

A good life for the planet

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A sermon preached by Dr Mick Pope for Science Week 2015. Dr Pope has a PhD in Meteorology and a degree in Theology. He is the coordinator of the environment think tank of Ethos: EA Centre for Christianity and Society, and a Fellow of ISCAST: Christians in Science and Technology.

The Earth has a fever

Maverick scientist James Lovelock says that the Earth has a fever, and one of my favourite cartoons depicts the Earth at a doctor's surgery with a thermometer in its mouth, being solemnly told that it has a "nasty case of humans." The consensus of the climate science community and represented by over 97% of published papers is that the planet is warming, and that this is largely our fault. The temperature has on average, warmed by about 0.85° C since the start of the industrial revolution, and human activity is the key driver. While this might not seem like a lot, it has had a number of significant impacts.

The number of days per year in Melbourne with maximum temperatures above 35° C has increased by about 2.5 days in recent decades. To put this into context, 4 days above 35° C in 2009 killed nearly 400 people above the long term average. By 2070, some climate projections have the number of days above 35° C in Melbourne doubling. I'll leave you to do the maths. Heat waves also affect our wildlife. For example, in Western Australia, in 2010, a heat killed half of the remaining population of an endangered parrot. Heat waves push of native fauna beyond their natural ability to cope.

A consequence of warming temperatures is sea level rise. Sea level has risen by about 19 cm in the period 1901 to 2010. Again, this might not seem a lot, but this would be cold comfort to Nicholas Hakata, an elder from Han Island which is part of the Carteret group of Papua New Guinea. He laments the fact that his people are having to plan to leave their homes and their way of life due to sea level rise, which has damaged their islands via erosion and inundation. Inundation after unusually large tides has left bodies of still water on their island, which has acted as breeding grounds for malarial mosquitoes, giving malaria to children who have never experienced it before.

It now seems clear, unless a miracle literally occurs, that we will struggle to stay below 2° C of warming by end of century. This will result in more than 99% of all coral reefs disappearing. This includes the fishing grounds of the Carteret Islanders that they hope to return to. It also includes the Great Barrier Reef, home to, as Psalm 104 notes "creeping things innumerable."

The Earth has a fever!

Creation is groaning

Paul says a very similar thing in Romans 8 that the creation is groaning: ¹²² "For we know that the whole creation **groans and suffers** the pains of childbirth together until now." I want to make three brief observations on Paul's statement.

Firstly, Paul is making an environmental statement. Malaria literally means bad air, and it aided in the collapse of Rome. We now have evidence from an ancient cemetery that contains the bodies of 47 infants and still borns, all with the marks of malaria. The still born children would have contracted the disease from their mothers during pregnancy. We also know that in 452 AD, the Huns refused to enter Rome because of the fear of the bad air. We know that this spread of malaria was caused by clearing of forests, and the formation of swampy ground where the mosquitoes could breed. Now we understand far more than Paul could on this, but it is also clear that there would have been clear signs of ecological damage that Paul could observe.

The cutting down of the trees also led to the silting up of harbour, and regular widespread flooding. Even Plato observed in 360 BC the impacts of cutting down trees on hillsides and the resultant erosion. The ancients were not as sophisticated in their science as we are, but they were not ignorant. Paul could also see the pollution of the Tiber River by raw sewage, which was why fresh water was supplied to Rome via their impressive aqueducts. He could also observe firsthand the poor air quality from fires. As the Philosopher and Senator, Seneca observed, who was a contemporary of Paul (4BC – 65 AD): “No sooner had I left behind the oppressive atmosphere of the city and the reek of smoking cookers, which pour out, along with clouds of ashes, all the poisonous fumes they’ve accumulated ... I noticed the change in my condition at once.”

So why is this important to note? Some Christians ignore climate science and other evidence of environmental catastrophes because they are suspicious of the claims of environmentalists as being politically or theologically suspect – and yet we have no right to do this! Christians can, and should, recognise and not deny when humans damage the health of the planet! It is not unchristian to recognise climate change for what it is! Furthermore common grace means that scientific truths are open to all, Christian or otherwise.

Secondly, Paul is making a theological statement. He says that ²⁰“For the creation was subjected to futility, not willingly, but because of Him who subjected it, in hope ²¹that the creation itself also will be set free from its slavery to corruption into the freedom of the glory of the children of God.” God subjected creation to futility because he’s let us run it – and what a fine job we’ve done of polluting the air and water, cutting down the trees and killing all the animals! Israel broke their agreement with God in following idols and pursuing ideas of empire and growth. The environmental consequences were spelled out in our Deuteronomy 28 reading, environmental collapse. In our day, as Pope Francis notes in the encyclical *Laudato Si’* “the present ecological crisis is one small sign of the ethical, cultural and spiritual crisis of modernity.” Elsewhere, he equates this with the worship of progress, technology, consumerism and individualism.

