

Lent Talks 2008 – 5 ‘What have we done to our planet?’

What have we done with the world we inherited? This might give us a sinking feeling, as there’s so much to trouble us about the world we know now, as opposed to the world we grew up in, or the world our parents remembered. This is a time of very rapid change – but while we might be pre-occupied with changes for worse, we would do well not to ignore changes for the better. People live longer, many life-threatening diseases have been conquered, health care has improved, whatever moans we have, compared to a generation ago. We are better fed, clothed and housed than our parents were. We can carry a personal phone and speak to someone almost anywhere in the world wherever we are. So different from days when we queued to use the single coin box on the street corner. BT up in Scotland are seeking permission to remove public phone boxes in places where no calls have been made in over a year. In our times the personal phone has become a commonplace domestic appliance. Without any geography or history course, we are better appraised of the past, and of what’s going on around the world at present, thanks to TV and the internet. We have transport that can take us great distances quickly and safely. We take it all so much for granted that complaining when it doesn’t work becomes a pastime. In fact, failures are relatively infrequent, and reliability high. Expectations have risen. We’ve learned to depend on the efficiency of the new technologies, so that every disruption, becomes a minor catastrophe for our plans. It’s all so different from how it was 25, 50, 100 or 150 years ago. And it’s all due to people working together for the common good, harnessing scientific discovery and the inventions of technology for the good of all. Worthy of praise. Great advances were made in the face of world war, and cold war, but on such foundations even greater advances have been made since then, and even more rapid progress in collaboration as a result of global communication. We’ve started space exploration, first in competition, now in partnership. There’s a live space station circulating the earth and shuttle flights to and from it. The secrets

of the atom and the stuff from which atoms are made is being probed by the gigantic particle physics project at CERN near Geneva. It's designed so that experiments can be run and controlled, not only from there, but if needs be from New Zealand, California, Hamburg or Tokyo when Geneva goes home for the weekend. All these research and exploration ventures are a feat, not only of amazing technical creativity, but also international collaboration between people whose parents were at war a generation ago. And all this happens despite the dark cloud of pessimism overshadowing us.

Industrialisation, which led to such progress, has badly polluted the planet, and given us global warming. The fact that industry perpetuated division caused by slavery, between haves and have-nots has perpetuated global imbalance in the distribution of wealth and power, leading to wars, afflicting poor and rich alike. The clock can't be turned back to a simple pastoral way of life in an environment where we have no chance to ruin the environment. It never existed. People have cut down forests, shaped the landscape planting for food, over-farmed or over grazed land to its ruin, for millennia. The Sahara desert is a monument to the Roman colonial over exploitation of fertile land. Since Stonehenge was built, people have scarred hillsides, quarried and transported stone, cleared land, and interfered with nature for their own benefit. I grew up hating the despoliation of the Valleys by the coal industry, and have lived to see its green fertility return and its streams run clear again. The barren rocky fringes of the Beacons National Park were home to early iron production that was the backbone of the British Empire 150 years ago. You'd hardly think it now, unless you look closely. It shows how nature, with a little tlc, can recover. Worries about the impact of a Severn Barrage are now being voiced, as they were over a Cardiff Bay Barrage 25 years ago. Yet, salmon have returned to the Taff, wetland birds have settled into new habitats upstream. Are there any losers?

Nature and people have adjusted to each other yet again. With proper care and consideration their interaction doesn't have to be catastrophic in effect. The real

problems are caused by consumption of resources that cannot be renewed. We're now having to do something about our carbon footprint to limit damage and avoid eco-disaster. It's not just a matter of consuming less, or renouncing strategic commodities that inflict most damage. It's about making more efficient use of resources, eliminating all waste, removing all poisonous processes from industry, to halt the damage being done. For 200 years it's as if we've been resigned used to large scale industrial processes emitting toxic by products into the atmosphere and water, and only recently, in the past fifty years started to make an effort to clean up after or restrain these unhealthy side effects of wealth creation. Now new technologies are emerging that can make the same products more efficiently with minimal pollution. New industrial methods of treating waste materials of every kind are now developing that can lead to total re-cycling. No landfills – can you imagine? Once the green investment is made, industries are finding that an eco-friendly approach is more profitable – green economy can spread rapidly, when the components are in place, and the will to change.

