

Sustainable September 2010



Bible Study Resources

Introduction

Climate Change is the theme for our studies for Sustainable September. This year's series of studies have been prepared by a number of writers, and this is the first time we have had the Anglican Diocese of Perth, the Council of Churches of WA and the Uniting Church Synod of WA working together to prepare the resources. It's an exciting development and there are different approaches to the studies. The range of approaches give a chance for the different ways we think and theologise to provide stimulus for your community to engage with the challenge of climate change.

In week one, Rev Evan Pederick sets the scene with his question "what does it mean to reflect on sustainability,..." and aiming to think theologically about the answers to such questions.

The second study by Elaine Ledgerwood, a PhD student at Murdoch University, poses the questions – what does climate change mean to the majority of people? Are Christians who live in metropolitan areas less connected to the issues of climate change than those who live in rural areas? Does the challenge of climate change exist on our thought horizon?

The third study in the series (written by myself) looks at the challenge of climate change to both individuals in their faith journey and to the Christian community. One of the key questions is "Does God weep over the way humanity has treated the world?"

The final in the series is derived from a longer article by Rev Neville Watson, written in June 2010. We decided it would be an excellent final study in the series to address the question 'Climate Change a challenge for the Christian Community worldwide'.

We hope you are challenged and blessed as you engage in this Sustainable September study series.

Rosemary Hudson Miller
Associate General Secretary (Justice & Mission)
Uniting Church Synod of WA

Climate Change: A challenge to creation



Week One: Rev Evan Pedrick (Anglican Church)

Writing this reflection in the middle of a Federal election campaign, I am reminded what a ‘hot button’ issue climate change has become. Clearly, whichever political party leads our country over the next few years, some positive action to reduce carbon pollution will need to be taken. Yet so much harm to our natural environment has already been done – even if global warming could be stopped tomorrow, we would still be faced with an unprecedented crisis compounded by the loss of biodiversity and natural habitat, and degradation of water, air and soil.

In such a context, what does it mean to reflect on ‘sustainability’, a word that my dictionary defines as ‘being able to maintain something at a steady level so as not to exhaust natural resources or cause severe ecological damage’?

Sustainability is more than just a buzz word because it focuses our thinking in a helpful way on the long term consequences of how we live. The question it poses is: what is going to happen if we keep doing this? Given that our planet is around 5 billion years old, that its living systems have been evolving and growing in complexity for over 3.5 billion years, and that human beings have been around for 200,000 or so years, but that we have done serious damage to fragile biological systems in just a couple of generations, we could certainly benefit from taking a longer perspective! Sustainability also focuses our thinking on the interaction of entire ecological systems. Thinking about sustainability over the long term inevitably means considering how biological, geological and chemical systems interact with each other.

The trouble is, the essentially economic perspective of sustainability does not take account of all sources of value. Take the report a couple of years ago that economists had valued the Great Barrier Reef at A\$54bn – by adding up all the dollars that could be lost to the fishing and tourist industries, plus the multiplier effects of flow-throughs to other sectors such as real estate, farming and retail. The valid point being made was that to spend a few dollars now – or even a few million dollars – to ensure the reef remains healthy is just common sense. But what was missing was any sense of the value of such a unique and beautiful ecosystem in its own right, much less of how we ourselves are diminished by thinking about other creatures and life-systems only as raw materials or resources for our own use. If we ask ‘how much is the Great Barrier Reef worth to a songwriter or an underwater photographer or an unborn child?’, then we might start to get some idea of its true worth in human terms. If we ask how much it is worth to the whales that migrate through it, to the turtles and coral fish that call it home, or to the anemones and sea-grasses and the coral polyps themselves – then of course the answer is ‘everything’.

Our human habit of thinking about other creatures and our planet itself only in terms of how they affect us is challenged by ‘deep ecologists’, who view human beings as just one – very destructive - species competing for space and finite resources on our planet-home. Deep ecologists are interested in the health of the whole planetary system, which some think of as being a single, living organism. In this view, human beings are part of the problem, not part of the solution!

