

Launch of CLIMATE SUNDAY

Morning Worship and Live-Streamed Communion – 6th September 2020

The Climate Sunday initiative has been set up by a broad collection of Christian charities and denominations including the C of E, beginning today (6th Sept). The aim of the initiative is to help churches to engage with and take action on the issues relating to the Climate Emergency. This initiative will lead up to the deferred UN Climate Conference (COP26) now scheduled for November next year. We will be touching on this theme at certain points between now and a planned national Climate Sunday service on 5th Sept 2021. Our services of worship in church and online - liturgies, prayers and sermon - all reflect this theme.

The Sermon Readings: Psalm 104; Numbers 22: 21-34; Matthew 22: 34-40

I wonder how familiar you are with this strange tale of Balaam and his talking donkey? The story takes place when the Israelites are trekking through the wilderness towards the Promised Land. The King of Moab is so anxious about the Israelites and their success in defeating other armies, that he calls upon the services of Balaam, a famous holy man. He offers Balaam increasingly large amounts of gold and silver to place a curse on the Israelites, and despite being warned in the night by God to bless not curse the Israelites, Balaam manages to convince himself that God has changed his mind. Our reading continues the story: *'Balaam got up ...and saddled his donkey...'*

Love of money of course has dulled Balaam's spiritual senses. He can't see the angel of the Lord blocking his way. But the donkey can.....and tries his utmost to protect Balaam from being hacked to death!! For his efforts, the poor donkey is repeatedly beaten, until God finally gives him a human voice. Balaam's eyes are opened - saved from destruction by listening to his loyal but aggrieved animal.

What can we learn from this story, you may wonder? According to New Testament writers, Balaam was blinded by greed: *'he loved the wages of wickedness'* to quote from Peter. This was a man of faith remember, but he allowed the lure of wealth to blind him, not only to the voice of God, but to the sin of letting a whole people suffer a curse because of his greed. What an unpleasant man you may be thinking. And yet.....if a prophet were here amongst us, he would surely point a finger at every one of us and declare: 'You are that man'.

Like Balaam we are blindly travelling towards destruction. Climate change..... environmental degradationdestruction of rainforests...catastrophic decline in animal and plant diversity....endless extraction of the earth's resources.....abuse of animals on an industrial scale... all of this and we still seem unable to take the radical action that is needed to save us.

Like Balaam we are blinded by affluence. Our love of materialistic comforts prevents us from seeing the sword-wielding angel. Unprecedented floods...storms....wildfires....melting glaciers.....rising sea levels....viruses: how many more warnings do we need?

And like Balaam – we seem willing to allow other people, not to mention animals, to suffer in order to maintain our comfortable lifestyles. The wealth and comforts we enjoy are at least partly the result of other nations being cursed – unfair trading agreements....exploitative multinational corporations....debt....the effects of climate change.

The Anglican Church has at last declared a climate emergency, following the Pope's lead last year, when he stated that a failure to act urgently would be *"a brutal act of injustice toward the poor and future generations"*. The poor, those least responsible, are the first to suffer. The climate emergency is a profound justice

emergency.....the refugee crisis being merely a foretaste of what will happen if we don't take radical measures.

As Christians, Jesus asks us to pronounce a blessing on the poor, not a curse. To do this we'll need to do 2 things.

The first is to go back to our Bibles and ask ourselves do we know them well enough? Do we understand God's original purpose in creating this world and the values he wants human beings to reflect? Western theologians historically have interpreted Genesis as an invitation for humans to subdue creation, as if we can exploit it endlessly for human benefit. A dangerous and deeply flawed interpretation.

A more **careful** reading of scripture tells a different story. Yes humans are singled out for particular attention, but they're not separate from the natural world. The creator loves all that he has made, showers his creatures with beautiful gifts.....all parts are treasured, intrinsically connected, and the health of one part is intimately tied up with the health of other parts. We only need to look around us – hedgerows heaving with blackberries, crab apples, berries, nuts, medicinal plants – to see that God's nature is to delight in his creation and provide abundantly, so that there is enough for all. This immense prodigality led the writer of the psalms to declare that the whole of creation praises God, humans alongside animals and trees, oceans and land, all enjoying their createdness. Ask the plants, we read in Job, ask the animals, they will teach you, as Balaam's donkey of course did in the reading. And Jeremiah states that 'the land mourns and the grass withers away at human sin' (Jer 12:4).

God surely must weep at what we're doing. So to bring a blessing on the world rather than a curse, the second thing we must do is to take action, to exercise our responsibility to care for the created world as image-bearers of God. In other words, to love and delight in the world and its creatures, to work for its flourishing. We need to offer the world something more than we are presently, something that reflects the values that we discover God is calling us to live out.

So on this Climate Sunday I urge you to learn more about this world and the damage we're doing, and to then take action. As a church we're already working on this, helped by the Eco Church scheme on which we're registered, and I encourage you to support this in prayer and action. As individuals, there may well be things you're already doing but there are many more.

- Think about God's values in relation to the food that you eat.....how much plastic you use....your buying habits and how they impact on people across the world.....your use of fossil fuels.....the campaigns you support....the list is endless.
- Can I suggest a good place to start? Find an online carbon calculator. WWF have a very simple one, which will help identify areas of your life where your impact is most high.

This pandemic has exposed our fragility. We may feel unsettled, daunted.

But we are people of hope. The tomb has been opened. Christ is risen. Our hope is grounded in the promise of renewal and restoration for the whole of creation. God calls us to be co-creators in that task, serving as God's hands and feet in bringing about healing to both people and planet. May we rise to the challenge, confident that God's power, *'working in us, can do more than we can ask or imagine'*. Amen.

Penny Evans, Licensed Lay Reader