



Queensland
Churches Together

ANNUAL GENERAL ASSEMBLY
Saturday 12th October 2019
Address

Rev Dr Graham Warren

[I am Graham Warren, an Anglican priest attached to the Cathedral with a loose brief to be a loose cannon on the deck of the ship called the church, adrift on the turbulent seas of climate change.]

Psalm 22:1 “my God, my God, why have you forsaken me?”

At a recent gathering this week in Bishopsbourne at St Francis’ College a number of us in a group session were asked to adopt physical poses to reflect the felt impact of climate change upon each of us as individuals. More than most adopted poses of cowed resignation, frozen apoplexy, defensive indifference or belligerent resistance. In one way or another each one was feeling and expressing the sense of being forsaken.

Our postures echoed the psalmist - “my God, my God, why have you forsaken us?”

Let me begin by saying unequivocally that climate change is real and it is happening now. It is not a future emergency just for those who are vulnerable. They already have had to leave their island home in the Pacific and become climate refugees doing seasonal work in places like

Gatton or Stanthorpe. Some are now members of our parish communities in those regions.

Today I am less concerned with the fact of climate change than I am with our response to it as a Christian. We have been burning fossil fuels for over a hundred years and we have been practicing industrial scale agriculture and grazing exotic animals in a fragile environment for just as long. Only now are we realising the consequences of these practices.

But people of faith have faced crises before. We have a rich literature and a bold tradition for confronting crises. I want to look with the eye of faith at those responses.

The most damaging response to an emergency or crisis is to deny it is happening. Elizabeth Kübler Ross speaks eloquently of the stages of grief or loss, in her case specifically in the stages of dying, but the stages are universal and applicable to any situation where we are facing massive life-threatening loss or grief. As climate change wreaks more and more of its effects and damage to our earth systems, so it also wreaks damage and havoc on our equanimity. We are like startled rabbits caught in the headlights of reality. We have frozen. The full impact of what is happening is too much for the human psyche to sustain. However it is not too much for the human soul to sustain. The soul is larger and more robust than the psyche. The soul is fortified by God and by our faith. So to confront massive existential cataclysmic assault, it is in our souls that we need to trust.

Let me go back to the first moment of assault. The initial human response is to freeze and then, when the full impact of what is happening dawns upon us, we realise the enormity of the loss we face.

Our grief response to this is, as Kübler Ross suggests, staged. The second stages or strategy` we use after the initial freeze is denial. "This can't be happening" we say. Denial is a normal, if unhelpful way to respond to the despair of realising what may be about to overwhelm us. Denial - climate denial - is the most unhealthy response imaginable, even if partly understandable. We have to confront denial with respect and compassion. Denialists are suffering, as we are suffering, but their response will not help. What will help?

Our scriptures are replete with the ways we as humans have responded in times past to crisis or calamity. Our treasure trove of psalms are the first to come to mind. The psalms are remarkable for many reasons. Even as historical literature they are unique in that in them for the first time in recorded history the voices from below, the voices of the Anawin, the voices of the oppressed , the disenfranchised, the lost, forgotten and suffering were heard. In ancient times only the voices of the kings and princes were heard. All else was silent, until we come to this marvellous liberating body of work.

The other noteworthy thing about the psalms is that in them we have expressed every conceivable human emotion. From anger to calm; from melancholy to joy; from despair to hope. It is to this polarity of despair to hope that I want to speak.

We are a people of hope. We are a people of the resurrection. We are not a people of despair, for we have no reason to despair. We live in the reality of eternity. We are quite simply spiritual beings enjoying a brief bodily experience. When this experience is complete we shall return to our natural home in eternity. At any moment in time it is merely a thin veil that separates us from ultimate reality. Periodically

we experience brief glimpses through that veil. Reading poetry, joining worship, peering into the lens of a microscope or telescope, meeting a lover's glance. It is mathematically possible to write the equation of mass / energy and so sum up all reality. One of the most interesting and arresting observations when this is examined is that *time* is not a necessary variable in the equation. Reality can be described, as Einstein demonstrated, without any need to have *time* as a functional variable. This therefore is mathematical proof that eternity is the true nature of reality. Eternity is not time going on forever, it is reality without a time constant or variable. Eternity is where we belong, and when we know where we belong, and to whom we belong, all existential despair and fear evaporates. This is the basis for Christian hope. Hope is not wishful thinking about a fairy tale ending. No, it is a clear-eyed view of reality; a clear-eyed view of true nature of things as they are created.