In this study, however, we aim to think theologically, which is to say, about creation and human life in relation to God.

What is the value of creation for God?

What is our place in creation and what are our responsibilities towards it?



The Old Testament readings for this Sunday help to re-orient our thinking to God's perspective.

Read Psalm 139:1-18

One of the best-loved psalms reassures us that we are known and loved by God. The psalmist asserts that God is intimately acquainted with our human ways and thoughts. God's knowledge of us is poetically described as being both longitudinal, extending from before our conception until after our lives are hidden in death; and also contextual, revealed within the matrix of creation itself. The psalmist speaks of God's creative presence within light and darkness, the dizzying heights and depths of sea and sky, and the subterranean vaults of the earth. Wherever human beings venture, we see that creation is filled with God's presence. The psalm shares the perspective of the creation stories of Genesis that human beings are made in God's image as the pinnacle of creation, but that our lives unfold in the context of creation, and our experience of God's love and care bring us into relationship with the whole of the created order.

Read Jeremiah 18.1-11

The passage begins a series of prophetic judgements against God's people, who are accused of idolatry and faithlessness. As Jeremiah's warnings unfold, the consequences for Judah of worshipping foreign gods and pursuing foreign allegiances are revealed to be invasion, siege warfare, destruction and exile. This week's passage, however, begins with the parable of the potter and the clay, which as a metaphor for the relationship between God and creation is surprisingly intimate, even tender. The link that this image makes with the creation story of Genesis chapter 2 is revealed in the Hebrew word for 'potter', *yasar*, which also appears in Gen 2.27 and Ps 139.16 where it means to form or shape.

The work of a potter requires physical strength for kneading and 'wedging' the clay to remove air bubbles and make it pliable and responsive; centring the lump of clay on the wheel and working it up and down before beginning to 'throw' the pot. The clay is not inert but 'alive', and to work it successfully the potter needs to feel its texture, its tension and springiness and work within its limitations. The lump of clay on the wheel and the potter hunched over, working the clay and feeling where it 'wants' to go are a single organism. The clay yields to the potter's vision of how it might be transformed, but the potter needs to understand the clay, to visualise its shape and coax the pot into being through the pressure of strong hands and gentle fingers. The image reminds us of the false starts and evolutionary wrong turns of creation; the potter's pushing down of a spoiled pot not an act of frustration or destruction but of patient remoulding and shaping.

The image also informs our human interaction with creation, somewhat surprisingly affirming human artifice and the reshaping of the natural environment to accommodate human needs. As creatures made in God's image, or evolution become aware of itself, human beings are the responsible part of God's creation. The perspective both of the psalm and the reading from Jeremiah affirm the value of human use of the environment, but insist that we act as co-creative partners with God. Where the psalm offers us an image of our own lives interwoven with the created order, the parable of the potter suggests the need to work cooperatively with the earth, adjusting ourselves to its rhythms and respecting the integrity of its living systems.

The Jewish perspective on creation is that it involves divine self-limitation, that in order to make room for the universe to come into being God must, in some sense, withdraw. To be committed to the world, God must allow room for the world in its evolving and becoming. God's creative self-limitation can thus also be seen as an act of solidarity with the suffering of a creation that is struggling toward completion. Whatever happens to the world, happens to God too! As a model for our own engagement with the created order, this suggests the need for self-limitation on our own part, for understanding our dependence on the living systems of our planet as well as our responsibility for their flourishing.

Can you think of some ways in which human well-being might be connected with learning to take less, rather than more, of the earth's resources?



Week Two: Elaine Ledgerwood (Uniting Church)

Readings — John 3:16-21, Job 38 & 39

When I look around at our lifestyle, it seems to me that it is rather too easy to forget about climate change. Particularly for those of us who live in the city or large towns, we are relatively untouched by the changes going on around us. We hop from air-conditioned cars into air-conditioned buildings in summer. In winter we turn on our heaters. The tap always brings out the water we need, though we might not be able to water our gardens quite as often as we would like. Life goes on as usual and our largest reminders that the earth is warming comes from what happens to other people – the droughts, fires and floods that we see happening to those others on television.

