On hope and the environmental crisis: A sermon delivered at Ely Cathedral, 5 October 2025

Nigel Cooper

Nigel is the chaplain to the Chapel at Churchill College, Cambridge and the Diocesan Environment Officer for the diocese of Ely (Cambridgeshire and west Norfolk). He is also a visiting professor in the Global Sustainability Institute, Anglia Ruskin University, Cambridge.

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"We look not at what can be seen but at what cannot be seen; for what can be seen is temporary, but what cannot be seen is eternal."
– 2 Cor 4:18[1]

We have not had feel-good readings this morning.[2] No "Come to me all ye that are heavy laden". Paul is apparently in prison. Habakkuk's prophecy is still waiting to be precisely fulfilled.

These readings come on top of the desperate dynamics in the news, especially the terrifying momentum to the right, both in Britain and in many other countries.

As a lifelong environmentalist, I weep and often despair.

You know the catalogue. Let me just mention Trump calling climate change the greatest con job ever. Kemi Badenough wants to repeal the Climate Change Act. And the UK's Climate Change Committee persistently criticizes governments of all colours for not doing nearly enough. The Paris 1.5 degree target has been breached and is surely now a lost cause. And all this in the face of both the science and our lived experience.

There is a saying – attributed to Slavoj Žižek and Fredric Jameson – that it is easier to imagine the end of the world than the end of capitalism. I find that true for me. What about you? Is it easier to imagine the end of the world than the end of capitalism?

Of course the end of the world is not the explosion of the Earth into tiny fragments; or the end of life on Earth; or even the end of humanity. It is really about the end of life as we know it, including capitalism itself. A leading Swiss insurance executive recently caused a stir by suggesting on his blog that

climate change might destroy capitalism (Thallinger, 2025). From what little I have read, it seems the insurance industry is genuinely anxious.

This pitting of the environment against capitalism I find very instructive. I think what is meant by capitalism here is not basic market exchange. It is primarily a social system, bolstered by some theories of economics to justify it. It is where people and corporations with wealth use it to extract more wealth from the system for themselves. They want ever more wealth to gain the power they need to control society so that it works in their favour. Wealth gives them power over media and so how we all think; it gives them leverage over politicians; it gives them financial bargaining power; it can give them celebrity status as an influencer. All this works quite effectively. Wealth inequality statistics demonstrate this. Here is just one; back in 2023 researchers at Greenwich University estimated that the top fifty wealthiest families in Britain own as much wealth as the total owned by the bottom fifty per cent of the population (Tippet and Wildauer, 2023).

Nature doesn't work that way. Wealth cannot bargain with it, force it to compromise, change the way it thinks about itself, or impress it with posturing. Nature is actually the real world, in contrast to the social and financial worlds, which are the products of human imaginations.

Take fish. Marine conservation biologists estimate the 'maximum sustainable catches', which are often much less than what is being caught. Governments, when determining quotas, hear these as negotiating positions *vis-à-vis* the demands from the industry and go for some sort of compromise. But nature does not negotiate. In this case, the fish populations just decrease until a tipping point is reached and the ecosystem collapses. This was the case in the cod fisheries in the north-west Atlantic. Now the North Sea cod populations are also in dire condition (Beament, 2025)

The wishful thinking of a Trump or a Farage is based on phantasy or a callous disregard for others for short-term personal gain: When it all goes wrong, I have enough money to do well out of the catastrophe; or, *in extremis*, I shall go to Mars! Meanwhile, such people can employ the environment or Net Zero Carbon policies as another scapegoat, alongside immigrants, to work up the populace into voting them into power; this, despite it being against the interests of the general population. Currently, they are promulgating the claim that net zero pushes up prices and the cost of living, rather than admitting that profiteering is to blame (UNITE, 2025).

Now, in this scenario I have been sketching, it is not surprising if religion is sidelined. This is particularly the case for what might be termed a Lukan gospel. Think of last Sunday's gospel of Dives and Lazarus (Luke 16:19–31), of the Magnificat, and of much more. You cannot serve both God and mammon. It is not a welcome message. In truth, as a middle-of-the-road Anglican I am not very keen on it either. I think this is one of the factors behind church decline. It is at odds with the spirit of the age.

"They have Moses and the prophets, let them listen to them", says Abraham to the rich man. Yes, and I would add, resurrecting the old notion of God's two books, of scripture and of nature: "They have nature, let them listen to her".

The church has been unfashionable for a while now. I anticipate it can expect hostility to increase, particularly if we are faithful to our prophetic calling, of turning the hearts of the disobedient to the wisdom of the just.

