

# Christ Church Institute



## Inaugural Lecture

Friday 6<sup>th</sup> October, 2023

7.30pm

### Topic:

The Anglican Church and the Environment:  
Caught between extinction rebellion & climate  
denial - Where to next?



## Bishop George Browning PhD DLitt

### Caught between Extinction Rebellion and Climate Denial – where to next?

*The supreme reality of our time is our indivisibility as children of God and our common vulnerability on this planet<sup>1</sup>.*

I was 21 years old when John F Kennedy uttered these words to the Irish Parliament. There is little doubt that at that time the prospect of nuclear disaster was uppermost in his mind, little thought was then being given to an approaching environmental catastrophe. However, by the 1970's scientists were warning that the industrial revolution, made possible through the burning of fossil fuels, was yielding an unwanted and threatening consequence to the biosphere. Today, sixty year later, the environmental catastrophe, a present reality not just a possible future threat, has almost eclipsed the menace of nuclear disaster as the planet's most existential threat. The doomsday clock has again been brought forward; it now sits at 90 seconds to midnight.

Father Shane and members of the St Lucia Parish, thank you for inviting me to give this address in what is a very sombre context, but equally, it is an address that must be delivered with more than a little splash of hope, and an understanding of what we can and must do. I do not wish to rehearse (or rehash) the science, it has been settled for some time. What has changed is not the science, but an update of assumptions based on the science. As frightening as the prognostications were, say, in the early 2000's, the reality is that they were understated, the situation being far more serious, and with greater accelerating speed than had been anticipated. How do we respond? What new and compelling insight can be gained? In this address, I want to focus on theology, and economy. Theology is a Christian's viewing point for understanding the world and human behaviour, based on our understanding of the divine ordering of things. Albert Einstein is reported to have said: "God reveals himself in the orderly harmony of what exists." The economy consists of the production and consumption of goods, refined in most of the world as the free-market.

As a Christian, what I find distressing is not just that science is contested by those whose self-interest leads them to dabble with alternative facts, but that some Christians contest the

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<sup>1</sup> John F Kennedy, Address before the Irish Parliament in Dublin, June 28 1963

assertion that environmental issues must be considered first order Gospel priorities. As you know, the fifth mark of Anglican mission as stated by the Anglican Consultative Council is: *To strive to safeguard the integrity of creation and sustain and renew the life of the earth*. Each mark facilitates the other four. We cannot properly care for people in need, address unjust structures, or indeed evangelise, without taking creation seriously.

## 1. Theology

What the Church/Christians believe about creation and what is believed about an ideal human society, are intertwining claims to truth arising from an understanding that creation is a single house (oikos). (It is from the idea of a single house that we derive the words ecology, economy and ecumenism). However, since the industrial revolution a new human society has been created with an emphasis upon the freedom, autonomy, and rights that individuals can claim, and nations assert. This movement has seriously contested the fundamental concept of a single house, a view shared by both the Christian faith and contemporary science. This period, influenced by the enlightenment, has not been anti-religious, but it has developed an ideology of human reason and autonomy without reference to a meta religious narrative. Christianity does not fit with an individualised world view, nor does natural or ecological science, but sadly many popularised versions of Church attempt to make the fit and in so doing prostitute the faith. The supreme irony is that it is not liberal minded Christians who undermine the faith as conservatives maintain, but conservatives who prosecute a faith which exhorts individualism.

Bishop Lesslie Newbigin, from my perspective a theological and episcopal hero, said the enlightenment spawned two distinct worlds:

*The public world is the world of facts upon which every intelligent person is expected to agree – or being capable of being persuaded. The private world is the world where we are free to follow our own preferences – a world in which there is no right or wrong in lifestyle. The response of the Christian Church post the enlightenment has been to retreat into the private world. It has secured for itself a continuing place at the cost of surrendering the crucial field.<sup>2</sup>*

That we have surrendered the crucial field needs little attestation. Most of our contemporary statements, overheard in the public space, relate either to personal piety, or they are judgemental, moral assertions in the fields of sexuality and gender.

