

## **And who is my neighbour?**

Hope for the Future Climate Ambassador Training Day  
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Two thousand years ago, according to the remarkable document we know as the Gospel of Luke, a largely unknown Jewish teacher named Jesus set his face to go to Jerusalem<sup>1</sup>.

His journey took him from the north of the country near Galilee through the hostile country of Samaria to Jericho and then up to Jerusalem. The Gospel is clear that Jesus recognizes he is travelling towards his death<sup>2</sup>. Jesus travels with many others: the twelve, a much larger group of seventy, the crowds, his enemies and his friends. And along the way, Jesus tells stories.

The first and the best known and the most universal of the stories on the journey starts like this: "A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, and fell into the hands of robbers, who stripped him, beat him and went away, leaving him half dead".

You probably know the rest of the story even if you don't share the Christian faith. For this story has been told and retold in every generation since. It's one of the best known stories the world has ever known.

"Now by chance, a priest was going down that road; and when he saw him, he passed by on the other side. So likewise a Levite, when he came to the place and saw him, passed by on the other side".

To understand the next part of the story all you need to know is that Samaritans and Jews in general despised one another for long and complex reasons.

"But a Samaritan, while travelling, came near him and when he saw him, he was moved with pity. He went to him and bandaged his wounds, having poured oil and wine on them. Then he put him on his own animal, brought him to an inn and took care of him. The next day he took out two denarii, gave them to the innkeeper and said, "Take care of him; and when I come back, I will repay you whatever more you spend"<sup>3</sup>.

The story of the Good Samaritan is one of the most powerful stories ever told. It's a story which crosses religious and racial divides and appeals to our universal humanity, compassion and the call to love our neighbour as ourselves.

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<sup>1</sup> Luke 9.54

<sup>2</sup> Luke 9.21, 44, 18.31

<sup>3</sup> Luke 10.25-37

As we know, 2015 is a critical year for international action on climate change. The different faith communities will play a key role in the debates. Pope Francis is to produce a major encyclical to help guide the response of the church throughout the world. According to a report in New Scientist on 14<sup>th</sup> January:

“The encyclical may be published as early as March, and may be couched in terms of the biblical parable of the Good Samaritan, which teaches that we have responsibilities to our fellow humans”<sup>4</sup>.

A recent CAFOD paper identifies two primary biblical passages as resources to help the Church community in England and Wales: the creation accounts in Genesis 1-11 and the parable of the Good Samaritan<sup>5</sup>. These passages are familiar, inside and outside the Church. They contain powerful moral arguments for clear and decisive action on climate change.

So let me invite you at the beginning of this day to reflect for a few minutes, whatever your faith background, on this simple story Jesus tells and its power to shape human society.

At its heart, the parable takes us into the central mystery for all those who seek action on climate change. Global warming is real. The causes of global warming are clear. There is a strong and growing scientific consensus. The effects of climate change are already with us. The forecast of the further change that may come if the climate warms further is clear.

Yet here is the mystery: the subject of climate change remains stubbornly low on the political agenda – probably lower than it was before the last General Election five years ago. There is no doubt that Hope for the Future is needed as are the other climate change campaigns planned by the Climate Change Coalition.

The Genesis accounts of creation help us to explore the wonders of the created earth and humanity’s responsibility and role as a steward of creation. But the story of the Good Samaritan helps us to understand why action on climate change is so difficult to take and how we might break the cycle of indifference.

Sea level is not irrelevant to the story. Jerusalem is 2,500 feet above sea level. Jericho is 700 feet below. The road from Jerusalem to Jericho runs through steep narrow gorges. It is an ideal place for an ambush. But the path is narrow. It would not be easy to pass by on the other side.

66% of those who travel down the road from Jerusalem to Jericho see the problem but do not take action. Public opinion in favour of addressing climate

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<sup>4</sup> New Scientist, 14<sup>th</sup> January 2015:

<http://www.newscientist.com/article/mg22530044.500-pope-to-make-moral-case-for-action-on-climate-change.html#.VMn5M0uzDwJ>

<sup>5</sup> Loving God’s creation: Biblical stories for CAFOD’s One Climate One World campaign by Augusto Zampini Davies available on the CAFOD website.

change has shifted in the United Kingdom in recent years. During the floods in Britain a year ago, the New Statesman carried the headline: Climate Change has finally returned as a mainstream political issue. 23% of people rated the environment as the number one issue for the country<sup>6</sup>. A Populus poll in November, 2014 found that 73% of people want world leaders to agree a global deal and 66% think action must happen now.<sup>7</sup> These are encouraging figures and indicate that various campaigns by government charities and faith groups are having an effect.

