

World Environment Day 2018

Pitt Street Uniting Church, 10 June 2018

A Contemporary Reflection by Elizabeth Maddox, Gerard McEvilly and Vivien Langford

Psalm 104: 1-12; Psalm 104: 22-32

This reflection can be viewed on You Tube at <http://www.pittstreetuniting.org.au/> under "Sunday Gatherings" tab

Liz

Sometimes I find myself counting heads on a Sunday morning. Are there going to be enough of us to keep afloat, week after week, year after year; enough to keep the institution of the church viable?

But a few weeks ago when I read an article from the Guardian website by political scientist and respected environmental advocate Meyer Hillman, I stopped worrying. The article was about the predicted tenure of human civilisation as we know it, which he calmly sets at the end of this century.

This article shook the foundations of my castles in the air and made everything look different. For a little while. For as long as my mind could hold on to the concept that Bach and Shakespeare and Confucius and Socrates, the solemn temples, the great globe itself, yea, all which it inherit, really might dissolve, and within the lifetime of my grandchildren. So powerful is the denial that we have built into our civilisation that it was only for a few days that I could look at trees, forests, entire ecosystems, and see their precarious state, and our own.

I do know, cerebrally, that our comfortable materialist society is careering towards a precipice.

If the church is not to lose its salt, if we are to emit light in these dark ages, then our concern cannot be our numbers. The preservation of life is preliminary to any passing of the torch of our religious tradition; without it there can be no preservation of love. If we are to offer anything to the world, to our city or our fellow citizens, we have to offer a way forward for our planet.

Whatever we conceive God to be, there can be no single more important way of loving God than striving to protect life on earth. Love is the end, the means and the vision. To love others, we must labour for the survival of the only place there is to live.

If we are to stop climate collapse, the world needs a new narrative; one that is able to articulate the state of our earth and not despair, because we hold one another in community, valuing each other above goods and comfort.

Now we fiddle while Rome burns but this need not be so. As George Monbiot says, in his gentle echo of the prayer of St Francis, we can, and must, be a cradle of belonging, affirming, nurturing and demanding justice in its myriad guises, personal and political, our eyes fixed joyfully on the race before us: the survival of the Earth.

Incidentally, if we do so, the church will find itself more important than ever before. I do not think that numbers will be a problem.

If we do so, the coracle of our church will indeed become an ark.

Gerard

Lizzy has shared two perspectives – the alarmism of Meyer Hillman and many others...

Then the other perspective is George Monbiot echoing St Francis more or less....

Where there is darkness, let me sow light

Where there is despair, let me sow hope

Maybe these are two sides of a zipper and we actually need to be prompted in this world of distractions about what really matters and how to respond.

How can we take that prompt of despair and harness it to hope for the sake of our brothers, sisters and all our grandchildren?

Well, first and most importantly, let's celebrate what we are already doing, as individuals and as a faith community. We have marched in support of climate action; we've hosted our Pacific Island neighbours and heard their stories – and seen their celebration amidst the worries that they have. Some of us have pledged a dollar a week towards Pitt St's Green Energy Fund (but we need more pledges). Some of us have adopted worm farming.

In a community like this, talking about a topic like this, I have such a strong sense that everyone's sitting here as I do, thinking: *well I feel like I'm doing everything I can*; but if we think of it as a journey and there are always new steps we can take.

There's lots of sources of help. Mark and Tom Delaney describes from a really interesting perspective of their background, how it can be challenging and how it can be fun and certainly community building to keep considering our behaviour and think about that. But even so, individually or even as a community can seem a little trivial. Are they really making any difference – given the scale of the issues we're facing?

Well Pitt St is also part of ARRCC – the Australian Religious Response to Climate Change. That encompasses all of the faith communities – working together to address this issue. Through our membership of ARRCC, we can be part of a global inter-faith campaign called Living the Change.

This gives us a way to count all those tiny changes that seem so insignificant when we make them. But together they can really add up.