How has it come to this? I proffer the view that since the Reformation a theology of redemption outside the context in which it must always reside – creation, has predominated in the preaching and teaching of much western Christianity. Redemption that sits outside a theology

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<sup>2</sup> Lesslie Foolishness to the Greeks, 19

of creation breeds individualism, together with the rivalry and competitiveness with which individualism is inevitably associated. In 1967 Lyn White in his devastating: *The historical roots of our ecological crisis*, placed the blame for the environmental crisis at the feet of Christianity's individualism.<sup>3</sup> What White wrote is undoubtedly overstated, nevertheless, we dismiss his analysis at our peril if we wish to make a difference from the perspective of faith. I hardly need to remind you all that contemporary responses to the environmental crisis at a local, regional, national or international level are always couched in terms of self-interest. As I sit at the computer writing these words, a headline news item has been the revelation that Mark McGowan, when Premier of Western Australia, pressurised the head of the Environmental Protection Authority to remove WA's tough emissions targets. Apparently, he did so at the request of the big miners and the self-interest of WA's budget.

The outcome of redemption is always new creation. Creation is about relatedness, about a single house. In a single house good can only be good when it is common. Rowan Williams wrote:

*No process whose goal is the limited or exclusive security of an individual or interest group or even national community alone can be regarded as unequivocally good in Christian terms because of the underlying aspiration to a state of security in isolation.*<sup>4</sup>

Where we perceive our place to be in the world is determined by our viewing point. Our Christian viewing point is the Logos of God; the living word to which the written word bears testimony. *All things came into being through him and without him not one thing came into being. (John 1: 3)* From this viewing point we understand the relatedness of all things, requiring good to be understood as common. This is our ethical cornerstone. On the other hand, some kick the environmental can down the road saying technology will ultimately solve our problems. Technology carries no ethical mandate. Its provisions have the capacity to enrich and harm in equal measure.

We need a global ethic that is more than the sum of existing human declarations of rights and freedoms. In 1993 Dr Hans Küng drafted a "Declaration of the Religions for a Global Ethic at the parliament for World Religions. The final paragraph of the Global Ethic reads:

*Earth cannot be changed for the better unless the consciousness of individuals is changed first. We pledge to increase our awareness by disciplining our minds, by meditation, by prayer, or by positive thinking. Without risk and a readiness to sacrifice there can be no fundamental change in our situation. Therefore, we commit*

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<sup>3</sup> Lyn White *The historical roots of our ecological crisis* Science 155

<sup>4</sup> Rowan Williams, *Faith in the public Square* 229

*ourselves to this global ethic, to understanding one another, and to socially beneficial, peace-fostering, and nature-friendly ways of life.*<sup>5</sup>

Because science and technology, in and of themselves do not work within an ethical framework, it is difficult to see how a global ethic can emerge other than from within a religious framework. The kenosis passage from Philippians 2: 5 – 11 offers the kind of ethical framework the current crisis demands, but it is too counter intuitive for those outside of faith to embrace.

Wisdom calls in the streets, begging that all human endeavour submit to the order of relational harmony in which all things are held. Just as there are physical laws which prescribe and describe the way the universe operates, so there are relational precepts which we might choose to ignore, but which we cannot abrogate. Let me give Jürgen Moltmann the final word in this section:

*We human persons need each other within communities. We human communities need each other within the community of humanity. We humanity, need nature within the community of creation. We, the creation, need God our Creator and Re-creator.*<sup>6</sup>

## **2. Economy**

Climate denialism is not really about climate, any more than the Referendum No vote is about First Nations People and their flourishing. Climate denialism is about the defence of an economic theory, namely an unfettered free-market economy, unrestricted by regulation. Its attack on global warming, emissions reduction and climate science is a consequence of a fierce defence of a free and unregulated market. It is a theory that in all things the market must prevail and the individual's right to make money must face no regulatory limit. Clive Palmer, Barnaby Joyce, Senator Matt Canavan, and Sky after Dark are relentless apostles of this world view. Because changes necessary to secure a sustainable future in the face of global warming require investment that in the short term is costly, these initiatives are seen by climate denialists to place an unacceptable limit on the rights of individuals and companies to serve their self-interest.

