

Once, a long time ago, there was a man called Paul. He talked in a way that some people - often those in charge - didn't like, and more than once Paul found himself in trouble for speaking truth to power and refusing to back down. Paul did this because he had had an encounter with Jesus - the risen Jesus no less - someone else who spoke truth to power and was executed because of it. Both Jesus and Paul were Jews - a culture that is very simply summed up in one verse of the prophet Micah *"He has shown you, O mortal, what is good. And what does the Lord require of you? To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God,"* And of course all of us do that in different ways.

It's really good to be with you this morning as you mark I think the second week of environment Sunday. My name is Hilary, I am a Church of England pioneer priest, and I am a climate activist. I don't know what to picture comes into your mind when you hear the word activist, but I expect most of you can, already have, conjured up some sort of image that goes with the word. I am going to talk this morning a little bit about scripture - because that's always a good place for a Christian to start; a little bit about my own story; and a little bit about different sorts of activism and why they might be part of the expression of our Christian faith.

Have you ever noticed the way that when something really matters to you, or perhaps you have been thinking about something a lot, that it shows up everywhere? The way that when you buy a new car, you start seeing the same sort of car everywhere; or when you or someone you love is pregnant, all of a sudden there are pregnant women all over the place. We tend to notice what matters to us, and care of creation, climate justice, and walking with God are some of the big things matter to me.

So let's start with scripture.

This morning's gospel readings are really easy to relate to creation care. Jesus uses stories about the natural world that his listeners could see around them in order to teach them something about the kingdom of God. Jesus would have been steeped in knowledge of what we called the old Testament – the Hebrew Bible, and in those Scriptures, right from the start, the people and the land are linked. We start in the creation story with a perfect relationship between God, humankind and the rest of the natural world. In Genesis 3 as God tells Adam and Eve that they must leave the garden he says, *“the ground is cursed because of you,”* but then he goes on to say that the ground will still provide them with plants to eat as well as weeds to get in the way and that they will have to work with that ground in order to survive. The people who wrote this down knew just as well as we do that if you want your soil to produce good crops, you have a responsibility towards it and if you don't look after it, it won't look after you. So they still have a responsibility to care for the land, a responsibility to the changed version of what God has given them.

So – in the Bible – Life goes on. Sometimes people get it right and they are close to God and living the way he knows will bring them true fullness of life, and sometimes they get it wrong and move away from him. It is amazing how often when God calls his people back to him, his call includes something about the land. 2 Chronicles 7. Solomon is dedicating the temple. There are major sacrifices of the best that the land has to offer, celebration, solemn assembly, and a dedicated temple. Then God appears to Solomon in the night. God voices his approval of Solomon's temple and his prayer, and then issues a warning. *“when I shut up the heavens so that there is no rain, or command the Locust to devour the land, or send pestilence among my people, if my people who are called by my name humble themselves, pray, seek my face, and turn from their wicked ways, then I will hear from heaven, and will forgive their sin and heal their land.”* You may argue with my interpretation of

this, but it seems to me that as a church now, and in recent history, we are very good at looking at the bit that says when things go wrong we need to humble ourselves, pray, seek God, turn away from sin and be forgiven, but also quite good at overlooking the little bit at the end about healing our land. The idea of covenant faithfulness and the well-being of creation and the relationship between those things is there all through Chronicles six and seven, as well as other places, and I believe it should connect with us as a church much more strongly than I see it doing at the moment.

I have been involved with creation care pretty much all of my life. I think it started with the pet woodlice on the patio when I was about three, adopted and named by me as I played outside while my mother tended our garden. She taught me to notice and appreciate the world around me, and by the time I was a teenager I was helping her to teach eco-orientated courses that encouraged children and young people to engage with nature using all of their senses. I went to college, and although I was supposed to be doing a degree in music and drama, I found myself living in a house with a large garden – my own garden for the first time in my life - and as well as doing just enough work to get the degree, I discovered a love of growing food. A few years later I got married to a man who is an ecological contractor – he rescues endangered habitat. As well as being a priest, I am a director of his business – so I hope you can see that care of creation is and always has been part of my DNA. Church also seems to be part of my DNA. At about the same time as I adopted the pet woodlice on the patio, my Welsh Methodist mother took me to church and despite numerous attempts to escape I have always been part of Christian community in one way or another. What took me rather longer – was realising how closely the two are joined together - but it began to happen about 15 years ago when I discovered Franciscan spirituality.

