

St Swithun's - Climate Change.

14th July 2019

When Gary asked me to do the talk for this service, I have to admit, I only had a vague understanding of the legend behind St Swithun. I'm sure many of you are much more informed than myself on this subject, but I'll share with you what I have discovered!

St Swithun was an Anglo-Saxon bishop of Winchester who lived in the ninth century and subsequently became patron saint of Winchester Cathedral. Not a great deal is known about Swithun's life though he is said to have been the spiritual adviser of Æthelwulf, King of Wessex, who donated much of his royal land to Swithun to build and restore many churches.

His enduring legend is due to events after his death on 2nd July 862. He was buried outdoors, rather than in his cathedral, at his own request. Here his body lay for over a hundred years. However, in 971 it was decreed that Swithun was to be the patron saint of the restored Cathedral at Winchester where an impressive shrine was built for him. His body was removed from its simple grave and interred in the new Cathedral on 15th July 971. According to legend, forty days of terrible weather followed.

Ever since, it has been said that the weather on 15th July (his feast day) supposedly determines the weather for the next forty days, as this Elizabethan proverb illustrates:

“St Swithun's day if thou dost rain
For forty days it will remain
St Swithun's day if thou be fair
For forty days 'twill rain nae more.”

The thought of it raining constantly for forty days is pretty dismal – I'm sure you'll agree last month we certainly had our fair share of wet weather!

On a more serious note, I'd like you to cast your minds back to last year's weather... to March when much of the UK suffered from extreme cold temperatures and snowfall, known as the 'Beast from the East.' Then in July, we had weeks and weeks of scorching heat when extreme hot weather struck across Europe, from the Arctic Circle to Greece, and across the world, from North America to Japan. In the news we regularly witness droughts, wildfires

and floods which consequently spell out their catastrophic effect on the world's flora and fauna.

These meteorological extremes are indeed a worrying sign and most likely point to climate change. According to Professor Michael Mann, one of the world's most eminent climate scientists, "This is the face of climate change; we literally would not have seen these extremes in the absence of climate change."

There is today no doubt that extremes of climate are not simply because of where we are in the earth's natural cycle; they are caused primarily by humankind's burning of fossil fuels since the beginning of the Industrial Revolution. Rising temperature is leading to a growing list of species extinctions and destruction of ecosystems. But it is not too late to make the significant cuts needed in greenhouse gas emissions, maintains Professor Mann, because the impacts progressively worsen as global warming increases.

Last December, at the opening ceremony of the United Nations Climate Change conference, Sir David Attenborough called climate change "humanity's greatest threat in thousands of years" and said it would lead to the collapse of civilisations and the extinction of "much of the natural world."

Back in April this year a 16 year old Swedish student, Greta Thunberg, condemned the UK climate stance in a speech to MPs saying, "You did not act in time." This young woman began a 'climate strike' outside Sweden's parliament last year with a hand-painted sign. In her speech she continued, "This ongoing irresponsible behaviour will no doubt be remembered in history as one of the greatest failures of humankind. You lied to us. You told us that the future was something to look forward to. You didn't listen to the science because you are only interested in solutions that will enable you to carry on like before." Wow! What courage, what clarity, what a spokesperson for her generation!

So why am I talking to you today about climate change? Well, I believe as Christians, both individually and corporately, we too need to be a prophetic voice.

I'd like to address four biblical reasons for this: loving our neighbour as ourselves, stewardship, repentance and reconciliation.

Archbishop Justin Welby has said: "Reducing the causes of climate change is essential to the life of faith. It is a way to love our neighbour and to steward the gift of creation."

Certainly, the poor of the Global South will suffer long before our comfortable, developed world is affected to the same extent. In fact, many are suffering right now.

During Lent this year, Christian Aid ran a campaign called 'Count Your Blessings – Rise Up Against Climate Change. Through lent themes such as awareness, repentance, and transformation, those who got involved discovered more about the lives of real people around the world who are being pushed to the brink of survival by climate change and precarious livelihoods. The Philippines is one of the countries most affected by climate change today. More than half of the population live in disaster prone areas. About twenty typhoons hit the country each year, and many cities are vulnerable to rising sea levels.

