

Reflection: ‘Ready for Anything!?’ Mission in a changing climate’.

Sermon for St Columba Presbyterian Church, Havelock North

Silvia Purdie, 12 November 2023

Readings:

1 Thessalonians 4:13-18

Matthew 25:1-13: The Parable of the Ten Bridesmaids

Are you allowed to argue with scripture?

I mean, I deeply respect the Bible, and I gladly affirm the statement of faith that I made at my ordination that

“I believe in the Word of God in the Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments.”

Interestingly, Presbyterian ministers are allowed “liberty of conviction” ... in other words, we can argue back to scripture, “but only on such points as do not enter into the fundamental doctrines of Christian faith contained in the Scriptures and subordinate standards.”

So, under that umbrella of ‘liberty of conviction’, I do find myself wondering about, even wanting to challenge, some Bible texts. Especially some of those written by Paul. I find myself imagining myself as his good friend Priscilla, arguing with him about that verse in Corinthians when he says that women should keep quiet in church. Really, Paul, you just don’t mean that! We know that Paul did not mean that to be a blanket ban on women speaking or preaching ... Paul was frustrated with some very dominant women in Corinth and he was trying to get them to calm down long enough to actually learn something. He was not to know that those words would be used over 2,000 years to deny women’s leadership and teaching.

This reading from 1 Thessalonians is also the cause of massive problems for the church and its mission ever since. Why? Because Paul here paints a picture of ultimate hope and ultimate glorious future at the return of Christ, and in verse 17 he describes his vision that we

“will be caught up in the clouds together with them to meet the Lord in the air; and so we will be with the Lord for ever.”

Oh dear, really, Paul!? In the clouds? Floating in thin air?

As an eco theologian I have a big problem with this verse. Because I see the damage it has done through the centuries in disconnecting people of faith from the land. If our ultimate hope and ultimate future is to be found somewhere floating up in the clouds, then why would we care about the earth?

It is my ‘liberty of conviction’ that this verse is entirely inadequate as a description of eternal life. Elsewhere in Paul’s writing he describes the renewal of all things, the coming together of heaven and earth under Christ’s embodied lordship, as the ultimate vision of eternity.

As an eco theologian it is my job to call the church to this vision, which challenges our assumptions of what spirituality is, what everlasting life might look like, and what the Bible actually promises us. Why? Because I believe that it is vitally important, both for the church and for the world, that people of faith deal with the earth, care for the earth, and believe for the future of the earth.

We used to take the natural world for granted, but now we cannot. God's creation is massively under threat. The climate is changing. Man-made plastics are everywhere, literally everywhere, on the planet. Pollution, waste and habitat destruction threaten all of life, including human life.

If Christians imagine ourselves as only spirits, gently wafting off into thin air after we die, then why would we care about this earth? This is not what Jesus believed, or what Jesus taught. He promised resurrection – and, I believe, resurrection not just for humans but for all of creation. A new heaven and a new earth, heaven and earth forged together so that all things are made new. This is my hope.

What you hope for shapes what you work for.

Jesus called his followers to be ready. He laid out the hope of renewal and resurrection, and he promised to not leave us abandoned but to be with us through his Spirit until such time as he returns in person. And he calls us to be ready and waiting for this hope. “Keep awake, therefore”.

Now, in 2023, is an excellent time to look around and see what is happening in the world, and to wonder about where God is in it all. And to wonder what is coming. What do we need to be ready for?

I work particularly in the area of climate change. I try to stay on top of what is happening to planet Earth, though I am no scientist. I am a minister and a counsellor, so my wonderings are about how a warming world is impacting people's hearts and minds and souls. And I work with churches and community organisations to help them start to think through – how will climate change impact us and our clients and our communities? I didn't expect to be doing this, but it seems that God has called me to this work, though it is certainly not easy work.

The title of my sermon this morning is **‘Ready for Anything!? Mission in a changing climate’**

It contains a question – are we ready for anything? And a claim – that church's context for mission is changing, specifically because of changes to the climate.

I was taught that a good sermon had to make three points, so here are three possible answers to this question and this claim.

