

**Climate Change**  
2018 August 19  
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Early 19<sup>th</sup> Century English poet, John Keats, began one of his most famous poems, titled, “To Autumn,” “Season of mists and mellow fruitfulness/Close bosom-friend of the maturing sun;” etc., “Conspiring with him how to load and bless with fruit, the vines that round the thatch-eves run,” etc. “To bend with apples ...” etc!

His was an England scarcely begun its Industrial Revolution with all the blessings and degradations of that epochal time.

I remembered this poem pretty much every Autumn I lived there – all twelve of them in Lincolnshire – wheat, barley and sugar beet - the bread-basket and sugar-bowl of England. The pastoral scenes of “mists and mellow fruitfulness’ we all desired, and, yes, knew were there, yet were blocked out and the sun turned to blood by the smoke of farmers’ fires as they burned off the stubble in their fields, rather than plough it under. We didn’t know about particulates and the adverse health effect of breathing in this haze day after day. All we knew, and I knew, was resentment that our local farmers – four of them in my parishes could do so much damage to otherwise lovely, mellow autumn days.

It was the same all across Eastern England with motorway pile-ups because the wind would change and impenetrable smoke reduced visibility to near zero. This was a man-made hazard (farmers were all male) caused by the desire for easier profits – no ploughing necessary, just burn it off and let the rain soak the potash into the soil.

I thought again of Keat’s romantic poem these last couple of weeks as our Colorado-blue, cloudless skies became hazed over with smoke, particulate, from the worst fires on record in California and places adjacent. These fires were natural, not man-made, not caused by human activity, or were they? The worst ever recorded, still burning in many places. Not to mention Europe ...

In our short gospel reading from the Prologue to the Gospel of St. John, the writer makes an extraordinary claim – that claim being that Jesus, the Christ, is the agent of creation – “All things came into being through Him, and, “and without Him, nothing was made that was made.”

The Evangelist was not the first to make this claim; forty years before, Paul, or a scribe of Paul, made an equally bold, staggeringly original claim about Jesus: “He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation; for in him all things in heaven and on earth were created, things visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or powers—all things have been created through him and for him.”

Wow! “The earth is the Lord’s and all that therein is ...” Yeh, Yeh, we know that – sort of – “All things bright and beautiful, all creatures great and small ...” who doesn’t love that hymn from our childhood, “all things wise and wonderful/the Lord God made them all.” Etc., “The purple-headed mountains, the rivers running by ...etc.” (Can’t pass up the opportunity to note that this was written by

an Irish woman, incidentally, the wife of the Bishop of Derry – we were there three weeks ago, didn't see her...)

This beautiful, verdant, incredible, life-giving planet earth, made for and through our very own Jesus Christ out of love, we are degrading, plundering, gouging, burning, destroying and utterly defiling. Why? Because we can. It's our earth.

No wonder, then, that no less a personage than Pope Francis I in his recent encyclical, "Laudato Si ..." (Praise be to You) wrote "We are turning the earth into an immense pile of filth." it was May, 2015, just in time for then US President Barack Obama to sign on to the Paris Climate Accord in September of that same year, with 180 other countries. Now it's 180 minus one ... what have we done?

We hear often today, the term "Sacred Duty" or "Sacred Role," and either pass over such loose language or think that must be right – such and such must be a "Sacred Duty." There are very few "sacred duties," and voting is not one of them, being president is not one of them, being a border guard is not one of them. Good and honorable professions or duties these may be, civic duties they are, but sacred they are not.

Being a White Helmet in Iraq or Syria may well be a sacred duty, being a Doctor or Nurse Without Borders may be a sacred duty, being an environmental activist may be a sacred duty – the earth is the Lord's and doing what we can to protect and preserve it is a sacred duty. Destroying or exploiting our planet and its inhabitants, animal, vegetable or mineral is sacrilegious and is a deliberate desecration of the gifts that God, through Christ has provided for each of us to wonder at and to enjoy. "All things were made through him and without him nothing was made that was made."

The burden of the Pope's Encyclical, *Laudato Si*, is his great regard for the earth's poorest peoples and how they, more than any other of the earth's human inhabitants, have been, and are still being, adversely impacted by the effects of climate change. He doesn't waste time or ink supporting the science of climate change and global warning – for him and for most sentient people, it is settled science – and he knows from first-hand experience how devastating climate change, the steady rise in sea-levels, and conflict-induced famine are on the earth's most vulnerable peoples. His sacred duty is clearly to bring before the mind and conscience of all people of good will that this cannot continue. "The cattle on a thousand hills are mine," says the Lord through the Psalmist, our sacred duty is to protect and to preserve and to eliminate preventable death and "Mans' inhumanity to man."

