



COP26, Faith, and Climate Justice

by Fr Steffan



From 31st October to 12 November, the UK will host the United Nations Climate Change Conference (known in the media as COP26). World leaders will be meeting in Glasgow to discuss how to achieve the climate goals set out in the Paris Agreement in 2015. The '26' in COP26 comes from this being the 26th climate change meeting of the United Nations, starting in 2005 – so this isn't something new. So why is it such big news this year?



UN CLIMATE CHANGE CONFERENCE UK 2021

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Partly, with Covid, it's been a couple of years since COP has met, and in that time, we've become more aware than ever of the crisis we are reaching. Glasgow has launched a 'Climate Clock', counting down the time we have to act before global temperatures rise 1.5°C: 31st December 2027. A 1.5°C rise in global temperatures would be a tipping point. Extreme weather would become far more common – flooding, fires, drought – we had a small taste this year in the UK, as we experienced what felt like all four seasons over summer. 1.5°C is also the point at which ice caps begin to

melt at an accelerated rate, sea levels will rise, and many inhabited places will become dangerous to live. As well as this, this is the first COP meeting since the Paris Agreement where global leaders are being asked to 'up' their targets, to reimagine what reducing global emissions might look like, and to act faster and harder than previously agreed.

Why does this matter as Christians?

Our greatest command is to love God and love our neighbour. Across the world the most vulnerable communities are already facing the extremes of climate change. Christian Aid have, in light of COP26, launched a campaign 'Same Storm: Different Boat' – that all of us will experience the dangerous extremes of climate change, but richer nations, particularly those in areas less affected, have the resources to mitigate the damage, whereas poorer communities around the world will suffer disproportionately. This storm is coming for all of us, but we are sailing in a large, well-made ship, whereas others are in boats that cannot withhold the tide.

But what about our obligation towards creation? In Genesis 1:28, God has created the world, and humankind, and gives the command to be fruitful and multiply, to fill the



earth, and 'subdue it'. The Hebrew word *cabash*, translated 'subdue', has often, traditionally, been the Christian focus when thinking about our obligation to creation – that God has given us creation, and we are to control it. But when we look at the whole of the creation story in Genesis, something very different comes out. Firstly, after God creates on each day, he looks at what he has made and says 'it is good'. Creation is good – God does not make mistakes in what he has made – instead he is pleased with it, he rejoices in it. And what about our role? While humankind are told to 'subdue' the earth in Gen 1:28, something very different comes out in Genesis 2:15. God puts Adam in the garden, and tells him to 'work the earth and take care of it'. The two words used here are significant – *ebed*, to work, has a broader meaning of 'to serve' – Adam is not master over the earth, but is to serve it, tend to it, care for it. And *shamar*, 'to take care of', has a broader meaning of 'to keep, to protect, to guard' (for example, 'keep me as the apple of your eye' in Psalm 17:8). The emphasis here, as Christians, is dramatic. We are not to see the earth as something we own, something we can use to our own advantage, but we are to guard it, to protect it, to tend to it.

What would it look like to take seriously the command to tend to everything God has made? To protect it? To see it as a failure in humanity every time a plant or animal becomes extinct? We often talk about the threat to the rainforests in terms of the impact on us, that we must protect them because they are the 'lungs of the planet' and we need the oxygen. We talk of the great coral reefs as needing protection because they are

beautiful, because future generations must see them. We talk about the climate crisis as a threat to our children, our grandchildren.

But in all these ways of talking, even when they have positive ends, the focus is still on us. Instead, what would it look like to see them as beautiful creations in their own right? Worth protecting because God has made them, because God has asked us to guard and protect them, even if they are no benefit to us whatsoever?

On the 4th October Pope Francis brought together faith leaders from around the world – including the Archbishop of Canterbury Justin Welby, as well as representatives from Islam, Judaism, Hinduism, Sikhism, Buddhism, Confucianism, Taoism, Zoroastrianism and Jainism, to deliver a joint statement to world leaders. He said "COP26 in Glasgow represents an urgent summons to provide effective responses to the unprecedented ecological crisis and the crisis of values that we are presently experiencing, and in this way to offer concrete hope to future generations... we want to accompany it with our commitment and our spiritual closeness." Archbishop Justin said "We have in the past 100 years declared war on creation... Our war against the climate affects the poorest among us." The leaders in their joint statement said it was time "to take speedy, responsible and shared action to safeguard, restore and heal our wounded humanity and the home entrusted to our stewardship." Climate change is the ultimate interfaith issue. It affects everyone. An action on one side of the world impacts someone on the other. Now is the time to act – we must pray our leaders have the courage to fulfil their obligations.

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