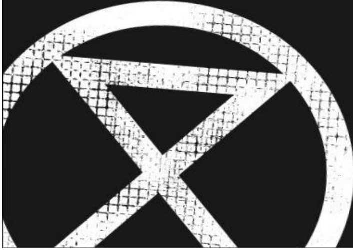
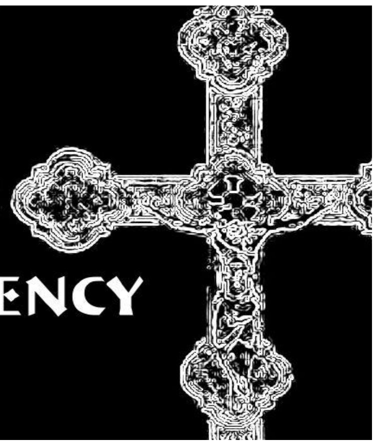
The CHURCH and the CLIMATE EMERGENCY





Like a great many people, I've found environmental issues gathering a greater urgency for me as a result of a series of scientific reports and climate events over the last couple of years. The Christian Churches have been far from silent on this subject but I find their responses leave important things out, so I wanted to think it through for myself.

- James Rattue, rector of St John's, Summer 2019

The Situation

It is now beyond all reasonable doubt that the world's climate is being affected by human activity. Industry based on the exploitation of fossil fuels has released carbon dioxide and other gases into the atmosphere, trapping heat close to the earth's surface, an effect known about in theory since the 1820s. Combined with other changes which are not directly caused by climate effects but which are also linked to industrial processes, such as decline in insect numbers, pollution of the seas, and the erosion of soil fertility, this poses a threat to human civilisation, and, potentially, our sheer survival.

While no particular extreme weather event can be ascribed to climate warming, the succession of record-breaking temperatures, storms, melting of ice cover and observed rises in sea levels are consistent with the picture climate-change science has been presenting for some time. Standards of measurement differ, but a widely-accepted figure is that average global temperatures have risen 1° since the end of the 19th century. The International Panel on Climate Change – a group of leading scientists in this field convened by the United Nations – stated in a report in 2018 that unless steps are taken by 2030 to restrict the rise in temperature to 1.5°, the effects on human society will be radical and

hard for our existing way of life to accommodate. If nothing happens, global temperatures will probably rise by up to 3° by 2100, with enormous consequences.

Many scientists think the IPCC estimate was too conservative, that warming is already accelerating faster than we realise, and that the measures humans need to take to reverse the process are, accordingly, much more severe and much more urgent. If you really want to depress yourself you can try reading this year's report from the Breakthrough climate think-tank in Australia, which, summarising a variety of scientific research and assuming the more severe models are accurate, concludes that even if countries meet their current carbon-emission reduction targets, human civilisation is likely to collapse soon after 2050. If they are right, hundreds of millions of people will be set on the move as low-lying cities are inundated and parts of the world became too hot to live in, while at the same time crop yields fall all across the globe. This would be a situation our existing political structures could not manage. These warnings are at the 'fat end' of the predictions, but they are not unrealistic: the situation they describe is already beginning. And countries are not meeting their current environmental targets: instead, emissions continue to grow, and a certain amount of temperature rise is already built-in.

The direction we are travelling in is not in serious doubt. What remains debatable is how far we have already gone, how far we might go yet, how fast, and how much we can mitigate the effects of what has already happened. Speaking personally, until relatively recently I knew that change was needed, but assumed we had perhaps a couple of centuries to get used to it: it now seems virtually certain that we have nothing like that amount of time to act.

The science indicates that most human effects on the climate have taken hold over the last fifty years. On the one hand, this is frightening, as it shows how fast the climate is changing. On the other, it is encouraging, as it demonstrates how we could turn things around in the same sort of time, if we were determined.

Part 1 – Practicalities

i. Things Individuals can do

People in developed Western economies are in a good position to be able to contribute towards the reduction in global carbon emissions because our current lifestyles cause so many!

The existing global food system is a major source of environmental damage. In general, animal-based foodstuffs require more energy to produce than plant-based ones, so reducing your meat and dairy intake or cutting it out entirely is worthwhile. But other aspects of our lifestyle have an even greater impact.

