



E3G

**Speech by John Ashton (expanded text)**

# Pilgrims again

**Reflections on Climate Change, Struggle and the Christian Mission**

**Ecocongregation Scotland Annual Gathering**

**St Aloysius College, Glasgow, 29 March 2014**

Thank you Ewan. It's an honour and a pleasure to be here.

The front line of the political struggle today is the community. And Ecocongregation Scotland has, in a short time, put itself at the forefront of community engagement in Scotland on climate change and the environment. It's an amazing achievement.

I really do feel honoured to be here.

After all, you are a Scottish movement. This is a palpably Scottish event in a Scottish city. I'm not Scottish. In case you hadn't noticed I'm actually English.

To be English in Glasgow at this particular moment in British and Scottish politics does make you feel a bit conspicuous.

I'm conspicuous in another way as well. You are a movement of faith communities, of congregations. I feel at home in this room with you, thanks to your warm welcome. But I must confess that I am not a member of any church or denomination, of any congregation.

In other words, you have chosen to give your main platform, a platform that comes up only once a year, to someone who is not one of your own, someone who comes to you from outside.

That says something important about the spirit that is guiding you, and about your mission. You understand that the world is our mirror: to find ourselves, to make sense of what we see within, we must also look outwards.

I had the good fortune to grow up in Northumberland. I left long ago, when I went to university; but Northumberland has never left me. As I was searching for inspiration about what to say this morning, I found myself reaching back to my Northumberland childhood.

One of the great figures in what is now Northumberland was St Cuthbert. He comes vividly to life in the writings of Bede. His story, I now realize, had a formative influence on my childhood imagination. His spirit lives yet, more than 1300 years after he died, in the spirit of Northumberland.

It is not that St Cuthbert is in our history books, that he is still talked about, that is striking. It is his place in the emotional memory of those who now live where he lived. In his own day he was greatly loved. And that love has endured, you can still feel it, even though most people now have only the vaguest idea of who he was and the times he bestrode.

Nowadays you can walk St Cuthbert's Way, which runs from Melrose Abbey in the Border Country where he first became a monk, to Lindisfarne, his base as Bishop of Northumbria. From here, as Bede tells us, he would roam the countryside, always seeking out those in need - the poor, the sick, the distressed - seeking them out and bringing them comfort.

Those were harsh times and it is no surprise that the people came to love the man. The poet R S Thomas might have had Cuthbert in mind when he wrote:

*...the parish / has a saint's name time cannot / unfrock...*

Here is a story from the end of Cuthbert's life.

When he knew his time was coming, Cuthbert went back to the tiny island of Inner Farne, where he had lived for six years as a hermit before reluctantly agreeing to return to the world to serve as Bishop. When he became too weak, in his final illness, to care for himself, a few devoted monks led by Herefrith came across the water from Lindisfarne to look after him.

But as death approached, Cuthbert begged the monks to return to Lindisfarne, to allow him to taste for one last time the joy of solitude. The monks were loath to go, fearing they would never again see Cuthbert alive. "When should we come back?" asked Herefrith. "When God wants you to" replied Cuthbert, "He will show you".

With heavy hearts the monks rowed back to Lindisfarne. As soon as they had landed a storm blew up. It raged for five days, and the water between the two islands was impassable. But at last the waves relented and the monks returned to Cuthbert.

They found him in a small hut that he had built during his first sojourn to receive visitors. He was sitting perfectly still. He had, he explained to Herefrith, been there all that time. "While I have been waiting here, the Devil has attacked me with greater force than ever before. But in God's strength I have defeated him". Later that day, 20 March 687, Cuthbert died.

Now remember, this was a man who had lived his whole life in struggle. Cuthbert was the archetypal ascetic monk. It must have been a struggle to subject himself constantly, as he did, to hunger and discomfort. He seems to have struggled day and night to free his spirit from earthly constraints, to purify himself in prayer, to set an example against greed and pride in others.

He was at the heart, too, of a great political struggle, between two conflicting Christian traditions. The Roman Church, brought to Britain at the end of the previous century by St Augustine, had been expanding its sphere, and trying to impose a single universal approach to Christian practice. In its way stood the less centralized and perhaps more naturalistic culture that St Columba had brought from Ireland to Iona, which had spread from there throughout the northern part of our country.

