*Intro*

The green team is an informal gathering of lay and ordained people in the diocese who are interested in the 5th Mark of mission, which is to strive to safeguard the integrity of creation and to sustain and renew the life of the Earth, and we have specialist interests between us ranging from forest church to farming, and from worship to water pollution. You’ll hear from some of our other members in this section as well, both in person and in video form. We’ve been asked to give an introduction to our net zero carbon agenda item today, setting it within our wider calling to the 5th mark of mission.

I don’t want to start with climate doom mongering and the facts and figures of net zero carbon, because our calling as Christians doesn’t come from anxiety about our own security and survival. It comes from our calling to love as God loves, including God’s love for the natural world he has created. I’d like to start by setting out just a little bit of the biblical basis for the vision of a renewed relationship with the natural world, which is made possible by the work of Christ.

*Mark’s vision for a renewed Earth*

I thought seeing as we’re in year B, and lots of us will be studying and preaching on Mark’s Gospel this year, we could start there. Mark’s gospel is a great starting point. In Mark, people meet Jesus, they’re instantly transformed, with forgiveness, physical healing or liberation from evil forces, and they are sent on their way to live differently. And just as they respond with urgency to the good news and transformation that they’ve received, the gospel invites us the listener to respond with urgency as well – hopefully the kind of urgency that can awaken us from our apathy about climate justice.

Mark’s gospel is also the most physical of the synoptic gospels. In a way that’s a little more obvious in the Greek than it is in English… time, place, weather and creature are not just a backdrop or a prop, but become almost like characters in Mark’s story.

When we read scripture, we’re often listening for God’s voice, which is right, whether it’s the voice of God, or God speaking through the prophets or angels, or the words of Jesus, that’s often what we pay attention to the most. And then we’re quite good at hearing the human voices as well because we identify ourselves with those. But perhaps if we incline our ear to the text even a little more, we might hear the voices of the natural world as well, and they might call us to action.

*Mark 4. 37-39*

To explain a little of what I’m talking about with Mark’s storytelling, I thought we’d look quickly at a couple of passages from Mark’s Gospel. This story of Jesus calming the storm is present in all 3 gospels, but they tell it a little differently. In Matthew and Luke, it’s all about the effect on the boat – the boat was overcome and starting to sink… that kind of thing… but Mark is more interested in what the wind and the waves are doing. In English it’s often translated as “they beat into the boat”, or “they were breaking into the boat”, but the Greek word *epeballen* is even more physical than that – it’s more like “they were throwing themselves onto the boat”. And, in all 3 we are told that Jesus “rebuked” the wind and the waves, but only Mark bothers to tell us what he actually said – it’s often translated as “peace, be still”, but the word he uses isn’t *eirene*, which is sort of the Greek version of *shalom* Jesus says “*siopa*” – be silent. And then he says “*pephimoso*” which literally means “be muzzled” or “shut your mouth”, so it’s not just a display of power, it’s more like he’s winning an argument. For Mark the Earth has a voice, it has action, it relates directly to Jesus, and he to it.

*Mark 1. 12-13*

If we go back all the way to the first chapter of Mark’s Gospel, these 2 verses are all we get of Jesus’ time in the wilderness, but even in this brief glimpse Mark includes something that we often pass by – and that is the wild animals. The word “with” here is *meta* which can mean with, but it implies a sense of harmony, of being on the same side. This scene gives us a contrast to our own relationship with animals, which isn’t all bad, but isn’t all good either. Christ isn’t using the animals for his own gain. He isn’t dominating them or riding on them or breeding them excessively or making them perform in shows for him, or getting them to fly down the Church with wedding rings… he's just with them.

The picture is from Stanley Spencer’s “Christ in the Wilderness” series. It’s probably too small for you to see, but he’s painted Jesus with an Israeli black scorpion I think, which really was one of the wild beasts present in the Judean wilderness and you might still find one there today. A lot of the wild beasts of Jesus’ day, such as jackals, foxes, vipers, sand cats, hyenas and hyraxes are still there in good number today but others such as Arabian leopards and Nubian ibexes are critically endangered and the Asiatic cheetah is sadly probably extinct as of about 2018… caused by a mixture of things like climate-change induced drought, habitat destruction and the overhunting of its prey species.

*Mark 11. 12-14*

The lesson of the fig tree I always find a bit difficult, but maybe Mark is pointing to a future here, as he does throughout the Gospel, where in Christ’s kingdom we won’t feel at the mercy of the elements, or the seasons, or cycles of feast and famine. Mark’s vision of a renewed resurrected world, that we see glimpses of through encounters with Christ, includes all creation in its peace and prosperity. In Christ’s coming kingdom, we will no longer fear the wild animals, or battle the elements or go hungry because it’s not the right time for fruit.

*Matthew 6. 26-29*

Moving into Matthew’s Gospel, this passage “consider the lilies” I think is important to the 5th Mark of mission for two reasons. Firstly it tells us that God cares about the creatures and the plants. “Look at the birds of the air and how your heavenly father feeds them”. That should be enough for us to care about them as well. We often talk about why extinction of species and disruption of habitats matters to us… for example when we talk about saving the bees, it’s always because we need them, they are pollinators, and they are needed for food to grow. I don’t know if you have ever seen a hive of bees that’s been affected by pesticides. Bees bring poisoned food back to the hive and they all start shaking and falling over and they can’t fly and then they all just die in their hundreds. To try and protect the hive they push all the little bodies outside into tiny mass graves. Aside from their usefulness to us, does that kind of suffering matter?

