

Bitter Reflections on Climate Change – Fr Keith Joseph

My friends Nigel and Edward come from an island called Ontong Java. It has about 3,000 people, who have lived on their quiet home half way between Malaita (Solomon Islands) and Nauru for over one thousand years. The highest point is only 3 metres above sea level. Every year the water rises a bit more, the tides cover the islands, the swamp taro crops are spoilt by the salt water, the coast erodes a bit more. The gravestones fall into the sea, and Nigel desperately tries to figure out how to save his people's culture once they are in exile, when their home is no more.

A couple of years ago I attended the ordination of my former student Polycarp. His people live on the artificial islands in the lagoons of North-East Malaita, but their islands are being eroded. They showed me where the high tide had increased by 30 cm over the last twenty years. The fish are no longer there, and their islands are falling apart, forcing people back to the mainland.

The village that is now my Solomon Islands home is on the north coast of Guadalcanal. We cannot dig latrines: the water table is now only one metre below the surface, forced upwards by the rising waters which also destroy the beach. Our wells are life; we cannot build latrines in the same water we use to drink and to wash.

So I must admit to anger when I see some self-righteous bastard arguing that climate change is a myth, that the evidence is not in, that it is only happening to a few islands. It is happening all over the Pacific. The scientific evidence is overwhelming. If our human behaviour is likely to lead to something wrong, and there is evidence that things are going wrong, then only an idiot insists on absolute proof. You look at things going wrong, and you do something. At the very least, you stop doing the stupid things; you stop the pollution, stop the needless waste of our limited resources.

Even worse, some Christians deny that anything is wrong, or that they are responsible. They say their prosperity is God's gift; how dare anyone suggest that such a blessing is wrong! God has promised no more floods they say – but forget that this flood is not from God, but from humans. As for the earth, they say we have dominion – and then forget that is dominion under God, for which we will be held accountable. If the people of Judah lost their land because they failed to give it Sabbath (2 Chronicles 36.20-21); then how much more will we be held accountable for destroying the land, especially the land on which our brothers and sisters live?

But no! The wealthy of Europe and Asia and America and Australia do not want to pay any more tax, do not want to lose the second car, the McMansion, the third refrigerator, the TV set in every room. These are now "necessities". Let us be blunt and honest – in denying climate change, we are just defending our greed. Nothing more. You hypocrites are killing the islands of my friends, my brothers, my home. You are not Christians – you worship Mammon, not the God of heaven and earth, to whom we must answer as stewards of His creation.

When I lived in the Solomon Islands I happily lived in a small house with no car, no television, and power only 12 hours a day, no lights after midnight when the power went off. My carbon footprint was almost nil. But now I live back in Australia, the land of my birth which I also love, I need a car, I need a television, I need air conditioning and a heater for the large house I live in. I am now part of the problem, and I loathe it. Lord, forgive me for being part of the problem. Lord, help me to be part of the solution. Amen.