

# Common ground?

Ruth Newton asks: Can the Church learn from Environmental Activists?



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Frequently ignored, sometimes ridiculed, yet passionate about a powerful and important message, environmentalist activists and Christians have more in common than a shared desire for ecological health and social justice. For environmentalists at least, the tide appears to be turning; people are beginning to sit up and take note in an unprecedented way. In part this must be due to the urgency of the situation, with last year's report from the United Nation's Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change spelling out both the scale and urgency of the action needed to avoid disaster. Persistence too, will have played a part, just as water eventually has an effect on a stone, so the repeated warnings given over decades are finally starting to be heard. However, it took the perfect storm of a David Attenborough documentary, the civil disobedience of Extinction Rebellion (XR) and the tenacity of the 16-year-old school-striker Greta Thunberg, to force the issue of the climate emergency to the top of the news agenda.

It is ironic that at a time when the Church is struggling to communicate its message to the masses, so many of the approaches successfully adopted by climate change activists can be found within the Christian tradition. Activists can be seen as the modern-day heirs of the Biblical prophets, who were both foretellers, making predictions about the future, and forth-tellers, commenting on the political and moral issues of the day. Often these two roles were intertwined as their predictions described the inevitable consequences, if the behaviour they were denouncing continued. Gifted with a "God's-eye view", they were tasked with calling people to repentance, helping them to realise the error of their ways and urging them to live differently. Much of this resonates with the work of modern day protestors, who may not necessarily consider themselves to have a "God's-eye view" but may well be espousing one anyway. It is hard to imagine God taking issue with an agenda that demands justice for His created world, the planet's poorest people and generations yet to come.

The message is not a new one. Greta Thunberg's reproach to the UK parliament, "The future has been sold so that a small number of people can make unimaginable amounts of money" is reminiscent of St Ambrose of Milan, who argued in the 4th century that "The world has been created for everyone's use, but you few rich are trying to keep it for yourselves. For not merely the possession of the earth but the very sky, the air and the sea are claimed by the rich few".

Words are not the only tool of the prophet. Actions are key. We might think of the semi-naked protest which took place at the House of Commons as a modern phenomenon, but the Biblical prophets got there first. Both Micah and Isaiah reinforced their prophetic message by dispensing with clothes and shoes (Micah 1: 8, Isaiah 20: 1-6). Jeremiah famously smashed an earthenware jar (Jer 19:10) and Jesus Himself engaged in what can be described as both enacted prophesy and civil disobedience in His triumphal entry to Jerusalem and cleansing of the temple. So, gluing oneself to a train, and even holding "die-ins", where numerous people lie on the ground and refuse to move, seem to be part of a long tradition; after all, didn't poor Ezekiel lay on his left side for 390 days and his right side for 40? Then, as now, prophetic actions grab the public's attention and capture their imagination. Whether their warnings are heeded however, remains quite an entirely different question.

Part of Extinction Rebellion's strategy during their April protest was mass arrests, but even being "arrestable" has Biblical antecedents. Although the Apostles didn't actively seek to be arrested they certainly knew how to exploit the communication potential if they were. Acts 16 recounts that when Paul and Silas were arrested, they milk the experience for all it's worth, praying and singing in a powerful show of defiance, that impresses those imprisoned with them. When a miraculous earthquake presents them with the opportunity to escape, they refuse to leave and so earn the gratitude of their jailor, who is converted along with his whole household.

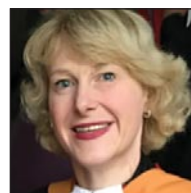
The maxim that, "actions speak louder than words" is true not only for headline-grabbing set pieces, but also for individual choices. After Emma Thompson flew a reported 5400 miles to join in the April Rebellion in London, accusations of hypocrisy followed hot on her heels. A stark reminder, if one were needed, of the necessity of "walking the talk" or "being the change you wish to see". Society demands that those advocating for action on the environment must themselves be living in environmentally-sensitive ways, otherwise their message, however worthy, is dismissed. Authenticity is an important part of earning a hearing. This is a lesson which Christians, as well as environmentalists must take to heart.

When prophetic action and authenticity are combined the results can be very powerful indeed. Greta Thunberg never flies and travelled by electric car, train and sea to address UK parliamentarians. Many of the XR protestors have made costly life-styles choices which match their message, and must find accusations of hypocrisy galling indeed. Some take the unity of means and ends even further: those who are part of "Grow Heathrow" or the ZAD (a group which protested the proposed "Airport of Notre-Dame-des-Landes") have gone so far as to form "prefigurative communities" by occupying land surrounding the proposed constructions. Here, people live as if the world they are seeking to create has already arrived. This description by a member of the ZAD outlines the principle.

"We built a common life here, our cabins nestled into the rich hedgerows that criss-cross this land, the empty farms squatted and revived. We said 'NO' we don't want an airport, but also 'YES' we will construct new forms of life, we will live as if we are free, here and now, and stop treating the world as an object to make money from, but as a subject to share life with."

The "Transition movement" adopts similar, if less confrontational tactics. Guided by principles which include respecting resource limits and promoting inclusivity, they invite local communities to imagine the future they would like to see and then take steps towards it, with the explicit intention of modelling a positive version of sustainable living in order to inspire its widespread adoption. This living as an example in "the now", whilst working towards "the not yet" will feel very familiar to Christians. Indeed I would go so far as to argue that the Church is a "prefigurative community", living as if "the kingdom of God" is already here – prefiguring it whilst anticipating a future where it is more fully realized.

The successes of climate change protestors should give the Church food for thought. Is it time for the Church to dust off some of the ancient tools in its armory and rediscover prophetic action and the power of authentic community as a means of evangelism? Or should it simply draw confidence from the fact that a relevant yet challenging message can be grasped in the 21st century, if delivered with sufficient conviction and lived with sufficient integrity? ■



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