

What climate change means to us as people of faith

Pitt Street Uniting Church, Sunday 5 May 2024

A Reflection by Trinity Ford, Dave Cahilap and Bill Thomas

Easter 6 B

Contemporary Reading: *The Seven Sisters Songline* by Margot Neale; John 15:9-17

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

BILL Introduction

Today we reflect on what climate change means to us as people of faith. I have two great-grandchildren aged 9 & 12. All of us have children and young people in our lives. So of course climate change matters. But does that have anything to do with being “*people of faith?*” Or is that irrelevant? We hope to explore that today with you as we share our personal stories.

DAVE

Salam Sejahtera and Good Morning,

As we gathered in this sacred space, I am drawn to share my reflections on my upbringing as a native of Sabah, Malaysia.

Growing up in the heart of Sabah (in Borneo Island), Malaysia, was like being immersed in a living painting of nature's finest work. My hometown, tucked away amidst the dense forests, was a paradise teeming with life. Every day was an adventure, filled with the sights and sounds of vibrant flora and fauna. From the majestic rainforests echoing with the calls of exotic birds to the serene rivers where colourful fish danced beneath the surface, nature was my playground.

I remember those days fondly, where every corner of my village held a new discovery, from the intricate patterns of leaves to the melodious calls of unseen creatures. But in 2009, I embarked on a journey far from home, leaving behind the sanctuary of my beloved Sabah. Though I have since built a life in Australia, the memories of my homeland linger, a bittersweet melody that tugs at my heartstrings.

Yet, as the years have passed, I've witnessed firsthand the changes in the climate and the unpredictable weather patterns that have become the new norm. I'm not alone in this observation; I am sure many others in my community share my concerns about the shifting environment.

As an Orang Asli or Native Malaysian, my connection to the land, water, and all living beings is not just a cultural trait—it's a fundamental part of who I am. For generations, my community has lived in harmony with nature, our customs and traditions deeply intertwined with the rhythms of the environment. Whether it's the lush rainforests of Peninsular Malaysia or the pristine waters of Sabah and Sarawak, our way of life is inseparable from the natural world.

But now, the looming threat of climate change casts a dark shadow over these sacred connections. Rising temperatures, erratic weather patterns, and rising sea levels jeopardise the delicate balance of ecosystems essential to our way of life. Changes in rainfall patterns could disrupt our agricultural cycles, while coastal erosion threatens our sacred sites and ancestral lands, severing the spiritual bond between our people and the Earth.

The impact on our livelihoods is profound. Hunting, fishing, and subsistence agriculture have sustained us for centuries, providing not just food and shelter, but also cultural identity and social cohesion. Yet, the effects of climate change pose a dire threat to these traditional practices. Declining fish stocks, diminishing crop yields, and the loss of biodiversity undermine our ability to sustain ourselves and our community. Unpredictable weather patterns make it increasingly challenging to predict the best times for planting and harvesting, leading to food insecurity and economic instability.

Moreover, despite contributing minimally to the causes of climate change, Indigenous communities like ours bear a disproportionate burden of its impacts. This injustice deepens existing vulnerabilities within our community, perpetuating cycles of marginalisation and discrimination. Government policies often prioritise economic growth over environmental conservation, further eroding our land rights and access to basic services.

As climate change threatens to reshape our landscapes, it also endangers the rich tapestry of traditional ecological knowledge passed down through generations. Efforts to document and preserve this knowledge should be prioritised to ensure its continuity and relevance in the face of a rapidly changing climate.

As a person of faith, I recognise the sacred duty entrusted to humanity to care for the Earth and its inhabitants. For Indigenous communities in Malaysia, this spiritual responsibility is deeply ingrained in our cultural practices and rituals. Climate change represents a moral imperative, challenging us to act as stewards of the Earth and guardians of future generations. By embracing principles of compassion, solidarity, and collective action, we can advocate for environmental justice and uphold the sacredness of all life.

TRINITY

I observe climate change as I observe all forms of systemic desecration: at once, from within it and from afar.

Like a few of us here, I'm a Catholic by my upbringing, but choose to celebrate my faith as a part of this congregation. But there's a stickiness to Catholicism, so forgive me for dredging some of it around with me. A formative part of how I understand the world is through the principle of Sacramentality: that we encounter God's presence in the ordinariness of the world. That being present with any tangible element of creation – through love, aid, touch, celebration, silence – is a sacrament. That it imparts and reveals divinity. Secular people sometimes describe a similar concept: we are the universe perceiving itself; stardust looking back up at itself.

In understanding climate change as a form of systemic desecration, I mean that it involves a violent refusal to look and love. The decisions long-since made to pump greenhouse gasses into the atmosphere have already narrowed the windows in which my disabled body can navigate the world safely and comfortably. Extremes in temperature, humidity and air pollution cause me exhaustion and symptom flares. Nobody looked me in the eyes when they triggered my tachycardia. That's how systems work.

