

Keynote Address

From Global Commons to Global Community

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I am delighted to be with you at this International gathering as you explore in many different ways the theme of global commons. It is a fascinating topic and one most relevant to the critical times in which we live.

As it happens, my wife and I have a small property in a tiny hamlet called Oldwalls, near Llanrhidian on Gower. Our cottage adjoins the common land that is one of the most beautiful features of the peninsula. The landscape of lowland commons on Gower has been formed through the complex interaction of geology, climate and stewardship of the commons by successive generation of ‘commoners’.

The Gower commons are locally, nationally and internationally important for nature conservation and, collectively, are one of the most significant areas of lowland heathland in Wales and the world. As with other common land in the UK, the Gower commons continue to be grazed by local commoner’s animals and this grazing is still an essential part of the farm economy. I am given to understand that there are over a million acres of common land in England and Wales alone (over 9000 separate units) and of course, originally most land was held in common. Sadly, the Commons, are in effect, what is left after seven centuries of steady depredation by landowners, and we have to acknowledge frankly that the Church, as one of the major landowners, was not without guilt in the major periods of enclosure.

Thomas More (Utopia 1516) suggested that the practice of enclosure was responsible for some of the social problems affecting England at the time, specifically theft. He accused the rich and powerful of ‘stopping the course of agriculture, destroying houses and towns, reserving only the churches, and enclosing grounds that they may lodge their sheep in them’. An anonymous 17th Century protest poem summing up anti-enclosure feeling at the time says:

“They hang the man, and flog the woman,

That steals the goose from off the common;

But let the greater villain loose,

That steals the common from the goose.”

But, to return to our cottage on Gower, from our sitting room we can see wild horses, sheep and cattle that roam the many acres. What I find most remarkable is that this common land exists at all in our tiny island where property developers have gobbled up most of our available land. For hundreds of years the common land of Gower has seen innumerable peoples come and go and it has remained possessed by all and owned by none. It remains a place that is still the livelihood of those who live by the land and yet it is for all of us, like the landscape, the sea view or the beach, held in perpetuity for the whole of creation; the wild horses, the soaring hawks, the rabbits, the farmers and the wandering tourist.

In the address I am about to give I want to use the image and the story and experience of Commons to reflect on some of the concerns at the heart of my beliefs and concerns. I have entitled this address: 'From Global Commons to Global Community.'

Predictability can be a curse as much as a blessing. Making assumptions in learning is the way we join things up and is a key factor in growing up; but when it becomes a habit, so it may become a prison that stops us breaking out of moulds and finding new trails of knowledge. I hope that this Conference will have that kind of effect; that instead of reinforcing what we know, we may be jolted into new thinking and our old assumptions challenged.

In 1987 I became bishop of Bath and Wells. This diocese, conterminous with the county of Somerset, is a place of remarkable beauty with seaside, moor, levels and hills providing a habitat for animals and human beings. I spent a great deal of time listening to ordinary people who lived by the land. Sometimes their stories were told to me by some of the old parsons who themselves lived so closely with their people that they identified with their problems and their aspirations.

From them a darker story began to emerge that seemed to challenge the pretty story that the average person saw of the rural dyll. This darker account spoke of the way richer people were buying up farms and using intensive farming methods; of fewer people being employed to care for the land; of farm land being used for tourism and development; of younger people being driven from country areas because they could not afford to live there any longer.

Part of the story that worried me was the growing gulf between townspeople and country-folk. I put some of these thoughts in a speech to the Green Party in 1988. But, to return to our cottage on Gower, from our sitting room we can see wild horses, sheep and cattle that roam the many acres. What I find most remarkable is that this common land exists at all in our tiny island where property developers have gobbled up most of our available land. For hundreds of years the common land of Gower has seen innumerable peoples come and go and it has remained possessed by all and owned by none. It remains a place that is still the livelihood of those who live by the land and yet it is for all of us, like the landscape, the sea view or the beach, held in perpetuity for the whole of creation; the wild horses, the soaring hawks, the rabbits, the farmers and the wandering tourist.

It is of course true, as many thinkers have concluded, that the rise of western science and technology owed a great deal to the pre-eminence that Protestant Christianity in particular gave to the individual conscience and to progress, but could it be that it encouraged humankind to interpret the Genesis command to be a 'steward' of creation as a call to dominate and, adversely, to regard the world around one of our playthings?

Christianity must take some of the blame for the polluting of the earth, certainly not all and most definitely not the most. The humanocentric view of the Christian faith is susceptible to distortion with some Christian groups focusing attention on individual redemption to the detriment of the world around, and others assuming that creation is but an adjunct of the human story. One Christian theologian, Loren Wilkinson, admits candidly that 'with a few important exceptions, Christians have not shown much concern for the world's health'. However, attributing blame is a useless exercise- we are all guilty and as human beings we are all challenged to be part of the answer as well as the problem.

Our theme of Global Commons makes the point that, just as in medieval times in Europe and places in Africa, South America and elsewhere today, the commons were and are the place where the local, regional, national and global meet so ecological problems are problems for us all, and, very sadly, it is usually the very poor who are most affected.

