

What Would Jesus Do – about climate change?

Pitt Street Uniting Church, Sunday 19 September, 2021

A Reflection by Rev Dr Josephine Inkpin, Gerard McEvilly & Vivien Langford

Third Sunday in the Season of Creation - Sky Sunday

Psalm 19: 1-6; Genesis 1: 1-18; Jeremiah 4: 19-27

This worship service can be viewed on You Tube at <https://pittstreetuniting.org.au/spirit/reflections/>

JOSEPHINE

WWJD – What Would Jesus Do – about climate change? In the face of the increasing climate crisis, highlighted by the latest IPCC report and weather events across the world, how are we to react? As people of faith, what might guide us in our responses, as individuals and as a community together? This is the challenge which, with Gerard and Vivien, I ask us all to consider today. For, during this Season of Creation, we have rightly given expression, in several different ways, to our wonder at God's world of which we are a part. We have joined with others elsewhere and received the gifts of Ecopella and other artists. We commit ourselves to continuing to grow more deeply in the soil of God's love in Creation and to share more deeply in that grace and beauty. What however will we now do to honour that same Spirit of Christ?...

Our bible readings today do not provide us with straightforward 'answers'. For however much some would like it to be, the Bible is not like that. Nor is it a set of moral precepts, or definitions of God, although some can be found within it, of various and sometimes conflicting kinds. That can be disappointing – including trying to fix the climate emergency. I remember, many years ago, founding an ecumenical ecological action network in England, the North East Churches Environmental Group. One of our most energetic members was a young Methodist lay preacher. He was fond of using texts like Genesis chapter 1. *'Just follow the Maker's instructions'*, he used to say.

Unfortunately, it is not that simple. Our biblical texts will not directly resolve our political, or our theological, questions, about climate change or many other modern challenges. Yet they can help us cultivate a deeper understanding and provide inspiration from which to act.

So what do you see and hear in today's reading? Let me briefly offer three things this morning from Genesis chapter 1. We could spend much longer over them, and perhaps another time we will. For the moment, let us just gently hold them up as contributions to our shared reflections. Firstly, this is a kind of hymn, or poem, to recite, inwardly or outwardly, within our hearts and lives. Indeed, some scholars suggest it is a priestly liturgical canticle, or an expansion of one. Note its shape, particularly its rhythms and refrains. Adapted a little, it is thus something which could shape our own personal and communal prayer. For we too are called to be priests, singing the songline of Creation.

Secondly, this reading highlights the wider Creation, with no mention of humanity. Yes indeed, human beings do come later in the hymn and can be seen as the ‘crown’ of Creation. Yet we might do better to see humanity as a later thought, interdependent with all that goes before. Note well, on this particular Sunday in the Season of Creation, the attention given to the Sky: to the changes of light and darkness; to Sky’s relationship to the Earth, its waters and other properties, and the heavenly bodies which move within it. These are infinitely valuable to God in themselves, prior to ourselves, and part of ‘the communion of subjects’ we affirmed recently.

Thirdly, and most importantly of all, Genesis 1.1-18 speaks of God’s goodness – repeatedly. Note well: goodness here means neither moral perfection nor completed creation. It does however proclaim that, in origin and ultimacy, all of God’s Creation is to be seen and treated with love.

In contrast, Jeremiah chapter 4 speaks of what happens when Creation is not seen and treated with loving compassion. Like many other prophetic texts, not least in Jeremiah, it is discomfiting. Indeed, such passages typically approach Earth’s suffering with ancient preconceptions of God with which we may struggle. Yet, if some of us understandably balk at raw ideas of judgement and providence, we must acknowledge the power and reality of the pain and destruction present in such imagery. There may not be straightforward ‘Maker’s instructions’ in the universe and we may understand God’s role and judgement differently. Yet it is a vivid lament for what happens when human beings neglect the promptings and the web of love in the universe. Above all, the final verse rings out a word of hope for our troubled planet today. Even if, as the prophet discerns, ‘*the whole land shall be a desolation*’, God’s word rings out: ‘*yet I will not make a full end.*’

So, strengthened by the hymn of the goodness of Creation and the prophetic affirmation of continuing hope out of desolation, what will we now do as co-creators of God’s love and purpose?

Gerard and Vivien will offer us ways forward. Importantly, they will speak of God’s creating love *already* at work in others. For it is not simply a question of WWJD – what would Jesus do?

We can be also inspired by what I would call WIGAD – what is God already doing? In particular, what can we learn from the activities of ARRCC, Extinction Rebellion, and others, and how may we play our part more fully?