Firstly there is the use of energy in our homes. Solar- and wind-generated energy is now almost as cheap as that generated by oil- and gas-driven power stations. We can change our energy supplier to one that concentrates on renewable energy, or to a green tariff with our current supplier if they offer one. Heating our homes can be made more efficient with better insulation and smarter controls, and not heating rooms that aren't being used. Ultimately, we will need to shift from gas to other forms of heating.

Secondly there is transport. Motor fuel is a major source of carbon emissions: we can assess all our car journeys to see whether they can reasonably be made another way, on foot, bicycle, or public transport. Many major car manufacturers are quickly shifting to making electric vehicles, and these are rapidly becoming cheaper and more efficient, but they're not easy options for consumers as yet. Flying is *so* damaging that it should be used very sparingly, although aviation itself accounts for a small proportion of global emissions.

Carbon offsetting – paying for someone to absorb the carbon we have emitted by planting trees and other initiatives – is controversial, and it's almost certainly better not to emit the carbon in the first place, especially as trees grow slower than we need them. But offsetting has its place as some emissions are unavoidable at the moment. There are various online tools (of differing accuracy) to calculate your carbon footprint, the amount of carbon dioxide you, as an individual or a household produce, and the UN suggests a list of projects for companies and households to support to offset their emissions.

Very radically we can think about how many of us there are, especially in developed Western economies. Each soul in Britain uses umpteen times as much of the Earth's

resources as a soul in Nigeria or Bangladesh, yet it is developing nations which will suffer the consequences of climate change first and hardest. To put it brutally, until Western economies are cleaner, the last thing the world needs is more of us.

Beyond this, there are all the choices we've got used to making involving recycling, not using pesticides in gardens, and so on. Churches can think about the impact they have as organisations, too. But there is a limit to what we can do as consumers, and the biggest decisions are not ones we can make – at least, not directly.

ii. Politics

What consumer choice can and can't do

As well as making a personal contribution to mitigating climate change, our consumer choices can make it clear to industry, commerce, and government where we want to go, and so they are one way we as citizens can exert pressure on them to do the right thing. However we are also constrained by the system within which we work, and some people are more constrained than others by limited income and by circumstances. They can less afford to take green options. Restructuring the economy to make environmentally-beneficial choices easier is work that only governments can do: only governments have the necessary power and legitimacy. The big decisions about energy use, food production and transport are political ones we can only make together, and which we must enact collectively. The decisions we can make about our personal habits, energy use, and transport, are worthwhile but limited.

Pressure and consent

Governments rely on consent or they cannot assume their stability. They won't embark on potentially problematic programmes unless they are sure they can secure the consent of the majority of their people. This is especially true in democratic systems, but even in non-

democratic systems governments can't rely on pure force for long. Thus governments may know they have to act in a particular area of policy, but will do nothing for fear of the short-term consequences.

Pressure from citizens in the area of climate policy, showing that they are prepared to risk short-term detriment for the sake of human survival, is therefore vital to encourage governments to act. Equally, debate is necessary to build the social consensus which alone can underpin the great changes we need to make and which will affect the way we all live. The Citizens' Assembly on climate change recently announced by the UK Parliament, even though its conclusions won't be legally binding, will be a crucial element in building this consensus and therefore enabling more radical action by the British government.

Many governments do not want to act. This is because they are afraid that the changes they suspect they need to make will damage their economies and therefore their ability to hold onto power, so they reject the scientific evidence that the global climate is heading towards crisis, or find other ways of arguing that they don't need to do much. This is especially true where economies are reliant on the production of fossil fuels, such as Russia and Saudi Arabia. Their resistance does not justify countries such as the UK doing nothing. Instead it makes such action all the more necessary to demonstrate that it can be done: what we do here is part of the pressure applied to those who are dragging their feet and risking the survival of the human race.

Even where governments commit themselves to environmental targets, they often engage in sleight-of-hand to make their performance look better than it is. The UK government claims it has reduced national carbon emissions by 50% since 1990: it manufactures this figure by excluding emissions from shipping and air transport as though they are someone else's problem. We also fail to count the effects of the goods we consume, as well as those we produce. This is not facing the truth: it is trying to avoid acting because you are afraid that acting will hurt too much.

An economist friend of mine insists that 'solving global warming is easy', in the sense that the technology exists to do it. What doesn't exist yet is the political will, and that remains to be built.

iii. Practical change

Developed Western economies have spent decades building up a society which rests on the exploitation of fossil fuels, rapid personal transport based on the motor car, and a

food production system rooted in factory farming, intensive agriculture and global trade networks. There are many benefits to this way of life, at least for the citizens of rich Western countries, and it is too much to ask individuals and households to change it on their own account: the immediate cost is too great for the market to do it alone. Governments have to alter the framework within which choices are made.

