

Isaiah 32:14-18; Philippians 4:5-7; John 14:15-17

You may have noticed that the order of service says, "Sermon and activity"! This is something that was suggested as part of the wider resources for this service, and the activity is going to be going out into the Churchyard to see what we can see and perhaps hear, and then bringing those findings back into Church to share with others. More on that later. But please be reassured that this is an optional activity, and if you'd prefer to stay in Church, that's fine. There will be something else to occupy you while others are outside.

But first the sermon. I was struck particularly by the words at the beginning of the Isaiah reading where it says: "For the palace will be forsaken, the populous city deserted; the hill and the watchtower will become dens forever, the joy of wild asses, a pasture for flocks". This is a scene of desolation, where all human activity has ceased. The king is no longer in his palace, the watchtower isn't 'manned' suggesting that even war has come to an end. The people have departed or fled, and the palace and city and land are left to wild asses and flocks that are presumably roaming wild, no longer under the care of a shepherd.

While obviously addressed to the people of Isaiah's time, and all that was going on then, it speaks of a desolate creation, devoid of peace. Devastated cities and wastelands reflect the destructive impact that human activities can have on earth. And all this, in Isaiah's time, was due to injustice and the broken relationship between God and humankind.

And so perhaps it can also be read as a prophecy to us about climate change and the loss of biodiversity, of where we are heading and why. In line with this, a group called Christian Climate Action has just published not so much a report as a cry directed particularly at the Church of England.¹ Entitled *Stop Crucifying Creation* it constitutes "a call to the Church to exemplify radical and transformative Christian living in the face of climate collapse". Timed to mark its launch, today it is holding a National Day of Prayer with a number of vigils taking place at cathedrals around the country, the most local being in Newcastle.

Acknowledgement of the combined climate and nature crisis is, then, the first step. Lament and confession follow, and we have already done both of those in this service through the hard-hitting confession that we made together. But, of course, lament and confession should themselves lead on because true repentance always means seeking to put right the wrongs we have done, the rights we have not done. And again, within our confession, we have already prayed for that: "Empower us to choose the road that leads to life [which links with what Jane was saying last week]. Guide us in the paths of righteousness", we have prayed.

But what then might that look like in practice? Well, the first thing is to realise that we are not alone in this. The Isaiah reading went on to say that the desolation would continue, "until a spirit from on high is poured out on us". And our gospel reading followed that up with the promise of the Holy Spirit. And the Holy Spirit is first the Spirit of truth who, it says a little later in John's gospel will guide us into all the truth (16:13).

¹ See <https://christianclimateaction.org/>.

And that's important, particularly when we are faced with many who deny this truth. The *Stop Crucifying Creation* document urged the Church, "to speak out more clearly, and with a prophetic voice, telling the truth about the destruction of Creation, on which all life depends". And the Holy Spirit is with us in that. We are not alone.

But then the document went on immediately to say, "and act like it actually matters". And that's where the rubber really hits the road (to use an inappropriate metaphor). What would acting like it actually matters look like? Well, the document made several demands:

- The Church should publicly rebuke and boycott businesses providing financial services and/or insurance to the fossil fuel industry.
- The Church should rebuke media outlets for spreading misinformation about the climate emergency and ecological destruction.
- Every part of the Church should bank ethically and Church money should be held only in banks that have no role in servicing the fossil fuel industry. (We do OK on that score.)
- The Church needs to radically prioritise its expenditure to meet commitments it has made to decarbonise its entire physical estate (for example by reaching Net Zero by 2030). (Our PCC will be discussing that further tomorrow night).

And so on, but including that:

- The climate and nature crisis should become central in the prayer life of the Church: committed, urgent, relentless and with fasting.

And, beyond all that at the Church level:

- Every level of the Church should explore how New Testament principles of sharing and holding things in common - knowledge, skills, time and resources - might be lovingly applied today to draw communities together, support individual decarbonisation and seek liberation from excess consumerism.

So, we cannot just leave this to 'the Church', but need to reflect and explore, individually and together, what more and what else we can do. I wonder if, as well as responding now, that might be a theme for us in Advent this year.

But finally, we also need to be a Church and a people of hope. Our Isaiah reading left us with a wonderful picture of the wilderness becoming a fruitful field, with justice dwelling in the wilderness, righteousness abiding in the fruitful field, and people abiding in peaceful habitation, in secure dwellings, and in quiet resting places. The world as it was meant to be, in other words, and as it will be in God's new creation. We need to hold onto that hope, and build towards it.

And that is one of the key contributions we and the Church can make. Holding out a vision of what the world could be like. Believing that the realisation of that vision is possible. We have a God who, in Christ, irrupted into His world, bringing healing and transformation. We have a God who, by the Holy Spirit, can and does and will irrupt again into His creation to help us and save us. Keep believing that. Keep hoping that. Keep praying that. That is our call.

Amen

Activity

Go into the Churchyard and look and listen, but don't pick! See what you can find. Perhaps there will be something to lament; almost certainly there will be things to rejoice in, and things to wonder at. Appreciate and marvel at God's good creation. Take your phones and take pictures. And then, when you come back in, share your pictures and experiences with those around you including those who weren't able to go.

For those remaining in Church, look more closely at the symbol for this year's Season of Creation, and work out more fully what it's saying, and what that might mean for us in practical terms. And discuss that with those around you. And you might like to walk round the Church and look at the wonderful Harvest flower displays.