

REFLECTION ON CLIMATE CHANGE AND CHRISTMAS 2019

AFTER UNFCCC COP25 IN MADRID

By Bishop Philip Huggins

“In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being”. (John 1:1-3)

Amongst those who “came into being” are the familiar faces of the Christmas story. They faithfully, lived the life they were given. There is significance in this for us, in our being here now.

The life they were given was very different to the life they had probably planned: Joseph, after he learned Mary was pregnant. (Matthew 1:18-25). No quiet life for him thereafter, as a carpenter in Nazareth; Mary herself....

In Madrid - early for the UN Climate Change Conference -UNFCCC COP25 - I sat for an hour in the Prado Gallery just looking at Fra Angelico’s painting of Mary’s Annunciation (Luke 1:26-38).

The shepherds, the Magi too.

As in the poem, “this was the moment when a few farm workers and three members of an obscure Persian sect walked haphazard by starlight straight into the Kingdom of Heaven”(UA Fanthorpe).

So, the point is, for us now, likewise, “we must live the life we are given, which may be different to the life we had been planning” (Wendell Berry).

Elaborating, in the context of climate change, what is the life we are now given?

Here is a story and two reflections:

First, the story. On the Friday of St. Nicholas of Myra Feast, December 6, starting outside the Prado in beautiful evening light, thousands of people rallied to encourage good outcomes at the UNFCCC COP25.

The mood was buoyant and resolved.

The resolution I carried to Madrid was symbolised by a photo on my heart of our three grandchildren under 5.

My barely contained angst towards some political leaders is focused thus: “You want to continue doing exactly what you know is causing global temperatures to rise, endangering many lives and destroying many species, FOR WHAT?”

There were many banners at the rally and march.

I carried from Genesis: “God saw everything that God had made and indeed it was very good” (Genesis 1:31).

Others?

“Creation-Not for Sale”.

“Climate Justice is Intergenerational Justice”.

“Don’t wait until it is too late”.

“Get finance out of fossil fuels and into renewables”.

“Denial is suicide”.

“We can’t drink money”.

You do not need many words to make the point about this global climate emergency and why, in the motto of UNCOP 25, this is the “Time for Action”. (A motto now mocked by the minimal outcomes from COP 25).

So with this in mind, a reflection on two critical questions, as we gather for Christmas, 2019 years since the birth of Jesus.

First, in the context of climate change what does “living the life we are now given”, mean for personal lifestyle? Second, what does all this mean for our advocacy in 2020?

1. Personal Lifestyle.

There is another guiding wisdom from folk like Gandhi and Martin Luther King, who responded to major needs for change in their day:

“The problems are huge. What we can do about them seems insignificant. However, it is ESSENTIAL that we do it!”

Joining a dynamic movement towards us being a human family which is a more benign and loving presence on this planet, we can all contribute.

Suggestions include: a more plant-based diet; ramping up renewables; capping our flying; choosing non-carbon based modes of transport like electric cars; changing consumption habits (during the latest Black Friday shopping day, ‘Fair Trade UK’ shut all their shops for the day); attending to modes of renewable and sustainable building, heating and air conditioning etc.

A person from Green Faith told me she once named her daughter “Hope” because she wanted her to be ever hopeful.

She said: “Now I would call her ‘Courage’ because that is what is needed if we are to make the life-style changes in this life we are now given”.

A German scientist gave a riveting presentation on various delusional, so called “Geo Engineering” Solutions to Climate Change. At best, these ideas are decades away from implementation. That will be too late. Moreover, a number of them may have unacceptable downsides, both ethical and pragmatic.

We cannot allow any distraction from the nature-based solutions which we know will prevent a continuing rise in global temperatures.

At some stage, in the more leisurely days of the Christmas season, perhaps with loved ones, a discussion and review of our ‘life style’, amidst climate change, may be possible for those of us in “the lucky country”.

Perhaps such discussions might lead to some robust New Year resolutions.

2. Advocating for a National Summit in 2020

Our context:

“All parts breathe together”, wrote St Clement in the first century, about our organic universe. We are all in it together, interdependent.

But we will not last unless serious changes are made very quickly.

Specifically, carbon consumption and emissions must be reduced if we are to keep global warming to within 1.5% above pre-industrial levels.

The framework for achieving this is present in the UNFCCC COP and its “Paris Agreement”.

Scaled up “Nationally Determined Contributions” (NDCs) are due by August 2020, before UN COP26 in Glasgow, next November. These are to be contributions, which in the principle of ‘subsidiarity’, nations volunteer freely for the common good.

It is a consensus model, based on mutually trusting that each nation will do their best. (Hence, tricky accountancy use of historic carbon credits is viewed unfavourably).

It assumes nature-based solutions, such as a shift away from coal to renewable energy sources.

As we know from the last Federal Election, the politics of this in Australia are very complex.

It is the issue of transition away from coal jobs in areas where a job surge is associated with the construction phase of mining being welcomed as a solution to regional unemployment. The emblematic significance of Adani tells part of the story.

The other part is that coal exports are currently, as I understand it, our nation's main export, worth \$67 billion annually by 2030. ("The Australian", December 14-15, p15)

Thus, early in 2020 we need a National Summit of generous hearts and innovative minds as we try to find a unifying and nation-building way to integrate two realities.

On the one hand, the need to clarify enhanced NDCs by August 2020 ahead of COP26. On the other hand, the employment needs of regional coal industry areas and the needs of a Federal Budget, barely in surplus.

There is already much innovative thinking from generous hearts which can assist such a National Summit early in 2020.

This includes Ross Garnaut's latest book, "Superpower" in which he conveys a transition to renewable energy in Australia, with enhanced economic strength.

It includes the innovative thinking of distinguished former Federal Minister, Ms Jenny Macklin, on an "Emissions and Employment Accord" to revitalise the nation like the Prices and Income Accord did in the 1980's. (Brotherhood of St Laurence, Sambell Oration, November 2019).

Her proposed Accord includes features which protect people from the worst of the shocks that will come as the economy weans itself off carbon; nation-building plans to give communities that rely on coal a pathway to future prosperity.

The fact is that our world is doomed unless big emitters step up their NDCs and bring them to UNCOP26, as required by the Paris Agreement. Every nation must do the best it can.

Instead of Australia being viewed as "selfish", as I heard repeatedly at UN COP25, after a National Summit perhaps jointly convened by our Prime Minister and the Leader of the Opposition, Australia can offer a generous and uplifting NDC to UNCOP26, whilst still taking account of domestic realities.

Advocating for such a National Summit seems a good idea.

It would also include, as an aspect of being good neighbours, attention to how we can better assist those Pacific nations who are already suffering "loss and damage" from climate change: people displaced by rising sea-levels, the aftermath of more extreme and more frequent weather events, like cyclones.

Australia's "Step-Up in the Pacific", plus the recently announced review of our Aid and Development program offer opportunities to give such beneficial assistance.

Conclusion:

Joseph, Mary and all involved in the Nativity, responded faithfully to the life they were given. It was very different to what they may have planned. But they knew God was with them - Emmanuel- in that humble scene of Jesus's birth.

Likewise, as promised, in love for the whole of creation, God is with us now as we make this crucial journey.

It is a story for another day, of how I experienced God's accompanying on the way to and through UNCOP25.

What I am left with is this high sense of both opportunity and responsibility, as I offer this Christmas Reflection.

With prayers now, in the beloved, with Mary and all the saints,

Bishop Philip Huggins

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