Eva, who lives on one of the remote islands in the Philippines says, "As humans, we are supposed to be equal, so I appeal to richer nations to stop activities which are destroying the environment and violating the human rights of the poorer nations. It's us, on this island, who are suffering."

As Christians we need to repent for the destruction we have caused – to align ourselves with God's heart – to change our ways.

Remember the story in Luke 19.1-10 about Zacchaeus, who was a corrupt tax collector? When he met Jesus, he realised that his livelihood was ruining the lives of others. He repented by giving back half of what he had to the poor, and paid back four times the amount to the people he owed.

God has called us to look after the earth, to be good stewards to care for all that he has created: Genesis 1.26 tells us: 'Let us make humankind in our image, according to our likeness; and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the birds of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the wild animals of the earth, and over every creeping thing that creeps upon the earth.' For Christians, this responsibility of stewardship and duty towards nature and the Creator are an essential part of our faith. But there are times when we haven't taken this calling seriously. Today, our world is crying out to us because of the harm we have inflicted by our irresponsible use and abuse of the riches with which God has endowed her. Our behaviour continues to radically alter and damage the earth and it is essential that we repent and take

ownership of this accountability, including our actions that affect our neighbours in the poorest countries of the world.

These people are mostly innocent of any role in causing climate change, yet are already suffering the consequences, such as last year's flooding in Bangladesh and more than 40 million people in South Asia being affected. Like the prophet Micah who called the people's injustice to light, we too are called 'to do justice, and to love kindness.'

Take a moment to think about the areas where you've perhaps been irresponsible in your attitudes to global warming. When you get home, you might like to write down three ways you can 'live greener' and stick these on your fridge as a reminder. You may have taken some ideas from the recent presentations by our home groups on caring for God's creation, but if you missed these, some ideas include: switching over to a renewable energy company; reducing your meat and dairy consumption; looking into ways of replacing your household products that use single-use plastics...

Our western culture and lifestyle has lost touch with the rhythms of nature. Michael Northcott in his book 'A Moral Climate' believes "industrial consumerism is a form of material culture which is entirely at odds with the regenerative and recycling patterns of natural systems."

Individualism has replaced relationship with family and community; isolation and self-interest has become the trademark of modern Western society. We see this in mainstream relationships, lifestyles, diets, and in materialistic and consumerist attitudes.

We live in a throwaway culture driven by excess consumption – always wanting more. God makes it clear that our purpose here on earth is not about possessions and indulgence; it is to know, love and serve him – for his glory (Romans 11.36) and it's in Jesus that we find out who we are and what we're living for (Ephesians 1.11).

Our reliance on fossil fuels has led to the release of harmful carbon emissions into the atmosphere for nearly two centuries. The ozone layer in the northern hemisphere is being eroded by 5% a decade. The polar ice caps are melting at around 20,000 square miles per year. Sea levels have risen by 8 inches in the last 150 years and sea temperatures have risen by one degree Fahrenheit in the last century.

We have to leave these ways behind and take up collective action to build a different future.

As Christians, our life in Christ should be a holistic, flourishing relationship with God, lived out daily, loving our neighbour, and seeking justice for all to live fairly and sustainably.

In church we recently looked at the Five Marks of Mission; the fifth being 'To strive to safeguard the integrity of creation, and sustain and renew the life of the earth.' Let's be honest, none of the four previous marks of mission will matter if we don't seriously address the fifth! Climate change is telling us to change our lifestyles. Our call is to live in balance and harmony; to live with awareness and sensitivity; to speak out in favour of the protection of all God has created. To live in such a way that we facilitate and support the on-going creativity of our creator – in our world and in each other.

God wants to transform our lives and make us more like him. We become more like him when we make good choices! God wants to reconcile the whole of his creation to himself. We are part of his plan and his purpose of salvation - we play a role in bringing creation into its fulfilment. St Paul reminds us we are Jesus' continuing presence, body and creative force here on earth (1 Corinthians 12.27). So we have a lead to take on his behalf. We have been given the ministry of reconciliation (2 Corinthians 5.18-19) and by acknowledging our part in the brokenness of creation, we are called to share in God's work of healing.

We are not here to wait for the harmony that heaven brings, rather as instigators of God's will being done and his Kingdom coming now.

As Christians, we need to live distinctively. Let's make the right choices **now** and make a difference.