

OUR DAILY BREAD

FOOD IN GOD'S CREATION

Sermon

for Creation Time 2011



Based on an original text by Dr Michael S Northcott

Photo: [Susy Morris](#) 

Revised and updated by Revd Dave Bookless for inclusion in CTBI's Creation Time resources 2011

The Climate of Communion

Woe to those who add house to house and join field to field until everywhere belongs to them and they are the sole inhabitants of the land. Yahweh Sabaoth has sworn this in my hearing: "Many houses shall be brought to ruin, great and fine, but left untenanted; ten acres of vineyard will yield only one barrel, ten bushel of seed will yield only one bushel". (Isaiah 5:8–10)

In June 2010, the temperature in Moscow reached 100°F for the first time on record. This wasn't a one-off event. Throughout last summer, Russia experienced an unprecedented heat-wave – culminating in a temperature of 102°F in Moscow on August 6th. The resulting fires and crop failures across the grain basket of Russia's steppes has been a major factor in rising global food prices in late 2010 and early 2011. Food riots rippled across many parts of the world as a consequence – and some would say these were one of the major triggers for the 'Arab spring' uprisings of this year. Changes to the climate are no longer limited to theoretical possibilities and computer models. They are already impacting the politics, economics and – particularly for the poor – the eating habits of the world.

Overall, 2010 was – according to both NASA and the Met Office – equal with 2005 as the warmest year on record. Of course global warming is only one symptom of climate change, and around the world it has been the increasing unpredictability of weather patterns that has played such chaos with the lives of both people and the ecosystems on which they depend. Floods affecting 20 million in Pakistan, drought in the Amazon basin, forest fires in numerous areas – including across the UK in April 2011. The climate in many parts of the world is becoming so unpredictable that drought, flood or fire pose increasingly regular and destructive threats to some of the poorest and most populous regions of the planet.

In the rich North residents and businesses are insulated by insurance, government assistance and personal or corporate wealth from the effects of climate change. But in the South climate change and associated environmental problems are a significant cause of poverty and crop failure and a contributory factor in the current refugee crisis in Africa involving more than ten million people.

Climate change and its unequal effects on the poorest regions of the earth should be the central issues on the agendas of the G8, the G20, the IMF and the other global decision-making bodies.

Yet what we consistently see is priority given to bailing out the economies of wealthier nations, rather than the radical economic and political changes that are needed to help poorer countries adapt to a rapidly changing climate, and to mitigate the harshest effects of climate chaos. The powerful nations of Europe and North America refuse to acknowledge the ecological costs of the industrial and consumption patterns of the rich North, and the link between the corporate pursuit of globalisation and the growing ecological crisis.



Photo: [Max Mayorov](#) 

Instead, the corporate vision of economic globalisation without ecological or social restraint is presented as the only way to achieve sustainable development, with no reference to the contribution of the increased volume of international trade to global warming and biodiversity loss.

At the Rio Earth Summit in 1992 the governments of the world laid down a radical agenda, known as Agenda 21, for moving the world's economy in a more sustainable direction, and for addressing climate change. In addition to a Treaty on Biodiversity, the International Convention on Climate Change was conceived at Rio and finalised at Kyoto in 1997.

In the nearly twenty years since Rio, the wealthy nations have consistently dragged their feet in signing up to protocols, and in delaying, opposing or watering down international treaties on issues such as toxic waste disposal and the patenting of genetically modified foods. It is not surprising that the Copenhagen climate summit of late 2009 ended in a weak compromise bordering on failure. As the world plans for a second Rio Earth Summit, 20 years on in 2012, the pressures exerted by powerful business interests mean there is still no agreement about what constitutes a green economy.

Despite the ecological reforms outlined at Rio, and despite worthy statements of intent such as the Millennium Development Goals, the actions of wealthy nations have meant that in the last twenty years world poverty has increased, fossil fuel use has grown, and thousands of novel chemicals and hundreds of genetically modified species have been released into the environment, while the destruction of the world's forests and ocean habitats – the main causes of species extinction - has continued unabated.