How did this happen? Here Newbiggin can also come to our aid:

As the principle of the division of labour gained ascendancy, the market moved into central place as the mechanism that linked all the separate procedures with each other and the consumer. The modern science of economics was born. Economics was no longer part of ethics. It was not concerned with the purpose of human life. It was no longer about the requirements of justice and the dangers of covetousness. It

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<sup>5</sup> Parliament of World Religions

<sup>6</sup> Jürgen Moltmann Creation and Redemption. 134

became the science of the working of the market as a self-operating mechanism modelled on a Newtonian universe.

Extinction rebellion mercenaries are mostly millennials and generation Z. They understand a world governed by this theory is unsustainable, because profits are extracted in the present at the cost of long-term sustainable outcomes. The damage done to their future is already around us and the further this economic theory is allowed to predominate the worse and more irreversible the damage will be, at least in the short term. No wonder many are angry. Further, the theory assumes and depends upon exponential growth. We live in a finite world. Exponential growth in a finite context is simply undeliverable without damage. One small example, the timber industry is apparently dependent upon old growth eucalyptus harvesting in a NSW Koala park. Similarly, housing development goes ahead in areas already gazetted as wild-life corridors.

I understand the global human economy to be hovering around \$100 trillion annually. As Wendell Berry and others point out, what we call the human economy is a subsidiary of the great economy, ie. what we understand to be the created order. We can cut down and dig, we can collect and corral, we can combine and divide, but we are utterly dependent upon the web of natural resources with which we are blessed to share the planet. GDP would be more soberingly realistic if the boasted annual figure was discounted by the value of resources that have been lost or ecosystems depleted.

Neo-liberal capitalism is unsustainable because growth does not dependably occur because of increased productivity, but because of population expansion. Australia is saved from recession by substantial migration. As Paul Crutzen<sup>7</sup> pointed out, we now live in an Anthropocene era, an era distinguishable from the Holocene by virtue of the fact humans now occupy every corner of the planet, are responsible for the survival or extinction of every species, animal and plant; and most terrifyingly, by virtue of our numbers, we effect changes to climate models that had been in place for 600,000 years. The earth simply does not have the resources to support a population pressing towards 10 billion, all of whom aspire to live (and use) the volume of resources needed to support the expectations, nay demands, of the first world's middle class. As parts of the planet become uninhabitable, those who have been fortunate enough to live in a more homely environment will face the challenge of welcoming others who not unreasonably wish to share this space. Apparently, the Australian government is reluctant to release a contemporary security defence analysis which is reported to say the greatest threat facing Australia is not military aggression by a foreign power, but mass migration to Australia of peoples no longer able to inhabit their homelands.

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<sup>7</sup> Although American biologist Eugene Stoermer coined the term in the late 1980s, Dutch chemist and Nobelist Paul Crutzen is largely credited with bringing public attention to it at a conference in 2000 as well as in a newsletter printed the same year.

Finally neo-liberal capitalism or free-market economics is unsustainable because the model allows, more probably needs, the opportunity for unrestricted exploitation. Exploitation of the labour of the world's poor to meet the demands of the world's well off, exploitation and exhaustion of natural resources, exploitation of the future to meet the unreasonable demands of the present. Lynn White blames Christianity for this predicament. He argues Western Society which enjoys the lion's share of wealth was cradled in Christianity, a Christianity that taught true human vocation is to have dominion, to tame an untamed natural order.

Here is the hub of the matter. At what point are we humans most aligned to our natural or God given identity? Are we most human when we seek to dominate, to exploit, to seek the largest possible piece of the pie? Are we most human when we understand 'good' to refer to that which serves my self-interest? Or are we most human when we seek to serve, when we exhibit traits that we attribute to the one the Bible describes as the human face of God. Surely if we believe the world and everything in it to be sacred, then the human vocation must always be to imitate the one whose love causes all things to be.