So what is our Christian contribution to the climate emergency? Naturally we are called, as all responsible citizens are, to engage the political debate and forthrightly defend the need to live sustainably, or better still regeneratively, so all, human and non-human alike, can share equitably and justly in the bounty of creation. It requires that we live within the bounds of our needs, not beyond our bounds within our greed.

But more importantly there is a parallel crisis that is threatening to overwhelm us and further paralyse us. Its name is despair. It is climate change despair. It is real and it is pernicious. It is being manifest in ennui and depression. It is being manifest in fear and anxiety, particularly in the young who are tormented by the full impact of this prospect upon their future. Most of us here have lived a life. The young

have not yet had that chance. So we have the responsibility to share with them the bounty that we took for granted. That is justice. Yet we have our own anxiety as mature people. We share the anxiety that we wish for our children, and their children, the future that will allow them to thrive as we did. This is intergenerational justice, and this is our most pressing calling.

First we need to sustain our own hope and fortify our souls for the task. So let us turn to the psalms for this fortification. The psalms of lament are a rich and sustaining body of nourishment for Christians. In the wake of the devastating Victorian bushfires of January 2010, Paul Kelly, the Australian balladeer, wrote a song for a fund-raising memorial concert which was based upon the 23rd psalm. In it he acknowledged the pain of the community with its words of 'death's dark shadow', while at the same time offering hope with the first person invitation: 'I am your true shepherd... come and meet with me.'" The biblical tradition of lament has been used forever by poets and song-writers because it expresses universal experiences in the light of the hope that only God can give. It is the generous offering of an eschatological vision of peace and restoration. Eschatology is the science of deep time.

Lament is not only used for mourning, but more often when we lament we also protest. Protest is a faith-filled response that our Jewish forbears understood and used well. We are entitled to protest. The psalms are full of the righteous indignation of protest alongside lament. While we protest we also lament. We lament our part in the unravelling of the fabric of earth's fragile systems. We have lost habitat, we have lost biodiversity, we may have lost a future for our generations to come. It is right – in fact it is very right to lament.

Lament rightfully names injustice. When we are part of that injustice, we need to repent. Lament leads naturally to repentance. Lament also has a prophetic edge to it. We are called are we not in this time and place to be prophets. Prophets, since time immemorial, have been the chosen ones who stand forth in the face of denialists and name the way things are, and the way things ought to be, as seen through God's eyes. There is no need to remind you that in Jerusalem they stone the prophets. So stay away from Jerusalem until things settle down a bit.

Psalms of lament release rage in the context of faith demanding God's answer. Even if we do not like the answer, we are called by our need to release the rage. Some of that rage is self-directed, as we acknowledge our complicity in the undoing. The Old Testament regularly assumes that this is a proper and legitimate form of prayer. Israel had the right and the obligation to ask of God in insistent ways.

Finally the most distinctive characteristic of lament is that it is profoundly hopeful. Psalms of lament may express praise, celebration and confidence. Lament also provides us with the language of outrage that speaks against the way things are, but always in the hope that the ways things are now, is not the way they will always be¹.

Going back to our beginning - Psalm 22. Whether protest, complaint, sad resignation or even expression of guilt, the prayer voices loyalty to God and expects a responding loyalty from God, an expectation that arises from a covenant relationship. We are, after all, people of the covenant are we not?

¹ John Swinton, *Raging with Compassion: Pastoral Responses to the Problem of Evil*, Eerdmans, Grand rapids, MI, 2007, p.105.

What therefore is the task of the church today? How do we enact that covenant? Why would we gather and chinwag here today?

Shall I answer faith, hope and love?

That sounds beautiful, but I would rather say – courage.

No, even that is not challenging enough to be the whole truth.

Our task today is recklessness.

For what we Christians lack is not psychology or literature, prophetic though the psalms may be, nor even hope.

We lack a holy rage.

We lack the holy recklessness that comes from a deep trust in the creator God and a trust in our shared humanity.

The ability to rage when justice lies prostrate in our synods and councils...and when the lie rages across the face of the earth – a holy rage about things that are wrong in the world.

To rage against the ravaging of God's earth and the destruction of God's world.

To rage when Pacific island homes and habitats are submerged beneath rising tides; while the tables of the rich and smug are sagging with false security.

To rage at the senseless obliteration of whole species and against the madness of unfettered consumption.

To rage at the lie that nature bends to our will, and the strategy of destruction that is called progress.

To rage against complacency.

We are called to restlessly seek that recklessness that will challenge and change human history until it conforms to the norms of the

commonwealth of God. We pray daily “your kingdom come on earth as it is in heaven”.

And remember that the signs of the Christian church have always been –

The Lion , the Lamb, the Dove and the Fish – but never the chameleon.

The Lord be with you...

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