Pentecost 20 **Mark the Evangelist**
26/10/2025

Psalm 65
John 17:11-17

A little gospel realism about climate action

ForeWord

Something must be done

Our most recent "Quarterly Conversation on the *Quarterly Essay*" – looked at Marian Wilson's "Woodside versus the Planet". Wilson recounts the processes towards extending fossil fuel extraction permissions for the energy company Woodside, in the context of growing concern about climate change.

There are no real surprises in the Essay, including the not particularly encouraging conclusion that the "next three years are crucial", but we live in a world in which are continually made the kinds of compromises Wilson describes in the Woodside saga.

A couple of leading reasons present themselves as to why we might act with respect to climate change. One is the perceived necessity of preserving nature as it is. With all its creatures great and small, the world is bright and beautiful, and must be preserved for its own sake. A second reason is that we depend on the world for our own survival. No healthy world, no human future (and we have an interest in a human future). An extension of this concerns the human generations that will follow us, who could be significantly affected by what we do (or don't do) now.

Behind both of these concerns, of course, is the assumption that we can make a difference here. The expected climate changes are not natural effects; they are the result of human action, human decision. This is why we think climate action matters: we have acted to cause this, now we must act to mitigate it. Natural processes involve no decisions and so have no *moral* element. But this looming crisis seems to be a matter of decision, and so is experienced as a moral imperative.

But, now being moral, the question ceases to be "scientific" or "rational" or even "natural". We are now in the realm of balance and interpretation: a question not of the necessities of nature but of risks of action and accountability.

This becomes clearer if we shift from the possible extinction of beautiful but dumb creatures to the plight of future human generations. Less predictable weather patterns, higher temperatures and rising sea levels could adversely affect, displace, or kill hundreds of millions of people. What responsibility do we have towards them?

The easy answer is at least "some" – we have some responsibility. Many would say that we have much more than just this. But why does this not move us to radical action, even if just for the sake of our future selves?

A failure to love

The answer is that we do not love the people of the future as we love ourselves. Perhaps it's surprising that *love* might appear here, although less so when we consider that this is a question of moral action, which action is always finally about love.

We have done so poorly in responding to a crisis which has been looming for more than 40 years because we are lousy lovers, especially outside of our closest connections. The difficulty we might have in sympathising with future generations and moderating our

actions to improve their prospects is precisely the same difficulty we have here and now in acting sympathetically towards those around us. We are afflicted here and now by contempt and violence, ideological and economic divisions, loneliness and oppression, for the same reason that climate futures look bleak: the lack of respect for the other, the poverty of our efforts at love. We do not love others – present, or to come – as we love ourselves.

Now, that's pretty bleak, pessimistic even. But, bleak or not, is it correct? Because if it *is* right, we are about as likely to act successfully in the future interests of the bright and beautiful creation as we are to act successfully to bring peace with justice in our own time, here and now. (And where is that peace?)

This is not to suggest that there is nothing to be done about climate change, or that what action we might take would be pointless. It is to say that, to the extent that what needs to be done depends on human moral agents like us with our limited capacity to love each other as we love ourselves, we will not do enough to avert a major environmental catastrophe. Things are going to get a lot worse, climate-wise. And, in view of what we are – as evidenced by our collective action – there is little we can do about that getting worse.

As pessimistic as this sounds, it's closer to the mark to speak here of gospel realism. This realism hears a command to love across 2000 years (and more) as a *new* word, because we are not yet good lovers, despite how many times we have heard the command to love. The new problem of climate change is the old problem of love.

And, as we've seen before, the old problem of love – as a *problem* – is shown in the appearance of love in the Gospels in the guise of a command. The problem in the struggle with climate change is the problem Jesus addresses in his great prayer for his disciples (John 17), and at the heart of his moral teaching: love one another, as I have loved you. That we need to hear the command to love is the bad news here – and why we'll likely not act according to the threat of climate change. The good news is in the "as I have loved you" – that we have been loved in a particular way, which is where the good news begins.

The long defeat

What are we to do with the gospel's uncomfortable realism about our moral capacity, in the face of the very pressing moral imperatives, not only of climate change but also the many other encroaching powers which reduce us to less than the glory of God? Is nothing to be done? Is it all hopeless?

That depends on what we think "hope" is. Towards an answer, we must keep in mind that the biblical testimony has *always* been pessimistic about us. But this has also been part of the gospel, part of its *good* news. Things are no more hopeless now than they ever were. Hope just isn't what we usually think it to be – the hope that we can win, that we can save ourselves, whatever we think "win" or "save" might mean here.

In another piece on climate change I read earlier in the year, I came across a notion from J. R. R. Tolkien's Middle-earth sagas: the notion of the long defeat. The long defeat refers to a struggle against the odds in a losing battle – a defeat which is long precisely because of the struggle and which is inevitable because of the kind of world we're in. The life of the long defeat is one in which you know you are going to lose, and yet you fight on anyway. Why? Because that struggle is the form truth's light takes in a dark world. The struggle will yield victories along the way, but the challenges will continue. What victories we might manage, are only temporary.

On that happy note, let's pause to hear again part of a passage we visited a couple of weeks ago, within which Jesus draws a distinction between being in-and-of the world, and being in-but-not-of the world.

Word: The Testimony of Scripture

(→ Hearing: John 1711-19)

Word: Proclamation

In the world.

We've already thought a bit about what Jesus had to say in our text today – being in-and-of, or in-and-not-of the world. The point there was that generative AI tools are in-and-of the world, and so lack any novelty; they produce more of the same.

But we can come at the passage from a different direction, beginning with the "in" the world. Jesus prays for the novel – for what is *not* "of" the world but jis still *in* the world. The disciples might – *might* – change, but the world does not. And *what* of the world does not change? The world's need for the command to love, given its continued failure to love.

The shape of this general condition is the experience of Jesus himself: Jesus struggles and finally succumbs to the unloving world. Jesus is finally *defeated*, on the cross. A reading of the cross as defeat is much stronger in Mark and Matthew than in John (or Luke), and we've seen how John twins the defeat with victory, making the cross itself in-but-not-of the world: the cross is *more* than defeat. (Paul is clearly here, too).

But it is still a defeat; God is rejected, the resurrection notwithstanding. And then prays precisely that this experience – his experience – be the experience of the disciples. This sharing he calls "a sanctification in truth".

And what is this "truth"? It's not a doctrine, not a list of credal statements. It is a way of living in a defeating world. It is Jesus' own way of living: in the midst of death, life in all its fullness. The of-the-world defeat still looms but the gospel refuses to allow it to be understood on the world's own terms.

And so the defeat, in *Jesus'* terms, is "not of this world". It is not *tragic*. It speaks something new. John's word for this new thing is "love", a love-in-the-midst, : a local, temporary, re-ordering "of the world" into something not-of the world.

Perhaps the work of love stands for a while, perhaps it is fleeting. Whatever the case, the imperative is the same: not "save" the world but "love". Be human in the midst of inhumanity, because the inhumanity will continue.

Love has failed; long live love.

Discipleship – being friends and followers of Jesus, loving despite unlove – is about having cool heads in a hot world. It is the willingness to struggle against the long defeat. The world is going to need love, and heads, like this.

Let us, then, play our part in love's work. And all God's people say … Amen.

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