For city communities, do you think this is an accurate description of our perspective? What would you change or add to make it more accurate for you?

For country communities, has there been an impact from climate change on your community? How could you respond to those whose experiences of climate change is second hand?

Read John 3:16-21. When you read these verses, read with the original Greek in a few places – for “world” read “cosmos” and in verse 19 for “judgement/condemnation” read “crisis”.

What do these elements of the original text inform us about the relationship between God, humanity and the world? How does this change the way we think about climate change?

Light and darkness have often been used (and misused) to describe good and evil. Much more frequently there are shades of grey.

As a group identify elements that could be contemporary examples of light and darkness (or greys).

Select one of these examples to focus on and read John 3 v19-21 again.

What (if anything) does this inform you about your example? What is the crisis?

It also seems to me that as we have been able to control our environment more and more, we have lost the sense of wonder at the world around us. Our lives become rushed and busy so there is no longer time to ponder or to enjoy the beauty of a single flower. Some of us may potter in the garden or walk in a park, but even those examples are controlled by humanity.

Share with the group a time you have encountered God in nature.

Towards the end of the book of Job, God responds to Job's complaints, not by giving a direct answer, but by giving Job a perspective that takes him beyond the needs of humanity.

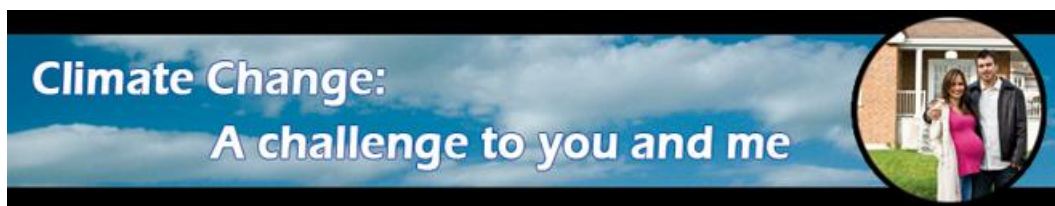
Choose a section (just a few verses) between Job 38 – 39 to read.

What does this tell you about God's relationship with the cosmos? How does this change our perspective on our relationship with the world?

One awe-filled moment for me was standing in the darkness looking at the vastness of the cosmos and realising that in spite of the relative smallness of us here, God loves humanity.

During the week, find a space in nature and wait for God.





Week Three: Rosemary Hudson Miller (Uniting Church)

Lectionary Readings — Jeremiah 18:18 – 19:1, Ps 79:1-9, I Tim 2:1-17, Luke 16:1-13

Climate change seems an innocuous phase now. Perhaps we have been inoculated from the challenge of it. Is climate change still a challenge? Is it one for you and me or is it too hard to make any difference? For 70% of Australians it is still an issue. I visited the USA and Canada last year and was encouraged by my conversations with young people there. But how is it for the Christian Community?

Read Jeremiah 8:18 – 9:1.

In the Jeremiah reading, God is grieving for the people of Israel. In a very beautiful passage we read of the self destruction of the people. It speaks to my heart, writing this study in August 2010, in the hot-house environment of a federal election campaign.

Jeremiah was written in the context of war, and we are reflecting in the context of climate change.

Does God weep over the way humanity has treated the world?

Reading Jeremiah now, can we hear the voice of God talking about the environment. The Word speaks to us in the places we find ourselves. I hear God's grief for the 'good creation' being destroyed by the wanton greed of humanity. This passage speaks to me of compassion for God's people 'for the hurt of my poor people, I am hurt. I mourn and dismay has taken hold of me' Jer 8:23. Many of our partner churches in Asia and the Pacific are despairing at the failure of the rich nations to lead on the Climate Change debate and to cut our pollution so that their counties will not face the consequences of global warming and ocean acidification. Many of these largely poorer countries will face the consequences of these results of pollution much sooner and for low lying land in a catastrophic way.

