

## **MISSING THE MARK**

We heard, a week or so ago, from our friends in Houston about the recent 'snow event'. The energy capital of the USA without electricity, water having to be boiled before it could be used, and so cold. For two of our friends, the temperature in their house got so low, they kept warm by spending the whole day in bed! We are getting used to odd and disturbing patterns in the weather in the UK, but nothing like that. It was perhaps the most astonishing examples of climate change, of the volatility of a warming world. And it is clear that it doesn't take much alteration in temperature to bring about dramatic changes.

In 2005 I read a report of a conference on climate change organised by the UK government. It included the prediction that low-lying countries like Bangladesh will disappear, and that seaside towns like Brighton, and even London, will suffer the same fate. I felt my spine stiffen as I read the report. This is chilling stuff. I'm not programmed to take in that sort of information. I can get my mind around a small pacific island being inundated, but the loss of London...? To understand this I need a new outlook, a new way of looking on what I take for granted. That was also the situation in which Nicodemus found himself when he came to Jesus by night.

Jesus' ministry was about refocussing our lives, helping us to get back on track so that the Kingdom could come in all its fullness. The clever people generally rejected him, and those who thought he might be right found him hard to follow. One such was Nicodemus. He comes to Jesus by night (a sign, perhaps, of his spiritual state – and of the world today); he recognises that Jesus has come from God, his miracles and his words have touched his heart, but he can't quite see where it's all leading. Jesus says he needs to be born from above if he is to see the Kingdom, which is where it is all leading. In other words, Nicodemus needs a completely new outlook – like being reborn, becoming a new person. And what is the agent of this rebirth? It is the Spirit, which like the wind blows where it wills, beyond our control. If you want to see where it's all leading, says Jesus, you have to let go and let God put his Spirit within you.

It's the same for us. We do not face simply an ecological crisis or a technological crisis; we face a spiritual crisis, because climate change is at root about what we worship. Having our own way, being in control, increasing consumption and power are what matter to most of us, rather than God and his Kingdom. It is that kind of approach that has made Houston what it is – and there is lots that is good! – but at root we are out of focus, we have missed the mark in the most desperate way. In a word we're in a state of sin like never before.

Sin is state of separation from God, falling short of that fullness of life held out to us by Jesus. Sin is the failure to receive the gift that

God offers us. Generally we think of sin in terms of wicked and wrongful acts. They are, of course, sins, and they have a major part in causing global warming, like the destruction of rain forests, the reckless pursuit of economic growth, the desire to maintain our wasteful way of life, and so on. These are the equivalent of the last six Commandments, e.g., murder, theft, adultery, and coveting. But these things do not go to the heart of Sin. The heart of Sin is to be found in the first four Commandments, which begin, 'I am the Lord your God... you must have no other God besides me.' The first four commandments require us to honour God as the only God, not some graven image of our own making; the last six are manifestations of the failure to honour the first four commandments, each one placing some object, attitude or desire in place of God as the thing we worship. Sin is the state of living our lives out of focus, off beam, missing the mark.

God has shown us how to hit the mark, to live our lives focussed on him and his Kingdom, how to care for the earth and for our neighbour. He promised through Abraham that through him all the families of the earth might be blessed. But we have ignored his commandments, exploited the earth, and turned his blessing into blight.

There is nothing automatic about the survival of life on this planet; our freedom is part of God's gift, and if we abuse it we shall perish. Children love the dinosaurs; they remind us that life has perished

from the earth before. Of course its not all down to us. God has not retired from the scene; he still cares for his creation and works ceaselessly to bring it to the fulfillment that is his will. He has given us the skills we need, even to combat this crisis. In 1998 I heard a talk by Sir John Houghton, then vice-chairman of the International Panel on Climate Change, who said precisely that, and this year's lectures at the Royal Institution carried the same hopeful message. God is not indifferent; he sent his Son not to condemn the world but to save the world, but it seems he will not do it without our co-operation.

In the present crisis, to be sure we need all the help technology can provide, but above all we need a new spirit, a new way of looking at things. How else will we be able to make the life-style changes that are required – reducing our use of energy, or paying more for cleaner energy from renewable resources? How else will be able to reconceive our economics and move away from a consumer economy? How else will we find the generosity to support and absorb those displaced from their lands and homes as the seas rise? Such profound changes in outlook can only be described as a new birth, an awakening from Sin.

Some years ago the writer Coleen McCulloch wrote a book called *A Creed for the Third Millennium*. It is set in the USA; climate change has begun to bite, affecting the way people live their lives. Energy and materials like paper are in limited supply. The President begins a search for someone who can preach a new gospel (he doesn't call it

that, of course) to help people cope with the changes that are upon them. Such a man is found who helps people look at their situation with new eyes. At first he is listened to, he is on the news and all the chat shows, but as the story unfolds things turn against him. Eventually he senses that he must give his life for the people. The book ends on an enigmatic note; it is not clear what effect his death has: are we saved or do we perish?

It would be nice to end on a reassuring note, but we can't. We have missed the mark on a colossal scale, and the effects of such Sin cannot be quickly overcome. We know disaster is round the corner, and like snow in Houston, it *will happen*, but on what scale depends on us. Unlike Coleen's book there will be no new saviour; there is only one saviour and he has shown us how to live. We know that God will do his part; the question is will we repent and do ours? Even now, says the Lord, rend your hearts, return to me, be born again and be healed.

To him be the glory, now and for ever. Amen.