

The Sunnybrook Pulpit

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November 25, 2018 – Reign of Christ Sunday


God's Reign and Climate Change

Jesus answered, "You say that I am a king. For this I was born, and for this I came into the world, to testify to the truth. Everyone who belongs to the truth listens to my voice." – John 18:33-37

Reign of Christ Sunday asks us to consider carefully the question of our ultimate commitments: to what and to who do we really belong? Who really reigns in our lives? When our lesser commitments come into conflict, what are we really committed to? Is our ultimate commitment to our families, our communities, our employers, our country, or to something deeper, but less tangible?

In today's passage from the Bible, Pontius Pilate, the Roman Governor of Judea asks Jesus if he is a king, but Jesus will only say that his kingship is not from this world. Pilate and Jesus belong to different worlds. (show slide)

Pilate's world is the world of power and the struggle for power. For him, the title of king means the one who holds ultimate power, and anyone who claims to be a king is entering that struggle for power and trying to take it from him (Pilate). When his lesser commitments come into conflict, it is the question of who will gain and keep power that will guide his decisions.



Pilate's world:
the struggle for power

Jesus' world - God's kingdom:
the struggle for truth

Jesus, on the other hand, to the extent he uses the term "king" at all, says that his kingship is from a different world. If it were from Pilate's world, his followers would fight for power. In the world Jesus belongs to, the ultimate commitment is to truth. "For this I was born, and for this I came into the world, to testify to the truth." And to the extent that he is a king, he is king over those who belong to the truth. His authority is not forced on people by violence and coercion, but it comes from those who give him their allegiance because they recognize in his voice the way of truth. "Everyone who belongs to the truth listens to my voice."

Famously, Pilate asks a question that continues to haunt us today: "What is truth?" We live in a time in which truth is contested ferociously, and those with the power to do so seek to create their own reality. There are those who dismiss anything they find inconvenient as "fake news" and brand journalists as "horrible people" and

“enemies of the people” for asking difficult questions.¹ But I think of responsible journalists, not as enemies of the people, but as the prophets of our time. Their vocation is to seek and report the truth courageously through rigorous research and careful evaluation of sources. Scientists also courageously seek the truth through experimental method, careful collection of data, and the process of peer review. It takes courage to seek the truth, because the truth often challenges the way things are and the way we think. And that is why those who pursue and defend the truth as their ultimate commitment belong to God’s kingdom and not to Caesar’s.

Now Jesus was talking primarily about moral and spiritual truth, but there is no more important question of truth in the world now, and no more fiercely contested question of truth (at least in North America), than the question of climate change. In Europe, politicians debate how they will address climate change, but they don’t see the science itself as a political issue. That is the way that it should be. But in North America, science has become politicized, and that is a major problem. “The same groups who disagree on ‘cultural issues’ — abortion, same-sex marriage and school prayer — also disagree on whether climate change is real...”² And for a number of reasons the public has been confused about the science. (show slide) One poll found that Americans believe that only 55% of climate experts agree that global warming comes from burning fossil fuels.³ The actual number, according to several studies, is 97%.⁴



My intent here today is not to convince any of you that are skeptical, and little of this will be new to most of you, but it is important for you to know how serious I

¹ Timothy Snyder, "To abandon facts is to abandon freedom. If nothing is true, then no one can criticize power, because there is no basis upon which to do so. If nothing is true, then all is spectacle." *On Tyranny: Twenty Lessons from the Twentieth Century*, quoted in Hillary Clinton, *What Happened*, p. 9.

² Dan Kahan, "Fixing the Communications Failure," (*Nature*, Vol 463, 21 January 2010), online.

³ from a survey conducted by John Cook and professional survey firm Qualtrics.

⁴ Climate scientists overwhelmingly agree the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) statement that 'human influence has been the dominant cause of the observed warming since the mid-20th century' (Qin *et al* 2014, p 17). The National Academies of Science from 80 countries have issued statements endorsing the conclusion that recent climate change is caused by human activity. Climate scientists and their publications show that "(i) 97–98% of the climate researchers most actively publishing in the field support the tenets of Anthropogenic Climate Change (ACC) outlined by the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, and (ii) the relative climate expertise and scientific prominence of the researchers unconvinced of ACC are substantially below that of the convinced researchers." Anderegg *et al*, *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences of the USA*, July 6, 2010 107 (27) 12107-12109; <https://doi.org/10.1073/pnas.1003187107> Those conclusions are supported by eleven other studies using a variety of methodologies. See Cook *et al*, "Consensus on consensus: a synthesis of consensus estimates on human-caused global warming," *Environmental Research Letters*, Volume 11, Number 4, 13 April 2016.

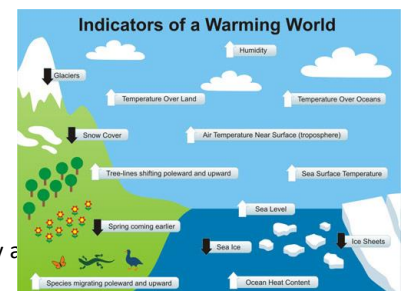
think this is, as a matter of faith and ethics. It is what I think about when I think about Jesus' commitment to a kingdom devoted to the truth.