The parallel experience is that of wartime. During 'total war', such as we experienced between 1939 and 1945, all of a society's resources are organised around a single, overarching aim, and this must be what happens again. Certain personal liberties we are used to – moving where and when we want, aspects of private consumption and expenditure – will almost certainly need to be constrained. Every public choice will have to be assessed for its environmental impact, and what were private choices will often become public ones.

Government could introduce greater regulation of the food industry, or forms of rationing, including the use of energy. It could co-ordinate more rapid transition to the use of low-carbon energy, and begin replacing the nation's gas boilers and improving energy use and insulation in its homes. It could mandate carbon-offsetting and invest in carbon sequestration technology to recapture as much as possible of what has already been emitted. It could refuse to expand air travel facilities or fossil fuel extraction. Many of these changes will require citizens to reorganise aspects of their lives, not to mention additional taxation and bureaucracy, which is why overall consent – not to everything in detail, but, as in wartime, to the aim – is necessary.

iv. Ideological change

The efficiency of the global economy, and national economies, is measured in terms of growth. To reduce it to the most simple terms, growth is the difference between the value of what we dig up from the ground and the value of what we turn it into. Ever since the Industrial

Revolution, which began in England in the early 1700s, this process has been fuelled, literally, by the exploitation of fossilised carbon in the form of coal, oil, and gas, as well as minerals.

Making growth the aim of an economy has the great advantage that ideological choice is at least partly privatised, and taken away from the realm of public controversy. Wealth moves into the hands of individuals who decide what to do with it. Of course there can be a variety of opinions about where the boundary between private and public choice should lie, and hardly any political ideologies abolish the public realm completely, but most economies around the world are organised in such a way as to keep most wealth in private hands, assuming this results in the greater prosperity of everyone, and, much of the time, it does. The system has produced enormous benefits over centuries.

But the global party is coming to an end. Fossil fuels are becoming more and more costly to extract, catastrophically so if the great cost of the global climate crisis is counted in. Renewable energy sources are less economically efficient than coal, oil and gas, in the sense that it takes a greater input of resources to reap the same output, however good the technology gets. It's also becoming harder to source iron ore for steel and gravel for concrete (although predictions that the globe is 'running out' of any resource have a poor track record). This means governments are finding it progressively more difficult to produce the rates of economic growth that will satisfy the aspirations of their people. You can read much of the politics of the world at the moment in terms of this ongoing change.

It would be a great advantage to shift our ideas of economic productivity from current definitions of growth to something based more around an index of human welfare. In theory this should not be too hard, as all human beings want basically the same sort of things. But it will require talking about, and redrawing the boundaries of what we currently assume is the realm of private choice in favour of a more collectively-settled definition of what it means to live a reasonable human life. We will almost certainly not get it entirely right.

Part 2: Spirituality

i. The ethic of care

Although there is a strong strand of Christian spiritual practice which sees God's nature and activity revealed through the created order, theologically Christianity has traditionally been very anthropocentric – that is, it's primarily interested in the actions and condition of human beings, and in the natural world only as the setting and context for the drama of human salvation. It has taken greater awareness of human-generated climate change for environmental concerns as such to come to prominence in Christian discourse.

The story of creation in Genesis provides the basis for the case that Christians have a duty to care for the earth. God tells the first humans 'to be fruitful and multiply, to fill the earth and subdue it, to rule over the fish of the sea and the birds of the air and over every living creature' (Gen 1.28). In the second version of the Creation story, God places Adam in the Garden of Eden with the instruction 'to work it and take care of it' (Gen 2.15).

However, humans exercise whatever relationship they have with nature only in the context of God's prior relationship with it and ownership of all he has made (Ps 24.1). God does not retire: humans remain answerable to him for what they do with his gifts. God continues to own the land, reminding the Israelites 'you are but aliens and my tenants' (Lev 25.23). He still interacts directly with the non-human world, on the grand scale guaranteeing its security and order (Ps 75.3, Job 38.12-38), and on the micro-level placing words miraculously into the mouth of an ass (Num 22.28-30)!