Many have been reflecting on the level of public debate about the environment. We have grieved as the considerations of the community have been about our lifestyle, our way of life, our capacity to live at the same standard we have become accustomed to in the last twenty or so years.

The 1980's slogan used by the World Council of Churches – Live Simply, so others may Simply Live, comes to mind, but is that too simple in itself?

In some research on carbon reduction for the Uniting Church I was looking again at the size of the carbon footprint of each person in each nation. Australians, closely followed by citizens of the United States of America, have on average the highest per person carbon footprint in the world.¹ As Ched Myers says reflecting on an earlier passage of Luke 'The ancients understood the grace of finitude, but we are the children of Icarus: Our footprint is too big on the earth, and we are flying too close to the sun'.²

¹ http://www.zeroyourcarbon.com.au/info/carbon_footprint/79/1

² A Bible study on Luke 12, ecology, and economics. by Ched Myers

<http://www.sojo.net/index.cfm?action=magazine.article&issue=soj0912&article=pay-attention-to-the-birds>

Why is this? Largely because of our use of fossil fuel and the size of the dwellings we live in. How do you compare?³ This is a useful tool and one you might like to use with your study group to see how your lifestyle measures up. It is interesting that many people older than the baby boomers live with a smaller carbon footprint than many of us do. One of the questions the World Wildlife Fund asks is how many planets would we need if everyone lived like you and me?

Read Luke 16:1-13

What strikes me is the incongruence of this passage. Some commentators, including *Kari Jo Verhulst* in a brief reflection about this passage, seem to think the parable is about a continuation of engagement in the world. Everyone I have read agrees that it is a difficult and contentious passage. In the context of reflecting on climate change though, does it offer clues as to how we should regard possessions; is it too long a bow to draw to consider it in this context?

It may be helpful to reflect on the very old fashioned concept of stewardship. I found it helpful to think about it as a way of framing the Christian community's engagement with the world. In stewardship the concept of caring for what has been entrusted to us has often been thought of as money and hard assets like buildings. I think of it in a wider context. I think of it as the creation entrusted to humans, and for Christians this passage assists us to reflect on the key to understanding this passage is in the faithfulness of our care for what has been entrusted to us. And so it has led me to think about the encouragement to engage in the political system in order to work for change. It helps to note in the verse after the end of this lectionary passage, who else is listening as Jesus is speaking. It is the Pharisees. Those involved in the running of the society, who had wealth and privilege. Jesus challenges them to a different set of values, which doesn't justify wealth for its own sake but considers values of the realm of God.

Does this passage challenge the Christian community to re-examine its values?

Does it encourage us to engage more fully with the political processes of our society?

Does thinking about stewardship of creation help you to engage in living at your lifestyle?

How do you think about this passage?

Read 1 Timothy 2: 1 – 17

This part of Paul's first letter to Timothy is extraordinary. Is what we are called to in Christianity — to live a quiet and peaceable life? Is this why we are praying for all those in high positions? I pray for the leaders of Australia and of the world, and I pray for love and justice to rule their hearts. Not so that we can lead peaceable lives, but so that God's love and mercy is exhibited in all communities. So that God will move God's people and we will act in our own communities and in the world we live in so that justice and mercy are accorded to all people, and God's good creation is cared for in a way that honours God and people.

What is your reflection?

Do you think you are called to act for change yourself? How can you encourage those around you to look at their actions?

