

Stewards of Creation

Passages:

Genesis 2:4-15

Luke 12:42-48

The fires across Australia these past two months have taken a terrible toll.

- Many have lost loved ones (the latest count is 26 lives lost).
- Many have lost their homes and treasured possessions (at last count, some 2300 homes have been destroyed).
- Many have suffered extensive fear and trauma.
- Many are now living as refugees. (On New Year's Day, I spoke to an extended family of 10 who had evacuated Lake Conjola for Ulladulla, having watched their house burn down. Standing outside the evacuation centre, the father said to me, "What do we do now? Where can we go?")
- Of course, we thank God for the firefighters (mostly older retirees) who've been working beyond exhaustion, often without remuneration. The personal cost to them will eventually take its toll.
- And what about the millions of people who've been breathing harmful smoke? The risk of future illness may also come back to haunt us.
- We must also mention the many businesses that are going broke through this disaster. Many have lost their holiday income that accounts for up to 60% of their annual revenue.
- And then there's the heavy toll on nature itself. We are losing animals and their habitat, biological diversity and natural beauty at a massive scale.

The physical and mental scars will be with us for years. Every drive or walk in the woods will be a reminder. From now on, each spring will bring a renewed fear of the coming fires of summer.

And yet... I do have hope. I have hope that this latest bushfire catastrophe will be a turning point for Australia! For a start, it might cause our politicians to discard their out-of-date, out-of-touch policies on climate change and bravely lead us into a zero-carbon future. Indeed, it might bring climate change into such prominence in local discussions and any planning for the future that **2020 becomes the year when Australia leads the world into a better future.**

But I guess my greatest hope is that this bushfire crisis might finally **cause the Australian church to wake up and recognise its divine mandate to be at the forefront of a whole new way of life.**

Before I continue, however, some of you may be sceptical about making a link between **climate change and these bushfires**. As many have claimed, *“These bushfires are just the result of a prolonged drought... and a bunch of arsonists.”*

It’s not as simple as that. As the Bureau of Meteorology and CSIRO pointed out in its 2018 *State of the Climate* report, although the drought is a huge contributor to our present bushfire problem, the **fire danger index** *“has been increasing over several decades across many regions of Australia, especially in southern and eastern Australia”*. They go on to say; *“Climate change, including increasing temperatures, is contributing to these changes.”*

Research by Sarah Harris, from the Victoria's Country Fire Authority, has likewise concluded: *“We propose that anthropogenic [human-led] climate change is the primary driver of the [upward trend in the] fire danger index.”*

Just last week, the *Australian Academy of Science* released the following statement: *“As an independent and authoritative scientific adviser to the parliament and to the nation, the Academy draws on the scientific expertise of Australia’s leading scientists—the Fellows of the Academy. The scientific evidence base shows that, as the world warms due to human induced climate change, we experience an increase in the frequency and severity of extreme weather events...”* such as bushfires.

Take a look at this chart. The national mean temperature in 2018 was 1.14 degrees above average. Nine of the 10 warmest years on record have occurred since 2005. The Bureau of Meteorology’s 2018 climate statement report said Australia's climate *“is increasingly influenced by global warming”*. Most warming has occurred since 1950. This heat means the land is increasingly drying out, *even as rainfall decreases*. Nationally, rainfall in 2018 was the lowest since 2005 and 11 per cent below average.

One horrific consequence for fire authorities is that climate change is now causing the fire season to go on for much longer, while the window for hazard-reduction burning keeps getting smaller.

If you’re still unsure about the reality of Climate Change, multiple studies published in peer-reviewed scientific journals show that **97 percent of actively**

publishing climate scientists agree with this view that human-induced climate change is real. In addition, **most of the leading scientific organizations worldwide** have issued public statements endorsing this position. As far back as 1992, the world's nations, in recognition of the dire threat of climate change, signed a treaty acknowledging the risks and the need for action.

So, where has the church been? Sadly, we've been (by and large) absent! This could be due to the belief that's prevalent amongst many Christians that *the end of the world is a good thing* because it means Christ will soon return and we'll finally go to heaven (see the "*Left Behind*" books for more details of this 'rapture' theology)! It could also come from a widespread conviction amongst Christians that *the Lord is in charge of this world* and He will not let it be destroyed. (A recent article on the Christian website, *Answers in Genesis*, argue this way.)

