

Environment Sunday 2006 (St Benedict's, Northampton)

Harvest Picture

Today we give thanks for another year's harvest. We thank God for the fruitfulness of the earth. But we also want to step back, and look at our broader relationship with the earth.

*In particular, we want to focus on the earth's climate. We now hear lots about it on the news, not least when events like Hurricane Katrina (**Katrina**) – seen here from space – come along.*

But what exactly is climate change? Why are scientists so bothered about it? What has it got to do with you and me? Surely it's not a religious issue – is it?

Those are the questions we want to tackle, at least briefly. So let's start with a summary of what climate change is all about.

2 minute government Film – 'Climate Challenge'

Hey - Let's calm down a little! I know we had a heat wave this summer, but these things

happen from time to time. The weather isn't really changing, is it?

Is the weather changing?

Weather records have been kept in the UK since the 1660s. The ten warmest years since then have all been since 1990. The hottest temperature ever recorded in the UK was in 2003, at 101 degrees F, 38.5 Centigrade. All the evidence points to a definite change in the weather patterns – what is known as climate change.

OK – so it gets a little warmer. But that sounds like a good thing - what's the big problem?

Is it a problem?

There are some benefits, it's true. The gardeners among you will have noticed fewer frosts in winter. The summer growing season for plants in central England is now a month longer than it was in 1900 – or so I'm told. But there are downsides as well. Summer heatwaves are occurring more frequently. In just ten days in August 2003, over 2000 people in the UK died as a result of the heatwave.

And it's not just about temperature. We get more rain and snow than 50 years ago. But it occurs on fewer days, so it's heavier, more extreme when it happens. And that's often not helpful. The floods in 2000 in the UK were the worst for 270 years in some areas. They cost the farming industry some £500 million. Or think of Boscastle. **Boscastle.** Here's it is, after its recent flash flood.

So that's a feel for the impact on the UK. **World from space.** In other parts of the world, the challenges will be much larger, as the weather is more severe to start with. Christian Aid identify climate change as the single largest issue in coming decades. It has the capacity to wipe out the benefit of development work done over recent decades. **Drought** For instance, in Kenya it is already fuelling violence in drought-hit areas. Pastoralists in the north of the country have started killing each other over the right to water their cattle at a diminishing number of watering holes. **Bangladesh.** In low-lying Bangladesh, the predicted rise in sea level would leave millions with literally nowhere to go.

Already, families must move every couple of years, as increased meltwater from Himalayan glaciers sweeps their land and fragile livelihood away.

That does sound serious. But surely the climate has always been changing. It's only fringe scientists that think that it's anything to do with us, with human activity?

Climate Change just happens. The climate of the earth has indeed always been changing. But the variations have happened relatively slowly. The current rate of change is much faster. This accelerated change is exactly what scientists would predict, because of the big changes in human activity. Since the industrial revolution started 200 years ago, we've been using more and more coal, oil and gas. As a consequence, carbon dioxide levels in the atmosphere have increased significantly. In fact they've gone up 30% in the last 200 years. As early as 1896 scientists began to predict that increased carbon dioxide emissions would thicken the 'blanket' around the earth, and that the earth would get warmer as a consequence. That's exactly

what has happened. Although the issues are complex, the majority of scientists are convinced that we are affecting the climate by the way that we live.

Their big concern is that *irreversible* changes will soon begin to happen.

Amazon. Consider the Amazon rain forest. It has a major positive impact on the earth's atmosphere. Its trees absorb carbon dioxide, and therefore help to reduce global warming. Now, the Amazon has always been so humid that it's been immune to forest fires. But prolonged droughts have recently led to fires deep in the Amazon. If trees continue to burn, it's a double whammy. Their burning itself sends carbon straight into the atmosphere. And they stop their positive contribution, absorbing carbon dioxide. It's a vicious circle.

Arctic ice. Here are two pictures of the Arctic. The top one dates from 1979; the bottom from 2003, at the same time of year. You can see for yourself that the Arctic sea ice is melting - at about 1% each year. Now the ice that there is acts like a

gigantic mirror, reflecting much of the sun's warmth back into space. But as the amount of ice reduces, less of the heat gets reflected away - so the Arctic water becomes warmer - which makes the ice melt even faster. That's not just theory. In the 12 months of 2005, a huge 14% of the Arctic ice cap melted - a massive increase in the rate of melting. It's another vicious circle. It's another reason why many experts on climate change are seriously concerned.

Seriously concerned? Is it really such a pressing problem?

Polluting chimneys

Apparently it is. The key question is how much carbon dioxide the atmosphere can cope with before current weather patterns change fundamentally. Some climate models predict that we're only 10 years away from that point - unless serious change happens urgently.

You're getting me worried now, and I don't like that.

The issue is a serious one, and worry is understandable. What matters is what we

do with our worry. It's easy to just try and ignore it, **Head in sand**. – like this ostrich with its head in the sand - and try to think about something nicer. If that's what we do, the situation will get worse, and the reasons for worry won't go away.

But there is another option. We can face the seriousness of the situation, and be inspired to take action.

Take action!?! Surely I can't make any difference?

Making a difference 1

Each of us already makes a difference, for better or for worse. The way we lead our lives determines how much we contribute to the problem – or to its solution.

What do you mean?

The problem is mainly caused by carbon dioxide emissions. As the film said, if we could see or smell the gas, we'd be much more aware of it. But the fact is that our actions lead to emissions every time we use petrol, run our central heating, or use electricity sourced from coal or gas. Now none of us can suddenly *stop* all our

carbon emissions. But it's actually not too difficult to begin to reduce them. **Making a difference 2**. For instance, driving more gently could save many people half a ton of carbon dioxide a year – and a tidy sum in petrol costs. Or drive less. Walk, cycle or share a lift. Even half a mile less driving saves a quarter of a pound of carbon dioxide. Switching to an electricity supplier using only renewable sources would make an even bigger difference.

But all this feels like just a drop in the ocean.

The priority for the world must be to start reducing our carbon emissions. Each individual has an important part to play in that. The important thing is to do what we can.

So what has all this got to do with the church, then? It's hardly a religious issue, is it?

Hardly a religious issue?

I think it is. For instance, one important perspective is that of looking after the gift of God's creation. But let's take a different tack. Let me ask you this: When Jesus was

asked what is the greatest commandment, how did he reply?

Emm, love God with all your being, and love your neighbour as yourself.

That's right! And he went on to indicate that everyone counts as our neighbour. What does it mean to love someone? You certainly want them to live well, to be able to flourish. You make sure that how you live, makes their life better. If you realised that your lifestyle was making their life precarious, you would want to change, and fast.

The uncomfortable fact is this: our lifestyles in the affluent West are making life precarious for many of our global neighbours. We're not living in a loving way. How much carbon we emit is indeed a religious and a moral issue.

So what can we do?

What can we do

There are lots of things we can do as individuals. I've mentioned several already. You'll find more practical

suggestions in a leaflet that Helen Crabbe has prepared – pick one up after the service.

As a church, we have already set up an Environment group. It will regularly provide us with ideas for action. The PCC has said that it wants to face the issues and work out how we can respond. We aim to have an Environment day, perhaps next June, and invite the schools of the parish to bring displays on how we can respond to the issues. The Church of England as a whole is taking the issue very seriously, and has produced resources to help local churches move forwards.

Earth from space

Please, let's face the challenge. It's a good world we have inherited. Let's do what we can to preserve it.

As the Kenyan proverb puts it.
'The world is not a gift from our parents. It is a loan from our children.'