**Talk for St Matthew’s Surbiton**

**Earth Matters: care for Creation**

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Ian Christie

Environment Advisor to Dioceses of Southwark and Guildford

Centre for Environment and Sustainability, University of Surrey

Member of Eco-church team, Christ Church West Wimbledon

University of Surrey programme CUSP on pathways to a sustainable Good Life: [www.cusp.ac.uk](http://www.cusp.ac.uk)

**Introduction**

Thank you to Reverend Helen for the very kind invitation to speak to you all in the St Matthew’s community as you make progress with Eco-church and as you embark on the ’40 ways to spring clear your life in Lent’. The 40 Ways for Lent are excellent and I think this is a splendid initiative. We have something similar in my church in Wimbledon and I shall carefully copy some of your ideas for next time.

I would like in this brief talk to do three things. First, I want to highlight the reasons why Eco-Church activities and ideas are so important to us as Christians. Some of that might depress you.

Second, I want to cheer you up. I will stress how much there is to hope for despite the unquestionably serious damage we have collectively done to God’s Good Earth, especially in the past 70 years.

Third, I want to emphasise the importance of acting as members of a community - a congregation. Together we can accomplish things that are too much for us as individuals.

We’ll begin with a quick review of why Eco-Church and environmental action matter so much.

Our Gospel reading from John is a rich one, but I just want to focus on one thing. That is the use of the word ‘world’. God doesn’t come to us as Christ out of love just for people, or for communities. He comes out of love for the *whole world* - the common home we have with other creatures, a tiny part of the whole of God’s Creation. God loves His world, not just human beings as creatures in that world. That world is a gift to us. What have we done with it?

Here, to complement our Gospel reading, is another text.

**A reading from the book of David :**

**“*Our planet is home to a seemingly infinite variety of species. From ocean giants to the tiniest insects. We call this abundance of life - biodiversity. But today, it's vanishing at rates never seen before in human history.***

***It is worse than expected. This is happening much faster than we've ever seen before.***

***Today, we are ... causing many, many species to go extinct...***

***The evidence is that unless immediate action is taken, this crisis has grave impacts for us all.***

***We're not just losing nice things to look at. We're losing critical parts of Earth's system.***

***...***

***Scientists have even linked our destructive relationship with nature to the emergence of Covid-19.***

***We are encroaching further and further every day into wildlife habitat, and that drives emerging diseases.***

***...***

***The decisions made as we rebuild our economies are critical.***

***Get it wrong and we will be in deeply dangerous territory.***

***Get it right and we still have the ability to pull back and rein in the collapse of biodiversity.***

***We have a moment when we can change our world and make it better. This is that moment*.”**

That comes, of course, from the book of Sir David Attenborough - not yet St David, although I sometimes think he might as well be!

**Why we need to take action to safeguard life on Earth**

Those words are taken from his recent BBC programme on ***Extinction: the facts*** - a follow-up to his equally urgent and chastening programme on the climate crisis. If you have not watched those programmes, I urge you to do so. The science is very well communicated and is accurate.

Like the teenage climate activist Greta Thunberg - with whom Sir David evidently gets on very well - he’s speaking the language of the Biblical prophets. Amos and Jeremiah would see them as kindred spirits. We could easily translate Sir David’s lament and call to action - and those from Greta - into Christian terms.

And indeed that’s being done - by our archbishops and bishops, by the Pope, by the many Christian and inter-faith environmental campaigns in this country and around the world.

Through our eco-church projects such as the St Matthew’s one, we are linked to the international green Christian charity A Rocha.

What A Rocha, Christian charities such as Tearfund and Christian Aid, and many others, are calling for is urgent action by governments, by business - and by us as individuals working together in our congregations and communities.

We need action to respect, restore and sustain god’s creation - our common home, the good earth, which is God’s irreplaceable gift to us.

The overwhelming body of evidence from climate science and broader environmental science tells us that our industrial production and consumption patterns have overloaded and depleted the life support systems we and other creatures all depend on.

The climate system is being disrupted by greenhouse gas emissions from burning of fossil fuels. Habitats, species and genetic diversity are being lost forever, risking not only large-scale extinctions but also the dangerous degradation of habitats, soils, freshwater and the oceans. If we carry on undermining our life support systems, our common home - our *only* home - will become horribly inhospitable for billions of people by the end of the century, and stay that way.

The people most at risk are the ones who have done least to cause the dangers - our children and grand-children, and their descendants, and in the present, the poorest people of the world. But we too are at risk, here and now in the rich world, as the bushfires in Australia and California, and the growing threat of floods and extreme storms, make clear to us all.

We have to cut our greenhouse gas emissions in half by 2030 and get to a more or less zero-carbon economy by 2050. We have to conserve wildlife and habitats on a massive scale over the next generation. These tasks together represent the biggest collective challenge we humans have ever faced.