I think both of these positions are very naïve! Let me show you why. In the very beginning of the Bible (Genesis 1:27), we read that human beings were made "***in God's image***". Now, most of us understand this to mean that all human beings are created equal...as is stated in the US Constitution. But there's another aspect to being made "in God's image" that we often fail to see, but which has a direct connection to our climate change debate.

According to Genesis 1 and 2, being made *in God's image* means that we were created to *be like God* in this world. As His *image bearers*, we've been given the privilege and the responsibility *to rule* over this creation *as if we were God!* We've been *made like Him* in order that we might exercise *the same love and care that He would exercise*. That's what God meant in Genesis 1:28 when He commanded Adam and Eve to...

"Be fruitful and increase in number; fill the earth and subdue it. Rule over the fish in the sea and the birds in the sky and over every living creature that moves on the ground."

This idea of *ruling over* God's creation continues in Genesis 2, when God sets Adam (and eventually Eve) in the Garden and commands them to "***work it and take care of it...***" As those "*made in God's image*", we are to act like God towards the natural order by taking care of this 'Garden' we call earth.

Today's passage from Luke 12 goes even further in describing how we, as God's "image-bearers", are to live in this world. The key word used here is "manager" (Greek, 'oikonomos' = chief steward). As Christians (Christ's

disciples), we are called to be God's managers... His chief stewards... on the earth. That's why Jesus gives **2 parables** in this chapter... to show us what this looks like! (Note: These 2 parables were given to Jesus' followers, not to unbelievers!)

1. **The parable of the rich fool** (Luke 12:13-21) is a negative example. It explicitly warns us **not** to be like this *foolish* man who exploited the earth for his own wealth and pleasure. In the end, he is directly denounced by God for his uncaring attitude towards the world and for stoutly refusing to live as God's *'image bearer'*.
2. **The parable of the wise and faithful manager**, on the other hand, is a positive example. It tells us that we are to be like the ***"faithful and wise manager whom the master puts in charge of the servants to give them their food allowance at the proper time."*** Let's unpack what this positive example means for us, today:

- a. ***faithful and wise manager-*** As the manager, this man stands between the Master and his servants. He is *wise* because, unlike the 'servants', the manager knows the master's will. He is also *faithful* in that he makes sure the Master's will gets carried out.

Applying this understanding to us, it's easy to see that, as Christ's disciples, we are all His "managers". We've been made "wise" in that we've been given knowledge of the master's will. The only question we have to ask ourselves is whether we will be *faithful in carrying it out*.

- b. ***whom the master puts in charge of the servants-*** You may be surprised to learn that we, the managers of the parable, are "in charge" (or, "responsible for the welfare") of the 'servants'. Clearly, the servants are the rest of the world-- people who do not know Christ and have no knowledge of His will. As such, as Christ's managers, we are called to lead the rest of the world to understand and live out His good and perfect will on earth.

But, what is the Master's will? (let's read on)

- c. ***to give them their food allowance at the proper time-*** the Master's greatest desire is to see humanity flourish on earth! *"At the proper*

time...” carries with it the notion of seasons and harvests established by God. Hence, as His managers, our task is to make sure the earth continues to flourish as God originally intended it to. When the earth flourishes, so too will humanity!

Let me summarise:

As Christ’s disciples, we stand between the master and the servants. We know the master’s will! We know His plans for the human race. We know how He yearns for all people to be reconciled to Him. His cross is the ultimate proof of that. We also know that, through Christ, His ultimate purpose is not to *discard* this world but to **restore/redeem it to its original beauty and perfection**, so that (with its bounty) all people can be equally and abundantly cared for.

But... we are the key for this to happen. As His managers, we’ve been called to give the people of this world **“their food allowance at the proper time”**. This, I believe, means that (as Christians) we must faithfully lead the world on issues like environmental degradation and climate change. As *wise* stewards of the earth, we must actively foresee all the possible environmental problems of our world and correct them before they take place. As God’s *faithful* managers, we need to **subdue** the growing dangers to our natural world, (or there will be no “food allowance” to give out “at the proper time”.)