GERARD Where to now?

All things Bright and Beautiful, All Creatures Great and Small...We don’t hear those words much these days, but what a beautiful simple message that teaches children about the connectedness between God and our world.

Thank God that more and more of the grown-ups in faith communities around the world are embracing this, not just in this annual Season of Creation but throughout our faith journeys.

Thanks especially to Pitt St for embracing this idea of caring for the planet as adding deep meaning to our faith journey. There is a growing inter-faith movement that also embraces this idea, which I will come back to.

Two weeks ago, Jo discussed 'helpful' and 'unhelpful' models and metaphors of the earth. One unhelpful model is to see the earth as a supermarket – as a collection of objects from which we can pick and use up at will. Unfortunately this model is still influential in some Christian thinking.

The alternative model, which really chimed with me, was to see the Earth as a communion of subjects. We saw and heard this beautifully expressed in last Sunday's anthology of individual experiences with nature compiled by our friends at Glenbrook Uniting. You may remember, Jo suggested an exercise where we might reflect on how the three elements of creation - God, humanity, and the Earth - inter-relate, perhaps using different coloured sheets to represent them? Those Glenbrook stories last week were another powerful representation of communion with God and the Earth at an individual human level.

I would like to suggest another perspective on communion at the collective human level. It's what we do as Pitt St every Sunday, but also when we share in something like our action at 11am on March 11th this year

We baggiped down Pitt St with our banners and leaflets. The Ecopella choir entertained the passers-by and Jo and Penny joined in their first Pitt St activity. It was a lot of fun but also very moving as a form of communion.

At the same time, 136 other faith communities around Australia were also having fun at 11am, ringing bells, making noise. Many other Uniting Churches plus Buddhists, Jews, Catholics, Muslims, Quakers, you name it. So our communion was much wider, because of our networking both through Synod and also ARRCC – the Australian Religious Response to Climate Change.

And our communion was wider still as ARRCC links us to the global multi-faith group Greenfaith. Around the world, hundreds more communities of faith are taking their spiritual perspective on caring for Creation into the streets and into the faces of political leaders.

But let's look at who else is talking to the leaders. This graph shows the hundreds of Corporate engagements on climate with government in the last three years. It adds up to a small but powerful communion of coal and gas corporations with vested interests to protect.

The point of the report this comes from wasn't to say "*shock horror, fossil fuel sector is constantly lobbying government*". The point was that many, many other corporates are pro-climate action for sound business reasons - but just don't engage so assertively. Let's face it many of us are a bit like that... of course we think creation is important, but what difference can we make?

Thankfully, as individuals and as a communion, there is a lot we can do, from checking who our super is invested with to handwriting personal letters to the PM like we did recently – some of over 600 he received this week.

We might be able to follow up in person at the PMs Office in four weeks' time - IF Covid allows!

That will be two weeks before he goes to the COP talks in Glasgow that set the stage for our grandchildren's' future.

Who knows? With our prompting, our leaders may turn out to be wise and wonderful after all?

The prophet Jeremiah's vision is of disaster overtaking disaster, the mountains quaking, the birds all gone and a fruitful land made desert. But we are living out this prophecy on a global scale, aren't we? I think the only difference between Jeremiah and us is that his vision comes from an angry God who is prepared to make the whole land desolate; with the saving grace that he will not "*make a full end*". For us it is the IPCC report dubbed "*code red for humanity*". There is no saving grace for us in that report, unless we adopt a decarbonisation scenario at a scale and speed that very few of us can imagine yet. It feels like a Jeremiad to me, that IPCC report.

We are the first generation to know that the scale of massive floods, fires and hurricanes isn't really an "*act of God*". Yet we resist the knowledge. Like Jeremiah's people "*we do not know how to do good*". We are so skilled in getting away with murder. Even in Glasgow Australia will claim we are doing our bit while wrecking global efforts. We Australians are among the worst per capita emitters and exporters. And we are not a small player internationally, being high in the club of coal and gas exporters.

When Rev Josephine asked us to consider what would Jesus do in the current climate crisis. I was thrown into a paroxysm of dismay. I phoned up a lot of my friends in Pitt St hoping for answers. I have lived all my life in this Judeo Christian culture but I had no ideas about Jesus. I guess he would do miracles. He walked on water once, so could he stop the melting of glaciers and permafrost, maybe just to buy us time to stop emissions? He overturned the money lenders' tables back in Jerusalem, so could he expose or disable the fossil fuel money that is corrupting democracy and unleashing environmental chaos?

