

Paul Parker's talk to 'A Future for All...'

14 July 2018

Have you ever been back to visit your old school? There's a walk I go on from home which takes me past my old school. . It looks smaller now, despite having new classrooms and a lick of paint, but children play outside it as they always did. Last week I met a man who'd been to visit his father's old school. They found it, but it was not only in ruins, but under a metre of salt water. It was claimed by the rising Pacific Ocean; children will never play outside it again. While we in the UK enjoy a bit of sunshine and grumble about the heat, for many the reality of climate change bites hard.

We've all heard these stories. It's easy to switch off because of despair, fear, guilt or annoyance at others telling us how to live our lives. And because of that, there's been a lot of thinking about how we talk about it, whether it's as an opportunity to build healthier cities; or that there is joy in living simpler, low-carbon lives; or that we're all in it together.

These points of view are very valid, but perhaps the full truth is more complicated.

It's also about justice. Historically, as a relatively rich and privileged nation, we've benefited from fossil fuels and lots of other commodities at the expense of others. But if we're serious in our belief that every human is a child of God, then as the UK negotiates what part we play in confronting our global climate crises, it's important that historically privileged nations, and communities within them, confront their historic responsibility to do more than others to cut carbon and resource collective action. We need to be able to look people from the global South in the eye and say not only that we did what we could, but that we did everything we could.

Our awareness about the scale of the crisis of climate change is fairly recent. But there are deep truths that we've always known.

For example, generations before us may not have been aware of the greenhouse effect. But it's always been evident that extracting fossil fuels creates, and indeed feeds on, injustice. We're all complicit in this problem of extraction and 'extractive economies'. But we need to face up to the fact that extraction is damaging, and it tends to impact not only ecosystems, but poorer and less powerful social groups, often determined by class and race, around the world. What do we do about this community living where we want to mine coal? How do we get away with paying people poorly to extract it? How do we silence people objecting to having their water sources contaminated by drilling? Often, extraction has relied upon people who are in the way of so called progress having little power. Naomi Klein has said that 'it was the relative ranking of humans that allowed the digging up of all that carbon in the first place'.

I was talking last week to a sister from Cameroon, caught up in a civil war I hadn't even heard about, and who was trying to run a hospital. She said, 'of course, it's all about the oil. And the money doesn't even stay in the country when they've finished.'

I say all this not so that we spiral in to despair, anger or even guilt. But so that we see purpose in the UK taking radical action now. Perhaps we as people of faith are able to confront these truths whilst having faith that we can achieve change.

And after all, the truth is, that both collective action for social change, and the low-carbon society that can come result from it, can be joyful, and good for us.

Pope Francis, in his 2015 encyclical *Laudato Si* – a radical call for transformation – the overturning of the economic system as we know it, but also personal transformation – what Francis calls ‘ecological conversion’, and perhaps we Quakers would call ‘ecological convincement’. I was at a conference at the Vatican to mark the 3rd anniversary of *Laudato Si* last week.

Quakers sometimes get hung up on the question – what should we do first? Should we change the system or change ourselves? We are so complicit in this problem. Do we need to give up our cars before we demand political action on climate change. Or should it be the other way round?

Well, let’s do both. And let’s embrace the fact that social change is messy, imperfect and full of contradictions.

To speak out for economic and social change, we require the integrity of making changes to our lives. But we also live in a system, largely fuelled by fossil fuels, which is more-or-less impossible to simply opt out of. If we demanded that political activists rid themselves of any carbon footprint, the climate change movement would be in a very bad way. If we don’t change our own lives at all, how can we show politicians what’s possible, and give them a sense of what changes people at the grassroots are willing to make in their lives?

As Quakers, we do know that the scale and nature of the changes we require, demands bold action from government. And that for governments to take action for the planet, civil society must demand it. When I met the minister responsible for climate change last year, in the aptly titled Department for Business, Energy & Industrial Strategy, we talked a lot about where the leadership for change should come from. Should it come from the grassroots? Or should it come from government? There is certainly a role for civil society in showing a lead here, including faith communities which are experienced in helping individuals to think about how they can live their lives. But there is also a clear role for government in raising ambition, regulating and legislating for change.

Currently, the UK government subsidises the fossil fuel industry by approximately (fossil fuels subsidies are notoriously non-transparent and hard to calculate) £1.3 bn per year. We don’t need to give up our cars and switch our fridges off before we can say that this money should be redirected to the low-carbon economy.

The UK continues to back highly carbon intensive projects like airport expansion and fracking. We needn’t be green gods and goddesses to recognise that the time has passed when governments, seemingly completely disregard the climate impacts of these projects.

We're hearing more ambition from government of late – but it's not going to deliver anything without a surge of grassroots activism. So here we are today, with work to do.

Due to immense grassroots pressure – we're now in a better place than we have ever been in to hold government to account on climate change. In 2008 the UK government committed to law the target of cutting emissions in line with limiting global warming to 2 degrees above preindustrial levels. This included committing to national carbon budgets – so we could see how well the UK is doing (although the government has not always published these on time).

