

Paint the ceiling or deal with the problem?

An analogy

In many houses the hot water system used to be placed in the roof cavity. This allowed gravity feed for the water down into the house. But when something went wrong it made the unit harder to reach. When there were serious problems and the unit overflowed the water would stain or damage the internal ceilings in the house.

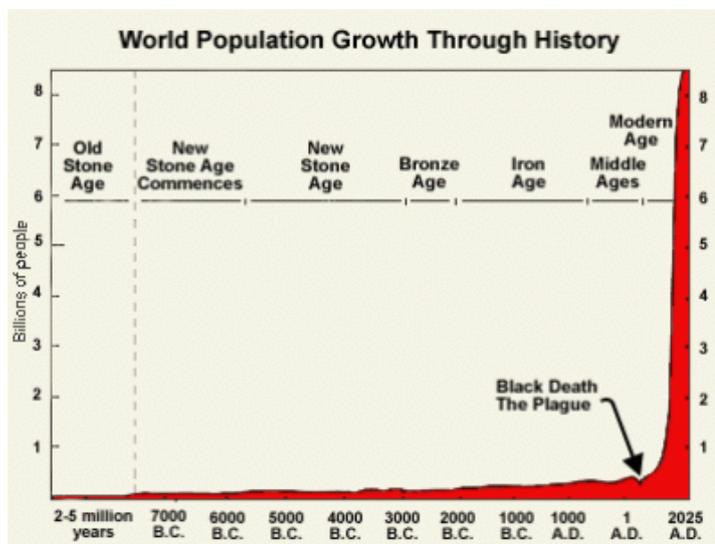
Imagine that you have such a system. Clearly it has been malfunctioning and there is a large stain which has appeared on the ceiling in your house. What do you do? Do you pay attention to the unit, replacing it or getting it fixed so that the problem will not recur? Or do you stock up on white paint so that you can just deal with the symptom, painting and repainting the ceiling?

This is an analogy of our world.

The problem

There is a problem. A much more complex and widespread problem than a single hot water system inside a house. There are symptoms, much more complex and widespread than stains on a ceiling but just as obvious.

We all know that human population has been rising at an extraordinary rate.



(<https://www.worldometers.info/world-population/world-population-by-year/>). In 1800 there were 1 billion people in the world. By 1900 that had grown to nearly 2 billion people. Now, in 2020, we have a world population of nearly 8 billion. Population growth has led to a myriad of problems, including the rapidly increasing consumption of resources on which we rely for life.

The Industrial Revolution has made possible much of what we take for granted as the essentials of life in our modern world.

(<https://www.history.com/topics/industrial-revolution/industrial-revolution>). Between 1760 and 1850 the world changed in ways which were beyond the imagination of anyone, except perhaps for

extraordinary visionaries like Leonardo Da Vinci! (<https://www.historyextra.com/period/medieval/leonardo-da-vincis-genius-visions-future-sketches/>). The rate of technological change has increased so much that we use now items which were almost unimaginable a decade ago. My mobile phone unlocks by reading my face. When I upgraded my phone the new device found my old phone and without any physical connection it downloaded all of the data into itself. I pay for coffee by waving a piece of plastic at a machine. My car tells me to keep my eyes on the road, because it is watching me all the time. If I choose to travel the whole world is available, barely hours away.

All this has come at a cost. Some of the elements of the batteries in my devices are mined, mostly, in very poor countries where effectively slave labour is used to extract valuable resources.

(<https://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2018/oct/12/phone-misery-children-congo-cobalt-mines-drc>). My car is made of steel produced in factories through a process which creates an enormous amount of pollution, pollution which is contributing significantly to changing the atmosphere of our world. My car runs on petrol created through the processing of fossil fuels which further contribute to the pollution.



In 1907 the first synthetic mass-produced plastic was developed. (<https://www.plasticseurope.org/en/about-plastics/what-are-plastics/history>). Since then we have become accustomed to almost everything being wrapped, supported or contained in plastic. And most of this plastic ends up as rubbish. Plastic breaks down into smaller particles, but it is still artificial. As micro-plastic it enters our food chain and we eat it all the time. We can order food which is gluten free, fat free, dairy free, no added salt, no added sugar and in many other 'healthier' configurations. But we cannot order plastic free food because it is now in everything we eat. It has been discovered in disturbing levels even at the depths of the oceans.