1. Creation care is becoming an integral part of church life and mission

Five years ago I was in ministry at Cashmere Presbyterian Church in Christchurch, a very similar church to yours here. And God was nurturing in me a seed he had planted long before, a fresh love for the natural world and a desire to connect that love with the mission of the church. And I discovered that the Holy Spirit was doing the same thing for lots of other people also. We got together, had some excellent workshops and worship. And we connected with an organisation called A Rocha. A Rocha is an international non-denominational Christian environmental agency. Our base in Aotearoa is at Raglan, where we run, in partnership with iwi and others, a conservation and education community project caring for seabird chicks and their very beautiful habitat on that wild west coast.

We also wanted to resource the church in Aotearoa to care for creation, and so we launched Eco Church NZ, just three years ago. It was wonderful to welcome St Columba Havelock North into our network. There are now nearly 60 local churches and 11 denominations and dioceses, right around the country, including the PCANZ.

Eco Church is an encouragement to incorporate care for creation in the whole life of the church ... from practical sustainability to community engagement, to how we use our buildings and our land, and all grounded in and returning to God through worship and prayer. Not just something that a

couple of passionate people do, but a call for a heart for creation to flow through the fellowship and teaching and outreach and stewardship of the church. I'm here today to encourage you folks on your eco church journey. I believe this will strengthen your mission, and your faith.

2. Preparing for disasters means investing in community resilience

One specific and vitally important way in which creation care strengthens mission is by equipping churches to be there for their community in times of crisis.

One thing that is agreed on by everyone other than the most staunch of climate deniers is that for the foreseeable future disasters will get worse. Intense floods, intense winds, and intense heat will push our infrastructure to its limits and beyond, in every part of the world. You folks here in the Hawkes Bay have experienced this. You know what it feels like, sounds like, smells like. You know the after effects for months, years after an extreme weather event. This will happen to every community, in some form.

In times of crisis people need safe places to go, and people who are prepared and resourced to be actually useful. The church can be this safe haven. You here in Havelock North can be ready for climate disasters.

Jesus told a story about bridesmaids waiting for the bridegroom to come. Those who had extra oil, just in case, were able to stick around, to stay on track, so that when they were needed they were there. I think this is a relevant call for us in a changing climate. Mission is not just what we do when things are running normally. Mission is also what happens when the roads and the power and the phones are out. That kind of mission requires strong community partnerships, and a vision to be the church of Jesus Christ no matter what.

3. Hope is our greatest gift

What is your best hope for our world?

And how fragile is that hope?

A tidal wave of despair threatens our world, starting with our young people. Few feel optimistic about their own futures, let alone the future of the planet. For the church to share good news with this generation we must be vibrantly clear about our hope, for hope is in desperately short supply.

I started my sermon with the promise I made at my ordination to uphold the fundamental doctrines of the Christian faith, and for me, at this time, this is indeed my passion – that a core conviction of the church, of the riches of our tradition and scriptures, is that we have a vibrant hope, centred in who God is.

Our hope is not in the wonders of human technology, economics, science or politics. These systems have created the terrible mess that Planet Earth is in, and these systems are unlikely to solve to the problems they have made. Our hope is in the living God, through Jesus Christ our Lord and Saviour.

I have argued this morning that it matters how we view the long story, and where everything is heading, because what we hope for shapes what we work for. And I have argued with the Christian view of eternity as being disembodied spirits floating around in thin air in some intangible spiritual dimension called Heaven. This is not my hope. No, my hope for the world is that one day, one day, maybe sooner, maybe later, my friend Jesus will return and make all things new, put all things right,

and bring together heaven and earth into a whole new reality, that Jesus described as the Kingdom of God. You and I will be resurrected, with resurrected bodies in a resurrected creation. I believe this because Jesus was resurrected from the dead, the first fruits of what will come. the first taste of glory.

This vision of full everlasting life flows backwards through time to us, to inspire our love, to sustain our efforts, to enable us to be Jesus people in our time and place.

This morning I have asked you some hard questions, and I have suggested some answers to the question of how climate change might shape the mission of the church. I am passionate about the integral place of creation care in our life, and the potential for local churches to be vital centres of community resilience in the face of climate change. And I call on the church to draw on our biblical vision of everlasting life in order to have real hope to share.

Thank you for the opportunity to speak this morning. I wish you every blessing as you move forward in this calling.