

For Love of the World

Rebecca Newland and Linda Chapman



Introduction

Rebecca Newland

In 2006, six years ago now, my husband and I went to see *An Inconvenient Truth*, Al Gore's film about climate change. We came out of that movie stunned and motivated. Although both of us had heard about the issue, neither of us had realized the scale or the potential impact if something was not done and done quickly to halt the change. Although the film created enormous controversy, partly because there were some issues with Gore's use of scientific data, it remains a watershed documentary and it changed many people's lives. Although many, many gifted people had been alerting us to the problem of climate change there is nothing like moving pictures, colored graphs and celebrity to get our attention!

David and I both saw the need to do something—something within our limited power to get some action on dealing with what was eventually called the 'greatest moral challenge' of our time. Two colleagues of mine, the Revd Linda Chapman and the Revd Sarah Bachelard, worked together to arrange a multi-faith climate change rally held at the Australian Centre for Christianity and Culture. The rally, called *For Love of the World*, was an opportunity for those gathered to hear the voices of a scientist, a poet, a farmer, a theologian, a conservationist and children articulating their responses, including lament and hope, to the reality of climate change. Bishop George Browning led other faith leaders in signing an appeal for action to the Australian Parliament. Those people who attended were provided with practical ways to address climate change in their own lives. We had speakers from the Australian Conservation Foundation, representatives from many other faiths and no faith at all. Guest speaker Michael Leunig was a particularly persuasive voice. There was hope in the air and a sense of purpose.

In my ministry I began to talk and preach about how caring for the environment was part of God's call and purpose for human beings. I talked about how Jesus Christ saw his own mission as proclaiming the Kingdom of God. That phrase, 'the Kingdom of God' is one of those slippery theological terms that Jesus himself never defined. Instead he lived, breathed and taught it from birth to resurrection. As I understand it, it is nothing less than the reconciliation, the healing of the whole of creation, heaven and earth, justice and peace for all on a global scale. It is everything ending up as God intended—at one with him, whole, complete, in all its and our diversity and complexity. Human beings are integral to this process—how we got here and what we must do.

The medieval mystics saw it and scripture confirms that humanity and the natural world are inextricably linked. Aside from the thousands of species that will become extinct over the coming decades, it is the poor who suffer the most from global warming. It seemed clear to me then that we needed to change our behaviour. In orthodox language, we needed to repent.

However, what I began to do in my ministry was nothing compared to what my husband

began to do. He is a scientist, not a climate scientist but a wildlife biologist. Like all good scientists, he is able to look at data sets and analyse scientific papers. And that's what he began to do. He came out persuaded that we needed to address this issue and we had to do so immediately. He was also convinced that it was a political issue and we had to get our politicians to take action. And so he campaigned. He gave talks. He protested. He nagged his colleagues and friends. He carted thirty five-foot blowup penguins around Canberra, put up placards, constructed laminated graphs, sat out in all weathers, handed out pamphlets. He was a one-man activist army.

Many people around the country were doing similar things, working for change and believing they could turn the tide. The winds of change were very much in the air as Kevin Rudd and the Labor Party were elected to government in 2007.

And this is where it begins to get very perplexing.

Scientists and those with an understanding of the dilemma thought that if we just present the facts, the statistics and the overwhelming probability that anthropogenic global warming was real, and then the lights would go on and we would seriously begin to address this critical issue. At the very least we thought the precautionary principle, would motivate policy change.

But since then, nothing much seems to have changed. Compared with the size of the crisis there has been a very limited amount of action and almost no consensus. Much talk, lots of hand wringing but little change. Although we now have carbon pricing legislation the actual public motivation and energy to do something about the crisis has actually lessened. And it's not because we think the government has the issue well in hand.

Recently I chaired a CES (Christians for an Ethical Society) forum about climate change denial and came away from that evening pondering one question. What was the Christian response? What was it that I must do as a follower of Christ the Lord? One word kept coming to me—prayer and repentance. Repentance is not a particularly attractive word but one that persistently spoke. It is both feeling grief and sorrow for what we have done and its negative consequences and a change of heart, mind and behaviour. Repentance is turning to God. It is a rebuilding of a relationship. In the context of climate change and our response, it's also fundamentally about the rebuilding of our relationship with God's beautiful and wondrous earth. After true repentance comes changed behaviour.

These studies are neither about the science of climate change, nor a policy debate about how to tackle the problem, nor a list of suggestions about how we as individuals may reduce our carbon footprint. They are about our relationship to God and to the earth—the world—that God loves. In the end, what ever we do, whatever happens, we must be able to say that we faced this problem, that we were indeed the priesthood of all believers who followed Christ to the cross and beyond. We must be able to say that we loved the world just as God in Christ Jesus loved us—or we at least did our very best.

Linda and I hope you find these studies assist you in discerning your response, your next steps, in the great journey of following our Lord.

Each study is focused on the gospel set for that Sunday in Lent and considers a pattern, a practice and discipline. There are questions to consider individually and as a group. At the back of the study is a summary of the climate change issue taken from *The Science of Climate Change: Questions and Answers* an Australian Academy of Science publication, August 2010. The publication with all references can be found on-line at www.science.org.au/policy/climatechange2012.html.