(<https://www.nationalgeographic.com/environment/habitats/plastic-pollution/>). The more plastic we continue to produce and use and discard the higher those proportions will become. Plastics have been a wonderful, useful invention. Yet they may end up choking us. Literally.

I am just one person but I am part of the 'developed west, the 25% of the world's population who currently consume between 80 and 85% of the world's resources each year.

(<http://www.fao.org/3/u8480e/U8480E0x.htm>). I, and we, have developed a lifestyle of over consumption. Currently approximately one billion people in our world live on between \$1 and \$2 a day.

(<https://www.worldbank.org/en/topic/poverty/overview>; <https://www.wri.org/resources/charts-graphs/population-living-less-1-day-1981-2004>; <https://www.worldvision.org/sponsorship-news-stories/global-poverty-facts>). Depending on the figures and how they are calculated, between 10% and 20% of the people in the world have an annual income of less than \$400. This is poverty and causes extreme suffering. Access to clean water is another enormous problem in our world. Yet these problems are solvable.

(<https://www.worldvision.org/clean-water-news-stories/global-water-crisis-facts>).



There has NEVER been a time, yet, in our world when there has not been enough food available to adequately feed everyone.

(<http://theconversation.com/famines-in-the-21st-century-its-not-for-lack-of-food-73587>). The problem has been the combination of over consumption by some and refusal to fairly distribute what has been available, refusal to share.

Famines, widely reported across our world in the last century and more, need never have happened. But some people and nations stockpiled food and refused to allow the dying people to be fed.

Moves to reduce poverty and provide necessary resources for life to people in underdeveloped nations will increase consumption in our world. Yet the resources for life on our planet are finite. When we want to lift people up from poverty will those of us in the developed west also be prepared to scale back our consumption? This challenge has been eloquently expressed as the invitation (attributed to Mahatma Gandhi) to "Live simply so that others can simply live."

So, making real change in our world does have a personal impact. It is not only that we are invited to be generous in response to identified needs. Where people are suffering, where disaster strikes, where tragedies are splashed across our media we are invited to respond. We are also invited to reflect and to learn how our lifestyle contributes to the situations which touch our hearts.



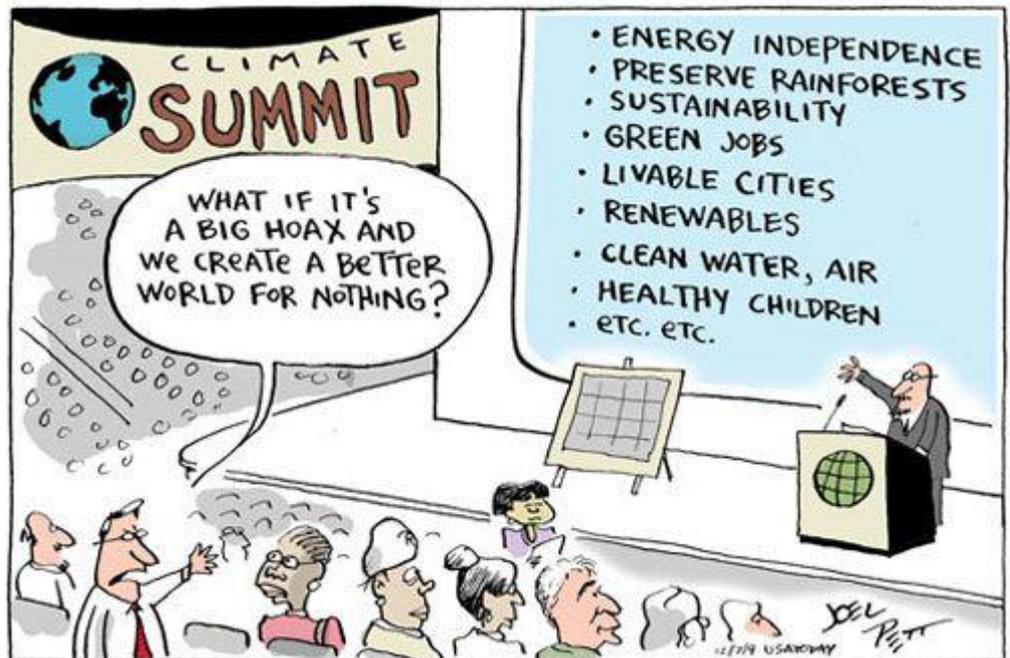
Responses

There are things that we can do. Living simply. Reducing our consumption. Choosing to use less of the damaging plastics. Recycling and repurposing rather than letting our lives end up as landfill.

