

# Talking Cents

April, 2016

*Talking Cents is an ecumenical group charged by the Auckland Anglican Diocesan Council to promote an alternative to current economic and political thought, and to encourage debate within the Church. Ministry units are encouraged to distribute these articles. This article is contributed by the Reverend Peter Bargh tssf, from the Auckland Anglican Social Justice Group.*

## “Hope or Idiocracy”?

We are a quarter of the way through 2016 and the Easter season is upon us. This is the time when Christians celebrate the Risen Christ, the Hope that comes from the Empty Tomb and the revelation of the reconciliation of God and God’s world. It is this Hope that motivates us to proclaim the Good News of the Reign of God.

It is also a very appropriate time to remind ourselves about the Reign of God; it is always beyond us and yet, at the best of times, we are blessed to see glimpses of it. This should be reassuring for us in Easter as when we look at the world with a critical eye, it can be difficult to see many signs of the “in-breaking” of the Reign of God in our world.

As we look at the sad situations around the world, especially considering the systemic failures to respond to climate change, it may seem like it is Lent; that time of preparation for the joy of Easter. Lent is a time for penitence and changing our ways. It is the time of walking with Jesus to the cross and death.

The image of walking with Jesus to the cross has remained with me thanks particularly to last month’s *Talking Cents* article. In it Mary Betz focused on a Pacific climate change conference held at Victoria University in Wellington. Amidst the great diversity of participants who spoke with passion and from a variety of disciplines about the threat of climate change, it was Kiribati’s President, Anote Tong, who stood out for me. He

spoke of walking to the impending death of that which he loved, in this case not of Jesus on the cross but of his homeland, due to climate change.<sup>1</sup>

At the same time as this conference was taking place, a bipartisan group of Florida mayors were drafting a statement which called on the moderators for the Republican presidential candidate debates to include questions on climate change as this was “of grave concern for the people of Florida.”<sup>2</sup> The lack of questions to the Republican candidates reflected what Rod Oram, speaking at the Victoria University climate change conference, described as the consequences of “vested interests and the lack of political will,” to engage seriously with climate change.<sup>3</sup>

Coincidentally, these events took place in February which was the hottest month on record.<sup>4</sup> This fact led to many headlines of alarm about the increase in global temperatures; however, as Stefan Ramstorf, a professor at the Potsdam Institute for Climate Impact Research, stated:

*What we are seeing is a continuous process of global warming that is superimposed on to the natural variability. Just like a few cooler years were no reason to talk about a “slowdown” in global warming. It would be wrong to conclude now that a few very hot years are acceleration. Global warming is proceeding pretty much as expected...*

*...It is becoming more and more urgent. **Time has almost run out to get emissions down. That’s the real emergency.***<sup>5</sup>

<sup>1</sup> “In the Eye of the Storm: Pacific Climate Change.” *Talking Cents*, March 2016.

<sup>2</sup> <http://www.scientificamerican.com/article/florida-mayors-press-presidential-debate-moderators-for-climate-airtime/>

<sup>3</sup> “In the Eye of the Storm: Pacific Climate Change.” *Talking Cents*, March 2016.

<sup>4</sup> [http://data.giss.nasa.gov/gistemp/graphs\\_v3/](http://data.giss.nasa.gov/gistemp/graphs_v3/)  
The Florida mayors’ letter was, however, published in March.

<sup>5</sup> <http://www.theguardian.com/environment/planet-oz/2016/mar/18/welcome-to-the-climate-emergency-youre-about-20-years-late>

The urgent nature of the situation we face can overwhelm us. Ironically, one response to this can be apathy. After all, the problem of climate change can seem too large for us, as individuals, to handle. Instead we leave it to our elected leaders! Part of the Easter message is that transformation of society and decision making systems is possible. God is with us on the journey.

Another factor that can make us apathetic is the disconnection between the scale of the problem and the solutions that are proposed. Naomi Klein uses the analogy of an anti-smoking campaign that points out the horrors and risks of smoking and concludes by asking you to smoke one cigarette less. How could you take the risks seriously when what you were being asked to do was so little? So it can seem with regards to climate change. If this is something that is destroying our planet, why are we only asked to “switch brands of cleaning liquid?”<sup>6</sup>

As Kevin McBride noted in his July 2015 *Talking Cents* article, Klein’s key point in *This Changes Everything* is that we can either “have capitalism or a viable planet.” Klein helpfully offers not only insightful books but constructive political engagement in her homeland of Canada.<sup>7</sup> She is part of a group who launched *The Leap Manifesto*. This is a plan, supported by climate scientists and environmental engineers, to get Canada to be “fossil fuel free” by the middle of the century or sooner – something that has been signed by tens of thousands of Canadians.<sup>8</sup>

The lethargy most current governments exhibit with regard to addressing climate change seriously or recognizing that “the system is broken,” does have consequences. Amongst the potential presidential nominees are candidates who are exploiting the anti-establishment sentiment and who will not tolerate “business as usual.” In one case, at least, the “solutions” appear to be focused

on denigrating any who are different, be it ethnicity or even gender.

Beyond the individual rhetoric is the growing sense that the current system, which espouses equal opportunities whilst enshrining laws and policies which protect the wealthiest, is neither sustainable, nor just, nor right. This hypocrisy, or lack of connection between word and deed, is especially jarring for the youngest among us.

As Noreena Hertz writes of Generation Z, those aged between 14 and 21:

*This generation does not believe that life is a meritocracy. In fact, not one teenager surveyed agrees with the statement that “society is fair and everyone has an equal chance”. Instead, they believe that it’s the colour of their skin, their sex, their parents’ economic status and their social standing that will determine their future. Depressingly, the data bears this out.*<sup>9</sup>

A 2005 satirical science fiction film which was released to little fanfare, *Idiocracy*, imagines a dystopian future populated, and therefore run by, idiots. In addition to the similarities in political leadership there is also an allegory for the fossil fuel industry. In the film people are starving because a major corporation uses a sports drink, rather than water, to water the crops. Changing this to provide people with food to eat, however, involves half the country losing their jobs because they are employed poisoning the crops.

As with Klein’s smoking analog this one cuts close to the bone with much thinking relating to climate change and economic models.

To get to Easter we journey through Lent and the challenges of Holy Week. Furthermore we are reminded once again of the foundation of the Christian faith – **love is paramount, hope is not lost. But apathy will inevitably lead to Idiocracy.**

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Rahmstorf is quoted by Graham Readfearn in an article for the *Guardian*. Bold font added for emphasis.

<sup>6</sup> Naomi Klein, *This Changes Everything: Capitalism vs. the Climate*, (London: Allen Lane, 2014) 213.

<sup>7</sup> This is even as she recognizes that for change to really come there is necessity for social revolutions.

<sup>8</sup> <https://leapmanifesto.org/en/the-leap-manifesto/>

<sup>9</sup>

<http://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/mar/19/think-millennials-have-it-tough-for-generation-k-life-is-even-harsher> Hertz calls this generation “Generation K” after Katniss Everdeen from the dystopian world of the *Hunger Games*.