and eeking out a subsistence living for her children.

You may say "but the problem of climate change is so great and my contribution is so small", that it is like turning up at the site of an earthquake with a dustpan and brush. Yes it is, but here is where our faith can challenge our pessimism. Remember how Jesus takes the 5 loaves and the two fishes and does something remarkable with so little? Remember how Jesus says to the cripple in Mk 2 get up take your mat and walk – now the man would have been within his rights to say "er, I can't, that's the point, I'm a cripple". But he doesn't – he endeavours to get up, AND HE DOES! Remember how Jesus says to the man with the withered arm in Mk 3 "stretch it out" – the man could have said "er, it's withered, stop messing with me" but no, he attempts to stretch it out and it is restored. And even in the storm on the lake – the disciples are involved – rousing Jesus from his slumbers to act. The point is that we are to offer in faith the small things for God to amplify and turn into a big difference. The rule of thumb seems to be God does nothing without us that God could do with us. So you need to turn up with your dust pan and brush, these can be the openings for God possibilities.

What does that mean concretely? Well as you may already know, among other things it means finding ways to consume less and appreciate more; be sparing with meat, dairy and waste; support leaders who demonstrate good habits of environmental concern and climate care; take your concerns to school, to work, to the shops and everywhere you spend money; be a role model for sustainable living; don't beat yourself up but don't let yourself off the hook either. And pray – pray as if everything depends on God – and act, act as if everything depends on us Amen.