

## **Sunday 15 September 2024 – 16<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Trinity – Christians and the Climate and Nature Bill – Michael Bayley**

*The Revd Dr Michael Bayley asks us to think about the climactic turning-point that confronts us in the light of our Christian faith, our responsibilities for what should be done about it, and our hopes for the future.*

### **Readings:**

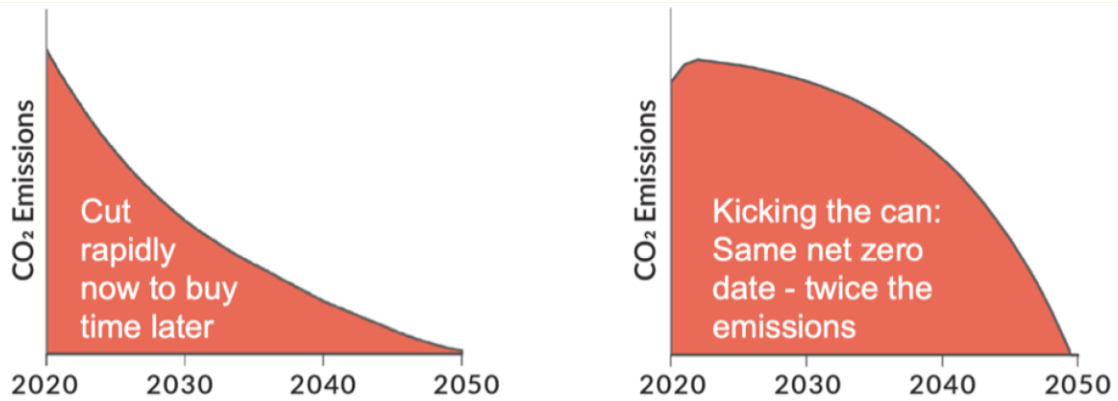
Isaiah 50: 4-9. Mark 8: 27-38.

### **Sermon: Christians and the Climate and Nature Bill – Michael Bayley**

Today's gospel from Mark is a turning point in Jesus's ministry. People must have been increasingly asking: "Who is this man? Who does he think he is? Who do we think he is?" If this was so for people at large it must have been an even more pressing question for the 12 disciples themselves. So Jesus puts the question to them: "Who do people say that I am?" And they replied to him: "John the Baptist; and others say Elijah; and others one of the prophets." And Jesus asked them: "but who do *you* say that I am?" It was Peter who dared to take the plunge, to take the risk and to say the almost unthinkable possibility: "You are the Christ." The best parallel I can think of this is the risk and heart-in-the-mouth experience of asking someone to marry you. It is typical of Peter's experience that, having made this bold and daring affirmation, Jesus wraps his knuckles firmly when Peter fails to understand its implications. From this turning point, Jesus is trying to get the disciples to understand just how tough the journey is going to be.

We are at a turning point with the climate. We have been living with a climate emergency for so long that it is easy to start ignoring the ever more dire warnings about what we as humanity needs to do to prevent a climate catastrophe. Zero Hour, the organisation which has been campaigning about this, wrote to the Prime Minister on July 24 saying: "You take office at a pivotal moment in history. Climate change and nature's destruction of the two defining challenges of our time. June 2024 was the 12<sup>th</sup> consecutive month when global temperatures reached 1.5° C above preindustrial averages – and almost 1 million species are currently at risk of extinction. The next five years are our last, best chance to 'keep 1.5° C alive' and to put biodiversity loss firmly in reverse... This Labour government, led by you, has a small and closing the window to follow what the science demands."

It is helpful to think in terms of a budget. In order to 'keep 1.5° C alive', humankind must not emit more than 400 billion tonnes of CO<sub>2</sub> into the atmosphere. That figure cannot be exceeded. We have been given a target date of 2050 for reaching net zero. But it is not so much the dates that matter as the cumulative emissions which we are piling up in the atmosphere. This means that it is not *when* we reach the target that matters. It is the path by which we reach it. This diagram makes that abundantly clear.



It is obvious that the sharp cuts of the left path are what we must follow. The right hand path ('kick the can down the road'), which recent governments have been pursuing, will produce twice the amount of emissions, and that will be catastrophic.