Perhaps more than any other wealthy nation on Earth, Australia is at risk from the dangers of climate change. These risks include: Increased droughts and floods, increased coral bleaching of the Great Barrier Reef, increased temperatures, increased bush fires, increased destruction of homes, wildlife and natural habitats, increased loss of native vegetation, increased fears and trauma, increased economic losses to businesses and the nation’s GDP, and an increased costs to taxpayers.

These thoughts may lead us to despair. But I get excited! As Christians, we have **a new opportunity** to be both **wise** and **faithful** stewards of God’s creation. I believe we are being personally called by God to lead the way to a systematic transition to a zero-carbon economy.

And, believe it or not, this will also be a great **evangelistic opportunity** for us!

- Today’s young people see the church as outdated and outmoded. Worse, they see us as a bastion of self-promotion, self-protection and conservative power. However, once they see that our Gospel is relevant to today’s most urgent issues and not simply about “going to heaven

when you die”, they may come to see the glory of Christ in the here and now!

- It’s also my belief that, as the church gets involved in climate action, people may also begin to see that tackling climate change is not *a left-right* divisive issue, but simply a matter of Biblical literacy and obedience. In fact, we may become the central agency which reconciles the two poles into one... to the glory of Christ, the master of this world.

Leading this climate change revolution, however, will cost us. Australia is the world’s second-largest exporter of coal. Indeed, the reality is that we have probably avoided recession for the past 27 years by selling coal. As Christians, are we willing to make the tough choices that may hurt us economically? (Remember, according to Luke 12, the only alternative to being **a wise and faithful steward** is being **a Rich Fool**. In Jesus’ eyes, there is no middle ground! We can either love god or love mammon!)

With that idea in mind, let me finish by talking about **William Wilberforce**. In the late 1700’s, Wilberforce was struck by the Biblical truth that every human being is made *“in the image of God”*. It awoke in him a strong conviction that he needed to fight against slavery.

I bring Wilberforce up because, in his day, Western economics was built on slavery! The great wealth and prosperity of both Europe and America came off the backs of slaves! Everyone profited from it. Indeed, *it was assumed that the Western world could not survive without it*. And that’s why the biggest pushback against Wilberforce’s campaign came from the wealthy; those who benefited financially from slavery; namely, the economic power-brokers of western society.

My point is this: With Bible in hand and the wisdom of God to guide him, Wilberforce had the moral courage and tenacity to stand up against the power of **the economic monster** called slavery.

Now, in this past century, a new **economic monster** has arisen in our world...one that’s been built (not on slavery but) on the burning of fossil fuels. Indeed, the supply of fossil fuels now controls the economies of the Western world (and if you don’t believe me, ask yourself why Saudi Arabia is allowed to get away with murder?)

The Western world is economically addicted to fossil fuels in much the same way that 18th century England was addicted to slavery. (Here in Australia, state

and federal governments reap millions of dollars in taxes from the coal and petroleum industries. In 2011, coal exports were worth A\$47 billion Australian dollars. In 2018, LNP exports exceeded \$57 billion. So many tax dollars flow from fossil fuel that it easily distorts political agendas! Fossil fuel lobbyists fill Canberra.) Few people can see any other way to economic prosperity except through the continued exploitation of fossil fuels.

But we must! Like Wilberforce, we need to look again at the Bible and, like wise and faithful managers, make tough moral choices even when they hurt our economic bottom line! While Australia finds itself stuck in the climate debate, even while its towns and cities choke on the ash of a burning world, **perhaps it's the Christians of this land who will lead the way into a new future... Christians like you and me, humbly going about our daily work with a distinct desire to be God's managers in whatever we do... "to give them their food allowance at the proper time."**

We're at a major turning point. Serious decisions must be made. Let me conclude, therefore, with Jesus' own words from Luke 12:48.

"From everyone who has been given much, much will be demanded; and from the one who has been entrusted with much, much more will be asked."

Let's pray.