

Practical actions for Creation

Pitt Street Uniting Church, 22 September, 2019

A Contemporary Reflection by Gerard McEvelly, Fiona Bennett,
Orange Kao and Vinita Thomas

Creation 4C – Cosmos Sunday

Psalm 148; Colossians 1: 15-20

This reflection can be viewed on You Tube at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=B_5hC-pJGk4

GERARD

I'm excited! I love stories and today three of our Pitt St friends are sharing theirs.

We will hear stories of quiet resistance to the threats that we're facing to our home, Mother Earth.

As we listen, let's not feel guilty that we are not doing enough ourselves. Let's not feel overwhelmed by the crisis we face. Let's rejoice in the small things that ordinary people can do.

As we listen, let's think how we could also become story-tellers ... by becoming part of these stories, maybe by passing them on, or by sharing our own.

Over to you, Fiona.

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FIONA

Thanks, Gerard.

I would like to share some of my thoughts about the environment, in particular, single use plastics – my big bug-bear! We have a collective responsibility to care for the earth and maintain it so that future generations, and God's other creatures, are able to enjoy living on this beautiful planet. I believe our overuse of plastics is putting this at risk.

Plastics are everywhere and have become necessary in a lot of applications – from transport to medicine, to building and construction. But we are using too much of it, and unnecessarily. And the plastic that we make persists in the environment almost indefinitely.

Global production of plastic is now at 400 million metric tonnes per year and rising. 99% of plastics are made from fossil fuels and are a significant contributor to greenhouse gas emissions. Current infrastructure and systems have not been able to keep up with the increase in production. We have an environmental and health problem that requires urgent attention and action.

Eight million tonnes of plastics enters our oceans every year, breaking down into smaller pieces. I have attended a number of beach clean-ups and have been shocked at the amount of plastic waste. An article in the Guardian last month by a beach cleaner in Wales wrote that, after four years coordinating clean ups he had decided to quit, as it was like trying to mop up a flood while the tap is still running.

Plastic has now made its way into the food chain from marine life through to people. Microplastics are a significant issue, and come from the breakdown of plastics and also from our synthetic clothes when they are washed.

In my work as a health professional, I am concerned about single use plastics in the hospital setting. In Sydney we are lucky to have safe tap drinking water. However, patients in public hospitals are provided bottled water, single use drinking cups and cutlery. And all medications are dispensed in single use plastic cups. And that's just for starters!

In a wealthy country like Australia, we can dispose of waste and move it to a different place where it does not impact on our amenity or health. But we have not developed systems where we adequately recycle and/or reuse these materials.

We have relied on China to deal with our waste, and are now transporting it to other countries in the Asian region who may not be equipped to deal with their own waste, let alone ours. The Christian charity Tear has a campaign looking to address the waste issue, as it disproportionately affects those in developing countries. You can find out more on their website.

While I am concerned about the overuse of plastics, I am also uplifted by the small changes that show we are capable of fixing this problem.

I shop at a co-op that gives consumers an alternative to multinational supermarket chains where everything is plastic-wrapped. I have noticed an increasing number of these co-ops and bulk food stores. People are taking up discounts for take away coffee if they bring their own cup. There are companies offering alternatives to plastic packaging such as Who Gives A Crap toilet paper, who also donate 50% of their profits to build toilets for those without.

At my own workplace I have initiated a working group that is looking at ways to reduce the environmental footprint of the hospital.

And most recently, on Friday, I was encouraged by the climate change action strike where I volunteered as a Marshall. The strike showed how many young people, supported by the broader community, want to care for and better protect this beautiful earth we are privileged to be living in.

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ORANGE

I'm going to talk about how I reduce my carbon footprint, with the focus on public transport, accompanied with a few jokes.

Warren has asked me to talk about what concerns me about the environment. I'm not "really" concerned. Just doing what I can do. And gently affecting people around myself if there's a chance.

For example, sometimes I have a flatmate who doesn't do the recycling.

I choose to say nothing, but quietly pick up the recyclables from the bin when they're not around, and recycle it afterwards.

But they will find out eventually, and start to recycle after a few months.

I am also asked to tell about what I might be doing. But I believe actions speak louder than words. So I'll only share what I already did.

