

Sermon for The University Church of St Mary the Virgin, Oxford
Sunday, 22nd September 2019.
By the Rev. Charlotte Bannister-Parker

Isaiah 35 1-10.

May I speak in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.
A very warm welcome to St Mary's for our annual all-age Harvest Festival service.
I want to share with you this morning two astonishing things happened to me this week.

The first is that, I fell in love with a new fruit that's been pretending to be a vegetable. The squash is botanically a fruit and I discovered that there are at least 16 types of squash. All types of squash have seeds and come from the flowering part of plants. In fact, edible flowers even grow out of squash and are known as squash blossoms. For you avid gardeners and allotment holders, my discovery, admiration, and wonder for this fruit might seem a little too enthusiastic, but please bear with me.

But like all new converts, I am deeply excited and I want to share with you all the phenomena – their diversity and beauty – of these marvellous squash. They are a marvel and a sensational phenomenon. Take, for instance, this one is called the 'Turk's Turban' (which has shades of orange and green with a hazelnut flavour), red onion (Kuri), Acorn, Harlequin, and finally, I found the 'Crown Prince'. I am just blown away by their beauty and diversity. But in order to survive, like any fruit, the squashes need sun, fertile soil, sufficient moisture, water, and cultivation – the hand of man. And that's exactly what we can celebrate on Harvest Festival: the need for all these elements to come together for great growth and diversity. At Harvest Festival, we celebrate God's gift to us of the conditions that make life on this earth possible, to grow food to sustain us and the planet. And if we look carefully at Isaiah 35 1-10, we see how the prophet has rejoiced and see the woven together creation, (the fruit of the land); also, it's us His people, and finally it's God, who emphasises our interdependent and inter-related nature.

The prophet Isaiah predicts here the transformation of creation in the words: 'The wilderness and dry lands shall be glad, the desert shall rejoice and blossom, like the crocus it shall blossom abundantly and rejoice with joy and singing.'¹ 'For waters shall break forth in the wilderness and streams in the desert, the burning sand will become a pool, and the thirsty group springs of water, the haunt of the jackals shall become a swamp, the grass shall become reeds and rushes.'² So there will be resurrection and hope in the fact that the dry lands will become wet and prosperous again.

¹ Isaiah 35 1-2 NRSV

² Isaiah 35 6-7

But Isaiah also says that there will be another transformation, that of God's people: 'Strengthen the weak hands that make firm the feeble knees, man will be strengthened because of Transformation of God's people: For, again, mankind is to be transformed as in Handel's Messiah.'³ 'The eyes of the blind shall be open, the ear of the deaf unstopped, the lame man leap like a hare and the tongue of the dumb sing for joy.'⁴ These two forms of transformation are dependent on the presence of God as 'come and save us.'⁵ And the transformation will occur by taking God's 'high way - the Holy way'.⁶

Later in this service, we can follow God calling of that Highway and/or Holy Way as you bring forth to the altar your goods for the Gate House and the Oxford Food bank. This service affords us the time to think more carefully about the High Way that we as Christians can take. We should be glad that the food banks exist. 120 volunteers in Oxford helping with up to 10 tons of good quality for 100 churches in Oxford and Oxfordshire. Surely, their existence is a sign that the world is not as God intended it to be, but it can also a sign that we can share and respond in a radical way to a human need. Through food banks, Christians are able to express key gospel values and declare something of our faith and how we live out that faith. By supporting the food banks, we are sharing our bread with one another welcoming the stranger in, loving our neighbour and acting as stewards of God's creation and provision. We are not wasting what was going to be wasted. However, we are also called to question the need to increase the need for food in our society today. And it also makes us ask questions about food justice and ecology. How has something that was meant to be a temporary stop become more of an ongoing ordeal for some?⁷ Of course, food crisis and issues of eco-food justice are not limited to these shores. In a recent report by Tear Fund, it documented the food crisis in Mozambique in the spring in 2019. For the first time in history, Mozambique suffered cyclone 'Idia' and then 6 weeks later, a tropical storm 'Kenneth'. Over a million people were affected by the washing away of maize and over 90% of the infrastructure on which their lives depended was affected. So our interconnectedness of our lives and of those living thousands of miles away is a fact.

I said two magical things happened to me this week. **The second** was witnessing the Oxford Climate School strike where Broad Street was filled with what seemed to be thousands of people. It was inspired by the young climate activist Greta Thunberg, who has declared this moment in history, as an emergency and an existential crisis, thereby she started the biggest ever climate strike around the world. Here, Broad Street, which was filled with young people campaigning for change, reminds us that what faces us as Christians, who are called to care for creation, is not a game, not a test run, but issues that must be at the centre stage of our lives.