Many attempts were made to resolve the conflict. Finally at the Synod of Whitby in 664 the argument was thrashed out and settled in favour of Rome.

Cuthbert embodied the Christianity of Columba. Nobody would have had greater personal authority with its adherents. He urged his followers to accept the Whitby settlement. But the wound obviously ran deep, and had not healed even as Cuthbert lay dying 23 years later. His parting appeal to Herefrith, with his last breath, was to “submit to the customs of the universal church”.

You get the impression that if Cuthbert had chosen to reject it, the settlement would not have held. Christendom would have taken a different path at that crossroads and we would not be here today.

Anyway, Cuthbert’s entire life had been one long struggle. If ever a man had earned a bit of rest before breathing his last, he had. And yet in those final hours he found the strength and resolve for that greatest struggle of all.

What Cuthbert says to us in that final refusal to yield is that to live is to struggle. We struggle as individuals every day to resist temptation, to be good, just and selfless. We struggle together in our politics to make the right choices as communities, nations and societies. Cuthbert knew, I suspect, that all politics is struggle, because power is never in equilibrium, it seeks always to impose itself, to enhance itself, to diminish rival power.

And of course we struggle most of all not in politics but in the life of the spirit. Is it not struggle that turns the wheel of Christian experience, the cycle that runs from confession to absolution to transformation?

I have just come from the front line of another kind of struggle. I spent part of this week in Lancashire, where I got a close up view of the conflict that is raging there over whether to frack for shale gas.

Those who want to open up the county for shale gas - the fracking companies themselves, their backers in the City, their political allies on the ground and in London - have launched an offensive to win hearts and minds.

They are taking prominent local figures aside for quiet talks. They are giving sports kit and lab equipment to cash-strapped schools. They are offering down payments to communities that will accept test drilling, with a promise of a share in the proceeds when production begins.

In the picture they are painting, fracking will bring resurgence to a county that has seen better days. King Shale will pick up the crown discarded long ago by King Cotton.

They are also - and this is the oldest trick in the political book - trying to create a mood of inevitability. "You may not like it, you may have misgivings", they are saying, "but face it, this is going to happen, it can't be stopped. Best to engage with it, make sure it is done in the right way, so that it is safe, clean and unobtrusive, and your community gets a fair slice of the cake.

My impression - from a short visit, I know - is that despite this effort fracking in Lancashire is not going to happen on any significant scale.

The communities that are likely to be affected feel they are being offered what the Chinese call a sugar-coated bullet.

They are mobilizing. They are doing their homework on the health and environmental risks associated with fracking, on the noise and disruption, on what has happened in other countries. They rightly fear the industrialization of their land, and the threat to jobs in tourism and agriculture. They resent the idea that they can be bought off. They feel at the receiving end of a patronizing metropolitan view that as natives of what one southern politician called the "desolate" north they are looking for an opportunity to sell their grandmothers for a few pennies.

Fracking in Lancashire on any scale will not be possible without the consent of the communities in which it is taking place. I saw no sign that consent would be forthcoming.

But the struggle may be prolonged and it will certainly intensify before it abates. It will sow division at a time when we urgently need to bring a divided country together. In that sense nobody can win. Any outcome will bring sadness and wounds that will take longer to heal than to inflict.

The fracking struggle is of course part of the climate struggle. To deal with climate change, we need to stop using fossil fuels, not lock ourselves more tightly into an energy system that is based on them.

You can't say you want to frack for shale gas while saying in the same breath that you want to deal seriously with climate change. You just can't; it's that simple.

Those who want to open our country for fracking are a bit like the drug dealer who knows the addict wants to give up crack cocaine but tries to persuade him before doing so to go on one last binge.

To fix the climate problem, we need to take carbon emissions out of electricity, transport, heating and industry. And we need to use energy in all its forms much more efficiently than we currently do. That means we have to dismantle the current energy system and replace it with a new one. And we have to accomplish that in little more than a single generation.

This will be a transformation - though a more benign one than the transformation that climate change itself will impose on us if we stick to business as usual.