My realization that it was our responsibility, our obligation to do something to help the world's poor came about courtesy of Oxfam, Gerald Todd and my friend group. Four lads, nineteen/twenty, socially aware, church-going and girl-less or girl-free; not lacking the desire, just the opportunity. North Street Presbyterian had the girls, lots of them, the Church of Ireland where we belonged and sang in the choir, just across the street in our small town, didn't have any, or so it appeared.

When North Street opened a brand new, expensive Fellowship Hall and a Sunday night Youth Fellowship to go with it, we were in.

We had many interests there, none of which ever came to fruition, and an abiding, critical approach to the Elders of that church for spending so much money on themselves when so many of the world's peoples were starving. We were very idealistic.

But, idealism was the mother of action and we devised a plan to stir their consciences and to recruit volunteers to organize and run monthly Bread and Soup Lunches. The idea was that people letting out of church at the same time after Sunday morning worship would flock to the Town Hall where we would provide a simple lunch of bread and soup – there might even have been cheese, I don't remember, and, crucially, donate the cost of a lunch they might have eaten at home. Certainly, we would need girl volunteers to help in the effort; always hope.

We five group-wrote Gerald's talk and heart-felt appeal and, on a given night, Gerald was part of the program. What we hadn't reckoned on was Gerald's warming to the task and going off script.

Gerald got going: "Look at your beautiful new hall ... how many thousands of desperate, starving people would this have fed? Look at your beautiful new chairs (rattle, rattle, scrape) look at your polished wood floors – screech and black mark with his trainers. What were you thinking spending this kind of money for a church hall when half the world is starving?" The beautiful, young Presby youth, probably had little or no say in the project but they shouldered the blame, nonetheless.

Gerald was a sensation and his appeals for volunteers and contributions to fund our hunger lunches was amply supported. We, or me anyway, were a little miffed that Gerald got all the applause and praise, hailed as a prophet in his own time – it wasn't just his idea and we had all contributed some element of guilt and scorn.

The idea of juxtaposing a much-prized new building when there was such need in the world seemed to be new. Besides, they might have a shiny new church hall, our church was built in the 12<sup>th</sup> century; we were pretty smug ourselves ...

The lunches happened, with loads of volunteers, youth group boys and girls, few stray Church of Ireland lads, and Methodists. It was a huge undertaking and risk, hiring the Town Hall, appealing to other church groups in the town, setting up for a hundred or more people, making the soup. And we did that maybe four times the first year before we all ambled off to college. The money we made, whether it was great or small, went to Oxfam, who provided materials on their overseas charitable work.

You know how all that goes, we had no clue what we needed but we had passion and Gerald's rallying call was a call to action and to accountability and to priorities. Adults rallied around.

Today we are facing the greatest challenge to "this fragile earth, our island home", that has ever been known. Our gospel clearly tells that this universe of ours was created for and though Christ and that we are the stewards of creation, and as stewards, we will be held accountable, not only for the state of creation but for the plight of the earth's most vulnerable inhabitants and its environment. This is our Father's World, as the hymn has it, this is our Mother's World as the hymn doesn't have it.

I like to visit Gerald whenever I am home in Carrickfergus, in Northern Ireland. I visited him three weeks ago. His grave is just feet from my family's plot, his parents next to him, so I don't have to go looking.

I was ordained Deacon on June 26<sup>th</sup>. Gerald died suddenly from an aneurysm, three weeks later while working at a summer job in England. Musician, Latin and Greek scholar, athlete, activist. I was twenty-three years old and my friend and young hero's funeral was the first and most truly-confounding of the many that would follow down these fifty and more years.

His smirking exercise in shaming, (and yes, he was enjoying himself) happened a very long time ago. Maybe some things have improved in our world; we young men learned then that a few passionate people can make a difference.

Our gospel today, and our epistle, remind us that, this is not our earth, but its inhabitants are our brothers and sisters. Pope Francis' Encyclical is the first such document from the Vatican that is not just addressed to the Catholic world, not just to the Christian world, but to the entire human family. What are we doing about it?