

Talking Cents

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Talking Cents is an ecumenical group charged by the Auckland Anglican Diocesan Council to promote an alternative to current economic and political thought, and to encourage debate within the church. Ministry units are encouraged to distribute these articles.

This article is contributed by David Tutty, a Catholic missiologist, currently the Executive Officer to the Social Justice Commission of the Catholic Diocese of Toowoomba.

Here, he writes in a personal capacity.

Climate Emergency: How do we go forward?

In mid-June, Pope Francis addressed a group of energy executives, investors and experts on energy transition and the need to care for our common home. In his speech, he said, “Faced with a climate emergency, we must take action accordingly, in order to avoid perpetuating a brutal act of injustice towards the poor and future generations.”

Among religious leaders, the pope is not alone in expressing grave concern about the state of the climate. The Archbishop of Canterbury, Patriarch Bartholomew, the Dalai Lama and Archbishop Desmond Tutu alongside key Islamic, Buddhist and Rabbinic organisations have named human-induced climate change as a real threat, not only to the environment, but also to human wellbeing. Like Pope Francis, they call for urgent action.

At the secular level, many local government authorities and even some countries have declared that we are now in a state of climate emergency. Auckland and Sydney, Wellington and Melbourne, the United Kingdom and Portugal are among about 800 local and national jurisdictions which are now seeking actions to follow from their emergency declarations.

Actions are urgently needed at all levels of human society. Yet in order to have some sense of how best we can go forward, we first need to look at what has brought us to this point.

To ask the question “what has contributed to this climate emergency?” requires many levels of analysis. At one level we could focus on the factors that contributed to the rise of the industrial revolution and the development of coal, oil and gas as key energy sources. At another level, we could analyse the contribution of capitalism and the neo-

liberal economic agenda. We could also attempt to unpack what has contributed to the level of consumerism that has evolved. While these analyses are vital, I think they do not adequately go to the core of the problem.

What has contributed to this state of emergency has its roots in the intertwining of the moral, cultural, spiritual and theological assumptions that underpin the ways we relate with each other, with the rest of creation, and with the one we believers call God. It is this complex mix that we need to unpack and analyse.

Yet to do this does not come easily. By their very nature, our assumptions reflect deeply held values and beliefs about how we are to live life and what constitutes a good life. For the most part, we are not conscious of our assumptions even though they guide so much of our day-to-day thoughts and actions. While assumptions can vary depending on an individual’s personal history and socio-economic, cultural context, in a community there are usually some key assumptions that dominate, often because the vested interests of those with power control the key formative institutions.

For us, who are descendants of western colonisers, I believe we do share a range of dominant assumptions that have contributed to the climate emergency we now face. Fundamental is our stress on the autonomy and personal responsibility of the individual. Underpinned by a privatised God, or no God, individuals focus on their own context and needs and name themselves as the ultimate rational yardstick. Also fundamental is the assumption that human beings are separate from and above nature. This allows us to objectify, marginalise and exploit

nature for our own ends. With this objectification, the economic is given priority. Progress, increasing production and material consumption, and improving standards of living guide how success and the good life are defined. Material prosperity is even used as the yardstick of God's blessing. We have also inherited the assumptions that enabled the whole hierarchical, patriarchal, colonial enterprise. Not only do we see that we can rightly exercise power over the earth and its resources, we also see that we can do this over those who are female, indigenous and poor in each land.

These assumptions are so fundamental that it is extremely difficult for the majority to envisage alternatives. Our capacity to avoid, and even deny, truths that do not fit with how we see ourselves in the world is incomprehensible. Fear is also a huge factor, as people fight to hold on to what they have. Alongside this, multinationals keep trying to distract us with the products of modern consumer living.

So, with this in mind, for us to go forward we do need to face the reality of climate emergency and deliberately seek alternative assumptions that enable a more sustainable and just future. I wish to name, in broad brush strokes, a few assumptions I see as vital for our way forward. What we need is a new balance between the individual, the collective (particularly the poorest and most vulnerable and those who will be born in the future), the rest of creation (particularly the ecosystems and creatures under stress) and the one we name as God.

Firstly, I believe that seeking the truth about our climate emergency needs to be a fundamental basic assumption. This truth respects the best of peer-reviewed science concerning both the existence of an emergency and the factors that have contributed to the reality we now face.

Secondly, we need to be committed to a new future that seeks to do things very differently from what has been. Learning to listen to the earth, those who are the indigenous of the earth, and those who are the poorest and most vulnerable of the earth is needed. A vital starting point is the basic assumption that we are diverse yet

interdependent and that we need the earth and the most vulnerable on the earth to be healthy. Building on this, then, is the commitment to being deliberately present within the ecosystem that is our planet earth, to see the importance of belonging, to value all of the creation of which we are a part, and to collaborate in seeking a new sustainable and just future.

Finally, I believe that this new way forward is only possible through a renewed sense of awe and wonder. Whether we choose to name God as God or not, it is crucial that we can see that there is so much more to reality than we can ever know and imagine. A more realistic sense of our true size in the universe opens us up to a greater sense of gratitude for the gift of life, a renewed sense of humility, an increasing willingness to accept vulnerability, a greater desire to love and be compassionate, and a more realistic understanding of how a good life is to be lived.

Key for believers is the need to re-vision and re-image the very nature of God and to learn to be open in new ways to how we experience God and hear God's call for us. Those who write from an eco-feminist, eco-theological, eco-spirituality or indigenous perspective have much to teach us! It is in all of creation that God is present and it is in all of creation that we humans can encounter the divine.

Now, there is a huge gap between the dominant assumptions of today and the ones we need to live by for the sake of the hoped-for future. How we go forward in the intervening years and decades needs to be shaped by our goal. To seek the truth about our climate emergency and to be committed to a new sustainable and just future through a renewed sense of awe and wonder will take significant work. This work needs to be out of love and compassion and therefore non-violent. It needs to model the hoped-for sustainable, just, compassionate, collaborative, interdependent future in its strategies and its care of friend and foe. In this journey, we will need to be open to both the mystics and the prophets amongst us.

Pope Francis' address can be accessed at http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2019/june/documents/papa-francesco_20190614_compagnie-petrolifere.html