



St Luke's Church, Hillmarton Road, London N7 9JE
020 7607 4892 admin@saintlukeschurch.org.uk

No Ordinary Time – Climate Emergency

Author/Presenter: Holly-Anna Petersen

Introduction

The Church of England is currently passing through the time of its calendar known as “ordinary time” and as a Church, St Luke's have agreed, that we would spend this reflecting on the fact that we are not in “ordinary times” at all.

Outside of my day job in mental health, I am a coordinator of the Christian arm of Extinction Rebellion – which goes by the name of Christian Climate Action. For the first half of this talk I'm going to be exploring the role that non-violent direct action plays in change making. In the second half I'm going to draw inspiration from two holy figures who used and embody non-violent direct action - Jesus Christ and Phil Kington, who we saw in the video earlier and who I consider to be a modern-day prophet.

This is a climate emergency

So, we are living in a climate emergency - which is already having devastating effects on the poorest communities around the world. However, this is something which at some point will affect us all. Scientists have said that if we don't act now, we could have climate breakdown as early as 2030-40. If we allow the fabrics of our planetary systems to keep degrading, our planet will be uninhabitable for life as we know it.

Emotionally processing

I think it's important to acknowledge how this makes us feel. It doesn't sit well does it? We might feel a tightness in our chest. Sickness in our stomach. A sense of desperation. Anger. Hopelessness.

In my job in the NHS, I see people who are seeking therapeutic support because they are so distressed about what is happening to our world. It is emotionally really difficult to process.

When something is so immensely difficult for us to comprehend, it can be easy to go into denial. To procrastinate, to down-play the intensity of the situation or offer half-baked solutions. I've heard people reluctant to paint the science of climate change in its stark reality, saying that as Christians, we are meant to be hopeful. But denial is not hope. Real hope needs to be bedded in truth.

We need to do the hard work of sitting with the pain that our situation causes us and give time to the grieving process. We need to grieve with God everything from his creation that we have lost and all that we stand to lose. Only through that can we be ready to comprehend what real hope might look like and how we can take meaningful action to make it a reality.

Young people are pleading for us to take action

Because if we don't take action, we will be the last generation who can. And young people are pleading for us to act, because it is their futures which are at stake. Greta Thunberg says that she wants us to panic. She wants us to act as though our house is on fire.

A justice issue is already happening across our very dinner tables. Every minute that we do not take action, is a minute that we put our own desires above the needs of children.

NVDA is the action that we need to take

Scientists have said that we need change at an unprecedented speed and scale if we stand any chance of preventing climate breakdown. This is the challenge we have in front of us.

So how do we create this unprecedented change? Well, for years we have been told two ways:

- Firstly, that to tackle climate change we each need to look at our individual lifestyles - that we need to eat less meat, buy clothes from a charity shop, take the train instead of drive.
- The other thing we have been told is that we need to be appealing to those in power - sign this petition, write a letter to your MP, go on a climate march.

It's important that we acknowledge that focusing on these solutions has not worked - it's not created the change needed. I'm not saying that we shouldn't carry out lifestyle changes. Reducing our carbon footprint on God's beautiful creation, is something that we should do to honour and worship God. However, we need to recognise that purely focusing on these two methods of change is not going to prevent climate breakdown. Definitely not at the speed and scale that we need.

So what does work? Well research shows that if we look back at social justice movements over the last 200 years, the American Civil Rights Movement, the struggle for suffrage for example, change hasn't just happened. It has happened because ordinary people like you and me took the decision to get involved in non-violent direct action. And not only that, research shows that it only took around 3.5% of the population to do that.

And I think that if we reflect on the last year we can see the transformational power of non-violent direct action. In just the short time that Extinction Rebellion and the school strikes have been active, climate change has gone from being a marginalised, almost taboo issue, to being a core topic in the news and having UK MPs passing a motion to declare a climate emergency.

Do we care enough to take meaningful action?

What this all means is that the important question is no longer do you believe in climate change? We don't need everyone to agree with us and quite frankly we don't have time.

We only need 3.5% of the population to create the change needed. The question is, are those of us who do care about climate change willing to take meaningful action?

We are the ones to take action

And if we are not, then who do we think are the people to be carrying that burden?

We can hold these images in our head of what a protester looks like. Someone who is older than me, younger, someone who is different to me. But it's not about who we are but what we choose.

Christian Climate Action is made up of people aged 21 to 86. We are of all different Christian denominations, we are made up of parents, grandparents, members of clergy, some of us are retired or we take action around our jobs and other life commitments.

The second reading today was the words from Phil Kingston – who as well as being one of my best friends, is one of the most gentle current day prophets that I know. Phil is an ex-parole officer and university lecturer. He is 84 years old. There are so many reasons that Phil could think of for why it shouldn't be him to take action.