Transphobic lawmakers and journalists are not looking the little trans boy in the eyes when they criminalise the love his mother shows him in smuggling his testosterone across the border. Criminalising God's love in creation of transsexual body.

If I receive the (literal, to Catholics) sacrament of marriage, its registration would trigger a chain of algorithms that would most likely cancel my pension. These are systems that refuse to look at the creation they desecrate and the potential sacraments they interrupt.

My chosen families are made of mostly disabled trans people. We understand these systems viscerally. This is why so many of us have looked to more radical political philosophies. There are a lot of socialists, communists and anarchists in these circles. Climate justice is one part of a vision we have to structure our society without the destruction of human potential.

It's daunting. I don't know if it's possible.

So as well as attending rallies and protests, we also build local networks of care and mutual aid. A little garden carved out from the rest of the world. Laura Portwood-Stacer describes this form of radical activism as "*lifestyle politics*". Many of us apply anarchist principles to how we work, love and hold space for community. Just in terms of climate activism, I might be at someone's birthday and we're all discussing strategies to manage temperature dysautonomia, or someone is offering me their flat to shelter during an upcoming heatwave. Or bulk-purchasing PPE to share when we meet at a community event, so we can manage bushfire smoke and Covid transmission.

This is "*love one another as I have loved you*". Just spending time with my friends like this is the sacrament that makes me feel closest to God. Being surrounded by laughter, music and care – just as Psalm 98 evokes. Using our hands and holy arms to bring deliverance, victory, to each other. My friends aren't religious, and certainly wouldn't use this language, but they do still describe their experience in these spaces as spiritual or divine, which I think is telling.

Most of us sacrificed a lot to build this. It usually takes restructuring your entire life and unlearning core beliefs about your place in the world: compulsory heterosexuality, monogamnormativity, internalised ableism. All of these culturally-grounded systems. We still cop a fair bit of all that when we're in mainstream society, but much less so in our sub-cultures. They don't live in our heads anymore. I can let my body rest when it's tired now, alone or in company, instead of disciplining myself for being unproductive.

But, you can't unlearn climate change. It's the effect of capitalist and industrial systems and it's already here. So the community organising and care we do – sharing information, PPE, air-conditioned homes – helps to reduce the human toll, and that's really important. But to my mind, the core victory of our lifestyle politics, is one that we have already achieved. We've made ourselves living proof that there is a better way of running things.

BILL

I grew up in a household that did not practice religion, although my mother had been raised a Catholic and father Protestant. Also he was a Free-mason. We were taught to accept people as people whatever their religion, nationality, race. They were Labor voters. My mother had lost her loved eldest brother at Gallipoli, and this shaped our family's leaning towards pacifism.

In 1948 we I moved from the flat behind my father's pharmacy in Balgowlah to a new house on a bushy block at Manly Vale. We could walk through the bush to Manly Dam which was a wonderful playground for me and my brother and our friends.

So you can see some of the values that were shaping me as I was growing up.

I came to faith as a teen-ager at All Saints Church of England Balgowlah. When it came time for all the youth to be confirmed I had to be baptised first, as this had not happened when I was a baby.

When I was in final year at high school, at a Christian camp for boys we were warned about two particular dangers at University: Girls and the Student Christian Movement. I'm not sure what the girls at the girls' camp were warned about. Having renounced the Devil and all his works it was not surprising that, on entering University, I joined the Evangelical Union

After about a year in the EU I was feeling a bit out of things and when some friends told me that they were praying for me I knew it was time to make a move. So I jumped ship and joined the Student Christian Movement. There I discovered progressive theology, the freedom to question, plus girls - or a particular girl.

When Ruth and I married we decide to be Congregationalists, Ruth's family denomination. The Congregationalists were open, accepting of all and sundry, were democratic and ordained women. Between 1963 and 1990 we were part of the Congregational, later Uniting Church community at Cheltenham and Epping. A wonderful progressive and forward-thinking congregation.

When it comes to matters of faith I have to confess that I literally am a doubting Thomas. No wonder my EU friends felt compelled to pray for me. I just don't like to be told that I have to believe this, that or the other to be an OK Christian. And there are some bits in the Bible that make my hair stand on end. I encourage everyone to read it cover to cover. But there some parts that resonate with this old leftie. Particularly, of course, Jesus and his teachings and how he lived, how he related to people. As well as the way he challenged the powers of his time. Also I can connect with much of what we find in the writings of the Prophets. Such as this from Micah:

'With what shall I come before the Lord,
and bow myself before God on high?
Shall I come before him with burnt-offerings,
with calves a year old?
⁷Will the Lord be pleased with thousands of rams,
with tens of thousands of rivers of oil?
Shall I give my firstborn for my transgression,
the fruit of my body for the sin of my soul?'
⁸He has told you, O mortal, what is good;
and what does the Lord require of you
but to do justice, and to love kindness,
and to walk humbly with your God?

Micah 6: 6-8

He has told you, O mortal,