Does it matter that when killer whales in Sea World (who are as intelligent as a 15 year old) are separated from their babies they grieve for them and stop eating, and cry long range cries looking for them for the rest of their lives, cries that in the wild would go out over thousands of miles? Do their cries matter to God? Do they matter to us? 10,000 to 100,000 species are estimated to go extinct every single year. Each of those was made by God, who cares for them. Their silence should grieve us… and move us to action.

The second thing that this passage tells us is that there is wisdom to receive from the natural world, that Jesus invites us to pay attention to. And I just want to give 2 examples of that in action. The first one is an example from a member of our Green team who has graves in her Churchyard which have been underwater for some time. This is a direct result of changing climate and weather patterns – as our weather becomes warmer it also becomes wetter. This situation has obviously been pretty upsetting to the congregation, but it has also confronted them with the realities of climate change and perhaps helped them empathise with creatures who are losing their habitats and people who are already being displaced from their homes due to climate change.

You might have noticed that here I have pictures not of lilies but of lichens. For your consideration, the top one is a hoary roseate lichen, and the bottom one is a soldier lichen – both UK species. I think that there is a lot of wisdom to learn from them. A lichen is a composite creature made up of both a plant and a fungus. The plant provides the energy, and the fungus provides support and structure, but the lichen is a new thing that is alive in its own way. In some ways they are the original “fresh expression”. Lichens only start to grow in places of scarcity. When times are good, and resources for plants and fungi are plentiful, the individual species can go it alone, but all you get is a healthy plant and a healthy fungus… no lichens. It’s only when conditions are harsh and existence is fragile, it takes an ecosystem that’s connected to keep life going forward. When the plants and fungi need each other’s help, then you get lichens. In a world of scarcity, shared wisdom and helping each other become critical for survival. So say the lichens… and so says shaping for mission, but the lichens definitely said it first.

But not just survival… the lichens don’t just then survive themselves at the expense of the plants and fungi around them – they help everyone to thrive. They transform the area to be rich in nutrients that all the species benefit from. The plants and the fungi can succeed because of the lichens, not in spite of them, and as a result the whole ecosystem can flourish. In our time of shaping for mission I think the wisdom of the lichens is much needed.

*Galatians 5. 22-23*

Speaking of flourishing, I just wanted to touch on St Paul’s vision for our flourishing in his “fruit of the spirit”. We often imagine the work that needs to be done to reduce our fossil fuel, chemical and plastic use will make our lives less full and less free. But self-denial along with joy, generosity and all the others, is a fruit of the spirit. Living a more disciplined, simpler, more attentive way of life is not a vision for our limitation, but for our flourishing. Joy and self-control sit alongside each other in a life lived in all its fullness.

*Psalm 107. 28-30*

I don’t know if climate change can feel to you like a lost cause - that the task is too great, or that our actions can’t possibly help with anything. But the story of Christ calming the wind and the waves, and these words from the psalmist that “the Lord brought them out of their distress” when the sea was raging, remind us that through the power of Jesus we can live in harmony with the natural world and not feel like we’re pitted against it. We already know that hope is possible in situations that seem hopeless. New life from death… as Christians this is “our thing”, and the world needs to hear us say it about this.

Our actions, our activism, our prayer really can make a difference, but it’s the work of Christ that makes it possible. God won’t give up on the earth, so neither should we (a bit like the Church). It reminds me of the vision of Julian of Norwich where she feared the world would fall into nothingness because it’s so small and fragile, but it doesn’t because God loves it.

*Where to start:*

I think we have to start not with facts and figures but with our hearts. Much is needed from us in terms of climate justice and reducing our use of carbon, plastic and chemicals, but we won’t be able to do it unless we are people who love creation as God loves it. So, listen for the voice of the Earth in scripture, listen for Christ calling to you through the suffering of God’s creatures. Luke’s Gospel says that if Christ’s disciples keep silent, the stones themselves would cry out. We have been silent about this, and the earth is crying out, so it’s time to lift our voices in prayer, in activism, and in conversations with friend and neighbour. Climate justice isn’t really about facts and figures, it’s about habitats and homes, the displacement of families, scarcity of food, the silence of species unique and precious to God, it’s about the hopes and fears of our young people. Allow your heart to feel it, because I’m sure God’s heart feels it. Our next bit is a video from Rich Clarkson about celebrating Creationtide which is a really great place to start with that.

Next we have to adjust our actions to align with our hearts – and remember that although we have to do the big stuff like the carbon, in God’s kingdom small things have great power and strength is found in weakness - small actions like recycling and turning down the heating do make a difference to the Earth, but they also make a difference to us – these disciplines shape us to be people who shape our lives around our care for the earth, so the big things will be possible for us as well. Biodiversity work is a really great example of that. We have lots of land as a diocese, which all belongs to God, and it’s time to start giving some of that back to God, for the good of his creatures. Each of us might only have a small part of that land, but even in a really small space we can do something beautiful and meaningful that will make a difference. I was hoping to talk about a bumblebee project in urban Walsall but we don’t really have time today, but hopefully we can send the information out to people – it’s a great example of a small thing with great power.

Debbie is going to talk to us about Eco Church. Eco Church is a great place to get started as it guides you through small changes into more courageous changes, and then we’re going to hear about our next steps towards net zero carbon, which I think will involve some big changes for us, hopefully, but ones that I hope will bring us closer to God, and to God’s promise of a healed relationship with the Earth.

*Mark 10. 27*

Above all, we have to remember that our hope for the renewal of the earth is not in science and technology, and it’s not in our own power, it’s in the work of Christ and his resurrection. “For God all things are possible.”