I am not sure who penned the following words, but they are prescient:

*The world will not be what it could be while human nature is not what it should be.*

### 3. Where to from here

At the recent UN Climate Ambition Summit,<sup>8</sup> the General Secretary António Guterres said: "Our world is becoming unhinged, and we seem incapable of coming together to respond. A multi-polar world needs effective multi-lateral institutions... to serve the world's challenges. But the current institutions formed in the ashes of WW II, including the UN and financial institutions, have not changed enough".

- i. As people of faith, we must be driven by an overwhelming conviction of the planet being a **single, finite, house**, inclusive of humanity

We must be convicted of the relatedness of all things. We are sentient beings. Most of us have choices available to us for responsible, ethical action, that the world's poor do not enjoy. We must develop a pattern of reflective action. We have the capacity to understand the implication of our actions great or small. We, the first world's middle-class use (consume) more resources than most of the world's population. What we purchase matters. Where it comes from matters. How it is wrapped matters. Whether it is capable of being recycled matters. The amount we invest in repair of creation's brokenness matters. Whether and how often we drive, cycle, fly and walk matters.

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<sup>8</sup> Held in New York 20 September 2023



- ii. Our politics, and debate in the public square, must be shaped with the **future in mind**.

The recently released: *2023 Intergenerational Report* dumbed down the implications of climate change with simplified economic models. It reasserts the need to achieve the 1.5 – 2 degrees goal but seems unaware that this horse has already bolted. As commendable as the efforts being made by the present are, in comparison with the shameful lost opportunities of the previous decade, they are still not enough to safeguard the future.

Decision makers must know that we will not tolerate actions that bolster the present at the expense of the future. It is generally recognised that politics are driven by short term outcomes. The future of the planet, indeed of civilisation, can no longer afford this to be the prism through which the merits of policy and action are determined. Biblical economies were Sabbath based, that is to say, they were based on seven-year cycles. (The fact there is no evidence the sabbath principle was implemented is another matter!) After seven such cycles, there was to be a total refit, called the year of jubilee when imbalances created in previous cycles were to be restored. When Jesus began his ministry, he read from the book of Isaiah (Luke 4: 18-19) and in doing so claimed his coming heralded an era of jubilee. As his disciples, we can do no other than be children of jubilee in all our actions – restoring the balance of creation's order and mending what is broken.

- iii. **Nationalism** stands in the way of global cooperation.

We have now reached a point in history where nationalism is a significant part of the problem. Nationalism must give way to a stronger sense of global identity. In terms of the climate there can be no best interest worthy of the name that is other than global best interest. Following the first world war, the Bishops of the Anglican Communion met to reflect on the horrors and cost of the war at their Lambeth conference in London. Amongst their resolutions there was one that read "self-interest is the most dangerous evil, and national self-interest the most dangerous of all". Fast forward 100 years and these words are prescient. There is no space for nations to argue self-interest over global interest.

- iv. An **unfettered, unregulated free market** will not serve the needs of the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

Wealth does not trickle down. Without regulation the free market will not bring about the changes necessary to restrict global warming. We have already passed any hope of restricting warming to 1.5 degrees. We may soon pass the possibility of restricting global warming to 2.0 degrees. We do not need to be reminded of the dramatic changes to climate we already endure. Do not allow the extreme right to instil fear that regulation is an attack on individuals and their rights, that it is the thin edge of a socialist or communist wedge. What we corporately inherit is of infinitely greater significance than what we might individually accumulate. I have come increasingly to the tragic view that I and my generation have enjoyed a world that will not be available to my grandchildren and their children. To quote the Chief of the Defence force

General John Campbell: *“Without global momentum needed, we may all be humbled by a planet made angry by our collective neglect.”*<sup>9</sup>

**v. Electricity.**

Hopefully, in the second half of this century, fusion, mimicking the reactions taking place on the sun, will be tamed and become the major and long-term source of inexhaustible pollution free, energy on planet earth. In the meantime, it is incumbent upon all citizens that we seek to utilize the daily and copious provision of energy from the sun, rather than relying on fossil fuels, the storage of the sun’s energy in millennia past. For many the opportunity of doing this is limited, but for others it is not. Margaret and I have enjoyed the benefits of solar panels since we retired and for the last couple of years have installed batteries to augment nighttime use and provide energy in times of emergency. We did not do this for economic reasons, but the economic benefits have been immense. If we live long enough it is our intention to fuel our own electric vehicle from energy harvested from our block. For many, harvesting your own energy is not easy for a variety of reasons. On the other hand, it is not hard to review energy consumption and take steps to ensure that consumption from the grid is minimized as much as possible.