And it is with the very poor that I want to pick up my biographical journey. In 1991 I became Archbishop of Canterbury. I was 54 years of age, Up to that point I had visited several parts of the Middle East, Australia and New Zealand – but I had never visited America and, for the purposes of this address, I had never visited Africa. It was Africa that awoke me to the tragic suffering of the poor. I saw it first hand in Sudan, in the slums of South Africa, in Rwanda and many other places.

Unlike a political leader I did not speed through the shanty towns merely seeing the problems. My wife and I stayed with the people; we slept in desert places under the velvety sky with an open latrine just a few feet away and rats scurrying in the darkness; we ate with the poor

with our fingers and through interpreters we listened to their tales of hunger and cruel death. It was one of those re-awakenings that occurs rarely in a person's life. We returned from our first visit to the Sudan haunted by what we had experienced and determined to do something about it. I raised money, I set up projects in development and I used my office to alert people to the issues involved in development.

But why should we at this Conference be concerned with matters of development? Well, let us not idealize or romanticize the notion of Common land. Common land has never been places simply to be gazed at as if they were paradises of beauty, tranquility and charm. They were essentially the common land for feeding the hungry, through common use of land owned by all. Is there not a direct link between our focus on global commons to our care for all people on our overcrowded planet? Let me remind you of the present situation: which is not only the challenge of inclusion, it is also the challenge of justice. We speak so readily of one world, which rich and poor share. But in reality there are two worlds. One world, one billion in total own 80% of global GDP; while another one billion at the other end of the spectrum live on under one dollar a day. The disparities are vast, unfair and indeed unjust.

And yet, the very odd thing about it all is that issues of environment and development belong together! There is an inter-connectedness that makes it extremely dangerous to separate them. I well remember in the early 90's making a visit to Armenia. We had first visited Russia and as we flew from Moscow airport the words of the British Ambassador rang in my ears: 'As you land at Yerevan look for the trees'. What could he have meant? As we landed, I realized what he had meant. There were no trees. It had been a harsh winter. There had been an earthquake and many had been living in tents, people were hungry and desperately poor. Desperation drove them to cut down the trees for firewood and, therefore, to create environmental damage. Ecology and development belong together.

In the land of the blind the one-eyed man may be king, but it is far more satisfactory to have double vision when it comes to problems of the magnitude we face today. So, from the viewpoint of someone reflecting on the world's ills from the beauty of Gower Common land, what do we need to do?

First, there is the need for understanding. The more we can do to bring home to people that our

mother home, the earth, is in deepest distress the better. But even better still is to bring home to each one of us that we need to inculcate new disciplines of restraint to consume less at every level if we wish our grandchildren to enjoy a reasonable life style. And such restraint will lead us to better health.

Second, there is the need for justice for the poor. We speak glibly of globalization but it has not yet gone far enough. Trade barriers mean that the poor cannot compete with American and European subsidies that protect us and hurt them.

Thirdly, there is the need for action. Governments, of course, have to play their part in creating 'green policies' that encourage citizens to be more aware of energy consumption. Nevertheless, a top-down approach on its own is sure to fail. If the theme of the 'commons' makes the point that common land is for all, and all are involved in responsible maintenance, it follows that the challenges compel each citizen to be more earth-conscious and to do what she and he can to live in rhythm with nature.

Fourthly, there is the need to confront the problem of exponential population increase. In 1650 total human population was 500 million and was spread thinly around the world. By 1996 the world's population stood at 5.6 billion. Shortly before 2000 AD we crossed the 6 billion mark. It is pretty certain that by 2011-12 the population will hover around 9 billion. The growth-rate, which is largely happening now in developing countries, is a disturbing time-bomb. Quite obviously, any reduction must involve a number of facts- principally, the empowerment of women in developing countries who, literally, bear the burden of the family; education, employment, and health care.

Fifthly, there is a need to combat together the weariness and sense of hopelessness that the current debate on global warming is engendering. The scepticism of Lawson and others, and indeed the Washington decision-makers until quite recently, has its roots in the complexities and calamities we currently face. It is tempting to throw up our hands in the air because the problems are too great, the solutions too hard to find.

The current debate on mitigation versus adaptation highlights the problem. Put in these stark terms however, it is clear that the answer must be that we both mitigate carbon as well as adapt to the effects of climate change. And our solutions should also aim to lead the public forward rather than berating them. Policy makers should encourage real and genuine change by shifting the burden of taxation rather than penalising and punishing ordinary people. The way to motivate support for responding to climate change is not to scare people, not to punish them, and it's not berate to them, but to invite them to take greater responsibility for their environment.

The Commons and the use of shared land for all, is a solution inviting people to care for land, which is no longer intensively farmed, but is enjoyed as a place of leisure, livelihood and sustenance for all. People tend to care for the spaces they share - they protect and value their land.

Well, our theme of Commons has allowed me to roam into areas of development as well as conservation. The commons reminds us all of our common indebtedness to mother earth and our moral responsibility to care for our environment for the sake of future generations. As a Christian my studies have shown me that although the Christian faith has a rich quarry of theology and thought concerning the environment it has been neglected in the past. You may not

share this resource of faith and, very possibly, you will have other reasons for being passionately committed to an environmental agenda. For us all there is but one challenge which is set out in the theme of your Conference, to ‘connect local experience to global challenges’. Few things matter more than that.

For Further reading:

Andrew Hurrell. On Global Order. OUP, 2007, p.218 ff. ‘The greening of sovereignty is an enormously difficult process’

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