Biblical writers consistently view environmental disasters as the consequence of human corruption and injustice, and the failure to worship God as the generous creator of the earth. The great flood described in Genesis was seen by the authors of Genesis as the judgement of God on those who had turned the earth into a violent and wicked place. But while the people were so wretched that God virtually wiped them out, God saved the animals, birds and creeping things through the device of Noah's Ark. Once the flood receded they, along with the descendants of Noah, were invited in the covenant God declared to 'abound on the earth and be fruitful and multiply' (Gen. 8. 17). The ancient story teaches us that the earth suffers ecologically when human injustice abounds, but also that God desires to redeem all of life from sin, and not just humankind.

Like the authors of Genesis, the Hebrew Prophets also identified a connection between ecological disaster and human sin and injustice. Isaiah argued that economic injustice, and especially the greed of rich landowners who dispossessed small farmers, was responsible for the declining fertility of the soil and the ruin of farms both small and large:

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Analogously, Jeremiah connects ecological problems in the land of Israel around the time of the Exile, including climate change and desertification, with the failure of the people of God to worship God and follow God's laws:

"Does the snow of Lebanon vanish from the lofty crag?

Do the proud waters run dry, so coolly flowing?

And yet my people have forgotten me; they burn their incense to a Nothing.

They have lost their footing in their ways, on the roads of former times, to walk in tortuous paths, a way unmarked.

They will make their country desolate, everlastingly derided:

every passer-by will be appalled at it and shake his head" (Jeremiah 18. 14 – 16).

The prophets point to the cosmic nature of the covenant between God and the people of God. The covenant community embraced humans and non-humans, and the land itself, in a complex web of relational connections between humanity and created order which humans neglected at their peril. And so when the people of Israel worshipped God as their sovereign Lord, and modelled their lives after God's righteousness, the land and all its inhabitants prospered.

But when the people neglected the covenant, worshipped that which was not the just and holy God, and where some grew wealthy and acquired great parcels of land, while others languished in poverty, then the land itself turned to desert and its non-human inhabitants also suffered. As Isaiah puts it 'the earth is mourning, withering, the heavens are pining away with the earth. The earth is defiled under its inhabitants' feet, for they have transgressed the law, violated the precept, broken the everlasting covenant. So a curse consumes the earth and its inhabitants suffer their penalty.' (Isaiah 24. 5-6).

In the times of Israel it was kings and wealthy landowners who oppressed the people and brought about ecological destruction as they destroyed forests and over-tilled the soil to serve their greed for greater wealth. In our own time it is giant multinational corporations which drive forward the expansion of global trade and who are responsible for so much ecological destruction in both North and South. It is also corporate influence and lobbying which has seen to it that nothing effective has been done to reduce natural resource consumption in the rich North or to eradicate poverty in the South.

This is why Greenpeace, Friends of the Earth and other NGOs have been urging that as well as setting real and enforceable targets to stem global warming, and world poverty and reduce species extinctions, international agreements should tackle the issue of corporate accountability. Ever since the 2002 Johannesburg World Summit on Sustainable Development, there have been repeated attempts to extend corporate liability to all 'activities that cause environmental or property damage or personal injury' including 'cradle to grave responsibility for manufactured products', and for corporations to be liable in the courts of the country where they maintain their HQ for damage to property, biological diversity and the environment in other countries.



Photo: [wanderlustNW](https://www.wanderlustnw.com/) 

However, on repeated occasions, such proposals have been turned into vague non-binding aspirations – with opposition to any binding agreements led by the United States and other nations. But the governments of the United States and the European Union, as well as Australia, Canada and Japan, are very heavily influenced by corporate lobbying.

For those of us disabled by environmental guilt, the focus on corporate accountability is vitally significant for it highlights the crucial role of multinational corporations in ecological destruction, and in corrupting the political process both locally and globally. It is not citizen groups who lobby or hold demonstrations to have a new hypermarket, motorway, nuclear power station, or airport runway built, or an ancient forest cut down. Those who drive these environmental nightmares are corporations, often in concert with government officials. And this is why corporate accountability, and the reform of corporate law, is potentially such a powerful device for turning back the tide of global ecological destruction.



Photo: [Lisa Murray](#) 

The origins of the modern economic corporation may be traced genealogically to the Pauline idea of the body – the corpus – of Christ as the distinctive polity of the Christian church, for it was the Monastic foundations of the Middle Ages which first gave legal expression to the conception of corporate action and property ownership.

