

*The Archbishop gave the sermon as part of the Church of England's weekly online service. This follows in full...*

There is a verse in the book of Ecclesiastes that I've always found mysteriously beautiful.

It is where the writer says that all the rivers run into the sea, but the sea is never full (Ecclesiastes 1.7).

I like it because it expresses something powerful about the ever sustaining and replenishing nature of the world God had made, a creation that creates and re-creates itself.

I am part of that creativity; made to be co-creative with God which is, indeed, one of the most evident expressions of my being made in the image of God. I am able to observe, reflect, create and be amazed, and, of course, it is in things like music and poetry that we are all most aware of this mysterious creativity, not least beautiful passages of scripture like this one. But with it goes the responsibility to use our creativity wisely, for the common good and for the good stewardship of the earth.

However, I find this text challenging today for other reasons. In fact, the words just don't work anymore in the way they used to.

Because the sea is getting full.

A few years ago, I met with bishops from Polynesia whose South Pacific island homes are threatened by rising sea levels.

And all the rivers don't run into the sea. Some of them are so swollen by a month's rain falling in a few hours. They burst their banks and bring terrible devastation.

Other rivers have run dry and no longer flow at all.

I have also seen this on visits to drought stricken parts of northern Kenya and it is a frightening, sobering scene. Empty riverbeds. Dying animals. Starving people. Though let me also say it was the hospitality I received from these very people who though they had hardly anything, shared what they had with me, that I began to see the change we need to make, acknowledging what is enough, turning our back on the illusion that we always need more, and honouring our common humanity as inhabitants of one world with a responsibility to each other and a delight in one another's wellbeing. What they shared with me cost them so much. It would be like me receiving a stranger as a guest and taking them out to dinner at a three star Michelin restaurant. However, they did it without thought of the cost because I was their guest, and they received as if I were Christ himself.

In our gospel reading, Jesus says look at the fig tree and when you see its leaves sprouting you can tell that summer is near (Luke 21.31). But that reliability is no longer here. And many trees are dying. And many more are being cut down, mainly so that we can eat as much meat as we like.

We do need to read the signs of the times, but it is the growing unreliability of the seasons, the change in weather systems, the rise in global temperatures, the melting ice caps, the disappearing rainforests, the swollen rivers, the raging forest fires, the blistering heat in summer, the dried up river beds, flood and famine that lead us to cry out with Jeremiah. It is time again for God to execute truth and righteousness and to do that for us by showing us again the ways of being human and of inhabiting the earth with justice that are given us in Jesus, the one who springs up a shoot and branch of righteousness.

The season of Advent is an invitation for us not only to prepare to celebrate the birth of Jesus Christ and be rooted again in his coming among us as one of us, but also to ponder the last things: God's judgement and God's reckoning.

Our complacency and avarice are bringing disaster upon the world. And our stubborn refusal to change, or even to read the signs of the times which are so clearly before us, has its roots in the most fundamental sin of all which is the refusal to honour God and recognise God's sovereignty, that we are ourselves part of God's creation, charged with this terrible responsibility for the stewardship of the earth. We need to turn again in penitence, to find again God's way of inhabiting the earth, the way that is shown us in Jesus.

Most of all we need to be ready to receive Jesus as our guest, and receive others as if they were Christ. Then in this Advent season, and at this time of peril and opportunity for the world, the church of Jesus Christ can take a lead in showing the world another way.

Watch the service on the [Church of England YouTube](#) page

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