When I was a child, I get Christmas gift every year. But when I was 9, I asked my mum to stop buying me gifts. Because I realised that I don't need it.

Instead, I ask my mum to put money into my bank account directly. It's an account without an ATM card, but I do enjoy seeing the number growing every year.

I think it's the result of the "money education" that my mum gave me, and the reduced carbon footprint is just a side effect.

I don't have a car. I rely on public transport, even for travelling to national parks in Central Coast – for example, the Munmorah State Conservation Area. It's a park with an unspoiled landscape that I visit for more than ten times. It takes me 4 hours to get there by public transport.

I'm probably the only person to visit there by public transport. The staff at the park remind me about parking fee. I told them I arrived by bus, and they seemed surprised.

Getting there takes 4 hours, but getting home is another story. It happened once that the bus didn't come. I have no other option but going to another bus stop, which takes 3 hours on foot, ten km up and downhill, to catch another bus to go home.

What should we all do?

I'm not going to give too much "teaching" or "interfere" with people's lifestyle.

But I hope you feel amused or entertained by what I just shared.

And please let me know if you'd like to join me travelling to Central Coast by public transport.

Together we can enjoy the natural environment.

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VINITA

Today, I want to share with you the impact of climate crises on the vulnerable population in developing countries.

My experience as a community development worker in India, and more recently with an anti-slavery organisation here in Sydney, has helped me to make a connection between climate change and Human Rights.

It was hard – very hard, I must say, in the beginning - believing that slavery exists in recent times. According to UN statistics, there are 40 million slaves in the world today more than any time in history. 15.5 million in South Asia alone. The route to slavery, in most cases, begins with debt as small as \$20.

Most debts are taken because livelihoods that are dependent on natural resources, like agriculture, are threatened due to irregular rainfall and untimely rainfall. In recent years rural communities that are already dealing with poverty find it hard to build resilience or adapt, and therefore have to take a loan to meet ends. Climate change impacts are felt each passing year in the form of drought, floods, heatwave, cyclones and many more.

In such situations migration to nearby cities becomes the only viable option. Migration means money can be sent home to service debt - and men usually go, leaving women and children behind. This coping mechanism increases susceptibility to trafficking. Not only those migrating, but also their families that they have left behind.

Bonded labour, child labour and sex trafficking are the forms of violence and slavery that are gripping developing countries. Traffickers find it easy to thrive where justice systems are weak, and laws do not protect the vulnerable. Countries already dealing with social problems are now crippled further with environmental ones. One can only imagine how climate crises will keep impacting human rights in more profound ways, than we expected.

The point I am making here is these issues are not localised anymore; it has become a global problem. As global citizens, we are equally responsible when it comes to taking action. It could begin very simply by becoming aware. Awareness will lead to taking action, and this is what is needed, action!

It begins as an individual turns into a collective effort.

I want to conclude with some hope that I found in the book *A Climate of Justice* written by Mick Pope. He says: "*justice should be important to Christians because it reflects God's character and if you love justice we must deal with climate change now*"

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GERARD

So we have heard a little bit from Fiona about, I guess, challenging corporate power in the hospital system. She's been very modest, but she's been to the very top, asking why so much waste is necessary.

We've heard from Orange about just leading by example as individuals.

And, we've heard from Vinita about standing up for the victims of climate change – the first people to suffer its effects directly - and yet powerless to respond.

Globally, we know, there's a whole generation who will be next to feel its effects. On Friday, this place was packed out with young Uniting Church people ready to join the school strike for climate.

They arranged their own service here; they invited Reverend Moni, with his Pacific Island perspective, to speak with them. Uniting Church leaders from Synod and agencies gladly came along to bless them and tell them about Synod's new commitment to their earth-saving mission.

And, of course, Pitt St people were here too, doing their best in hosting, welcoming, tech supporting; and Margaret led communion for everyone.

All those placards and slogans seemed powerful... the immense crowd in the Domain was inspiring.

But slogans won't change people's minds or attitudes. Jesus didn't convince by slogan. He led by example, he spoke truth to power and he stood up for victims. And he shared stories.

Let's pray that we can be bold enough to do the same.

To share stories and help stop God grieving about what we are doing - to the world and to each other.

Amen