

THE UK ENVIRONMENTAL LAWYERS ASSOCIATION

Précis of the speech given by Bishop James Jones at the Gala Dinner of the ELA Annual Conference in the crypt of the Catholic Metropolitan Cathedral in Liverpool on 4th July 2015

The Bishop introduced his speech with a number of anecdotes about Liverpool, the Cathedrals and his own work on the environment.

He warned that anybody speaking about the environment risked the charge of hypocrisy. There is no human activity that is environmentally neutral. The challenge lies in ensuring that the human impact is sustainable. The antidote is to keep ourselves conscious of the relationship between humanity and nature of which we are a part.

The Bishop spoke of young people's consciousness of the environmental crisis that is looming. Engaging with thousands of 16 to 18 year olds in school over a short period he found that the vast majority were both worried about the future of the planet and determined that we should take remedial action. He showed how one school in particular, the Academy of St Francis of Assisi, with the environment as its specialism, had transformed the life chances of its pupils from the inner city by raising its achievement from 27% GCSE passes to over 90% in 8 years. Quoting the African proverb 'we have borrowed the present from our children' he added that young people were aware of the fragility of the eco system and of this organism called earth of which humanity is a part.

The Bishop spoke of his work as Chair of the Independent Panel on Forestry which successfully recommended that the public forest estate should remain in trust for the nation. He told the story of visiting the Forest of Dean with the Panel and praising the natural landscape only to be rebuked by the local forester, "Bishop, that's not a natural landscape. That's a political landscape. Those oaks were planted to build ships for the British navy." The Bishop added that landscapes reveal our values and political priorities and imagined that environmental lawyers more than most appreciated this point.

Talking about forests and woods he quoted from his preface to the Forestry Panel's Report 'they are nature's playground for the adventurous, museum for the curious, hospital for the stressed, cathedral for the spiritual and a livelihood for the entrepreneur' They are a microcosm of life in all its interdependence. The Bishop made connection with the Conference theme of Water showing this interdependence is evident through trees purifying the water and protecting the land from flooding.

The Bishop added that 70% of the earth is covered by water but that only 1% of it is drinkable. Referring to the session that day about fracking led by Jake and Mark he was surprised to learn that a fracking well takes from 10 to 13 million litres of water. He drew attention to a prediction from a previous Secretary General of

the United Nations who speculated that the next World War would be about water. Already environmental refugees fleeing droughts and floods number in their tens of millions.

The Bishop spoke of his experiences in India of the super cyclones of West Bengal where children had drowned in the paddy fields because they could not run fast enough inland to escape the incoming tides. He then referred to Duncan Spencer's prediction that 'water risks will increase'. It prompted the Bishop to say that whenever he debates with those sceptical about a calamitous future he often says "well, listen to the insurance companies". It is they who are expert in assessing future risk.

Any discussion about the future of water cannot ignore the debate about the changing climate which raises the question of 'global neighbourliness'. The Bishop referred back to Camilla Lamont's exposition of the tension between 'neighbourliness' and 'everyone for themselves'. The Bishop added "that's exactly where we are in the climate change debate!" He further welcomed Lord Carnwath's reference to the upcoming Conference on climate change and international law, suggesting that climate change is a global problem that needs both local and global solutions.

The Bishop feared that in spite of the Pope's encyclical on the environment and the progress towards Paris 2015 there was still a lack of urgency.

In one of the sessions on water one speaker had referred to the Thames Barrier. The Bishop reinforced this point by adding that the Barrier had gone up 4 times in the 1980s, 35 times in the 1990s, and over 80 times since the year 2000. He surmised that if the City of London and the Palace of Westminster had been flooded as many times as the Thames Barrier had gone up in the last 35 years then Parliament and the financial institutions would have taken much more radical action by now! The Thames Barrier is unfortunately an example of how adaptation has taken the pressure off the necessity for mitigation.

The Bishop then referred to Linda Warren's session in which she showed that there were more habitats of species in the sea than on the land. It provoked the Bishop to wonder about the projected sea level rise and its impact on coastal habitats. In particular, the Bishop questioned the siting of nuclear power stations past, present and future on the coastline. He said that when he was in the House of Lords he had asked about whether any assessment had been done on the impact of rising sea levels on our coastal nuclear power stations. He had not been reassured by the answer which indicated that the assessment had been based on no more than 100 years. The impact of flooded nuclear power stations on habitats on both land and sea would tragically, in the Bishop's opinion, give environmental lawyers a field day.

The Bishop drew attention to the ground breaking work done in the City of Liverpool by the Proudman Laboratory and the Oceanic Institute of Liverpool University demonstrating conclusively that the oceans are both changing and warming.

Of course, the problem is that those currently most affected by climate change are far from the levers of power and unable to change the situation. Whereas those with the power do not as yet feel the consequences of our actions.

The Bishop ended with a parable (this can be found on the Bishop's website (bishopjamesjones.com) and with a definition of justice 'the whole point of justice consists precisely in providing for others through humanity what we provide for our own families through affection'.