³ <http://wwf.org.au/footprint/calculator/?gclid=CN2XsL-UjaMCFQYdewodSBNiVA>



Week Four: Rev Neville Watson (Uniting Church)

Introduction

Climate change is, according to former Prime Minister Kevin Rudd, “the greatest moral challenge of our time”. I am inclined to agree and on the 7th May 2010, I did a strange thing. I bought fifty acres of land fronting the Huon River in Tasmania. I purchased it as insurance for the children of my grandchildren’s children. It has been placed in a Trust for such of them who will be living in 2090. Why did I do this strange thing? Because James Lovelock, the global warming guru, maintains that when climate change takes effect, Tasmania and New Zealand will be the place to go. My purchase has been greeted with incredulity – not the least by my accountant who fondly believes that human ingenuity will solve all our emerging problems.

Before I move on to a consideration of the ecological issues we face today, let me mention a few reservations that I have about my purchase in Tasmania.

- (1) If climate change proceeds as envisaged, it is highly likely that law and order will break down under the pressure and the boundaries of my progeny’s little block will be of no consequence whatsoever.
- (2) It does nothing to solve the problem of climate change. It is simply the act of an old man to safeguard the future of his progeny. The best that can be said of it is that “he put his money where his mouth was”. The worst is that “he was more concerned about his progeny than he was about the problem”. The latter point is well taken. My rationalisation is that, having done what I can for my immediate family, I can now concentrate on assisting the wider family of humankind to see and react to the crisis we are facing.

What is was your first reaction to Neville’s purchase?

The Facts

As I see them, the facts are:

- (1) As determined by ice cores, greenhouse gases are at their highest atmospheric concentration in 650,000 years.
- (2) Whether or not climate change is due to human activity is not the point. The point is that the level of greenhouse gases in our atmosphere needs to be reduced.
- (3) The consequences of doing nothing are such that we need to err on the side of caution.

The Christian Faith and Climate Change

For me, the important question for us to address is “what does the Christian faith have to say about climate change?” To answer this question, we need to recognise that there are three major contexts for considering the faith: the **cosmological** (a concept of Creation), the **political** (the well being of all humanity) and the **individual** (the fulfilment for the individual). Each of these is an essential part of the whole. Without dealing with these three aspects of the faith we will never be able to come to grips with or make a contribution concerning climate change.

- The Cosmological Aspect

The cosmological aspect concerns our understanding of the universe and our place within it — how Jesus is the “universe come to consciousness”; how God is not a being but the ground of our being - the breath of life, the life force of the universe, our ultimate concern, the reality in which we live and move and have our being. God is not an old man on a throne in the heavens turning taps on and off. God is the evolutionary thrust inviting us to fullness of life. The glory of God is everything fully alive!

Sallie McFague⁴ sees the world as “the body of God” — a fascinating idea that makes climate change a major issue for the Christian faith. We live in God as a fish live in water. Religion all too often becomes one aspect of life among others. It is seen as something “for those so inclined.” Nothing could be further from the truth. Religion is about life at its depth. John 10:10 remains for me the central text of scripture. “My concern,” says Jesus “is that you might have life, and have it in all its fullness”. God so loved **the world!** The Christian faith is not about individual salvation. It is about the salvation of the world. It is about individual salvation only in so far as we are part of the world. We desperately need to recognise the cosmological aspect of the Christian faith - God as the restless energy of creative love inviting humanity to a fuller life of peace and unity, the cosmological God at the heart of life, God as the Spirit, the Breath of Life.

How do you understand the universe and our place within it?

- The Political Aspect

The second aspect of the Christian faith is about how we should live together on this planet. Jesus, of course, spent a huge amount of time and effort on this aspect. The Kingdom of God, the central concern and teaching of Jesus, is about the world as God wants it to be, and the Sermon on the Mount and the Parables set out some of the criteria of how we should live together. The Christian faith **is** political. The Christian faith is about how we should live together on the planet. We need to see life in terms of relationship. The words of Jesus make this crystal clear.

Do you agree with the assertion that “the Christian faith is political”?

- The Individual Aspect

The third aspect of Christian faith is the individual need and desire for fulfilment. In the modern era, the individual aspect of faith has dominated every other aspect. Each individual has a role to play, a gift to be exercised without which the human race is going to be poorer. This is a staggering concept if you can grasp it – the concept of fulfilling your potential.