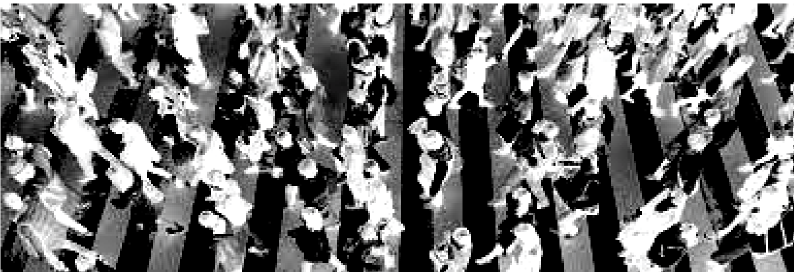
Furthermore, although in some sense humans, uniquely made in God's image and the only creatures capable of sharing in God's work of ordering creation (Gen 2.19-20), speak for every other living being, the non-human world retains its own direct relationship with God in its own terms. He provides food for it in a way humans have to manage for themselves (Ps 147.8-9) and watches over the very sparrows (Matt 10.29). The 18th-century Anglican poet Mad Kit Smart captured this in writing

> *For I will consider my Cat Jeoffry.*
> *For he is the servant of the Living God, duly and daily serving him.*
> *For at the first glance of the glory of God in the East he worships in his way …*

- which is only going a little further than Psalm 150 (‘let everything that has breath praise the Lord’) or the Benedicite (‘All ye works of the Lord, praise ye the Lord: bless his name and magnify him forever’).

The Prophet Isaiah was convinced that when humans turned away from a right relationship with God, there were consequences for the natural order: ‘the earth dries up and withers, the world languishes and withers … the earth is defiled by its people; they have disobeyed the laws, violated the statutes, and broken the everlasting covenant. Therefore a curse consumes the earth’ (Is 24.4-6). Isaiah clearly saw this as a result of specifically religious unfaithfulness, but throughout the Scriptures there is no sense that a just social order, proper stewardship of God’s gifts, and religious faithfulness, can be separated; they are all interconnected. This point becomes apparent in our own time when we consider how industrial development, farming practices and climate change impact on human welfare, especially that of poorer people. Human beings are therefore not free to use the earth and its resources as they please, as they have abiding obligations to God, to other humans, and to the creation itself - to ensure it is used in accordance with its essential nature, assigned to it by God and not by us.

ii. Rejecting anti-humanism



Within environmentalist ethics, humans and their activities pose a problem to be solved. Christian thinking sees this in the context of the Fall. The use of the word ‘subdue’ in the Biblical narrative of Creation suggests that by the time humans arrived, nature had already departed from God’s original plan and they were to help repair whatever damage had already occurred. However, the Fall radically impaired the ability of human beings to carry out their redemptive work, and from then on there has been an element of struggle and estrangement in their relationship with the natural world that was not intended to be present (Gen 3.17-19). The original commission to the first humans, therefore, cannot be

used to justify human dominance over the natural order since they are no longer in the condition which would make that dominance just; but the account of the Fall does indeed express the tragic reality that, for much of human history, the environment has been a hostile landscape against which humans had to battle to survive, wresting sustenance and resources from it. Just as tragically, we have carried that sense over into an epoch in which it is no longer true in the same way, a time when our power to affect nature has so dramatically increased that the earth is harder put to survive *us* than we, it.

Nevertheless, the Church remains necessarily committed to the narrative of salvation which is its reason for existing. Human beings are the centre of God's creative work, and their redemption is the core of the redemption of the whole creation. Were human life not essentially good and right, God could not have been born as human, lived, suffered, died and been resurrected as human, and would not have taken that human life into his own heart. Christian thinking is absolutely and inescapably humanist. The seventh Eucharistic Prayer of the Anglican Church, echoing the language of Psalm 8, declares:

In the fullness of time you made us, the crown of all creation

In the secular environmental movement there is a temptation to regard human beings as aberrant, dangerous, tainted, and sick, vermin that nature will be justified in destroying. Individuals can easily slip into this language, and environmental concerns can be a way of codifying and justifying misanthropy. Strangely, this hatred of human beings echoes some voices within Christian history; for them, the depth of human sin and frailty provides a rationale for disgust at humanity generally. The Church as a whole emphatically rejects this attitude as contrary to the revelation of God's love in Jesus Christ, and the fact of his sharing our human life with us. 'Everything God created is good', insists St Paul (1Tim 4.4), echoing the Creation story itself (Gen 1.31).