³ Isaiah 35 6-7

⁴ Isaiah 35: 5

⁵ Isaiah 35: 4

⁶ Isaiah 35: 8

⁷ There are now about 2,000 food banks across the UK, with the Trussell Trust accounting for about 1,200 of them. The number of supplies being distributed has risen by 73% over the past five years. Newcastle West food bank feed 46,000 a year 2018.

Greta's inspiration for strike action comes from a long line of leaders, such as Henry David Thoreau who campaigned for the abolishment of slavery, who in turn inspired both Gandhi in his fight for independence from British rule and Martin Luther King in his fight leading the civil rights movement in America. Thoreau wrote in his 1849 essay on 'Civil Disobedience, 'I ask for, not at once no government, but at once a better government. Let every man make known what kind of government would command his respect, and that will be one step toward obtaining it.'⁸ One can hear Greta calling out for a better government to sit up and listen, take heed to the scientific evidence that now exists.

And if anyone has any doubts about this, it is not a passing problem. It is the defining issue of our age. Look at these publications in the last month. Every single issue of these publications refers to the issues of food justice and climate change. *The Economist's* 'The Climate Issue' (see the colours changing on the front cover from blue to red), *Nature's* 'Time to Act', *The Guardian's* 'Climate Action for Peace', *The Guardian Weekly's* 'The New Normal', *American Scientists'* 'The Future of Water', and so on.

Greta says one must panic. But by panic, she calls not for 'running around madly, but to step outside of your comfort zone.'⁹ We must do what we can to 'put out the fire and listen to the science'. *The Economist* points out that the most global carbon emissions are from greenhouse gasses. Of this, three-fourth come from just 12 countries.¹⁰ When the UN takes notice, Antonio Guterres said that 'We can win, and we must, solutions are in our hands, we must. Listen to the passionate voices of young men and women around the world who understand that their future is at stake.' We know that change is possible. How can we not be overwhelmed? Can we walk the Holy Way here and now?

There are the individual actions that we can take and already know about such as less flying, creating better insulation in our homes, resourcing and eating local grown food, reduction of meat-eating etc.

But we can and should rejoice and obtain joy and gladness¹¹ that science is helping us in moving towards transformational change. The creation of 'Miracle Meat' is truly that: A soy-based veggie burger material that tastes exactly like a hamburger but uses 1% of the resources to produce. Burger King in the US put 'Miracle burgers' on the menu nationwide last month. Lewis Hamilton is rolling out a chain of 30 vegan restaurants across Britain based on the veggie meat.

Other innovations may help save us from dependence on fossil fuel and it is being developed right here in Oxford. Culham is one of the world's leading fusion research

⁸ H.D. Thoreau's Essay: "On the Duty of Civil Disobedience" Author: Henry David Thoreau, 1817-62 First published: 1849

⁹ BBC Interview <https://www.bbc.co.uk/iplayer/episode/p077dtv9/focus-its-an-existential-crisis>

¹⁰ The Economist, The Climate Issue, September 21st-27th 2019. p25.

¹¹ Isaiah 35: 10.

laboratories and that appears to be on the cusp of delivering that holy grail of energy production – fusion energy. It's a form of energy, it has no negative effect on the planet. The scientists and engineers are working with partners around the globe to develop fusion as a new source of cleaner energy for tomorrow's power stations. 'Nuclear fusion, the process that powers the Sun, can play a big part in our carbon-free energy future.'¹²

Finally, as we come to the table to share in the Eucharist, let us remember that for us Christians, bread is a symbol of life, in the form of God's gift. It represents this inter-connectiveness between creation, people and God. Bread is a food that symbolises both basic human hunger and bounty and also the deepest mystery of the presence of God with us. In breaking bread together during mass, that bread is a symbol not only of the manna from heaven and a symbol of God's presence amongst us all, but also a reminder of those who daily go without.

I wish to end with a quote from the NASA Astronaut Mike Massimino. Looking down at earth from the moon he had this observation to make 'I thought at one point, if you could be up in heaven, this is how you would see the planet. And then I dwelled on that and said, no, it's more beautiful than that. This is what heaven must look like. I think of our planet as a paradise. We are very lucky to be here.' Let us protect, honour and cherish the paradise that God has given us. **Amen**

¹² <http://www.cfe.ac.uk/CCFE.aspx>