

Theological reflections

Where you stand affects what you see. And so in the Diocese of Mozambique, a land now subject to increasingly unpredictable weather patterns and the resulting environmental challenges, every candidate for confirmation plants a tree. From where they are standing, learning to live in partnership with creation is a core expression of Christian faith, and one which they take on when they publicly confess that Jesus Christ is Lord.¹

Theirs is a witness which we need to hear. Because climate change has now almost certainly become the most challenging barrier to sustainable development in the world's poorest communities. And in order to create a different model for living well into the future, both for ourselves and for our neighbours, we too need to enter into a new and more fruitful relationship with God's created earth.

The 2015 World Development Appeal returns to the theme of *climate justice*, a phrase which unites two important truths. First, *climate* change is real, and well-documented. Rising concentrations of certain greenhouse gases in the earth's atmosphere are raising the temperature of the planet, and the unfolding consequences of this change are already affecting human health, food production, economic stability, education, and human migration patterns. And two of the main contributors to this rise in temperature and resultant climate disruption are the human burning of fossil fuels, and profit-led tropical deforestation.

We speak of climate *justice*, however, because of a simple and undeniable truth. Although it is the economic development model of the world's richest countries, and the lifestyles this model has created, which are primarily responsible for global warming and climate change, it is the world's poorest communities whose lives are now being most impacted by a changing climate. And this is profoundly unjust.

And so the challenge we face is two-fold. In this year's Appeal, we hear first-hand about the effects of rising sea levels and the increased salinity of agricultural land in Bangladesh. And we also hear from our partners in Ethiopia, where farmers are having to make a transition from traditional crops and farming methods to others which they hope will provide more economic stability in a changing climate.

Our first responsibility, therefore, is to ensure that the world's poorest communities have the resources they will need in order to continue to adapt to the changes they are already facing, and to prepare, as best they can, for the uncertainties which lie ahead. That so many

¹ *Song of the prophets: a global theology of climate change*. © Christian Aid, November 2014; p 12.

vulnerable communities are already doing this with energy and courage should surely be an inspiration to us.

Our second urgent responsibility, however, and that which cuts closest to the bone, will be to address with equal energy and courage those destructive assumptions and unsustainable practices which have shaped our own lives, often unthinkingly, in countries like Ireland. We too need to change the way we live, and urgently.

There are many resources already available to us to help us to do just this, not least those provided by Eco-Congregation Ireland. We must give them the attention they deserve, and respond in a way which is worthy of our poorest neighbours, as well as for our own good. And yet, for us as Christians, people called by the name of Jesus Christ, the reality of climate change also presents us with a crisis, a turning point, in our biblical understanding.

*How long will the land mourn, the prophet asks, and the grass in the fields dry up?
The animals and birds are swept away due to the evil of those in the land.
The people say, "God doesn't see what we're up to!"*

(Jeremiah 12.4, Common English Bible)

The prophets often remind us that the state of the lived relationship between humankind and the created earth is a reliable index of the health of *all* our relationships: our knowledge of ourselves, our concern for our neighbours, and our trust in God. But we have often failed to embrace a theology of creation which is both sufficiently rigorous and sufficiently joyful to give us the grounding we need to attend to our relationship to the land, and to the grass of the field.

In the first account of the creation in Genesis, humankind is created in the image of God, and is intended to exercise *dominion* over the other living creatures (Genesis 1.26). The Christian tradition has sometimes been accused of sanctioning ecological irresponsibility on the basis of this verse, as if it gave free rein to all kinds of environmental degradation for the sake of profitable self-interest.

It is true, of course, that according to this story, humankind is given a distinctive place and authority to act in creation. But this is a delegated authority, and is subject to the limits placed upon it by the One who has given it in the first place. In other words, humankind is given the role of representing and furthering God's intentions for creation, even when this means acting against our own narrow self-interest.

We know from the story that God's intention for a world that has been created good is that it and all its creatures should flourish and thrive. And at this critical juncture in the earth's history, this story offer us a powerful insight into the way in which we are *now* called to exercise our dominion: engaging in damage limitation and repair, resourcing climate adaptation programmes in service of the most vulnerable, and constructing human communities which will be more sustainable, more just, and – because we are exercising our dominion according to the gracious limits God originally intended – more joyful.

In a little village church in the coastal zone of Bangladesh, Momata Bala and her neighbours give thanks that they have already begun to exercise their God-given dominion in this way. May we have the courage and the grace to be her partners in the 2015 World Development Appeal.