



Anglican Church of Australia

Primate: The Most Reverend Dr Philip L Freier

23 January 2018

The Most Reverend Justin Welby
Archbishop of Canterbury
Anglican Communion
Lambeth Palace

Dear Archbishop Justin

It is always intriguing to hear Australia described as part of the "new world." Sometimes this is still the way that Australians see themselves - the National Anthem, for instance, describes the country as "young and free." That understanding comes from the European-centered history and perspective of colonialism but makes less sense geologically, culturally and ecologically. To encounter Australian history, land and culture is to realize that the Australian continent is not new but is old in a number of ways. The Australian land surface is geologically far older than that of the recently glaciated European continent. Aboriginal people have lived on Australian land for at least 40,000 years, and theirs is one of the oldest surviving cultures in the world. When we encounter the complex question of how we are to live in a changing and compromised environment, people in Australia often look to the example of the First People of this country whose history provides very good examples of how to live sustainably - restricting hunting, gathering and certain forms of agriculture to certain periods in order to allow replenishment of what has been taken.

Although today most Australians live in cities that hug the coastline, they are not unaware of the extraordinary and unique beauty of the ancient Australian landscape and of its plants and animals, and this awareness is often felt to influence Australian spirituality. Care for God's creation in this Province therefore involves acknowledging, and deeply respecting, Aboriginal history, traditions, and ecological example and appreciating the unique qualities of Australian land, flora and fauna. To some extent, Christian faith is practiced in this light. As one writer says: "By virtue of our geography, history, and necessary racial atonement with Aboriginal people, Jewish-Christian Australia is already going through [a] spiritual revolution and is developing new and healing concepts of spirit. ... what we are undergoing here is a transformation that all Western nations will eventually have to undergo if civilization is to recover a creative relationship with the earth."

At the same time, because Australia is a wealthy, industrially developed country, we mostly live in a way that has much in common with the lifestyle of Europe and North America. Despite the example of sustainable living shown by its First People, Australia is among the nations which contribute most substantially to the world's ecological decay. For example, although it only comprises about 0.3% of the world's population, Australia is responsible for about 1.5% of total greenhouse gas emissions which means that per capita Australians are among the world's highest greenhouse gas emitters.

One geological feature of Australia that is particularly pertinent to the global phenomenon of climate change is the plentiful supply of underground sources of coal, a fossil fuel which is a major source of carbon emissions. Despite the abundance of renewable sources of energy (tidal, wind, and especially solar) approximately two thirds of Australia's own electricity supply comes from coal. Further, and of greater global environmental concern, it is particularly significant and problematic that Australia is the fourth largest coal producer in the world, and that coal is Australia's second largest export commodity. The mining industry has formed a significant part (though in an ecological era not an uncontested one) of white Australian cultural identity, and despite the global turn to renewable sources, a considerable temptation and quandary is posed for politicians and the business sector by the global demand for Australian coal. Currently, the proposed Adani Carmichael mine in Queensland (one of dozens of proposed coal mine initiatives in Australia) is a symbol of ongoing environmental conflict and has become a highly controversial topic.

The unique ecological tapestry of Australia relates not only to the sustainable way of living of its First People and to the contentious question of coal. It is also a country whose features make it particularly vulnerable to climate change. It is almost invariably the case that the wealth and technology of richer nations can, to some extent at least, mitigate the effects of ecological change, and research indicates that the world's poorest people suffer the first and worst from climate change—many Central African countries and Bangladesh for example. Because Australians are counted among the world's wealthy people they therefore have quite a strong ability to withstand a changing environment. Nevertheless, because of Australia's unique position and geography (as the driest inhabited continent in the world) it is also likely to be more severely impacted than many other wealthy and developed countries. The naturally occurring El Niño/La Niña cycle (ENSO—the El Niño–Southern Oscillation) has traditionally subjected Australia to extreme weather events such as drought, floods, and serious bush/wild fires, but this situation has been dangerously exacerbated by human-induced climate change with an increase in the number and seriousness of events in recent years including the Victorian bush-fires of 2009 in which 173 people died. Regionally, rising sea levels pose a severe threat to Australia's neighbours who live on low-lying islands in Oceania. And the condition of the beautiful Great Barrier Reef continues to decline.

In Australia, as elsewhere, tackling environmental questions is complex because issues such as loss of biodiversity, climate change, deforestation and so on are not only political, scientific or economic, but also cultural, philosophical, spiritual and theological. These are fundamentally moral issues to which the Church is well positioned to respond. Changing our way of living entails changing our way of understanding ourselves and our world. The sustainable way of living exemplified by Australian Aboriginal people models a broader and deeper understanding of the relationship between the divine, the human, and the created, bio-physical world.

In terms of global action, the Australian Church encourages and endorses the work of the Anglican Communion Environmental Network (ACEN) and its projects. Perhaps the most significant task of the ACEN is its advocacy of ambitious international agreements regarding the limiting of carbon emissions. The ACEN's role is important not only because it will be heard by people of faith, but because the spiritual, ethical and theological dimensions of ecological questions have a legitimate and even a crucial place in society at large. The present time calls for public theology which is robust, clear and well-informed, thus the work of the ACEN is appreciated and supported by the Anglican Church in Australia.

The Australian Anglican Church has taken a number of initiatives in response to environmental questions. Some dioceses and some parishes are more active than others, and some focus more on practical outcomes, others on worship.

- The Primate is supportive of Australia's commitment to the Paris Accord to limit greenhouse gas emissions, and this was further supported by a General Synod motion in 2017. The Primate was also one of twenty-one Australian religious leaders in 2016 who joined an international appeal for urgent action on climate change;
- Nationally, the 2007 Canon on the Environment was passed by General Synod and has been adopted by a number of Australian dioceses;
- An increasing number of Australian dioceses, and individual parishes, are worshipping using the 'Season of Creation' initiative in the period 1Sept to Oct 4;
- A number of synods have voted to divest diocesan funds away from non-renewable energy sources;
- Parishes and dioceses have put into practice measures to reduce carbon footprint such as using renewable energy, conserving water and other resources, and re-vegetating land;
- Practical and symbolic actions have been adopted by many parishes and individual Anglicans including fasting on the first day of the month, and "carbon fasting" during Lent.

Overall, the Province supports local, national and global environmental initiatives in multiple aspects of the lives of Anglicans: praying, worshipping, living sustainably and articulating publicly the need to protect and restore our world for future generations.

Illustrations

The three attached paintings are by Glenn Loughrey, a Wiradjuri man and Anglican priest at St Oswald's, Glen Iris in Melbourne. He is an artist who explores his identity and story, and was a finalist in the Doug Moran Portrait Prize 2017. He is engaged in the dialogue for treaty, sovereignty and self-determination for Aboriginal people.

Towards Heaven & Earth II

The understanding that all of creation is alive, and a world view that includes the entire universe above our heads in the heavens and deep in our country which gives us our language, law, culture, ceremony and kin.

Towards Heaven & Earth III

This expands the idea to include all creatures as sentient beings and all created elements as integral to all life and being.

The Sermon on the Plain

The symbols of the goanna, the emu, the kangaroo, aboriginal person, all together on the plain where they share life together. The white cockatoo is the spirit.

Grace and peace in Christ Jesus

Yours sincerely



The Most Reverend Dr Philip L Freier
Archbishop of Melbourne and Primate Anglican Church of Australia