(<https://www.greenpeace.org.au/blog/beyond-reduce-reuse-recycle/>). All these things are important and possible. And they are not enough. There need to be major structural changes in the ways that the economy of the world is organised and the dependence that we have on polluting aspects of our society, especially the way in which we use fossil fuels.

For over a century scientists have been warning us that the increasing consumption of fossil fuels will have an increasingly negative effect on our world. Burning of fossil fuels, for power generation, through petrol consumption and in other ways, releases carbon into the atmosphere. This carbon, as carbon dioxide (CO²) has been gradually changing the

composition of our atmosphere. (<https://climate.nasa.gov/vital-signs/carbon-dioxide/>). The scientists whose concerns were first made public well over a century ago had studied the effect of the increased release of CO² since the industrial revolution and recognised that there is a cumulative effect which was and would continue to have an effect on the climate of our world.



COAL CONSUMPTION AFFECTING CLIMATE.

The furnaces of the world are now burning about 2,000,000,000 tons of coal a year. When this is burned, uniting with oxygen, it adds about 7,000,000,000 tons of carbon dioxide to the atmosphere yearly. This tends to make the air a more effective blanket for the earth and to raise its temperature. The effect may be considerable in a few centuries.

A newspaper clip published Aug. 14, 1912, predicts that coal consumption would produce enough carbon dioxide to warm the climate. (Image credit: Fairfax Media/CC BY-NC-SA 3.0 NZ)

In some early reports, once this became a more widespread conversation, this was called 'global warming' because one effect of an increase in the CO² in our atmosphere is to trap heat, like putting a blanket around the world, keeping heat from dissipating. As other effects became more obvious, like colder temperatures than previously reported, there were many people who said that 'global warming' was a fallacy.

The description which is now, more accurately, used is 'climate change'.

The effect of human activity has

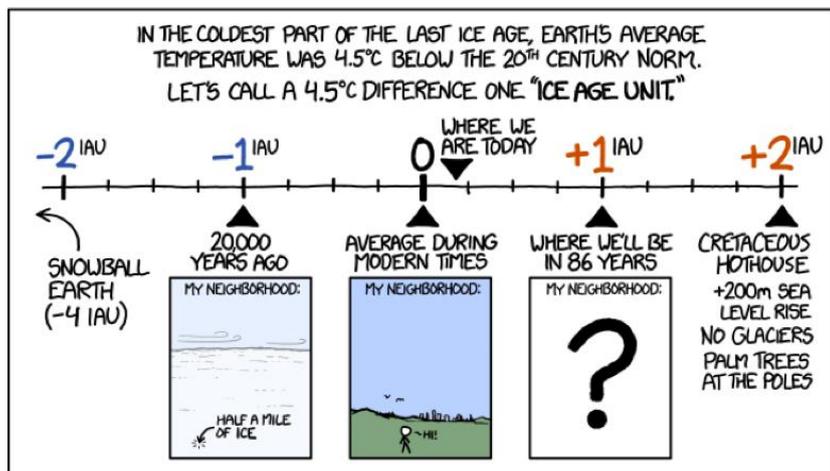
brought about change to our climate. Increased population is one factor but the scientific evidence suggests that the most significant 'cause' of the problem is the release of CO² through the burning of fossil fuels. The scientific evidence of this is overwhelming. The vast majority of scientists working across any field which touches on this problem in any way agree on the heart of the problem. Climate change as a result of human activity and related to the use of fossil fuels is real and is increasing. (<https://climate.nasa.gov/faq/17/do-scientists-agree-on-climate-change/>). The figure of 97% agreement is often quoted. A study critical of that number concluded that the real figure is closer to just over 80% (<https://climate.nasa.gov/faq/17/do-scientists->

[agree-on-climate-change/](#)). Whether 80% or 90% or 100% matters less than the fact that this indicates a ‘strong consensus’ about the reality of this change.

Our dependence on fossil fuels is killing us and our world.

WITHOUT PROMPT, AGGRESSIVE LIMITS ON CO₂ EMISSIONS, THE EARTH WILL LIKELY WARM BY AN AVERAGE OF 4°-5°C BY THE CENTURY'S END.

HOW BIG A CHANGE IS THAT?



So, what can we do? As suggested there are personal ways in which we can each respond. What David Suzuki calls ‘The Power of One’.