But Creation has hope, the hope of being set free from slavery to misrule. Hope as an essential quality in the face of our dire warnings – both for prompt human action (hopefully in Paris later this year) and divine action. Hence title of my book with Claire Dawson, *A Climate of Hope: Church and Mission in a Warming World* (UNOH Publishing, 2015). Paul says that ²²“For we know that the whole creation groans and suffers the **pains of childbirth** together until now.” Of course, birth pains point to birth! The whole creation is longing for the resurrection of the dead like a nine month pregnant woman groans for the baby to come out!

So why is this important to talk about? It is clear that climate change and other ecological issues are gospel issues because they stem from human evil, greed, selfishness, etc. Their solution is found within the central Christian doctrine of the resurrection. Promoting the good life for the planet should be part of the mission of the church because its hope lies with ours. We also need to do away with the myth that promoting the good life for the planet competes with that of individuals. Pope Francis also comments that “a true ecological approach *always* becomes a social approach; it must integrate questions of justice in debates on the environment, so as to hear *both the cry of the earth and the cry of the poor.*” Think of the plight of the Carteret islanders, they are the least responsible for their own suffering. Yet, we are, with our modern lifestyles.

The third observation that Paul is making is a political one. Let me briefly tease out the first century context. Paul was writing his letter to Christians in Rome, at the heart of the largest empire of the day. The announcement of Caesar Augustus’s birthday was hailed as good news by his heralds, but Paul says the gospel (good news) is the story of Jesus (in chapter 1). Caesar was proclaimed as Lord of the whole world, but Paul says that Jesus is Lord. Roman coins had the face of Caesar and bore the inscription, “Caesar Augustus, Son of God, Father of His Country,” but Paul says Jesus is Son of God. Rome proclaimed that the Pax Romana (Roman peace) was maintained by obeying Roman law, and the price for resistance was crucifixion. But Paul says peace with God comes through Jesus. We then note that the Roman poet Horace says “Your age, O Caesar, has restored plenteous crops to the land.” It is in this context that Paul says that creation groans.

So why is this important? The gospel is unavoidably political and is public not private, and climate change, and other ecological crises need to be dealt with using the tools of politics, sometimes subverting it and its claims. For example, with coal is NOT good for humanity as Oxfam and World Bank reports have shown – you don't lift people out of poverty by filling the air with coal smoke and dust, and baking the planet. We need to make this clear and oppose new coal mines in this country, even though to do so is "political."

Healing the planet is the church's work

Finally, Paul says that ²¹the creation itself also **will be set free** from its slavery to corruption into the freedom of the glory of the children of God." You might remember a few years ago the save the whale stickers, well it is God who saves the planet. But that doesn't mean we sit about doing nothing! Paul elsewhere in Romans says we don't go on sinning as if we are doing God a favour by giving him opportunity to forgive us, so why keep trashing the planet so God has more to fix up? Or again, if you knew you were going to receive a heart transplant, why would you wait until afterward the procedure to start forming good eating habits and give up smoking and drinking? Or finally, why knowingly do things that hurt others we don't know, like the Carteret Islanders or the Bangladeshis, or our children and grandchildren who will inherit this world? We need to start right now caring for the planet.

So what could this look like?

Firstly, be informed and learn to groan with creation and the poor. This could include buying my book. But it is more than just information, but taking this into our hearts. The church groaning is the church in prayer. Secondly, divest from fossil fuels, by changing banks (from the Big Four), super funds or energy providers (to Powershop for example). I note with some pride that the Anglican diocese of Melbourne is divesting from fossil fuels. Thirdly, be political. I don't mean me telling you who to vote for, but for example when there is next a rally, march as the church with banner. Write letters to politicians giving Christian reasons for writing. And signing petitions as a Christian, including becoming involved with organisations such as Common Grace. In 2014, we raised money to purchase solar panels for Kiribilli House. While the present was refused, the point was well made. Finally, we need to rethink what the good life is and consider simplicity, vegetarianism, and other ideas that focus on people and planet, not possessions and power.

While the creation suffers under human mismanagement and abuse, the church should be leading in the fight to restore it, and those who suffer as a result, back to health. We do this because we believe Jesus died, rose and will return to put the world right. To work for a good life for the planet is part of our gospel mission.