

# “Climate change”

Sermon - Gregor Henderson

Wesley Church, Canberra - 29 November 2009

Luke 21:25-36

In our three year cycle of Bible readings, the first Sunday in Advent always tells us of the rather scary signs of the end of the world, about earthquakes and disasters and strange events in the skies, about false messiahs and violent conflicts, and above all else about the second coming of Christ, “coming in a cloud with power and great glory” and the day of judgment. The old Christian tradition from centuries ago is that pondering the second coming of Christ at the beginning of Advent will somehow prepare us to celebrate again the first coming of Christ, born in Bethlehem at Christmas.

This year, Year C in our lectionary, we read Luke’s version of these predictions about the return of Christ as God brings about the end of the world. There’s one interesting difference in Luke compared with Matthew and Mark. Only in Luke is there reference to the oceans as part of the scary events which will signal the last days. Luke speaks of the “distress among nations confused by the roaring of the sea and the waves”. That sounds very much like king tides and storm surges and tsunamis, events which seem to be striking the world more frequently now than ever before.

Now, I’m not wanting to suggest we should be marching round the streets with placards proclaiming “The end of the world is nigh - prepare to meet thy doom” - for there are more than enough preachers who have claimed to know the end is near and every one of them has been wrong, at least to date! Rather, I want to use the reference in our gospel reading today as an excuse to consider climate change and to let you know that the church throughout the world is very active in seeking action against climate change.

This month I was one of 60 church leaders invited to New York to join what the World Council of Churches calls the “United Nations Advocacy Week”, a week which takes place every year when churches send representatives to the UN to advocate on a particular issue. Not surprisingly this year’s focus was on climate change and specifically on the needs of people across the world who are being displaced from their homes because of climate change.

We had people with us from the Pacific, from the horn of Africa, from the great lakes region of Africa, from India and Bangladesh, and from Colombia, each of whom told us firsthand stories of their fellow-citizens who’ve already been displaced from their homes because of climate change. From Tuvalu, formerly known as the Ellis Islands, we saw photos of a small island which used to be home to 22 households. Now only 6 homes are left, the other 16 have been washed away in the past few years due to the rising sea levels and the increasing number of storms. Remarkably, the six families that still live on this tiny diminishing island, their home for generations, do not want to leave - they are in denial that they will soon need to find a new home elsewhere. The whole population of Tuvalu, only about 10,000 people mind you, is under threat, and they’ve been appealing for some years now to Australia and New Zealand to help them find a safe new island home for their whole population. A church leader from our partner church in Kiribati was also with us, formerly the Gilbert Islands. He told us that when he was a child the big high tides and the storm surges that destroy people’s homes and livelihoods happened only once every few years; now, he says, they happen five or six times every year. The population of Kiribati, some 78,000 people, is also under threat from the rising sea levels.

An assistant secretary-general of the UN came and spoke with us. Olav Kjørven told us the UN is keen to work with religious groups, as he says more than 85% of people in the world are people of faith who are influenced by their religious leaders. He also referred to the economic clout of the world's religions, giving us the interesting statistics that 8% of the world's land is owned by religious groups, and that religions are the third largest sector in the world in terms of superannuation funds. The UN met recently at Windsor Castle in England with leaders of the world's religions, precisely to seek their help in advocating for action on climate change in the build-up to the Copenhagen conference.

Churches have been involved in the climate change issue for more than 20 years. The World Council of Churches issued its first call to action on climate change in 1988. In the Uniting Church we've been raising the issue with our governments over the past 10 years, advocating for serious efforts to reduce carbon emissions, to develop alternative energy sources and to assist poorer countries like Tuvalu and Kiribati who are suffering the effects of climate change even though they've made no contribution to it.

In New York our 60 representatives made direct submissions to over 40 national missions to the UN as well as directly to UN bureaucrats. I found it rather embarrassing that when I spoke with ambassadors from Poland, Jamaica and the Philippines each of them noted I was Australian and immediately made negative comments about Australia's high level of carbon emissions, our lack of commitment on climate change and the importance of our potentially positive role in Copenhagen. Each of them also welcomed the fact that churches are advocating with governments and with the UN for concerted action.

Two theological imperatives drive the churches to work for action on climate change:

- first is the role given to human beings by God in caring for creation; the creation narratives in Genesis tell us that God created this beautiful world, regards it as good, and expects us humans, the pinnacle of his creation, to be stewards, caretakers of all God's gifts in creation;
- and second is the fact that people are suffering from the effects of climate change, that those who suffer most are amongst the poorest people in the world, that their suffering is particularly unjust in that they have not had the benefits of the wealthy economies which are contributing so much to climate change, and that God calls us always to seek the relief of suffering and to address the root causes of that suffering.

And then there's the scientific imperative, denied by some and regarded with scepticism by others, that climate change is caused by human activity and is worsening, that sea levels are continuing to rise, that the effects on coastal regions, on diseases, on homes and livelihoods and probably on international relationships, amount to nothing less than catastrophe for the next generations of humankind.

So today, the first Sunday in Advent, we are reminded that God will bring this world to an end, in his own good time, and that in the meantime we are called to be stewards of God's creation and workers against the suffering and injustice affecting millions of our fellow-humans. May this Advent season and this Christmas season see the world doing more to combat climate change and to reduce the suffering of those most affected.

To the glory of God. Amen.