(<https://david Suzuki.org/take-action/act-locally/charged-up/>). Each person has the capacity to do something and to contribute, either to the problem or to the solution. And we can also each do what we can to bring about change at the level of government policy and practices which will change the ‘big picture’.

A spiritual issue

Why is this a spiritual issue? Why is this something that comes into any conversation among members of church communities? Most religious perspectives in the world include a call to care for the world in which we live. (<http://fore.yale.edu/climate-change/statements-from-world-religions/interfaith/>). It is seen as a shared responsibility to be good stewards of that which has been entrusted to us. From a Christian perspective this call goes back to the earliest texts, at the beginning of Genesis, where the people of the world are encouraged to be good stewards, to care for the world, to tend it as a garden.

(<https://www.eauk.org/church/resources/theological-articles/why-should-christians-care-for-the-planet.cfm>). Unfortunately, across the millennia, the way in which that stewardship has been expressed has been interpreted as ‘carte blanche’ for use of resources without responsibility. A more balanced approach, recognising the call to responsibility, still struggles to be believed in some Christian communities and beyond.

In the 1980s the worldwide Anglican Communion produced a series of five statements which defined how we understand we are called to be as the people of God. (<http://www.anglicancommunion.org/mission/marks-of-mission.aspx>). These ‘marks of mission’ are comprehensive and continue to guide who and how we are as the Anglican Church throughout the world:

The last of these ‘marks’ touches on our responsibility to be good stewards of our world. In some places this appears to be controversial. Theologically there are some whose position is that what happens in and to this world is of little real consequence. The ‘real’ place of importance is ‘heaven’. This was an early heresy which appeared in the

five marks of mission
mission of church=mission of christ

- To proclaim the Good News of the Kingdom
- To teach, baptize and nurture new believers
- To respond to human need by loving service
- To seek to transform unjust structures of society
- To strive to safeguard the integrity of creation and sustain and renew the life of the earth

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second century AD and at that time was expressed as if our behaviour here did not matter at all, an argument for licentious and irresponsible living as if all that mattered was the 'ticket' to the life beyond. It was a form of Gnosticism but rippled into other parts of the church and beliefs

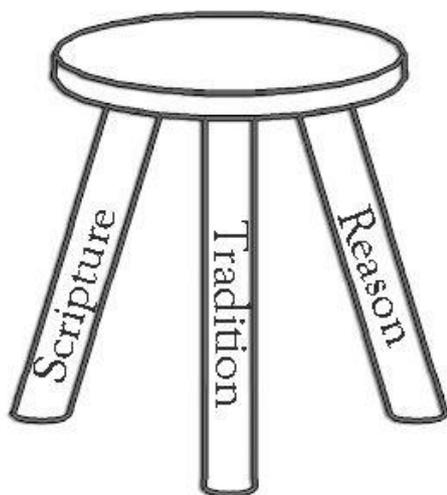
(<https://www.catholicculture.org/commentary/church-fathers-background-on-heresies/>). In some parts of the church that basic idea remains with the suggestion that attention to 'the environment' and stewardship of the earth is a distraction from the 'real' business of saving people's souls by getting them into relationship with God and therefore into 'heaven'. Such an approach is an unbalanced focus on the first two marks of mission, essentially ignoring the other three.

Primary producers, on whom we all rely and who have a very significant place in Australia's self-understanding as a nation, have sometimes felt under attack by some enthusiastic champions of the call to care for the environment and our world. The people who work the land, producing crops and tending livestock, often argue that they have a better understanding of how to care for the environment than those who live in cities far removed from the actual experience.

(<https://acola.org.au/wp/PDF/SAF07/social%20and%20political%20context.pdf>). It is true that the opinions and wisdom of primary producers has been disregarded in many places and that they have a lot to offer in understanding how the land can be cared for across the longer term. Deforestation, at whoever's hand has caused enormous issues in Australia and throughout the world. (https://www.abc.net.au/news/2020-01-23/what-i-learnt-about-australian-bushfires-living-on-edge-sahara/11885000?fbclid=IwAR2DBF2dJl2TTuzSjB-zo3lzvv6bU9V33WSe5w5tdUbF8-zaLnu_rnvcuPs).

The same can be said for the wisdom of care for the land which can be learned from indigenous people. (http://www.workingwithindigenoustralian.info/content/History_2_60,000_years.html). There also needs to be balance and cooperation though and a broader perspective, achieved through consultation and cooperation and founded on mutual respect.

