

The cry of the Earth and the cry of the poor

Commemoration of Benefactors (Lady Margaret Sermon),
at Great St Mary's, Cambridge;
7 November 2021

Preacher: Sarah Teather, Director of the Jesuit Refugee Service (JRS) UK
Scripture: Job 28, RSVCE

It is a great honour to be the Lady Margaret Preacher for this service to commemorate the benefactors of the university.

I am enormously grateful for the many gifts my time here as a student gave to me – gifts which continue to enrich my life today. Not just the academic education, but also the lasting friendships, the faith that was kindled here, and of course the many opportunities to make music (which as every singer will attest, is in fact the university's greatest treasure...).

I have to say, it is a real treat for me to hear the choir this morning. When I was at St John's, I sang with the Mixed Voice Choir as it first began. It is wonderful to see how great a choir St John's Voices are today. Thank you for the opportunity to listen to you.

The Deputy Vice Chancellor will shortly read the litany of names of benefactors; and what an extraordinary list it is; including Kings and Queens, covering a span of some 800 years.

I wonder what legacy these donors hoped their gift would provide for us? When we consider the achievements and international reach of the University today, it must far outstrip what their imagination could ever have foreseen.

Legacy and our global responsibility to future generations has been central to the framing of many of the emotional speeches at COP26 as world leaders gather to hammer out agreements on carbon emissions, deforestation and support for the poorest countries to adapt. The stakes are high, and the rhetoric has been apocalyptic.

Speaker after speaker has given witness to the devastating impact of climate change, not as some distant threat, but wreaking devastation in lives now. The youngest have spoken with the greatest prophetic clarity – “The Earth is speaking”, warned one activist from the Brazilian Amazon, “she tells us that we have no more time!”.

Watching the coverage from afar, you cannot avoid the sense, however, that the magnitude of what is required of us in this moment isn't quite cutting through. There has been progress in some areas (perhaps for the gloomy amongst us, it is, so far, even a little better than we feared). But yet, it is as if our leaders cannot lift their eyes over the top of the national frame. We need a paradigm shift, and that lies still beyond our vision and imagination.

“Where is wisdom to be found? Job cries in our reading. “Where is the place of understanding? Man does not know the way to it...”

I imagine that most of us are at the moment trying to make sense of this impending crisis, perhaps frustrated at lack of action, wondering also what we can or should do. I don't have solutions or tidy insights. But I would

like to share something of our experience at the Jesuit Refugee Service because it seems relevant. And I have an instinct that the provocative reading from Job we just heard may be a good place to return in our reflections.

That passage from Job comes at the point in his story when he had lost everything. Our outreach team at the Jesuit Refugee Service met Thanh this summer at rather a similar point in his life. His story illustrates the complex way climate change interacts with injustice and tells us something too about the way we avoid responding to it.

We met Thanh in Harmondsworth: a prison-like detention centre for migrants where self-harm is common and desperation saturates the air. It was the final destination of a gruelling and perilous journey that had taken him from Vietnam to China through Russia, across Europe and over the Channel in a small boat that could easily have sunk.

The tipping point in Thanh's already tough life was flooding. Even for a country as prone to storms as Vietnam, the rains that fell last year were on a different scale. Whole towns were submerged in water; homes, lives and livelihoods were swept away. When the waters receded, the crops went with them leaving behind scarred earth; landslides followed rains.

Thanh was poor. His work was unstable and unskilled. He had no safety net when disaster struck.

So he borrowed. How else was he supposed to rebuild the family home? To pay back the debt, he had to agree to work in China. And so it began: 14 hour working days without pay; held captive to an onward journey by the shackles of debt, daily violence and the always just-out-of-reach promise of a better future.

This story of slavery and trafficking has striking similarities to the stories of others we hear in our work. What is also revealing is the cruelty of our response to them.

The boat carrying Thanh arrived on Kent's shores in the frenzy of headlines about floods of migrant boats last summer, when rhetoric was macho and policy was brutal. He had been held captive by bonded labour, beaten as a slave in lieu of pay, yet he was then taken captive by the UK border force to deter others who might try the same. When representations led eventually to Thanh's referral to the system to protect trafficking survivors, he was released. But not into a safe house, as needed: he was released into an abyss of neglect. We don't know what happened to him next, because he went missing; but we do know that many trafficking survivors who meet this fate get re-trafficked, a fact that haunts the JRS team that supports them.

What happened to Thanh is a story about one man's struggle to survive and build a future for his family out of disaster. It is also a story about the way climate change magnifies inequality and feeds exploitation; and it is a story about the way scapegoating blinds us to the truth about global injustice. Even the political rhetoric being used to garner action on climate change this week has been wrapped up in the threat so-called "climate migrants" might place, not for their way of life, but for our way of life.

I am reminded here again of our story of Job. For those of you who know the rest of the book, his ill-named comforters were at pains to maintain the dominant idea of the day that goodness and success were inextricably linked. And that suffering, correspondingly, was a punishment for personal sin, or the sins of ancestors. We too go to great lengths to blame and ostracise migrants for their plight, especially when their presence challenges our entitlement to wealth. There is a connection between suffering and sin here, but it turns out to be our sins rather than theirs.