However there is still a gap between recognizing the problem and doing something about it. The parable of the Good Samaritan is about compassion leading to action. The lawyer asks “What must I do to inherit eternal life?” Jesus replies to his quotation of love God and love your neighbour with the words: “Do this and you will live”. Then there are Jesus’ famous words at the end of the story: “Go and do likewise”<sup>8</sup>.

The priest and the Levite see the man lying half dead at the side of the road but do nothing. The Samaritan sees the man and is moved with compassion. It is his compassion which drives him to action. The challenge for Hope for the Future and for other similar campaigns is to help more and more people see the need for action: for political actions such as writing letters or demonstrations; for acts of compassion giving to emergency appeals or to build resilience; for changes of behavior such as reducing our own carbon footprint or the food miles in our weekly shop. The challenge is to continue to build a critical mass of people who will take some action for climate change, who will no longer pass by on the other side.

The way to do that, surely, is to focus attention on those who will be most affected by climate change both now and in the future and to answer the question from the story which the world is still asking: “And who is my neighbour”. We need to set their stories within this framing story of the man on the Jericho road.

For the poorest people of the world, as we all know, climate change, as Rowan Williams has said, is far from a vague threat in a distant future but a present reality<sup>9</sup>. Our neighbours are suffering today.

“It is in the low islands of the Pacifics and in the coastal areas of Bangladesh that rising sea levels are becoming most evident and having impact already on people’s lives. It is among the farmers of Malawi and Ethiopia that changing weather patterns are already having a huge impact

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<sup>6</sup> <http://www.newstatesman.com/politics/2014/02/climate-change-has-finally-returned-mainstream-issue>

<sup>7</sup> <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/public-want-urgent-global-action-to-tackle-climate-change>

<sup>8</sup> Luke 10.25, 28, 37

<sup>9</sup> Quoted in the Christian Aid publication, *Song of the Prophets, a global theology of climate change*, p.7

on crop production and the stability of communities. It is among the rural communities of Bolivia that the erosion of glaciers already causes dangerous water shortages and among those living in poverty in the Philippines that a terrifying typhoon, the strongest recorded storm ever to fall on land, has already destroyed lives.”<sup>10</sup>

The poorest people of the world and those least responsible for global warming are suffering the most. It is our responsibility as Christians in the developed world to see their plight and, moved with compassion, tell their stories, urging our own political leaders no longer to pass by on the other side but to take action.

Global warming is, by definition, a global problem. It can only be addressed meaningfully by the nations of the world taking action together. The leadership which creates that action must come from a combination of the rich, powerful nations acting together with developing nations. The Christian Church was the first multinational community with common values and remains one of the largest such communities today. The Church and the other faith communities has a vital role to play in connecting those who are suffering now with those able to take action.

But there is another group of neighbours we need to be mindful of as we answer Jesus question. My nephew’s wife gave birth to a little girl, Bonnie, just ten days ago. My son and daughter in law are expecting their first child, my first grandchild, in four weeks time. A little boy and a little girl at the beginning of their lives. What kind of a world will they inhabit? What kind of legacy are we passing on to them?

Significant change is needed not simply in fossil fuel reduction but in a commitment to a more sustainable economy for all the world’s citizens . The motive for such change arises directly from the heart of the great faith traditions: the call to love God and to love our neighbour. It is a call not just to see but to take action and to take action together.

Thank you to all of you who are willing to become Climate Change Ambassadors for Hope for the Future. Thank you for the time you will give to motivate others to take action for climate change. At it’s heart you are helping people move from seeing and not acting to seeing and taking action out of compassion for our neighbours.

Hear again the words of Jesus:

“Which of these three do you think was a neighbour to the man who fell into the hands of robbers?” He answered, “The one who showed him mercy”. He answered: “Go thou and do likewise”<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Song of the Prophets p.7

<sup>11</sup> Luke 10.37