This is another spiritual aspect of the whole situation. Our perspective on life, as God calls us to live, is not found in enforcing obedience or subsuming the rights or opinions of any group under the might of another group. We are called into community and to treat one another as community, as mutually interdependent, as each blessed and each with vital roles to offer into a greater whole (1 Corinthians 12:12-31). So, the way in which this debate is conducted and the future is pursued matters. For any one group to dictate, riding roughshod over others, is not community, is not the best of being human as we are called to be.



There is an Anglican 'tripod' which suggests a way to approach the life we are called to live. This approach, developed significantly by the Richard Hooker (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Richard_Hooker), looks at the contribution of 'Scripture, Tradition and Reason' when we are considering any important issue. What does the Bible, that account of the relationship between God and humanity across over 2000 years and recorded and passed down to us, have to say about how we are to understand aspects of our life, individually and communally? How has this scriptural witness been understood across the past 2000 years, as the community of the people of God across the world and across time has sought to live faithfully immersed in God's world? How has human knowledge, blessed and given by God as part of our essential nature, been pursued and how has this shed light on the ways in which we interpret and respond to life? 'Scripture, Tradition

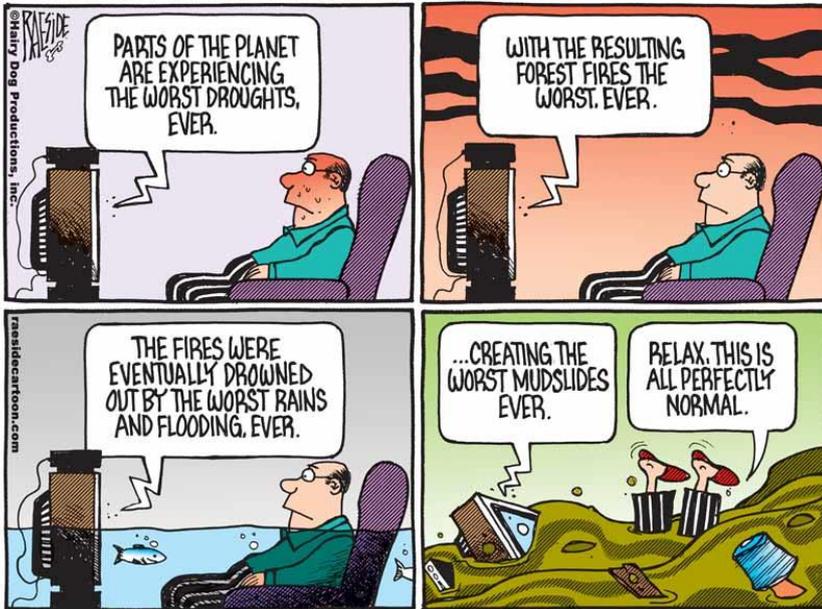
and Reason'. The three together provide some balance to our engagement with life.

The application of these three has led to the clarification of our place in the world for Anglicans expressed through the five marks of mission. All five. Each of them is necessary and important. This is the mission of the church to be engaged on ALL of these levels. To speak and preach and teach and act and to consider deeply the issues before us in society which touch on all of these areas of our life is both legitimate as ways of 'being the church' and it is our calling, our challenge.

And next ...?

In recognising the challenges to our world in many ways we are called to respond. Ignoring the problems or denying the evidence of problems which exist is not an adequate response. We can and will and should consider carefully HOW we respond, but responding and engaging is part of being faithful.

AT HOME WITH A GLOBAL WARMING DEBUNKER:



The current Federal Government in Australia, sadly, is heavily influenced by those who deny the real existence of climate change. This may be for many reasons. Some are among those who find it inconceivable that human activity can be causing any real change. Some deny the science and prefer to accept minority reports which focus on historical anomalies, which seem to suggest this is merely part of a cycle from which we will recover without any need for intervention. Some do, I expect, see and understand all too well the change which is occurring and the necessary response, but the cost, they say, is too high.

