



# *Christ Church Cathedral*

OXFORD

**15 September 2019: Choral Eucharist**

**The Thirteenth Sunday after Trinity**

**Job 36:22-33, 2 Thessalonians 2:1-8, Luke 13: 6-9**

**The Revd Dr Tim Howles, Curate of St Andrew's, Headington, Associate Research Fellow of the William Temple Foundation**

**'The Future of Creation'**

May I speak in the name of Almighty God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.

When I was at secondary school, I had a rather eccentric history teacher called Mr Evans. Even today, I can picture him in my mind's eye. In classic history teacher fashion, he always looked quite dishevelled, with wild, fuzzy hair, and (as I recall) a tendency to forget to button up his shirt properly.

But Mr Evans was also a great optimist. Because one of his favourite phrases was: "the arrow of history is pointing upwards". He used to say that all the time in lessons. You see, Mr Evans felt that by-and-large things were getting better. Human beings were gaining greater control over the world around us. Through the development of science, engineering and technology, we were making the material world work for us, to yield up more wealth, more prosperity and more comfort for all. So, whilst there may be ups-and-downs on the way, he felt that we are basically on the right trajectory: we could expect the future to be better than the past. And to illustrate this, he cut out a big, cardboard arrow that he would stick on the blackboard, pointing diagonally upwards.

I've thought about Mr Evans' arrow quite a bit since then. Actually, I think he was onto something. I think that human beings *do* need to believe in an "arrow of history", that things are improving, that the future will be better than the past, that the lives of the next generation will be more prosperous than our own. In fact, I wonder if thinking that way about the future is almost a psychological requirement for human beings.

But recently, something has come along that troubles that vision...

We switch on the TV or read the news. And we're confronted by stories about the environment. Hurricanes rage. Sea levels are rising. The atmosphere is warming. It's as if

the Earth itself is holding up a big “stop” sign; *you can't go on the way you have been up to now.*

And that forces us to think. We thought that history was moving in a certain direction. But now, the future seems less certain. What will the world look like 100 years from now? What about 20 years from now? What about 3 years from now? We really can't say. The old assumptions no longer ring true. It's as if Mr Evans' arrow has spun around and we no longer know which way we're facing anymore.

How does all that make you feel? Anxious? Confused? Disorientated? Perhaps there is even a sense of panic?

I think such reactions are entirely understandable.

In a TED talk from last year, the sixteen-year old Swedish climate-activist Greta Thunberg described how she felt when she first began to read the news about climate change: 'I became ill. I fell into depression, I stopped talking and I stopped eating. In two months, I lost about 10 kilos of weight [...]' She goes on to speak quite powerfully about her feelings of helplessness. What could she do to bring about change? What voice did she have? It was overwhelming for her.

Perhaps you recognise some of those feelings in your own life? There's something about the environmental crisis that challenges us at a profound level. It puts on our shoulders the responsibility to think in an entirely new way. What choices are we making and what values do we hold? What kind of future do we wish for our children? What role can we play in bringing about change?

None of this is comfortable. None of this is easy.

But I believe that the Christian faith supplies resources that can help us react.

Perhaps you find that idea strange. After all, doesn't Christianity teach that God is in control of everything? We had a sense of that in our reading from the book of Job. And one day we believe that Christ will return, to wrap-up history altogether. Doesn't that cause us to be restricted, constrained and locked-down, rather than freed-up? Many people have accused religion of doing just that. So in what sense does Christianity empower us to become agents of change at times like these?

Well, I think there's a clue in our New Testament reading, from Paul's second letter to the Thessalonians.

What do we find there? It seems that some of the Christians in that place had come to believe that the end was already upon them: “the day of the Lord” had arrived or was about to arrive (2:2). And (as we find out from the rest of the letter) that had the effect of de-energising them. If the end was already here, what did it matter what they did now?

But Paul writes to correct them. That’s not what Christianity teaches, he says. Yes, we believe that Christ will one day return at the end. But *the end is at the end*. It’s not today. In fact, God is actually “holding back” or “restraining” the end (2:6, 7), he says. Why? For what purpose? God is doing that so His people can get to work now, changing things, getting involved, making a difference, knowing that “our labour in the Lord is not in vain” (1 Cor 15:58).

So much of modern life tempts us to think there’s nothing we can do to change the great forces that shape our lives. We feel that things are set absolutely. And that makes us feel small and insignificant. What could I possibly do to make a difference?

But that is not the way of Christianity. Our belief is that God is holding open history itself to allow us to make a difference. For the Christian, the time is always now. We are called to be fellow-workers with God to bring about a better world, one that we can enjoy ourselves and bequeath to future generations.

For me, that’s why Christianity is so exciting: it’s to enter into an unfolding story in which I am called to play my part.

Is that a story you’d like to be part of too?

Chris Rapley is the Professor of Climate Science at University College, London. He’s participated in many initiatives to present the facts of climate science to the general public. But he also speaks candidly about his frustrations. Here’s what he says:

The science community has spent enormous amounts of effort trying to help you *know* more. But actually, our task is much harder than that. To tackle climate change, we have to change who people are. We have to give them epiphanies. We have to shift their values and their worldview so that they take this subject seriously and so that they do something about it.

That is precisely the vision that Christianity offers. The Gospel of Jesus Christ invites us to see the world anew, and promises to bring about the change that the world so desperately needs.

There's no doubt that many different constituencies will need to play their part in bringing about the future we need. But none more so than Christians: you and I. God calls us to do that.

Let me sum up.

When you think about the environmental challenges facing us, perhaps you feel overwhelmed? Perhaps you feel there's nothing you can do to make a difference? Perhaps you feel that sense of despair rising in your heart, as if you don't quite know which way to turn? Perhaps you feel that the "arrow of history" has fallen off the wall and the future does not look the way you once thought it would

Well, take another look at the Christian faith. You will find there a God who gives a direction to history. And that same God calls us to work with Him to bring it about, right now, in the strength that He provides.

May it be so for us.

In the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.