iii. Economics

The field of Christian approaches to economic life is too vast to cover in any detail here. Christian economic writings tend to confirm the bias of the writers, whether to a free-market or a socialist model

of economy, and justification can be found for both in the Biblical texts: the Bible clearly assumes that private ownership of property is legitimate, and also advocates generosity to the poor. What is virtually absent is any endorsement of the ideology of choice, that the purpose of economic activity is to generate private resources for individuals to use to express their own decisions. The closest the texts seem to come to it is the rhetorical question of the landowner – a stand-in for God - in Jesus's Parable of the Workers in the Vineyard: 'don't I have the right to do what I want with my own money?' (Matt 20.15), but this is not the focus of the story. It's about forgiveness and grace, not economic relations. The Biblical documents of course emerge from a largely pre-market economy in which social goods are so obvious – and so precarious – that choice is beside the point, whatever economic model might be deemed best to provide those goods. The New Testament, too, envisages circumstances in which believers do not expect to have any influence on the policies of the society they are part of, and so it does not speculate how that society might be arranged. It's only in the instructions the Pentateuch lays down for how the Israelites were to manage their potential state that any more definite attitude emerges. Here, individual accumulation of wealth is mitigated by the custom that property is vested in the clan and returnable to the clan at stated intervals, and by the remission of debts decreed by the seven-yearly 'jubilee' (not that these rules were ever, probably, enforced). The purposes of the social order were envisaged as fixed, and indeed divinely ordained, not up for individual determination. There was no room for the privatisation of the good, for the idea that individuals might use their wealth to decide for themselves what a good life means. Such concepts would have been incomprehensible to the Israelites: in their world, everyone already agrees what the good is.

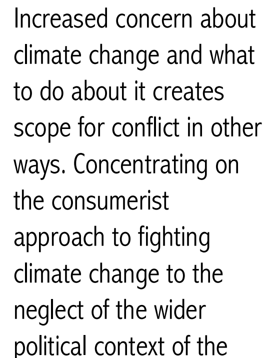
However, the scriptures have a great deal to say about what enables human beings to flourish. The use of common resources to provide feasts, the emphasis on generosity and hospitality, and Jesus's deployment of the imagery of feasting and celebration to express the nature of the Kingdom of God, all embody an ethic of abundance, enjoyment, mutual support, and joyfulness. The Eucharist repeats the same theme by using a symbolic meal as the means of communion between God and believers, bringing them into the presence of the coming Kingdom. This is of great potential value in shaping a renewed economics based around a notion of common good, rather than growth providing the means to pursue individual definitions of the good.

iv. Conflict over resources

It is virtually inevitable that large-scale changes to global climate conditions will produce great pressure on resources. Arguably this is already happening in a way that has an impact on communities and individuals. The Syrian Civil War developed from protests which began over the government's inability to manage the food supply after poor harvests; we are starting to hear reports of people killing one another over access to water in localities where this was until recently not a problem, ranging from Kyrgyzstan to Chennai in India. We have already mentioned the argument that declining rates of economic growth resulting from the increasing constraints of energy exploitation is being reflected in global political strain. Managing these changes is likely to be increasingly difficult for governments and inter-governmental structures. At its most extreme, these pressures could result in war, potentially including the use of nuclear weapons with cataclysmic consequences for human civilisation.

In these times, then, it is all the more vital that the Church should continue to restate basic convictions. Firstly, that the narrative of creation, fall, and redemption applies to the whole of humanity and that there is no dividing line between one category of people and another, and no just cause for preferring the needs of one group of people over others (Gal 3.28, Rom 14.4). Secondly, that the primacy of love among Christian values demands justice towards those who are poor in the world's goods (James 1.17, 4.17), not the hoarding of goods by those who have them. Finally, the example of Jesus points towards sacrifice as the motor of hope and redemption, written into the heart of the created order. We must hold on firmly to these truths if any of us are to survive. The writer of the Letter to the Hebrews, far from being daunted by the scale of the task, states 'encourage one another all the more as you see the Day approaching' (Heb 10.25).

v. Refusing to blame



Increased concern about climate change and what to do about it creates scope for conflict in other ways. Concentrating on the consumerist approach to fighting climate change to the neglect of the wider political context of the decisions consumers make divides citizens against one another on the basis of those consumer decisions, once they become cast as morally laudable or deficient. One person chooses to keep eating meat; another to carry on using a car; a third to take a holiday by plane. There is a strong tendency to criticise the decisions of others while excusing one's own. This overestimates the very limited role which individual choice can have in affecting global climate change, while ignoring the significance of politics, money and power in shaping and constraining our ability to take decisions as individuals. It lets off the hook those institutions and structures which do have greater responsibility. Put one way, nothing any of us can do is enough, and anything we can do helps, so there is no justification for any one person criticising any other for insufficient commitment.

