



# *Christ Church Cathedral*

OXFORD

**8 September 2019: Choral Eucharist in Creationtide**

**The Twelfth Sunday after Trinity**

**Deuteronomy 26:I-II, Philippians 4:4-9, John 6:25-35**

**The Revd Margot Hodson, Director of Theology and Education at the John Ray**

**Initiative, Vicar in the Oxford Diocese**

**'Christian discipleship at a time of environmental crisis'**

*Sermon opening prayer*

Lord God, open our ears, our eyes, and our hearts that we may together hear and receive your Word, even Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

*Opening*

Last month a 16-year-old Swedish girl who was not particularly into sailing accepted the offer to travel from the UK to New York on a racing yacht; across the Atlantic at the start of Hurricane Season. Why did she do such a thing? Many of you will know of Greta Thunberg, who is a young climate activist. A year ago she started a youth and children's movement to strike on Fridays – challenging us grown-ups to do something about the environmental crisis that we face.

Greta has captured many people's hearts and imaginations, with her impassioned speeches and her uncompromising commitment to living out a lifestyle that is sustainable for our age – hence the decision to take a small boat across the ocean, rather than a comfortable seat on a plane, to be able to attend the United Nations Climate Summit in New York – and have a gap year in America – accompanied by her father.

*Environmental crisis*

The evidence for environmental crisis cannot be ignored:

There is more and more evidence that our climate is slipping out of control, with terrible human consequences from droughts and floods (with refugees and migrants coming out of these). Hurricanes are increasing in intensity with devastating consequences as we have seen this week in the Bahamas. Our world's biodiversity is declining at an unprecedented speed: there has been a 60 percent drop in the world's wild animal population in the last

50 years, and massive clearance of our world's forests, especially rain forests like the Amazon. This level of drop cannot be sustained and – if ecosystems start to collapse – it will threaten the very balance of life itself on earth. And then we are entangled with plastic – and cannot get out from under it.

We are living in difficult times and it is hard to see how we can change things for the better. How do we all respond to Greta's challenge to live differently? And what does Christian discipleship look like at a time of environmental crisis?

### *Philippians*

The New Testament was written at a time of intense difficulty for the early Christians. They were facing opposition and persecution from society around them, and challenges internally as they sought to work out what following Christ really meant as individuals and as a very diverse community.

As we face very different challenges, we can draw from the wisdom of the Apostle Paul as he writes to the Philippians to strengthen their discipleship. He challenges them on who they are on the inside; and he challenges them on how they live – in what they do. Or put another way: he looks at where their roots are – who they are – what their lives are rooted into; and he looks at their branches – how they live – how their lives reach out to others.

### *Rejoice*

Paul begins by telling the Philippians to rejoice. This might not seem very sensitive to write to a people facing great challenges. But this is the first challenge that we need to respond to – he challenges us to rejoice *in the Lord*. We need first and foremost to root our lives firmly in Christ – he is the rock on which we can stand. This is not something that is false – the bright smile that you put on – even when all is going wrong in your life. It is right at times to lament to grieve at what has been lost, because the loss is terrible, both for us and most especially for future generations. But we don't need to give in to despair – if our roots are down into the security of God's grace there is a way forward, and he will lead us on that way forward, if we centre our lives on him and on his will for our lives. When we do that – we find we can rejoice – even in the most difficult of circumstances, because He has called us to live on this planet at this time and to follow him – so he will resource us to do it.

## *Prayer*

We will find that resourcing through prayer. As we centre our lives on Christ, so we will truly find peace and do the vital work of praying for our world – laying our concerns before God and realigning our lives: to see our world as he sees it; to love our world as he loves it. Our Christian discipleship should begin with prayer and that will better enable us to know how to respond –

## *Aim for the best*

And that response is crucial. We need action if we are to combat climate change and the other environmental challenges. Something needs to change in the way we live our lives and the values that shape them. In 2016 Michelle Obama gave a speech which became famous for the phrase: “When they go low; we go high.” As things deteriorate environmentally, things will also deteriorate economically and politically: and it may be that we are seeing the beginnings of that already. In this new reality it becomes easy for our words and actions to deteriorate with them. The temptation to take the utilitarian route and seek to achieve what needs to happen by whatever means. Tensions rise and tempers flare. It’s easy to look at other people or other nations and think that it is not worth making a difference: “Why should we try to reduce our energy when other countries may not be playing their part; or world leaders are not fully behind this cause. But when they go low – we go high.

Paul begins this passage by encouraging people to be gentle with each other –

And he ends by calling people to live by the highest values: true, honourable, just; pure; commendable; and excellent. Christian discipleship means that we seek to live by these values. At a time of environmental crisis, these values point us to another way of living: that can give space to all creatures who live on the planet; that enables us to stand back from seeking to shape the world around our own needs and wants, and instead – seek to shape a world that is for the good of all. We should seek to live out a life that helps to create communities that are caring and sustainable for all.

And if we do that - If we pattern our lives to live more sustainably – we may find that our quality of life actually gets better. It’s more rewarding to be part of our local community, and much healthier. If we transition to a more sustainable diet, we may find that the food is better! A greener future is a cleaner future – clearer air – cleaner water – quieter streets and less risk of asthma for our children.

### *Conclusion*

The world is in a bit of a mess at the moment – and there is a lot of work to be done. We have the opportunity to partner with others to help to make the world a kinder, cleaner, place - where all life can flourish. We can make the changes needed and in doing so we will find that we are following Christ. Are we ready to follow where he leads? – and rejoice?