This sermon has been pretty gloomy so far but there is hope, real hope. The hope is the movement which has led to the 'Climate and Nature Bill'. This bill is designed to enable us to follow the left hand path. It will be tough but it is possible.

These are its key proposals:

- it creates a joined up plan – the crises in climate and nature are deeply intertwined requiring a plan that considers both together. This is vital. An integrated approach is essential.
- It cuts emissions in line with 1.5° C ensuring UK emissions are reduced rapidly for the last chance of limiting warming to 1.5°.
- It not only halts, but also reverses the decline in nature.
- It enables us to take responsibility for our overseas footprint – both emissions and ecological.
- It prioritises nature in decision-making, and ends fossil fuel production and imports as rapidly as possible .
- It ensures no one is left behind through fairness provisions.
- It involves the public – giving people a say in finding a fair way forward through Climate and Nature Assembly, an essential tool for bringing the public along with the unprecedented pace of change required.

This is a huge and immensely demanding programme. Is it correct? It has been produced with the help of over 200 world leading experts and it is the only proposed path the legislation that matches the urgency of what the science amounts. It is not saying what it thinks is politically *possible*: it is laying down what is scientifically *necessary*. It has been supported by a letter from 1,176 leading climate scientists, ecologists, academics, and medical professionals. It has widespread and powerful support from over 1,600 organisations and also cross-party support from 170 MPs and 63 peers .

But the question remains is there really any realistic chance of this bill being passed? The answer is yes. At the beginning of each session of Parliament there is a Private Members Bill ballot open to all backbenchers. Only 20 MPs will be successful and even then you need to be near the top of the list. The ballot was drawn on September 5. Eight of the MPs's who were successful have already said to Zero Hour that they will support the bill. Of these eight, four are in the top seven and they are virtually certain to secure debate time for their chosen bill. One of them has to decide by October 15 that they *will* sponsor the bill.

You will not be surprised that I'm going to ask you to write to your MP to ask them to contact the four most successful MPs in the ballot to ask them to sponsor the bill. The names of the four MPs and advice about what to write are available at the back of the church.

But it goes much further than this. To pass this bill and then to put it into effect is going to be very hard indeed. In fact one could say that the probable outcome is that the venture will fail. But as Christians we cannot allow ourselves to sink into accepting the *probable*: our priority is what under God and through Christ is *possible*. What was the probable outcome of the crucifixion? Surely it was the extinction of the Jesus movement but look at what happened! The impossible happened. Paul Wilding writes wisely: "To governments, hope can seem dangerous in the way it raises expectations and gives the impossible a dangerous veneer of possibility. In reality, it is only hope – a belief that the world need not be, and is not intended to be, as it is – which will save us from destroying ourselves. Unless we cling to the faith that things can be different, they will stay the same."<sup>1</sup> Wilding also quotes Jürgen Moltmann: "Hope alone is to be called realistic, because it alone takes seriously the possibilities with which all reality is fraught."<sup>2</sup>

We all know that the government is under huge pressure from all directions. It will be very tempting for them to put this in the 'too-difficult' box. It will not just be a question of writing one letter to our MP, though please do that, but I believe that it will be a vital part of the mission of St Mark's, of the church at large, of all Christians to do everything in our power over the next few years to make sure that the provisions of the Climate and Nature Bill result in the action that is needed. What will it involved? Probably a lot of letter writing, a lot of lobbying and supporting our MPs and, especially, a lot of praying, a lot of deep, deep down praying.

*O Lord God, when thou givest to thy servants to endeavour any great matter,  
grant us also to know that it is not the beginning, but the continuing of the same,  
until it be thoroughly finished, which yieldeth the true glory; through him who  
for the finishing of thy work laid down his life for us, our Redeemer, Jesus Christ.*

*Sir Francis Drake*

Amen

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<sup>1</sup> Paul Wilding, 'Hope in our world', in *The Way* (October 1987), p. 256.

<sup>2</sup> Jürgen Moltmann, *Theology of Hope* (London, SCM, 1967), p. 25.

