

“Hearing creation’s groans” a sermon based on Matthew 13:24-30, 36-43, preached at Knox Church Dunedin New Zealand by Kerry Enright on 23 July 2017.

Over these weeks I am bringing stories and perspectives from the international gathering of Reformed Christians in Leipzig, held at the beginning of July. The international body is called the World Communion of Reformed Churches comprising 228 denominations from 108 countries. Last week I talked about three conversations.

This morning I want to speak about what has been the major theme of the World Communion of Reformed for the last fourteen years. Relating to the reading from Romans today ...

“We know that the whole creation has been groaning in labour pains until now”

Earlier Paul says – “the creation itself will be set from its bondage to decay.”

The groaning has reached megaphone volume.

Islands drowning;
Polluted rivers;
Species loss;
Extreme weather events;
Global warming
And more.

Some people are experiencing the groaning scarily close. We have heard in this Church from people in Kiribati and Fiji of invasion by the sea. When people gather from around the world, the groaning is named, personally and deeply. Especially from people in the global south who are most vulnerable, who do not have the protections of more wealthy nations. And generally they are not the people who are causing creation to groan.

So when people come from 108 countries, from the global north and the global south, they ask awkward questions and offer direct challenges. The groaning of creation relates to the dominant global economic system of our age. Inequality, poverty and environmental degradation are reflections of economy. And the major concern of the Reformed movement world-wide is the dominant economic system of our day.

It came to focus in the Accra meeting in Ghana in 2004. One day we were taken to Elmina, a castle on the coast from Accra. In the days of the slave trade, black people were captured inland, transported to the coast, and chained and imprisoned in the castle until the ship arrived. Then they were pushed down the shore, on to the beach, loaded on the ships and shipped to the Caribbean, America, Europe. And in the middle of the castle was a room used for trading six days a week, and on Sunday it became a Reformed chapel.

How was it that a room used for selling human beings could be used for a Reformed chapel on Sundays, apparently without any sense of connection between the treatment of human beings and the worship of God?

That sober visit woke our consciences to hear what was happening in the global south. Through people's voices, we heard creation's groans.

Marisol, a Colombian woman, displaced four times:

"I am a person of black African descent.... I have no more tears, I have no more strength, I don't want to live anymore. A friend of yours asked me if she could make a book with my name and with a picture of me, from here I answer her: make your book, use my picture and use my name, and if that saves "Tamarindo" and saves Colombia, sign it with my blood too."

Story after story of people who bear the brunt of inequality and poverty and environmental degradation, of creation groaning. We are often told there is no alternative to the present economic system, the neo-liberal economic system. What do we mean by neo-liberal?

A philosophy that rejects or tries to avoid government or other intervention in the economy;

That allows the market to operate without restraints or protections.

That focuses on free-market methods with fewer restrictions on business operations.

That protects property rights rather than human rights.

That promotes the market as the primary engine of human economic activity, emphasizing competition and growth, upholding individual self-interest over the common good.

Such an approach emphasises

- privatising services such as education, water, and health care;
- deregulating that reduces rights and protections for workers and the environment;
- reduces government spending on social programs;
- that encourages the free flow of investments, products, and jobs (but typically not persons) across national borders without restraint; and increased trade.

The concern of the world-wide Reformed movement is to present this as if there is no alternative, so such a system becomes an idol, with the status of a god, defining who we are, measuring our worth, promising what only God can give, causing creation to groan.

The Christian message today speaks of what causes creation to groan as Empire.

Empire is a central concept in Christianity because Jesus came to undermine Empire. The Roman Emperor was called lord and saviour. Jesus was given the same titles as the alternative emperor.

What does Empire mean in our day?

This is how it is understood in our tradition:

“... a coming together of economic, cultural, political and military power

An all-encompassing global reality serving, protecting and defending the interests of powerful corporations, nations, elites and privileged people, while exploiting creation.

A pervasive spirit of destructive self-interest, even greed – the worship of money, goods and possessions; the gospel of consumerism, proclaimed through powerful propaganda and religiously justified, believed and followed.

A colonization of consciousness, values and notions of human life.

A spirit lacking compassionate justice and showing contemptuous disregard for the gifts of creation and the household of life,”

Boesak, A. Weusmann, J. Amjad-Ali, C. 2010. Dreaming A Different World-Globalisation and Justice for Humanity and the Earth, The Challenge of the Accra Confession for the Churches Dreaming a Different World, p23.

This is all very political, you might think.

It was the Russian Orthodox philosopher Nikolai Berdiaev, who said that bread for myself is a material matter, but bread for my neighbour is a spiritual matter.

These are deeply spiritual matters.

Which brings me to the Accra Confession of 2004.

Representatives of the 228 churches that gathered said this as a statement of faith, among other things ...

“We have heard that creation continues to groan, in bondage, waiting for its liberation. We are challenged by the cries of the people who suffer and by the woundedness of creation itself. We see a dramatic convergence between the suffering of the people and the damage done to the rest of creation.”

“The root causes of massive threats to life are above all the product of an unjust economic system defended and protected by political and military might.

It then goes on to describe that system.

“We do not seek simple answers.

We reject the current world economic order imposed by global neoliberal capitalism and any other economic system, including absolute planned economies, which defy God’s covenant by excluding the poor, the vulnerable and the whole of creation from the fullness of life.

We believe that God calls us to hear the cries of the poor and the groaning of creation and to follow the public mission of Jesus Christ who came so that all may have life and have it in fullness.”

This is a statement of hope, of our trust in the God we know in Jesus Christ through the Holy Spirit, who endures beyond empower, beyond idols who do not have ultimate power.

This is a statement of hope because we are part of the global Christ and a global church so that as we bend towards the way of Jesus Christ, we join millions of others doing the same. We will not defeat the Empire as individuals acting alone. It needs nothing less than a global church, local congregation connected with local congregation, embodying and communicating the way of Jesus Christ, constantly renewed, reflecting, praying, acting together.

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