Saint Francis lived in Italy in the late 12th century. He didn't write an awful lot down, but one of the famous things that he did write was the first ever poem in the Italian vernacular which is called the Canticle of the creatures. In it he refers to all of creation as brother and sister; brother sun and sister moon, brother fire and sister water and so on.

In this morning's reading from Romans, Paul, in a very different context talks about us making it our goal to please God, and he also talks about the different ways in which that goal might manifest itself in us, and the fact that it might look odd to other people. This is the message of verses 13 and 14; ***If I acted crazy, I did it for God; if I acted overly serious, I did it for you. Christ's love has moved me to such extremes. His love has the first and last word in everything we do.***

For me, Love of Christ, and the knowledge of his love for me has moved me to do a few things that others may well perceive as crazy. I started out as an activist very gently. I signed petitions; I wrote to big business about their unethical practices, and I lobbied my MP. I got to the stage a couple of years ago where this was no longer enough. I got tired of feeling like people were putting me on the head and saying "there there you run away and play, we'll sort it out," and say nothing change. In that sense of desperation I became aware of extinction rebellion, and within that Christian climate action, and I chose to take part in the first protest I had been parcels since college days. The story of that protest is a long one which we don't have time for me to share with you today except to say that I found myself blocking a road in central London with many other people, and feeling that God was saying to me that if I walked away I would be saying to the whole world if it cared to be looking, that I cared about my own personal safety more than seeing climate justice come to all of God's creation - and so I didn't walk away; and later that evening I experienced the presence of God and affirmation of the

rightness of my actions, kneeling on the floor of a police cell. I know that that sort of action makes people uncomfortable, and I know that what I did and may well do again, is not for everybody, and that is fine. But..... if we take seriously that responsibility that was given to humankind through Adam and Eve and never taken away, then doing nothing should not be an option.

There are many forms of gentle activism that fit in between signing online petitions and being arrested.

1. Educate yourself. If it upsets you when you hear about species that are in danger of going extinct, find out what you can do to create habitat that would be suitable for them. If sea level rise bothers you, find out a few facts to drop into the conversation.
2. Don't stay quiet. The church that I am part of did a Lent course that was about care of creation and I was really surprised at the number of people who hadn't realised how big an issue the climate crisis is. Once you have educated yourself about it – talk about it whenever and with whoever you can. And in amongst that you can share the fact that your motivation is because of your faith in Christ and maybe the people you are talking to will experience a double conversion.
3. And if you are into making things there is a beautiful thing called craftivism. This is one small example..... (hanky). I admit that the sort of activism I am usually involved in can wind people up. At its worst, it can be intimidating, and although I am not about to stop doing it, I don't really like that side of it. But people do like a gift. You could make something like this and send it to your MP, or a business leader or anyone who was in a position to make a difference, with a suitable message on it. There are some lovely stories of how a simple gift like this has led to a conversation, and another conversation, and eventually to change.
4. And pray. Keep praying for climate justice on your own, in church, wherever.

As I said at the beginning, Jesus, the person who we follow, the person who we say we are trying to be like, was not only love incarnate, deeply compassionate, and a person who never turned anyone away; he was someone who spoke truth to power and died because of it. We need to remember that side of our Lord and Saviour, and work out how we as Christians express that part of our faith.

I'd like to finish off with a prayer. It's actually a Franciscan blessing. I love it very much, but the words are quite challenging. So as I say to the children in school when I stand at the front and say a prayer at the end of an assembly, "I'm going to pray this prayer, and at the end of it if you'd like to make it your prayer, feel free to say amen."

May God bless you with discomfort at easy answers, half truths, and superficial relationships, so that you may live deep within your heart.
May God bless you with anger at injustice, oppression, and exploitation of people, so that you may work for justice, freedom and peace.

May God bless you with tears to shed for those who suffer from pain, rejection, starvation and war, so that you may reach out your hand to comfort them and to turn their pain into joy.

May God bless you with enough foolishness to believe that you can make a difference in this world, so that you can do what others claim cannot be done.

And the Blessing of God, who Creates, Redeems and Sanctifies, be upon you and all who you love and pray for this day, and forever more.