You’re probably feeling daunted and maybe depressed to hear all this. I know I do, almost every day. *Things are serious*.

**Reasons to be hopeful**

I have been working on environmental policymaking in different ways for 35 years. It’s been a depressing world to work in for much of that time. But I am now more hopeful than I have been in all those years.

Why? Well, starting in late 2018 we reached a kind of ‘tipping point’. The pile-up of scientific evidence and terrible personal experience concerning climate disruption and the degradation of nature became unignorable to many decision-makers in governments and business. And a lot of credit for that must go to David Attenborough and to Greta Thunberg. The school strike movement that Greta initiated played a huge role in raising public concern, which was already growing.

Since then governments and businesses worldwide have made commitments to ending the use of fossil fuels and taking carbon emissions out of our economy by 2050. In 2020 the awful pandemic arrived and many felt that this would slow down environmental action and concern. But that has not happened. What the Covid-19 crisis has done is in some ways deeply instructive for us all. What is it showing us?

In one way it is a dire warning, as David Attenborough points out. Viruses such as Covid-19 are being released into our societies as we encroach ever more on wildernesses and disturb the creatures living there.

But in another way the pandemic has been a revelation of how we could live better, and how we could make the world better. In the first lockdown, during a beautiful spring, many of us were lucky to have access to our local commons and parks.

All over the world, people have found consolation and restoration by immersing themselves in nature. What we heard was birdsong, clear and vibrant as we’d never heard it before. what we saw was a cleaner world - and a more flourishing living world, recovering from the pressures placed on it by our economies and lifestyles.

Some of you might remember the late playwright Dennis Potter. When he was near the end of his life he gave a tv interview. in it he described the tree in blossom he could see from his window. his senses heightened by the closeness of death and the feeling of the preciousness of life, he said that the tree was holding the ‘blossomest blossom’ he’d ever seen.

Perhaps many of us have felt something similar in the experience of nature during the lockdown spring last year and ever since. In a way we’ve been experiencing a long Lent for a year now, which has perhaps planted the seeds of deep change.

In the past 2 years, then, a lot of decision-makers worldwide have committed themselves to big changes to safeguard Earth’s life support systems. That’s good news, but we have to play our part in pressing them to deliver on those pledges and to showing our support for them.

There is other good news. We know must make deep changes to our economy, our lifestyles and our values to enable the earth to sustain us and God’s larger creation. we need to do this in a fair and just way that lifts up the poor and vulnerable people of the world. It is a huge task and it is easy to feel daunted.

But - all our science, technology and know-how tell us it *can be done*. Collectively we can afford it - what we can’t afford is *not* to do it! We have the knowledge and most of the technologies we need. We in the rich world, who have contributed so much to the problems we face worldwide, have so far lacked the willpower.

**The Christian commitment**

We, people of faith, confident in God’s love, have a great role to play in providing that willpower across our communities, and through our eco-church activities.

People often feel very daunted by environmental challenges. On our own we can do so little, it seems - although Greta Thunberg started on her own, of course. And what needs to change are enormous economic and technical systems - that all seems too big. We can get stuck on the smallness of individual action in our homes, and the hugeness of what needs to happen.

But there is a level of action in between. That is the level of people acting in community - encouraging each other, doing things in groups, writing to MPs in droves, buying sustainable goods in bulk, sharing and collaborating with other communities. The churches have a head start here, because we live in *congregation*. And ‘congregational action’ is what makes the connection between what we can do as individuals and the big system-wide changes that are needed. Eco-Church is a very clear expression of that potential.

Two things matter a lot that often don’t get included in the list of Green actions to take in our daily lives. They’re both on the lists in your 40 Ways leaflet, I am very glad to see. First is to write to your MP, and to Ministers, and to other influential people you might know or to their organisations: make it clear that action on climate and nature matter to you as a Christian, citizen, consumer and voter. This really does make a difference.

Second, talk about climate and nature crises and what you are doing on your own and with others. These issues need to be part of everyday conversation with family, friends and colleagues, not something to shy away from.

Let me conclude.

The time is here to dedicate ourselves to the great Christian task of this generation and the next, to show gratitude for God’s gift of the good Earth and to sustain it, for our benefit, for the poor, and for those who come after us. It is wonderful to see St Matthew’s embarking on this task.

Thank you very much for the chance to offer these thoughts.

A closing prayer for our 40 Ways to a Green Lent : let us pray.

***Lord of life and giver of hope***

***we pledge ourselves to care for Creation***

***to reduce our waste***

***to live sustainably,***

***and to value the rich diversity of life.***

***may Your wisdom guide us,***

***that life in all its forms may flourish,***

***and may be faithful in voicing Creation’s praise.***

***may the commitment we have made be matched by our faithful living.***

Amen.