I grew up in Alberta. To a large extent, my well-being is dependent on the health of the oil and gas sector. Members of my family work or have worked in that sector. My salary is paid, in sizable part, by people who work in oil and gas, and that includes many of you. I rely every day on fossil fuels to heat and light my home, to fuel my car, to fertilize the crops that I eat, to run the computer on which I write my sermons. Oil and gas contribute products that are found in my clothing, my mobile phone, my sailboat, and my curling broom. In too many ways to count, and many ways I am not even aware of, I rely on the products of that industry and those who work in it to allow me to live the way I do. And I know that is not going to change overnight. Their work is important and I value it.

I am also a deeply conservative person, not in the political sense of the word, but in the sense that I am cautious and avoid risks. I am not impulsive. I ponder the many sides of an issue before making a decision. I believe in double and even triple redundant systems. I buy insurance, just in case my house burns down, or I am in a car accident. I believe in fiscal responsibility and in the conservation of our environment. *It annoys me that so many political Conservatives don't seem to think conservation is important; the two words, and two ideas seem pretty closely related to me. But I appreciate Preston Manning, for saying that "conservation is central to conservatism."*⁵

There are a lot of reasons why I wish that climate change wasn't happening, that it wasn't our fault and that it isn't threatening to seriously disrupt natural systems in catastrophic ways. I wish that none of that were true. I have been following the political and scientific debate about climate change since 1982, and I keep hoping that it will all just go away, that some paradigm will shift, or some study will provide another explanation, and everything will look different.

But instead, I see climate change with my own eyes. (Show slide) I notice that it rarely gets to forty below in the winter any more. Every time I visit the foot of the Athabasca Glacier, which is retreating 10 meters a year, I have to drive and hike further. Our famous Alberta blue sky is clouded by smoke from forest fires for weeks at a time and two of my colleagues have barely escaped with their lives from fires that burned through Slave Lake and Fort McMurray (drying of forests and a resulting rise in forest fires is one of the expected consequences



⁵ Quoted in Christopher Ragan "If you're a Conservative who opposes carbon pricing, are you really a Conservative?" (The National Post, November 21, 2018), online.

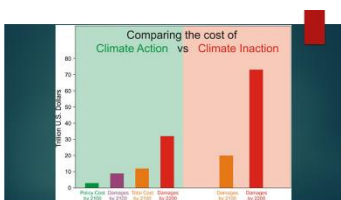
of climate change). My brother's house in High River was inundated by floods from one of those catastrophic weather events that climate scientists keep predicting.

In the Canadian North, where warming has been most rapid the Inuit are noticing dramatic changes in their environment: melting permafrost, changing migration patterns, thinning ice-packs, and many other effects. The desperately poor indigenous women I support in Guatemala have been asking whether God is abandoning them because their weather patterns are changing, and their agricultural cycles are no longer predictable. I have been following the climate change debate for more than thirty years, but thirty years ago, I never would have expected to see hurricanes flood New Orleans and New York, or horrible fires ravage California, or people die from heat waves in Montreal. I wouldn't have expected the Bow and Saskatchewan glaciers, source of drinking water for Edmonton and Calgary to be disappearing so rapidly. I wouldn't have expected the economic cost of billion-dollar droughts, storms, wildfires, floods to increase more than 150 times over that thirty years.

Scientists, insurance companies, statisticians and many other sources of evidence are showing clearly that climate change is real, and it is getting worse. The evidence is overwhelming, and I am too conservative to avoid that conclusion simply because it is inconvenient. If I must choose between my emotional comfort and the truth, then as much as I might want to avoid it, I have to face the truth.

The full consequences of what we do now won't become obvious for a few decades because the climate is a bit like the proverbial Queen Mary: once it gets moving, it has a lot of momentum, and it won't be stopped or turned around quickly. That means I won't live to see the worst effects of climate change. (show slide) This chart shows the projected costs of damage due to climate change by the end of the 21st century (in orange - \$30 trillion) and the end of the 22nd (in red - \$70

trillion). The right side shows the damage if we don't take action. The left side shows the costs if we take effective action. The cost of inaction is high! The little green bar on the far left shows how much it would cost to take that action (about \$2 trillion - It looks like a pretty good investment to me!)

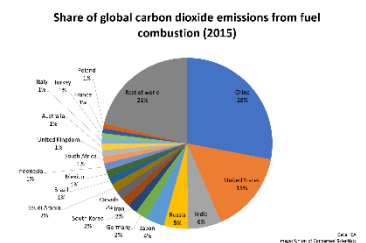


I won't be alive in 2200, but the choices I am making today will contribute to those possible futures. In the next month, I expect to be a grandfather for the first time, and the prospect of being a grandfather is changing the way I think about the future. A few decades, and even a couple of centuries from now is less of an abstraction than it used to be. It is a world that my grandchildren and their

grandchildren will inhabit, and they may well ask whether I did everything I could to make it a healthy one for them.