The poorest people of the Earth consume the least of the Earth's resources and make the least contribution to climate change. But they are amongst the most vulnerable to its worst effects. All over the world, families are forced to move because their homes and livelihoods have been made impossible by flooding, heat or drought. The vast majority are displaced inside their own country not over borders, usually moving from rural areas to the poor parts of cities. Places often without the infrastructure to support a growing population, frequently also vulnerable to the ravages of climate change.

The interweaving of wounds – wounds of the Earth and wounds of its people – is a feature of stories of many people we accompany at JRS, including refugees forced to flee conflict or persecution: there are stories of oppression that began with pollution, that led to protests, that were suppressed because of vested interests in the profit to be had from exploiting natural resources; there are stories about tribal tensions that flared when expanding desert encroached on fruitful arable land; or the terror groups whose popularity fed on the failure of governments to support those who suffered when the harvests failed. You can find traces of these mirror narratives of suffering – human and Earth – in the larger back story of many a conflict, from Syria to Ethiopia, Nigeria to South Sudan.

I think of South Sudan often, as I spent some time there with our international team 6 years ago. My JRS colleagues work in the very north of the country, with refugees from Sudan and families displaced internally from the ongoing civil war. Hunger was rife when I visited in 2015. Since then, South Sudan has known drought, famine, and devastating flooding. Climate change exacerbates conflict. Conflict leaves people undefended against disaster. And so it goes on. "Misery", Philip Larkin says, "deepens like a coastal shelf".

Our reading from Job began with a colourful description of the ingenuity and brilliance of man, who sees all that is precious under the earth, and risks everything to extract it. But he is not wise.

He cuts channels in rock, shafts in valleys, and binds up the streams. But he is not wise.

What then is this wisdom, if it cannot be extracted from the earth or traded for gold? (Hard to miss the metaphors for industrial capitalism there.)

Wisdom, Job tells us, is of infinite value; it existed before the world was founded and its presence is hidden in all of creation.

And yet, mysterious, elusive even; and we humans cannot see it.

What are we to make of this poem to wisdom in the middle of a story about terrible suffering? I wonder if paying attention to the story of those who suffer is part of the point, perhaps where we must begin if we are to understand the way the world is. But more than that, we must ask questions of sense and purpose about what we see, listening with all our senses attuned for the mystery of hope; confident that while Job's man binds up the streams, the God who creates all things anew is the living spring that flows from the temple side and swells to a river that sustains all life...

When we pay attention, when we really pay attention, like this, to the cry of the Earth and the cry of the poor, with senses attuned to the possibility of this creative hope, we see that we are all deeply interconnected, with one another and with our planet, in complex, overlapping, mysterious ways... That felt sense of mutual interconnection seems to be one of the things still eluding leaders at COP26. We know we cannot solve a global problem like climate change without a shared global solution. But perhaps we cannot imagine the solution now because of the scale of it – the paradigm shift in how we must live, work, be; our relations with one another and the Earth – it may be beyond our imagination because it requires a collective struggle and

journey to create it. It may remain out of sight without the insights, involvement and struggle of all. Making a shared journey, not agreeing the solution, could be the first collective task we must learn how to do.

I suspect though that our individualistic ways means we have lost the art of doing this kind of together-struggle, or the “ever wider we” that Pope Francis speaks about. I wonder too whether Christian Churches are out of practice at this kind of thinking, hamstrung by a perception of faith as private; a linear matter between soul and God. I hear it sometimes in the discussion about ecological conversion, when reflection too often stops at individual morality and choices, without also encompassing the civic, social and economic dimensions of the call to love; dimensions that can only be practised and learnt with one another, incorporating difference, rooted in dialogue.

How might we create space for whole societies to engage in reflection on the past and reimagining of a future? I don't know the answer to this, but I have an instinct that the project will require everyone – technological solutions to carbon capture and the like are not going to be enough. It will take the gifts of poets and artists, musicians and linguists, historians and lawyers to also play their part in imagining a new world. And the prayers of our benefactors too, who stand with us in communion as we seek wisdom across generations of the living and the long-since dead.

At the end of the book of Job, after the struggle and the dialogues, having lost all that he valued, Job is finally given a vision of the magnitude of God and a sense of himself in the place of creation as a whole. “And now my eye sees you” he said of God, in an echo of the lines about seeing we heard earlier. I would wager that for most of us, if we are honest, our greatest insights and growth come after those miserable periods when life dishes up lemons. Success, prestige, wealth, much of what we celebrate – even in a place such as this – is not nearly as good for wisdom and understanding as we might like to think. We get a better feel for what matters, what is truly valuable, after loss.

As wealthier people, in wealthier nations, we stand at a threshold: we know we must let go of some of the things we think we value and we are resisting that, even as we drive the world head-long into a brick wall of self-destruction. But let go we must. Our eyes cannot see yet what lies beyond; all we can do is commit ourselves to the struggle with one another of imagining a new way, trusting in hope that the threshold we stand on is the threshold of wisdom and clear sight...