However, Phil has been arrested 5 times since the beginning of Extinction Rebellion protests in November of last year. He has been involved in blocking the entrance of BEIS, blocking roads and in April he climbed on top of the Canary Wharf DLR and spoke truth about the funding of fossil fuels by our financial district. His actions and words have made headline news around the world.

And it does affect him. He has some issues with mobility. And it can get physically difficult with the police sometimes. But as Phil said earlier, he does it for his grandchildren. Because of that love. And as followers of Christ, we intrinsically understand that love is interwoven with sacrifice.

Martin Luther King highlighted many times in his speeches the fact that justice requires sacrifice. We may not all be ready to sacrifice like people like Phil do – to spend time in police custody. I'm not ready – I understand that civil disobedience is a vital component of what causes social change and I see the value that it brings, but I don't feel ready to make that sacrifice right now. The majority of roles within Extinction Rebellion are non-arrestable and I've learnt to sit with my decision that my sacrifice at the moment is the time and the energy that I'm giving around my job.

But it took me a while to come to terms with that, because the truth is that when we are not willing to take that sacrifice, we are passing that burden over to children and the poorest communities around the world. That is what we are seeing now. School children are having to break the law and skip school. And in communities on the front line, people are losing their lives pushing to protect the environment which they need to sustain themselves.

Jesus

Carrying out non-violent direct action might seem unsavoury to some people, but it is integral to the character of the Christ that we follow. Theologian Walter Wink writes amazing things about how Jesus inherently lays out the principles of non-violent direct action when he teaches and speaks to the crowds about how to act in such a way which not only exposes oppressive societal laws but acts to invert the power dynamics at play.

I remember the first time that I heard properly, the story in the second reading. That Jesus went into the temple, and that he was so pained by the injustice that was going on there, that the poor were being exploited, that he turned over the tables of the money lenders, drove people out of the temple and spoke truth to the crowds. And he did this knowing that it was going to lead to his arrest and his death. And I remember thinking “that is bravery” and that is integrity.

When we were doing an action recently, one member of Christian Climate Action, Martin, was involved a lock on - so that's where you create a human blockade by attaching yourself to the people next to you. And a policeman looked at him, and seeing that he was a Catholic Priest, asked him why are you doing this blockade? So, Martin started telling him this story of Jesus in the temple. And the policeman looked at him stunned and said, well if Jesus did that now he'd be done for criminal damage. Jesus is gritty.

And for me, the most beautiful thing about this final act of civil disobedience was that Jesus did it even though he was terrified. That was how much he loved us. When in the garden of Gethsamane, Luke's gospel tells us about Jesus that “being in anguish he prayed more earnestly and his sweat was like drops of blood falling to the ground”. Peoples sweat

turning to blood is a very rare phenomenon, but there is documented cases of it happening in situations of extreme stress such as people being condemned to execution.

Every time that I take communion, I think back to what the last supper was in its very basic sense - Jesus saying goodbye to his closest friends, because he knew the ultimate consequence for his actions was his arrest and his death. And that at that time he was going through the emotional process of not only coming to terms with his own fear but also comforting his friends as well.

I find it spiritual

For me my identity as a Christian is intrinsic to my identity as an activist. I feel exceptionally lucky to be part of an activist group who I see as my day-to-day Church and we do non-violent direct action as part of our worship. We eat together, cry together, before and at each of our demonstrations we pray, we sing hymns, plan actions and we do actions.

I have found some of the times when I have been doing actions to be some of my most spiritual experiences...

There was a situation recently where members of Christian Climate Action were blockading a road in order to cause economic disruption and urge the government to take action. Some members were laid down in the road physically locked on – so they had chains around their wrists connecting them to each and that over the top of these chains is a kind of plastic tubing.

And around us some people gathered and started praying. So, as the police started coming over and trying to disperse the group, you could hear the soft mutterings of prayer, which created this beautiful peacefulness. And then the police started the process of sawing through the plastic tubing with a tiny little handheld electric saw. And there was just this thick stillness in the air. All the sounds of London drowned away and over the sound of this tiny handheld electric saw, there slowly starts to rise the song Amazing Grace. Both Christians and non-Christians singing it together. It was beautiful.

The Church has so much to offer this

And I feel like this Climate Emergency is something that the Church should be leading on – it is something that we are so equipped to grapple with.

We have the Holy Spirit, who comforts us as we cry for all that we are losing.

A Christ who shows us the meaning of sacrificial love

And a God who sustains us to take action. And who reminds us that in these desperate times, we are called to be faithful, not successful.

Finally, we have a heritage of pushing for justice. Our actions today stand on the shoulders of a long line of inspirational people, who don't just want us to say their quotes, but to walk in their footsteps.

The talk was accompanied by reading Matthew 21:6-13 and a short video of Christian Climate Action protestor Phil Kingston.