The journey of the individual is important, but one of the main reasons for the human race being completely at sea as far as climate change is concerned, is that both Church and society have been and are dominated by an emphasis on the individual.

Some of the things I am saying may appear to some as being too political, and that they have no place in a sermon or bible study. But, while it may appear this way — I would contest that this interpretation is further evidence of the fact that we have concentrated on the individual aspect to the neglect of the political and cosmological aspects of the Christian faith.

Do you agree? Does the way Christianity has been traditionally understood impact on the way climate change is understood in respect to the political and cosmological aspects of the Christian faith?

⁴ *A New Climate for Theology*, Sallie McFague, Fortress 2008 P15



It will probably be no surprise that I see climate change as a spiritual problem. Climate change has to do with “the will to change” and the Christian faith, as I understand it, is about change.

The critical issue in addressing Climate Change is finding the motivation to change. We as individuals, and as a community, are the problem. Climate change is a spiritual problem. What I am suggesting is that the problem rests in a limited and narrow theology which concentrates on the significance of the individual to the detriment of the cosmological and political aspects of our faith. We need a very different paradigm or framework of faith – and without it our children’s children face a very grim future. Within our self centred beliefs and our unwillingness to change our way of life, lies the core of the problem.

Our hope rests, not in technology, but in dramatically transforming humanity’s relationship to the world — new values, understandings and attitudes which will make possible new political and social changes. Nothing less than this will suffice!

What can the Christian community contribute to this transformation?

What does all this mean in practical terms?

- (1) *We as individuals must make radical changes.* There is a groundswell within our community as far as solar panels, insulation and house design, transport, recycling and the like. As far as the individual aspect is concerned, there are signs of movement to a different way of life – and so there should be because Australians per capita are the greatest polluters on the planet. However, as admirable as individual effort is, it is not enough. The big changes that are required are systemic changes to the political, economic and cultural forces that control our lives today.
- (2) *We need to see the critical importance of politics.* We need to get rid of the attitude that the Christian faith has nothing to do with politics. It was, after all, responsible for the crucifixion of Jesus. Jesus wasn’t hanged. That was the punishment for criminals. Jesus was crucified – and crucifixion was the form of punishment reserved for enemies of the State. The idea that that Christians should keep out of politics arose from our concentration on the individual aspect of our faith. The cosmological and cultural aspects of our faith point to the fact that politics has everything to do with the Christian faith.

With our democratic form of government, Christian responsibility means electing legislators who can help structure our society in a way that is good not only for privileged individuals but for all human beings and all other life forms.

We have just had an election. Do you think this will make a difference?

- (3) *We need a larger vision of humankind and our future.* We tend to put great emphasis on things like ethnicity, racism, nationalism and patriotism. But what we desperately need to see is that what separates from each other is miniscule compared with what unites us. We need also to stress the inclusivity of our faith. We need to hold before ourselves and the world the vision of the Kingdom of God, the world as God wants it to be — as envisaged and put into practice by Jesus of Nazareth.

Conclusion

What then is my conclusion? It is this — that we as a Church are called to be the Church, to be a prophetic people, both in living an alternative life style, and being a global community with a universal concern, working with the restless energy of creative love inviting us to fullness of life, loving the world into being.

What we desperately need today are men and women of vision. We have to come to grips with the inability of people generally to face the issue, and we have to elect legislators who are wise enough to enact necessary

regulation to assist us to do so, and legislators who see humankind as a whole, as a family inhabiting and dependent upon what Sallie McFague refers to as the “body of God”. Only when we look at the big picture will there be hope! At the moment, with the dominance of the individual, and the narrowness with which the Christian faith is viewed, hope is in very short supply. The only hope that I see is that of the resurrection of life as portrayed in Jesus of Nazareth.

What hope do you see? What vision does your Christian community have?