If so, then I think I must be meeting Jesus every day. There are people working at miracles every day. By interviewing the people who are taking climate action our radio programme is in rather visionary. Rich society tells the polls they want something to be done and hope government will save us. In some cases government is stepping up, but their hearts are not "*beating wildly*", they do not "*writhe in pain*" like Jeremiah at the hell on earth they are creating. They approve new gas and coal projects and give out subsidies for gas pipelines. The people I meet are like Jeremiah. They cannot keep silent. Here are some examples:

Adrian Burragubba, Murrawah Johnson and Coedie McAvoy are right now practising ceremony on their traditional land. They say they will be there for as long as it takes, until Adani's mega mine is disallowed. I spoke to Coedie when he organised the Tour de Carmichael. His idea was to bring city people up with their bikes to block the roads and see what the Adani coal mine is destroying, including their sacred springs. Over 100 people came. The Wangan and Jagalingou say "*we are not at the frontline, we are the frontline*" They are literally inviting us into their connectedness with the land.

From Bangladesh I interviewed Dr Saleemul Huq and Runa Khan. He is a devout Muslim and director of The International Centre for Climate Change and Development in Dhaka. She founded the Friendship Floating Hospitals. The compassion and resourcefulness they exuded made me dance around the kitchen after I talked to them. It was so exhilarating talking to them. They are doing such huge work, I just felt uplifted. They know the worst but they cultivate courage and cooperation. Dr Huq will be at Glasgow defending the rights of vulnerable nations to the massive transfer of money and help from the rich world which has been promised by the United Nations. \$100billion per year from 2020. I don't think that money is flowing yet! Like Jesus, his focus is on those who cannot afford the adaptation and restoration which the big emitters usually can.

In France I spoke to Emmanuel Cappellin. His film “*Once You Know*” is a young man’s evolution from being apolitical to being engaged. He was worried about the path we are on, anxious about having children and, like Jeremiah, in deep anguish. In the film he meets many people and communities who are changing their relationship with each other and the earth. In the end he comes back to his village in France, he has a child (and the child was in the interview and kept running in and out with a toy truck! So moving when you have seen his film and where he has come from). He commits to local work - restoring the agriculture there, citizen’s assemblies, and last of all, he joined Extinction Rebellion.

The Australian Extinction Rebellion people are diverse. When our Environment Minister was told by the Court that she did have a duty of careⁱ to protect children and future generations, she appealed that judgement! It threw a lightning bolt through Extinction Rebellion.

As a result Extinction Rebellion Canberra dramatized what Duty of Care really means. One retired CSIRO environmental scientist stood at Susan Ley’s office counter and refused to move. His hand was stuck on. Also a grandmother Lesley Mosbey wrote Duty of Care on the office wall and stuck herself to the floor. Until then she had been an armchair activist but the thought of the destruction our future children will face got her moving. She went to prison for 7 days because as she says she had lots of privilege. She is educated, white, elderly. She said “*I can do this.*”

Then there was Violet Coco who is 30. It pains her to let her dream of children go, but she sees that we are pushing the biosphere to a point of no return .So she is devoting her reproductive years to turning the extinction juggernaut around. It was painful to see her burning a baby’s pram outside the parliament while others wrote Duty of Care on the walls. But, talking to her, I could see the integrity shining out. In prison one of the guards told her he’d been with his children to the school strikes for climate and wanted to know more about her ideas.

There is a proud history behind non-violent action. It requires strategy and a profound sort of co-operation, yet it is effective. The Extinction Rebellion people told me that for every one in prison there was a team of 40 outside to support their families, to get legal help, to amplify their message in the media and to give them hugs and reassurance when they came out. This is not a maverick movement. In London this last fortnight, many medical professionals were filmed lying on the ground in the financial district, hoping to disarm the social licence of the huge fossil fuel industries and the banks.

Imagine that! People in scrubs with signs on their chest “*I am an anaesthetist*”. “*I am a registered nurse*”, “*I am a surgeon.*” What they said to the camera was not that dramatic, but to know these are the people who save lives carried a lot of weight. They have plenty to do but they are wanting to prevent harm on a much larger scale than usual. So it comes down to that. Once we know, as Violet said to me, “*We all must do whatever it takes*”.

ⁱ Acts of God do not absolve people from a duty to exercise reasonable care.

A judge ruled the flooding in New Orleans caused by Hurricane Katrina (an act of God) as an act of negligence, citing the US Army Corps did not properly maintain flood defenses.