Many non-Christian people think of Christian ethics as excessively focused on individual moral decisions to the neglect of wider factors, but this is a caricature. One of the key arguments in the early Church concentrated around this issue; the British heretic Pelagius contended that it was possible for human beings to behave virtuously by an act of will, while St Augustine held that human will was so corrupted by millennia of sin that humans were practically incapable of right sentiment and action. Augustine based his case on St Paul's awareness of his own conflicted will (Rom 7.7-25) as well as his personal experience. Paradoxically, realising that all human beings are radically incapable of moral purity allows a more compassionate and less judgemental approach to individual souls. Jesus states that our moral scrutiny should focus on ourselves rather than others (Matt 7.1-5) while other New Testament writers stress the equality of human beings in sin (James 2.10-11). Christianity recognises the enormous weight of circumstance and history that operates on any human moral decision, and therefore rules out making definite judgements about individuals on the basis of their actions.

vi. Apocalyptic

Modern Christian discourse on environmental matters has largely echoed the concern of secular commentators. Christians have endorsed efforts to reduce human impact on the environment, and have warned about the effects of human-generated climate change. The mainstream Churches have for the most part stressed the role human beings have in stewarding the resources God has given them, and the responsibility they have to future generations. In this the Churches mainly reflect an established liberal consensus, as they so often do.

Within the mainstream Churches, Christian spiritual life recognises the slow and repetitious work that is necessary to reorder the scattered and disarranged energies of human souls. It does this by a structured rhythm of prayer and worship, ordered by hour and season, framed by buildings that are often very old and, even when they are not, that allude to a vision of the eternal. Change is conceived as an internal matter, and often one that moves forward at an imperceptible pace. Christians, no less than any other sort of human being, have a natural tendency to hold on to what they know, and their spiritual life encourages them to do so. The Collect for the Fifth Sunday after Trinity in the old Book of Common Prayer – now the post-communion collect for the same week – goes like this:

Grant, O Lord, we beseech you, that the course of this world may be so peaceably ordered by your governance, that your Church may joyfully serve you in all godly quietness …

… suggesting that what Christians yearn for is a quiet life to get on with praying. In origin this prayer comes from the 7th-century Leonine Sacramentary: it was no surprise that believers might have quiet political and social conditions as a priority at that time.

But there are strands running through Christian spirituality that pull in a completely different direction, and suggest, not that we should strive to preserve the world we know, but should accept its transient and provisional nature. Firstly, there is an insistence that the familiar world is less important than the spiritual reality behind it; that what happens here is a preparation, training, and proving-ground for eternity, and that we should

concentrate on that future state. Secondly, there is a drive through the whole of the Biblical narrative towards the replacement of this current order of things by another, better one, and that this is not something to be avoided, but to welcome, however painful may be the process of getting there.

Many of the statements and parables of Jesus reflect the first sensibility. 'Build not up for yourselves treasure on earth, where moth and rust corrupt, but build up for yourselves treasures in heaven,' he advises (Matt 6.19-21). His stories of rich people whose riches avail them nothing in the face of death and judgement don't just express a concern for justice between classes of human beings, but also denigrate apparent success in this life as less important than our fate in the life to come. In this, Jesus is repeating the sentiments of much of the Old Testament literature, with an added urgency owing to the imminent arrival of the Kingdom of God – the emergence of that spiritual reality within this earthly existence. St Paul, too, states that Christians should 'use the things of this world as if not attached to them … for the world in its present form is passing away' (1Cor 7.31).