I started thinking about this sermon after I got into a discussion at the curling rink a few weeks ago. This couple I was talking with were convinced that there is really is nothing that we Canadians can or should do about climate change. Their point was that we contribute such a small percentage of the world's greenhouse gases that even if we transitioned completely out of fossil fuels overnight, it wouldn't make a darn bit of difference. That is an argument that we hear over and over again from those opposed to taking action on climate change, but does it hold water? Well, yes and no, but mostly no.

In fact, (show slide) Canada is in the top ten producers of carbon dioxide, so our contribution is not insignificant. But we consume only 2% of the world's total, and that is a small percentage, so my conversation partners were right about the fact that Canada, acting alone, can't stop what is happening. In fact, every country is in the same boat. No country can turn things around by itself. Even the top three emitters (China - 28%, the United States - 15% and India - 5%) together contribute less than half of the total carbon pollution. The top ten emitters together make up two-thirds and the top twenty contribute just over three quarters.



So if this problem is to be addressed effectively, the nations of the world have to work together. But this is not unusual. Problems like that are called Collective Action Problems, and there is a whole branch of political science devoted to studying them. I spent a semester at Duke studying with a world expert on Collective Action. We studied successful efforts to reverse the destruction of the ozone layer, to ban whale hunting, to protect fisheries, to eliminate acid rain and water pollution. We also studied failures, and there are lots of those too, especially in fisheries. Those are examples of problems which no one country could solve alone. There is a lot of experience addressing them and many learnings from that experience. These problems require nations to work together, to reach agreements on targets, to implement the agreements within their own jurisdictions, and to hold each other accountable. Collective action is difficult, but it works.

Climate change is the most difficult collective action problem that the world has ever faced, and the most important. But we are a good part of the way there. In 2015, 196 countries, including all of the major emitters, reached consensus on the Paris agreement, and agreed to set new and more ambitious targets for greenhouse gas emissions every five years. The goal is to reduce emissions to a level consistent with keeping temperature increases below 1.5 degrees (or at most 2 degrees). That

will require global emissions decreases of between 35 and 50 per cent by 2030, now only 12 years away. That is a really challenging goal, a goal that isn't set by politicians, but by the science. It is the truth about what has to happen to prevent climate change from spiralling out of control. It may be uncomfortable and inconvenient, but it is an entirely reasonable goal given the scale of the climate challenge. It will be difficult and it will require a society-wide effort. One writer I admire says that addressing climate change will require the kind of effort we put into winning the last World War. He may be overstating the case, but not by much. Already, France and the Netherlands have announced plans to phase out diesel and gas operated cars. The Netherlands is planning to reduce its emissions by 95% by 2050. So far, Canada has pledged to reduce its emissions by just 30% and it isn't clear if we will be able to achieve even that under the current plan. Paris was a major achievement, but it requires our participation. If nations like Canada, a middle power with significant moral authority in the world, don't support the Paris agreement, it will fail. And if the Canadian government doesn't have the support of the people, we won't reach our targets and honour our commitments. This is a problem that we don't have the luxury to fail on. It has to be solved, for the sake of my grandchildren, and yours.

So let me challenge you to think about ways you can reduce your fossil fuel consumption by 50% over the next twelve years. It may not seem possible right now, but let's take this on as a challenge for ourselves, our church, and all the communities we belong to; let's talk about it and learn together and help each other. It won't be easy, but if we don't try, then it won't happen. Our Finance and Property Committee recently had an energy audit done, and is making the changes recommended as most cost-effective. For myself, Therese and I have already replaced our light bulbs, furnace and hot water heater to get the maximum possible efficiency. We are currently getting quotes on the cost of a solar panel array on our roof that will provide all the electricity our house needs. Up until the last few years, I didn't think it was financially possible, but now, with a 35% rebate from the provincial government I think it is going to cost around \$7000. That is a lot of money, and it will take quite a few years to pay it off, but for me, it isn't about cost-effectiveness; it is about doing my part to make sure my grandchildren have a chance to live in a healthy environment. And in the same way, every choice I make, whether it be buying a new toaster oven or a new car, I will ask how it might contribute, positively or negatively, to climate change.

The other thing that I think is really important is to be a leader in the community. Individual action on such enormous issues is discouraging, a bit like trying to drain the Pacific Ocean with a teaspoon. But when we join our voices together, we can

do so much more. Sometime in the next couple of years, we will be having elections at both provincial and federal levels, and climate change should be one of the major issues, not the only issue, but among the major ones. Some political leaders offer excuses why we can't do anything. I don't think that is good enough. I think we need every party to offer a plan, so we can have a healthy debate about what will actually work. So we need to use our voices, marshal our facts and our arguments, write letters, engage in a million conversations on social media or at the rink. Challenge the excuses and advocate for our children, our grandchildren, and their grandchildren. The cost of inaction is too high. We cannot afford to fail on this problem.

What does it mean to belong to the truth, and to follow the one who came into the world to testify to the truth? It means, I think to face uncomfortable and inconvenient truths, and then to respond appropriately. I don't know whether we will meet the climate change challenge effectively or not, but regardless of what others do, or don't do, I want to be able to look my grandchildren in the eye and say that I did what I could. On the day of judgement, whatever that means, I want to be able to stand before the Creator of all things, and say that I did what I could. Amen.