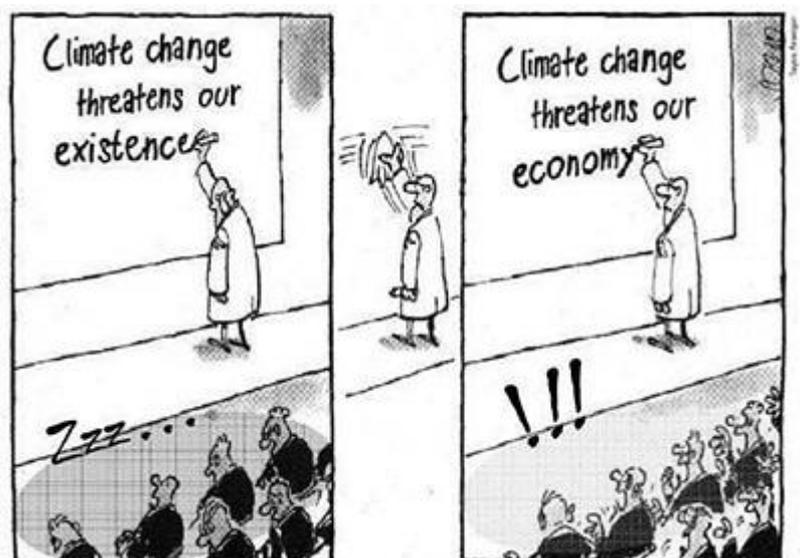
There is a cost, to communities which have been reliant on coal mining and other fossil fuel production. The earlier that we start to change the way in which our economy is structured the better for those communities. How long will it take to wean us off the fossil fuels and find other ways of doing the things that we rely on which are powered by those resources? 20 years? 30 years? We cannot just close those mines without enormous disruption and pain, including economic pain. But the longer we delay before starting the process the harder it will become.

[\(https://www.climatecouncil.org.au/resources/compound-costs-how-climate-change-damages-australias-economy/\)](https://www.climatecouncil.org.au/resources/compound-costs-how-climate-change-damages-australias-economy/). Some of the calls for urgent change seem to have ignored the pain to those communities and the loss of jobs which are threatened immediately if action is too quick. It is possible to transition, as Germany has shown. It is a matter of effective leadership AND compassion AND a real sense of urgency AND cooperative consultation rather than posturing confrontation.

The first step is to stop making the problem worse. The Adani mine will only result (from the latest reports) in 250 (or less!) permanent jobs after the initial stages.

[\(https://www.smh.com.au/national/adani-is-not-about-jobs-and-never-really-was-20190614-p51xu0.html\)](https://www.smh.com.au/national/adani-is-not-about-jobs-and-never-really-was-20190614-p51xu0.html). Yet for this the company gets a \$4billion subsidy from our Federal Government, from us as taxpayers, and they get access to precious water resources and (given their track record as a company) are placing significant water resources and ecologically sensitive areas at risk of pollution.

Policies which seek to mitigate the effect of climate change need to be long term, planned and will take leadership, which we have not yet seen. There are NO real current climate change mitigation policies in place or announced by our present Federal Government.



They are painting the ceiling, not dealing with the real problem. The proposals from the Labor opposition are also sparse and do not show sufficient effective leadership.

Bushfires and floods and droughts happen. They always have. What is different now is that the changes in our climate have exacerbated the severity of these events. On this the scientists and most of those directly involved agree. Political expediency makes some politicians very slow to agree though. The ongoing effect, higher temperatures, more severe weather events and devastating tragedies will not change, at least not quickly.

(<https://www.abc.net.au/news/2019-12-18/australia-heatwave-registers-new-hottest-day-on-record-bom-says/11810632>). Unless and until we make real change to the ways in which we are affecting our global climate then then patterns of drought and flood and bushfire which have been experienced so severely in Australia and in other places recently will become the new normal. When considering the cost of responding to climate change the cost of NOT responding also needs to be considered. (<https://www.amnesty.org/en/what-we-do/climate-change/>)

This is our responsibility. This generation. What will we do?

Paul Mitchell. © January 2020.



"Yes, the planet got destroyed. But for a beautiful moment in time we created a lot of value for shareholders."

An electronic copy of this paper is available.

This may make it easier to engage with the various links embedded here.

Responses and suggestions are always welcome!

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Please contact The Reverend Paul Mitchell at rector@stlukestoowoomba.org.au or on 0437391910

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Some questions to consider, for reflection and conversation:

1. What are the concerns that you have about our world?
2. How does the environment and the state of our world connect with your faith in God?
3. What are your fears for the world which will be inhabited by the rising generation?
4. What can we expect to do ourselves to respond to these concerns?
5. What can we expect our church community to do to respond to these concerns?
6. What can we expect our government to do to respond to these concerns?
7. Who needs to be cared for as change happens?
8. How will we begin?

Share your responses with the people in your life.