As well as this attitude of spiritual detachment, there is a movement in the Biblical text towards a final resolution of the conflicts and tensions we see in the current order of things. This can be glimpsed in the prophets of the Old Testament, in the statements of Jesus and those of the early Christian writers, and it finds its fully-developed form in the final book of the Bible, the Revelation of St John. Christians have traditionally thought about this vision of the End in different ways, but however we conceive it, there is no mistaking the fact that it is not an accidental add-on to the Biblical narrative, but a central part of it, framing the words and deeds of Jesus: he can't be properly understood without the Apocalypse. 'When you see these things beginning to take place', he states, 'lift up your heads, because your redemption is drawing near' (Luke 21.28); in this, he does nothing more than echo the Old Testament: 'Let the rivers clap their hands, let the mountains sing together for joy … for [the Lord] comes to judge the earth' (Ps 98).

There is no *necessary* contradiction between this concern with ultimate reality and a desire to care for the reality we have been given; in fact, the two can be held amiably together. But the challenge to Christians confronted with the effects of climate change comes in the area of our feelings. If what we feel is panic at the prospect of social collapse and the loss of what we now know and find familiar – and panic is not an unreasonable response – we may have to ask whether we are really taking to heart what the Christian tradition seems to say to us, that our task is not to keep the human show on the road as best we can but to prepare for something different. It's striking that the section of the Christian Church most comfortable with apocalyptic ideas, fundamentalist Evangelicalism, seems very

*un*comfortable with *this* version of the Apocalypse. Fundamentalist Evangelicals are accustomed to pointing to political events as signs of the forthcoming end of all things, and sometimes making predictions as to when this is going to happen. But curiously, faced with a scientifically-underpinned cataclysm which seems all too possible, they are quiet, or positively argue against its truth. Perhaps this is because its narrative is predominately progressive and scientific rather than reactionary and obscurantist. Anyway, it raises the question of whether such Christians really mean what they say.

The picture painted by the Book of Revelation is one of increasing disorder and conflict. There is war and famine and ideological strife in which falsehood and delusion seem to take over; commerce breaks down, the natural world convulses, and ultimately a confrontation arrives in which good and evil are separated and what is bad is permanently destroyed. Many Christians are somewhat obsessed with this strange and visionary narrative, while others look the other way and try to ignore it. But in our own times it takes on a new resonance: its outlines seem strikingly like the more pessimistic scientific predictions of the results of climate change.

'Judgement' means working out what is good and evil, what is false and what true, and a 'last judgement' would mean deciding that once and for all. The Book of Revelation is describing how good and evil become finally separated and seen for what they really are: it suggests that human history is on a journey towards that point, of seeing things truly and clearly, as God sees them, rather than the contradictory mess we experience now. But working out the truth hasn't been an easy process in the past, and wouldn't be in the future. It would involve pain and conflict, and would culminate when good and evil, truth and falsehood, could no longer be held together in this world. The Roman Catholic priest and theologian Teilhard de Chardin speculated:

Under the commonplace envelope of things and of all our purified and salvaged efforts, a new earth is being slowly engendered. One day, the Gospel tells us, the tension gradually accumulating between humanity and God will touch the limits prescribed by the possibilities of the world. And then will come the End. … Like lightning, like a conflagration, like a flood, the attraction exerted by the Son of Man will lay hold of all the whirling elements in the universe … Such will be the consummation … Anxious, collective and operative expectation of an end of the world, that is to say of an issue for the world – that is perhaps the supreme Christian function. (*Le Divin Milieu*, 1960)

We do seem to stand at a turning-point in human history. For the first time we can really see how our God-given creative energy, our ability to make things, also involves destruction. Seen from a Christian point of view, the climate emergency is about whether

we are willing, as individuals and as a society, to live by what have always been very basic Christian virtues: truth, love, and sacrifice. Even if we don't make it through, it brings us towards that last moment when good and evil are revealed in complete clarity. It will be the greatest, and maybe final, test of what human beings want to be. It will make clear, in Christian terms, what it means to be 'for Christ' and what it means to be against him.

Some Christians will react to the climate emergency by throwing themselves into the effort to avert the disasters it threatens: they are not wrong. While there is a chance of avoiding pain and horror, that chance must be grasped, in the name of the God who loves the world and died for it. Others will concentrate on becoming the best human beings they can be, resisting sin and cultivating virtue in preparation for the Judgement: they are not wrong either, because that is also what Christ asks of us. Both are part of the apocalyptic process that reveals divine truth, and the eschatological movement that takes us towards our destiny. 'Strengthen your hearts, for the coming of the Lord is near' (Jas 5.8).

vii. The Comfort of Transience

For centuries Anglican funeral-goers were familiar with the words used during the service, coupling phrases from the 14th chapter of the Book of Job with a translated antiphon from the medieval liturgy for the dead: 'man that is born of woman hath but a short time to live, and is full of misery: he cometh up, and is cut down, like a flower; he fleeth as it were a shadow, and never continueth in one stay. In the midst of life, we are in death.' Both a lament and a caution, these words also encourage us to surrender our anxiety.