By doing that, it provides us with two things: firstly we can therefore speak with credibility. All these faith leaders (and I hope you'll go and have a look and have a listen to some of the stories) they're really sharing their personal stories, including how hard it is to make those extra steps in lifestyle changes; in food, travel or energy use.

Secondly, this initiative brings us together as a global grass roots faith community. That means we can send a collective message to global leaders when they meet in September. What we can say is, there may be many diverse faith perspectives, but we all share this common call to tread lightly on this God-given earth. And we are acting on it.

So listen up.

Vivien

World Environment Day is like something too big for us to concentrate on, so I'd like to take you with me to Bangladesh to give the global perspective. One of the most wonderful people I met through my radio interviews was Dr Salim al Huq. He's a climate scientist. He contributed to the Islamic Declaration on climate change. It was similar to the Pope's declaration in *Laudato Si*, which influenced people around the world to get moving. His positive attitude springs from a deep humanity. I was so impressed by him because he talked also about the refugees who had come into Bangladesh that year while they were flooding.

Bangladesh was two thirds under water and on the east, from Burma (Myanmar), there were over 500,000 refugees – desperate people coming in – and Bangladesh had just absorbed them, looked after them.

Meanwhile, in the north, all around the Bangladesh border is an armed wall; a guarded wall where people patrol from India to keep the Bangladeshi climate refugees out. So there's not a migration to India and that wall reminds them that they're alone in handling the problem.

But Dr Huq, when I spoke to him was expansive. He was a climate scientist, he had all the information, he goes to all the world conferences. But he had total positive belief in the kind of can-do attitude and what they were already doing. He said: *We're already feeding 125 million people! What's another half a million!* Which really took my breath away! His message for us is that we in the west could rethink our role as donors. Australians are very good at giving to Red Cross appeals when there's a flood or an earthquake. But, he said *don't think of yourself as a donor. Think of yourself as a partner.* He said the global solutions are something we have to do in partnership. The climate change is affecting us now. WE are on the front line, but you in Australia are experiencing droughts and you will definitely know that climate change is heating you eventually.

So I'd like you to just listen to a little tiny bit of Dr Salim al Huq's interview and then I'll finish.

(Audio from Beyond Zero Emissions radio: <http://bze.org.au/bangladesh/>)

Straight after that broadcast, this was last September in the floods, someone from UTS University rang Dr al Huq and offered to collaborate with him, exchanging students. So sometimes you throw a seed out, as were hearing today, and it starts to flourish.

So, thank you for listening to him. I'd just lie to finish by saying: right now in the Vatican, Pope Francis is in a closed meeting with Oil Executives from the likes of Exxon Mobil, Royal Dutch Shell and his climate scientists trying to persuade them to fund the transition. To turn around the ship. As Dr Salim al Huq says, it's a crime to go on drilling for the fossil fuels.

Lizzie talked about preservation of life. I'd like you to think of those millions of Bangladeshis, every year flooded out and not just lying down and taking it. They could have 5 million people with megaphones to go around the villages and warn people that there's a flood coming, they have provision for livestock. They are on the front foot. They're not just saying let the government do something about it. They themselves are doing it.

So the restoration narrative we heard about from Monbiot is not just about restoring safe life for people. It's also about biodiversity, it's about sharks, it's about plankton, it's about mountain ash trees, it's about safe habitat for all life to live.

I think World Environment Day gives us a chance to think about that. So let's all talk about restoration in everything we can do. You can join in the Pitt St Green Fund. Gerard said that we haven't got enough people. I think only 15 out of the needed 50 people have subscribed. That's just one dollar a week to help Pitt St have a green fund.

There's also a little leaf that you're going to be told about in a moment, and I'm going to write on my leaf that I'm going to look u the website that Gerard told us about and work with that Living the Change – because there's so many ideas that we can encourage each other.

So, write your pledge on the leaf and consider the Green Fund and consider Living the Change.