In the north Pacific there's a floating island as big as Texas, created by currents, gathering rubbish dumped mostly from land into the sea. It's an ecological hazard to fish and birds already. Plastics in it eventually break up and sink to the ocean floor, toxic to fish and birds. The island floats in international waters, an unmanageably huge problem, legacy of half a century of careless dependency on ever-available plastics. Scarcity might have served us better. Imagine how this problem island will grow unless attitudes to consumption and the production of waste change globally. It's not impossible. We have means to communicate and educate each other in the hard facts, globally, quickly. We made a start by banning fluorocarbons from aerosols. Now the hole in the ozone layer has stopped growing. How greater planetary healing can occur we have yet to learn. Progress depends upon collaboration in the best interests of everyone. We're in a life or death situation with our planet. We work together or we face destruction, just as people had to work together 70 years ago to defeat fascism.

What have faith communities to offer to help make the world a better place?

They have a mixed record in industrial societies, both of resisting change, and of blessing progress – whichever best served the interests of self-preservation.

Now such self preservation might lead us to lose life, if we discern foolishly.

Now is time for all people of faith to remember their creator, the world's creator.

We are but stewards of creation, and it's not in anyone's interests that we do nothing, and fail to engage with the creative process of healing the earth which we've helped to wound by our consumer lifestyles.

Some traditional religious communities own and keep land, not as investment property, but as sacred space for contemplation. Church yards – yes, but also forests, lakes, rivers, mountains, left free of exploitation, where people are free just to be, to enjoy communing with nature. Great natural reserves and national parks are secular humanitarian extensions of this idea. Traditional agriculture and husbandry are deeply linked to seasonal religious rituals. These can get overturned, and land despoiled for motives of power or profit, or sometimes simply in order to create wealth to improve lives in desperate circumstances.

In the interests of efficiency and profitability, industries now run around the clock throughout the year. We may be better off but, we are losing a basic sense of life's rhythms, with disturbing impacts on health. The more we understand what damages us, the more we can do something to remedy the problem.

Today the scientific mind, in addition to reverence for nature and search for truth must be aware of the whole picture, the interdependence of all forms of life on each other. Every innovation has to be considered for its impact on all else. This sense of wholeness and interconnectedness is not exclusive to religions, but it is a spiritual discipline within a living faith.

The desire to know more about our universe and how it works for its own sake, and the desire to put what we know to good use, are both vital human impulses. Openness to the new and enjoyment of it, standing in awe of new discoveries for a while, is a kind of nature worship. But the eye of faith doesn't want to stop

there, looking beyond, reaching into the unknown to adore the Creator, letting the imagination catch fire with how such knowledge can be put to good use. This is the spiritual vision of human partnership with God in creativity. It cannot be reduced to a static inertia. It is fertile by its very nature.

Who hasn't been moved by photographs of distant galaxies from the Hubble telescope, or pictures of the earth seen as a blue dot from the far side of the rings of Saturn, from a far flung space probe? It's a huge human achievement to extend our awareness and imagination that far, something to rejoice in, from the perspective of faith in God. 'How many are your works O Lord, in wisdom you made them all. When I see the heavens I ponder. What is man that you are mindful of him?' Heaven and earth are full of your glory'. We see ourselves in context and marvel at the mystery of it all. And so much has been achieved in so short a period of human development – one lifetime.

We've done many things, both good and ill to the planet we inherited from our forebears. But what have we done to ourselves? We may see ourselves as tiny specks in a vast cosmos. We also know more than generations before us about how 'fearfully and wonderfully we are made'. We can look within our own substance into organs, bones, cells, the genetic material that determines our appearance our functioning, what makes us unique, what we have in common with each other and our animal neighbours. We observe how people behave in different circumstances, how we reason, decide and organise ourselves. We can repair injured bodies, cure fatal diseases, add decades to life. We're not far off creating life forms from raw biological materials. But rather than get hung up about human creativity seeming to usurp God's place, why not be concerned about how easily we can cut life short by violence or abuse? So many different capabilities are ours. Who are we, what are we here for? Science helps us face new questions about our existence arising in our changed world, questions our forebears in Jesus day or our grandparents' day could not have imagined.

What has religion to do with it?

As quest for truth, I'd say science is indeed a kind of religious, spiritual quest for ultimate reality, whether or not it's found, or can be found. Religion keeps on reminding science with its strict and particular focussed disciplines of enquiry, not to forget the bigger picture, the interconnectedness of all things, the impact, the consequences of this search for truth. Both require an attitude of open trust that truth is worth striving for, that searching will somehow be rewarded. Finding the truth, then doing it, applying it. That's what science and religion have in common, or they become bad science, bad religion, avoiding ultimate truth and reality. We need the best human endeavour, in all things excellence, to satisfy us – both to save and enhance our world. To the eye of faith, God our creator is glorified, and the Gospel lived out in both.