The early Biblical texts see earthly events as reflecting the interaction of divine and human agency: occurrences, good and bad, are caused by God's response to human sin or virtue. Gradually a sense grows that this cannot be entirely the case, at least as far as individuals are concerned. Even early on, the Book of Judges records an attack by an Israelite tribe against an entirely 'peaceful and unsuspecting' city (18.27-29): there is no hint in the text

that this is in any way the victims' *fault*, that they have brought it about by their own sin. The Israelites interpreted the disasters that befell their state as a consequence of their sins against God, but also accepted that the innocent were swept up in the tide of war, famine, and disease, no matter how faithful as individuals they might have been. 'Those who do not deserve to drink the cup, must drink it', Jeremiah the prophet warns the people of Edom (49.12). Jesus explicitly rejects the idea that individuals who suffer are any greater sinners than others (Luke 13.1-5), and his whole career proves that virtue isn't necessarily rewarded in this life; he warns his disciples to expect no better treatment than he will get (Luke 21.12-13). Instead, the poor and innocent are caught up in catastrophes they cannot control, and in which they suffer even when those events are in some sense part of the overarching purposes of God. 'You are a mist that appears for a little while and then vanishes', says the apostle James (4.14). This is no different from contemporary experience. In the Boxing Day Tsunami of 2001, for instance, possibly a quarter of a million people died in one event over a few hours, and the moral or spiritual state of those unique souls, of course, will have been as varied as their number.

The intense power of human imagination tends to make us exaggerate our own individual importance and difference from each other. We are theoretically aware that we are to a significant extent the subjects of forces beyond our control, from the internal dynamic of our genetics to the vast movements of history; but at heart we still believe we can circumvent these forces by taking steps to preserve our individual well-being, or that we can superstitiously bargain with the powers that we imagine control them. We are wrong, and the Biblical texts and Christian tradition as a whole point instead to our equality in suffering. If this is so, we do not deserve any better than the countless millions of souls who have perished down the ages before they 'should' have done: when the processes of survival and destruction are so arbitrary, there is no cause for complaint, nor for anxiety, but rather for acceptance – including acceptance of our limitations.

viii. Hope

Beneath and beyond all the threats and troubles of our own time, however they may turn out,

the Christian message stands the same as it has ever done: that God is sovereign, that his nature is revealed in Christ to be one of love and truth, and that the resurrection of Jesus proves his victory, in which we are offered the chance to take part. At the end of Revelation, after the conflict and the horror, St John sees that 'death and Hades were thrown into the lake of fire', and the new heaven and new earth take the place of the old. Into the heavenly city, the image of all beauty and abundance, 'the splendour of the kings of the earth' and 'the glory and honour of all the nations' are brought – that is, all the good things that have ever existed, the crown and cream of human endeavour, are held forever (Rev 21.24, 26). Though, for now, the buildings crumble and the books burn and the springs run dry, God remembers them and gathers them in, and our efforts to be what we ought to be and to do what we ought to do aren't going to be a waste. 'Death will be no more, mourning and crying and pain will be no more, for the old order of things has passed away' (21.4). On the far side of the tribulation lies the City. The promise stands. When Gabriel the archangel announced to the Virgin that she would become the Mother of God, she replied to her Creator 'be it unto me according to your will'. Strengthened by what we know of God, we face the future, and strive to say the same.

A Prayer

Lord, you gave us this world to support us and all life,
to help us learn to be more like you.
Used wisely it can support billions of human souls in peace and security.
We have not used it wisely.
We have listened to convenient lies and ignored the warning voices,
and now we face the ruin of all it has taken us thousands of years to build.
We find ourselves afraid.
If you have ever delighted in all you have made, even in us, your wandering children,
if we have ever given your Spirit one moment of joy,
help us to face the truth about what we must do now.
Give us strength, endurance, courage, imagination and kindness,
because we will need all these things.
May our human story not end here;
but, if this is truly the time of judgement,
may we not be found wanting at the last,
but live up to the best of what human beings can be,
as you revealed in Jesus your eternal Word. Amen.