**vi. Season of Creation**

“Originally established in 1989 as the Day of Prayer for Creation by Ecumenical Patriarch Dimitros I, the Season of Creation has grown to involve churches and organisations from various denominations across the globe. The ecumenical nature of Season of Creation highlights that caring for creation is a shared responsibility transcending denominational lines. All Christians are encouraged to unite, connected through our dedication to environmental justice and sustainability. There are many ways in which Christians and churches can participate in the Season of Creation. We can start by praying for our common home and showing gratitude for the beautiful creation that God has blessed us with. It’s also a great opportunity to have Creation-themed church services, where we can reflect on the importance of taking care of our planet. Engaging in sustainable projects and advocating for climate justice are also vital ways to make a difference during this season. Each year, the Season of Creation has a different theme, which provides us with a focal point for our reflections and actions. In 2023, the theme is “Let justice and peace flow”, symbolised by a mighty river. This theme is inspired by the words of Amos 5:24, which says, “But let justice roll on like a river, righteousness like a never-failing stream!”<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> General Angus Campbell Chief of the Defence Force speaking of Australia’s ongoing challenges 15 September 2023

<sup>10</sup> [https://cdn.csu.edu.au/\\_data/assets/pdf\\_file/0006/4233309/ACCC-Engage-Newsletter-Issue-13-WEB.pdf?bblinkid=271765238&bbemailid=49115910&bbeirid=-1521085348](https://cdn.csu.edu.au/_data/assets/pdf_file/0006/4233309/ACCC-Engage-Newsletter-Issue-13-WEB.pdf?bblinkid=271765238&bbemailid=49115910&bbeirid=-1521085348) Liz Jakimow.

**vii. Lambeth Call on the environment.<sup>11</sup>**

It is past time the Anglican Church at all levels matched pious words and resolutions with action.

“As a global, connected body with a shared identity that transcends national borders, the Anglican Communion has a distinctive perspective. Member churches of the Anglican Communion are involved in every part of the environmental emergency. We are the people facing devastation in disaster-stricken communities. We are all the polluters, especially in wealthy countries. We are people living in poverty and on the margins. We wield power and political influence. We are experiencing loss and damage of our land, homes and livelihoods. We are investors with financial capital. We are first-responders to disasters and those who accompany communities on the journey of recovery and resilience.

We contribute to the problem. We contribute to the solution. We are both local and global. We connect with one another, share our experiences and can leverage our networks and Anglican identity to mobilise for action. We do not speak from just one position but from many. We do not only speak to others; we speak also to ourselves. We are all part of the web of God’s creation for ‘in God all things in heaven and earth were created, things visible and invisible’ (Colossians 1:16). And we are called now to act together for the sake of all humanity, for all creation, and our shared home, planet earth”.

**4. Conclusion**

Christian hope is not some vague notion that somehow things will turn up trumps. It is an assurance that given what we know of creation, its origin and order, we have room for confidence.

We know creation as a whole, as well as its several members, has an enormous capacity for restoration and renewal. We know in some precise detail what the problem is and what we need to do to reduce the impact of the human footprint. We also know that it is within our capacity to act. We know action does not take us back to the stone age, but opens up a more cooperative, more peaceful, more relational world.

The question is will we? Given our propensity for action in the protection of self-interest there is good news and bad news. There is bad news if we are foolish enough to think self-interest is delivered by capturing short term advantage. But if we wake to the reality that life shared, community built, and ecology protected is in all our best interest, then we will act – it is never too late, for the year of the Lord’s favour never ceases to be on offer.

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<sup>11</sup> [23-24124-Lambeth-Calls-Updates-April-2023\\_ENVIRONMENT.pdf \(lambethconference.org\)](https://www.lambethconference.org/23-24124-Lambeth-Calls-Updates-April-2023_ENVIRONMENT.pdf)