Yet the gospel is not just the proclamation of judgement; it is also the proclamation of hope. This is not to be reduced to merely a hope in personal salvation, but a hope for the whole of creation. It is now subject to vanity, waiting in hope for its consummation in Christ.

Amongst all the environmental gloom, many clutch at points of light. Technology has developed rapidly and has been taken up in some fields – think of the rapid increase in electric cars. Though this is also, unfortunately, a classic example of the Jevons paradox: something becomes possible with less resources, but people use this as an excuse to use as much as (or more than) before by driving much bigger cars – how many small electric cars does one see on the road?

When we reflect on human nature and specifically with society's current terrifying momentum, we shall probably have to put up with whatever crumbs technology can provide; hence my personal hope shifts to my second point. If it does go badly wrong, it will not be the end of history. The forces of oppression and of justice will continue to wax and wane. Nature naturing will endure. I am reminded of Orwell, "but the earth is still going round the sun, and neither the dictators nor the bureaucrats, deeply as they disapprove of the process, are able to prevent it" (Orwell, 1968: 145).

For me, though, the focus of hope lies in a third direction. Hope is not an estimate of probabilities but a spiritual discipline. In his poem *East Coker*, TS Eliot writes,

> *I said to my soul, be still and wait without hope*
> *For hope would be hope for the wrong thing*

Hope is much deeper than hoping things will turn out for the best. It is an anchored commitment to things unseen, the things that are eternal; things summed up in the three transcendentals of goodness, truth and beauty, or in St Paul's faith, hope and love. That commitment is costly. It can end one up in prison, like St Paul.

I recently heard the BBC correspondent, Fergal Keane, talk on what gave him hope. He spoke of his experiences in South Africa at the end of apartheid, of Rwanda and in Northern Ireland. He singled out people of great courage who stood out against the forces of evil and hate. Some have famous names like Nelson Mandela. Most are hardly known. Do we have the faith, not to move mulberry trees, but to face prison with a Mandela or a St Paul? Do we have the grit to come in from the ploughing and then immediately to start serving our Lord in the poor?

That is a sermonic rhetorical question if ever there was one! Without the drama that the question presupposes, are there realistic – yet costly – ways in which we ordinary Christians can express spiritual hope?

One I particularly commend to you is to find ways of speaking about this to people around you (*cf.* Climate Outreach, 2025; Global Action Plan, 2021). It is

not at all easy, as it is a socially taboo subject. Nevertheless, a Yale University study of British people less than a year ago found 75 per cent of us understand climate change to be human-caused; 68 per cent thought the climate should be a high or very high priority for government; 80 per cent are 'somewhat worried' or worse (Leiserowitz *et al.*, 2025). Another study found that about 15 per cent of UK adults suffer from eco-anxiety, rising to 33 per cent in 18 to 34 year-olds (BusinessGreen, 2023). This provides the context. Can we, maybe, look out for opportunities to talk about climate in conversations? The perennial topic of the weather begs extension. "It's cold today." "Yes, but do you remember how cold it used to be in our childhoods?" At the mention of a grandchild, "I worry about how fit the world will be for them to live in. Do you also worry?" Let's just talk about it.

To end, I want to return to the thought that hope is a spiritual discipline. In the line following that which I quoted above, Eliot wrote,

> *there is yet faith*
> *But the faith and the love and the hope are all in the waiting.*

That waiting may be in the watchfulness of a Habakkuk on his rampart, or in the prison cell of a St Paul. It can be in the faithful speaking of the gospel, in season and out of season. We wait patiently, alert to the unseen, the things that are eternal.

Notes

1 Some might worry that this text consigns the natural world to the seen and the passing away. I do not read it that way. For those who look on nature and see only what is seen, they are seeing a surface of power. They can only see nature and all its members as instruments available for them to use in their own projects, projects that are themselves 'visible' and passing away. When we look for the unseen in nature we see the transcendentals instantiated. This is not as a mere window onto ideas (as Plato), but as particulars, each with their own being (which is the ultimate transcendental). It is also not a temporary phenomenon. Each moment of each member of nature partakes in eternity. Change and decay does not cast these beings into nothingness, the non-lasting. Rather, each moment is anchored for ever in the realm of the eternal. Beauty is a transcendental particularly associated with 'seeing'. An animal, a flower, a view, all we might judge from their appearance as beautiful. If we are only looking at what is seen, then we see a moneymaking opportunity. If we see the unseen, we are in awe. Beauty also has a time dimension, most easily appreciated in music and natural sounds, but also, for instance, in a sunset as it changes and the dark overwhelms it. The change adds to the beauty, even its passing does. The change itself partakes in eternity.

2 The readings were Habakkuk 1:1–4; 2.1–5; Psalm 37:1–9; 2 Timothy 1:1–14; and Luke 17:5–10.

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