Fast forward to 2015, and the UK upped its game again. It signed up to the Paris Agreement, which went further than the 2 degree target- it committed nations to limit warming to 'well below' 2 degrees and to 'further pursue efforts towards 1.5 degrees. The 1.5 degree target is what come of world's nations and communities most vulnerable to climate chaos are calling for, so for it to be at least partially committed-to is progress.

Then in April this year, the government announced that it is intending to update our climate laws to fully commit to this 1.5 degree target. The announcement was a quiet one, but it was really quite significant. We certainly weren't expecting it.

Yet as we know, its action, and the details that are important – and these paint a bit of a different picture.

Last year the government published its Clean Growth Strategy. It claimed to outline how the UK will achieve our international climate commitments.

It included some positive commitments. Significant investment in energy efficiency – the big no-brainer. Ambition for low-emissions vehicles. Some more support for renewables.

BUT it admitted that these commitments as they stood would not achieve the cuts required by a 2 degree target. Let alone a 1.5 degree target. Overall, despite all the promises nations have made through the UN climate process, we are still heading for well over 2C. At the moment, it's going to be bye-bye Tuvalu, bye-bye Bangladesh, and even bye-bye large parts of East Anglia.

At the same as announcing its taking climate change seriously, it increased subsidies for north sea oil and gas, announced a cap on renewables subsidies, committed to a third runway at Heathrow, and put in place new planning laws to make it easier for companies to start fracking.

All this shows that whilst we can support the ambition- and we must- we can't leave it there. It's down to normal people to demand more serious commitment, to demand detailed climate policy, and bold action.

We're working with other Churches to show government that we as people of faith care about the outcome, and we care about the detail. It's not enough to make high level commitments. We see our job to hold them to account.

This is all the more important with the UK's departure from the EU.

The government are being very woolly on the detail of how EU directives will be replaced with robust UK policy and investments. When I spoke to one of the Brexit ministers last year, and asked her how the government intended to allow itself to be held to account once the EU institutions which have often enforced change are no longer able to do it; the reply was that she expected this role to be taken by civil society. So that means we need to be vigilant, to scrutinise the government response, and to equip ourselves with the scientific knowledge truly to hold them to account.

It's easy to feel powerless. To sit back in despair and pray for deliverance. But for Quakers, prayer means action. And whilst we may feel powerless, through the eyes of someone from the global South we look powerful beyond measure. We have the voice, the money, the freedom of speech, the democratic structures and the access to government to make ourselves heard. And we must do so.

Here are some examples of what Quakers have been doing:

Firstly, on fracking. Given that to achieve 1.5C we have to leave almost all remaining fossil fuels in the ground, so it makes no sense to be looking for new ways to extract them, at the three centres of fracking resistance – Preston New Road in Lancashire, Kirby Misperton in North Yorkshire and Broadford Bridge – Quakers are getting really involved in local action. Some are locking on at the gates; some are going to meet the council; some are giving meeting space to local anti-fracking groups; some are going to make food for protesters. It's really inspiring to see so many people thinking about how they can do something, in whatever way, to support a struggle. And everyone can be part of such a movement, at whatever level, and whatever gifts you bring.

Divestment from fossil fuels. Quakers nationally have divested, and many local groups are doing so (if they even had money in fossil fuels in the first place). The only way fossil fuels will be left in the ground is if the companies which invest in them become worthless. Much as engagement with fossil fuel companies may be important, I think it's naïve to believe that they will withdraw from extraction altogether, which is what they have to do for 1.5C. And how could we possibly continue to profit morally from companies which are responsible for the degradation of our environment?

There are global opportunities for engagement coming up: the global climate conference in San Francisco this September; the International Monetary Fund & World Bank meetings in Bali in October; and of course the COP24 talks to be held in Katowice, Poland, this December, which is when the common rulebook for implementing the Paris agreement will be agreed. It's absolutely crucial that our government goes into these meetings prepared to raise aspiration and to show the type of lead a country as historically privileged as ours needs to give. So we need to embolden them to do so.

One of the speakers at the *Laudato Si* conference summed up the problem in 3 A's – Avarice, Arrogance & Apathy – to which Aggression was added. We have to remember that

war has significant effects on the environment, and that between them war and climate change account for almost all of the current global migration crisis, with more displaced people than at any time in history. Avarice, Arrogance, Apathy and Aggression are all things that we can do something about, as people of faith. They can all be challenged, in our own behaviour and others'.

There's a story Quakers like to tell about one of the early Quakers, William Penn, who went on to found Pennsylvania. He was a statesman and diplomat, and habitually wore a sword. When he wore it to Quaker meeting, not long after Quakers had renounced war, another Quaker George Fox, told him 'wear it as long as thou canst'. The next time they saw each other, he had stopped wearing it, having worn it as long as he could.

Friends, our lifestyle and our collective inaction is an act of violence to our planet, its peoples, and its delicate ecosystem on which all life and communities depend. Continue with it as long as thou canst!