However it was changes in American legal practice, later followed in Europe, which paved the way for the limited liability of modern corporations to local communities and their environments. And hence it is in the legal arena that reforms must be established. Despite their claims to powerlessness in the face of globalisation, national governments still have the capacity to shape the way in which their own courts view the actions of corporations and their responsibilities and this is why the efforts of Greenpeace and other NGOs to persuade governments to change the rules of global trade and finance are so vital.

The roots of the modern corporation in the corporate life of the church are a powerful reminder of the potential influence of spiritual communities in shaping current economic practices. In his book 'The Creation', the ecologist E. O. Wilson highlights the environmental influence of American Christians, such as those in the Evangelical Environmental Network, and argues for a new coalition between science and religion in the resolution of environmental problems. However, the focus in his proposed action plan is too much on biodiversity and not enough on ecological justice.

It is only by reconnecting the welfare of the economically poor with the biodiversity of their own local bioregions that it will be possible to stem the ecological devastation that the global economy is advancing and truly to turn back the tide of extinctions which is threatening the glorious diversity of God's greenhouse. And this can only be achieved by making corporations, and corrupt government officials, legally accountable for their destruction of indigenous ecological resources, so submitting economic power to legal and political restraint.

The recognition of the need to relocalise the global economy in order to redress ecological injustice and destruction finds significant resonance with the Pauline vision of the centrality of the local worshipping communities of the church in the divine plan to redeem creation which God inaugurated in Jesus Christ (Eph. 1. 7 – 14 and Col. 1. 15 – 20).

The archetypal form of Christian worship from the time of the apostles until now is the proclamation of the Gospel in and through the celebration of the Eucharist. In this paradigmatic act Christians not only recall the death of the Lord Jesus until he comes again, but also anticipate the great reversal of the messianic feast when God will 'fill the hungry with good things while the rich will be sent empty away' (Luke 1. 53). Bread and wine are staple foods in the Middle East and their transformation as the sacrament of the presence of Christ connects every Christian gathering around the Lord's Table with the good earth, and with local agriculturalists and purveyors of food.

The increasingly global character of the food economy is a major promoter of human and ecological injustice and of climate change. When giant food corporations purloin forests and agricultural lands for growing feed crops for Northern produced meat, or tropical fruits for Northern tables, they both disrupt the food security of poor communities in the South and at the same time threaten local biodiversity as these communities are forced to grow their own food on marginal lands such as hillsides, wetlands or by slashing and burning forests in the wake of the logging companies. The ecological costs of flying all this food from South to North, and of freighting food between the US and Europe and between European countries, are immense. Air travel is a major source of greenhouse gases, and the 'need' for onward transport of all this globally traded food across North America and Europe is a major source of the constant pressure from the road haulage lobby to expand the motorway network.

When we see the relationship of Eucharist and the food economy we remind ourselves of the connections between our own consumption of food and global ecological and justice issues. Food, along with housing, is for most households the largest weekly expense. If we choose to use our money to seek out local food suppliers, whether farmers' markets, organic boxes or produce which is clearly labelled as locally grown, we are making a choice which has tremendous potential for ecological change. Buying locally grown food, or growing food on allotments or in back gardens where we have access to them, are significant means by which we can begin to reverse the ecologically destructive tide of globalisation through local actions.

Christians break bread in recognition that the death and Resurrection of Christ represent the defeat of the Powers and that the peace of creation and the reign of God are already breaking in as they meet together around the Lord's Table. And the Eucharist, with its echoes in other acts of eating and food production, already anticipates the praise of all peoples that the Psalmists declared would be offered to God by all of life on earth as well as all its peoples at the end of time. The governments of the rich may promote the interests of corporations before people and planet. But when local worshipping communities reconnect the Eucharist with ecological justice and the food economy they announce that the corporate corruption of politics, and the corporate destruction of natural resources, can be hopefully resisted. And they give visible shape to the good news that the trouncing of the Powers that threaten life on earth by the cross and resurrection of Jesus Christ is not only a past event but one that is constantly breaking into our present reality, and especially when Christians break bread together.

This sermon is based on an extract from Michael S. Northcott's book *Cuttlefish, Clones and Clusterbombs: Preaching, Politics and Ecology*, London, Darton, Longman and Todd, 2010. First written in 2002. The time-specific examples and events were updated in a revision by Rev. Dave Bookless in May 2011, with Michael Northcott's agreement, for CTBI's Creation Time resources.