



Climate Change and the Purposes of God

Session three. What is God asking of me?

Notes for group leaders

Purpose of this session

The purpose of this session is to explore two of the major dimensions to Christian discipleship - the command to love our neighbours and to seek justice in all our human affairs.

This covers two sections of Climate Change and the Purposes of God, both of which could become a course on their own! In fact, the points made about seeking a different sort of economy are huge in their implications, and will require much more than a single course to explore fully. There is a growing library of books on Christian responses to the economic crisis, and it is hoped that this session of the course might provoke some further thinking on these topics.

This session also reminds us that the environmental agenda and the developmental agenda belong together, and the work of Operation Noah is complemented by the work of aid agencies such as Christian Aid, Cafod and Tearfund - each of which provide valuable further resources.

What is God asking of me?

'What does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?' (Micah 6:8).

1. Here is a story from Oxfam:

People living in Char Atra, an island community in Bangladesh, have had huge problems as their land is being lost due to erosion as the river floods.

"Eight months ago I was living where the river is now. Since I got married I have moved to a new home six times because of the river erosion. This is happening more frequently as before we used to stay for three or four years in one place but during the last five years we have been forced to move every year. Six years ago we owned some land but this became a river and now we are landless. I hope we will be safe this year but we can't predict where the river erosion will happen after the flood."

Hasina Begum, Char Atra, Bangladesh

Extract from Oxfam Education's Climate Change Impact Stories

And two stories from Christian Aid:

(i) In north-east Brazil, droughts are becoming longer and more frequent. Rainfall has become more sporadic, making it harder for farmers to know when to plant their crops. It also comes in heavier downpours, which can damage crops and cause flooding.

(ii) in northern Kenya, drought has increased four-fold in the past 25 years. Nomadic pastoralist communities living in the arid and semi-arid regions have been hardest hit.

(Christian Aid Time for Climate Justice 2010).

? Why is climate change a question of justice.

You might wish to use a video such as

<http://www.tearfund.org/driedup> or

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iSMB8m4_4BM&feature=youtube

2. Climate Change and the Purposes of God links the call to 'Seek Justice' with the justice of God:

Seek Justice!

'He will judge your people in righteousness, your afflicted ones with justice. The mountains will bring prosperity to the people, the hills the fruit of righteousness. He will defend the afflicted among the people, and save the children of the needy; he will crush the oppressor.' (Psalm 72:2-4)

God is just and requires justice in response from us. This justice applies to poor communities already suffering the devastating consequences of climate change, to future generations, and to all other creatures. The prophets put economic behaviour at the forefront of their call to justice. The primary driver of human induced climate change is the belief that prosperity depends on limitless consumption of the earth's resources. Today, the challenge is to seek a different, sustainable economy, based on the values of human flourishing and the well-being of all creation, not on the assumption of unlimited economic growth, on overconsumption, exploitative interest and debt.

To seek justice for all, for present and future generations, our authorities must encourage and enable all people to live fairly and sustainably. Acting justly requires us to hold our governments and corporations to account.

? What does the word 'justice' mean to you? Can you give some examples of ways in which we live 'unjustly' in relation to God's earth?

3. A definition of justice?

God's justice is about more than just fairness. It is a big word, which includes both judgement against what is evil or ungodly, and mercy and redemption for those open to God's grace. It is something to do with wellbeing and flourishing at all levels of life and relationship:

- Flourishing in our relationships with God
- Flourishing in our relationships with each other
- Flourishing in our own hearts and consciences
- Flourishing in our relationships with our environment.

? Discussion

Talk together about what the word flourishing means to you. What do you do which contributes to - or gets in the way of - human flourishing and the wellbeing of all creatures ?

Economics and justice

Climate Change and the Purposes of God identifies economic behaviour as central in the call for justice, and calls for a different approach to monetary justice and the priorities of our economics. This is a huge topic which really needs a whole course on its own.

? How could we look for a different sort of economics in which human flourishing and the wellbeing of all creatures takes priority over the quest for financial growth and making everything into a commodity with a price-tag?

4. Justice and neighbour love.

Justice is the social and political expression of love for our neighbours.

Climate Change and the Purposes of God makes clear that our Christian concern must focus particularly on the poorest and most disadvantaged parts of the world, and also for future generations who do not have a voice today.

It also reminds us that love requires action:

- *of generosity*
- *of reconciliation*
- *of witness*
- *of hospitality.*

What is the relationship between 'justice' and 'love for our neighbours'?

LOVE OUR NEIGHBOURS!

'So in everything, do to others what you would have them do to you, for this sums up the Law and the Prophets.' (Matthew 7:12)

Christ teaches us to love all our neighbours, not just our own family and friends. This love extends to our grandchildren and future generations. People in poor communities are mostly innocent of any role in causing climate change, whilst the nations that pollute the most, refuse to accept their responsibilities. Loving our neighbour requires us to reduce our consumption of energy for the sake of Christ, who suffers with those who suffer. To live simply and sustainably contributes significantly to human flourishing. As the nations fight over dwindling energy resources, Christians need to bear witness that the way to life, and not death, is the way of non-retaliation. In the future, Christians may also be called to receive into their communities refugees forced to leave their lands through climate change.

- ? Do you agree that God is especially on the side of the poor and disadvantaged?
- ? How, in practice, can we love our neighbours?
- ? How can we, as a church, become better informed about the impact of climate change around the world, and pray for those impacted most?
- ? Have you measured your household's carbon footprint? If not, use our calculator (<http://www.operationnoah.org/carbon-calculator>) to do this. A carbon footprint of 2 tonnes per person would bring some measure of justice around the world.
- ? Which aspect of your life contributes most to climate change? How might you commit to changing it?

A further note on economics and justice

Climate Change and the Purposes of God identifies economic behaviour as central in the call for justice.

*A primary driver of climate change is the assumption of limitless economic growth, depending on limitless consumption of the earth's resources. Can there be a different way of thinking about economics? Why does the morning news bulletin always focus on growth and the rule of 'the markets'? Michael Sandel's book; *What money can't buy: the Moral Limits of Markets* (Allen Lane, 2012) remarks how we have become a 'market society'. If the financial markets are geared to human flourishing and the wellbeing of all creatures, they can do good. But if society believes that everything is a commodity and must have a price tag, we have sadly lost our way. What then becomes of friendship, of loyalty, of love?*

Tim Jackson wrote a paper for the Sustainable Development Commission in 2009, in which he says we must:

'...question the underlying vision of a prosperity built on continual growth...search for an alternative vision - in which humans can still flourish and yet reduce their material impact on the environment....the requirements of prosperity go way beyond material sustenance. Prosperity has vital social and psychological dimensions. To do

well is in part about the ability to give and receive love, to enjoy the respect of your peers, to contribute useful work, and to have a sense of belonging and trust in the community. In short, an important component of prosperity is the ability to participate meaningfully in the life of society.'

The Sabbath Principle (see below) tells us that 'Enough is Enough', - there is a fine book of that title by John V. Taylor.

? *How could we look for a different sort of economics? A system in which financial growth is not the supreme value; in which human flourishing and the well being of all creatures takes priority. A system where we do not exploit the virgin territories of the Arctic and Antarctic as the melting of sea ice opens them up, simply for financial gain?*

Sabbath

One of the key features of God's covenant with Israel was the keeping of the Sabbath - a time to pause from the routine of work to reflect and to worship. The Old Testament law of Jubilee (Leviticus 25) is about a Sabbath of Sabbaths, for the land to be allowed to pause and recover and to ensure that capital does not build up in the hands of just a few but is equitably shared - because the land is the Lord's.

Jesus picks up the theme of Jubilee when he quotes from Isaiah in the synagogue at Nazareth:

"The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour."

Luke 4:18-21.

? *Reflect on what the Sabbath principle should mean for:*

- *The rhythm of our lives between creative work and reflection and worship*
- *How we see the rhythms of the earth - for example, in relation to flowers and trees, to farming and agriculture*

? *What would 'good news', 'release' and 'freedom' mean for those suffering the harmful effects of climate change - and what does that imply for us?*