At the heart of the transformation will be electricity. If we succeed we will find ourselves using electric power to do more things in smarter ways, while using renewable methods not coal or gas to generate it.

Most of our electricity today is generated in big power stations by utilities that to their customers can seem remote and exploitative. Tomorrow more of it will be generated in the communities and by the communities that use it.

More and more communities in Germany are already doing this. Those that do it feel liberated, and that is what is driving the extraordinary advance of renewable energy in Europe's largest and most successful economy, where it now on some days meets over 60% of national demand.

In Britain too we know how to rebuild the energy system. We have the technology to do it and we can afford it.

After the war, in a few years, we rebuilt our bombed cities including Glasgow. We were less wealthy and more in debt than we are now. Rebuilding our energy system is a smaller task.

Then why is it so difficult?

This isn't really about technology or economics. It's about politics.

The energy system is the foundation of the economy. And it is at the foundation of the economy that politics and economics come together. You can't rebuild the energy system without reorganizing the way power is distributed across society. A community with more control over its electricity is a community with more power in its own hands.

The trouble is, established patterns of power relations tend to resist being reorganized. If you want to reorganize them you have to embark on a political struggle.

To deal with climate change we will have to win a political struggle, one that has hardly yet begun.

And actually, when you think about it, this is a spiritual struggle as well as a political one. A struggle between two different and profoundly incompatible views of what it means to be human.

The first view is what we have at the moment, the status quo.

In this view, the stress is on the individual more than the community or society as a whole.

The individual makes choices within the market.

The market is held to be better at allocating resources than any alternative mechanism. So it is left as far as possible to determine outcomes. (Never mind that in reality the outcomes it delivers often reflect the interests of those who have been successful in exploiting it to accumulate wealth and power).

By definition what we experience thereby is progress. As long as we surrender our destiny to the market it can never take us backwards, only forwards. If we feel as if we are going backwards it must be an illusion. Of course the possibility of failure in the market is acknowledged, and corrections sometimes made. But what counts as market failure and what needs to be done about it is decided largely by those who idolize the market.

This system does its best to squeeze the experience of being human into a narrow realm of individual choices about consumption.

Bombarded by an unremitting cognitive assault designed to keep us wanting more, we come to define ourselves increasingly according to our ability to achieve gratification through consumption. Under that assault we forget where we came from - what we have struggled for - so there is no past. And because, having surrendered our will to the market, the future is simply whatever is going to happen to us not something we build ourselves, there is no future either.

This is a world of the perpetual present.

Power in this system tends to end up in the hands of an elite. It is a “power over” system, the power of a small group over the rest. And the institutions of power tend to be centralized.

But there is another view of what it means to be human; another world we can build for ourselves.

In this alternative world, the individual is still important but the character of society also matters. And society is made up not only of individuals but of communities.

The market is still important, but it is our servant not our master. We decide the outcomes we want and organize ourselves together to secure them.

The future is something for which we are responsible, we do build it, and progress something to be struggled for.

Of course we still want to gratify our desires, but we no longer define ourselves in doing so. Past and future have more meaning in our lives. We understand that with no memory of where we came from we can make no sense of who we are or where we are going, nor take responsibility for getting there.

This way of living holds out the prospect of a different kind of power. We do not have to yield up our destinies in trust to the whims of an elite, hoping that it will act always in the public interest not merely its own. We all have a voice. Power is distributed not centralized.

We summon it and express and channel it to our shared ends by participating. This society runs not on “power over” but on “power with”.

The struggle we are in is the struggle between these two views of the human condition.

To win it we must remember who we are and where we came from; we must take responsibility not just for what we want to consume next but for who we want to be together.

I started at the end of Cuthbert’s life. Here’s a story from its beginning.

Cuthbert was strong and agile, a natural athlete. As a youth he excelled in sport and revelled in his prowess.

One day the young Cuthbert was at play with friends when a small child ran up to him. With an expression solemn beyond his years the child rebuked Cuthbert for his self-indulgence. He told him that he should learn to control himself. But Cuthbert just laughed and went back to his sport.

At this the child threw himself on the ground and cried hysterically. Cuthbert, now moved, went back to him. He tried to console him and asked why he was so distressed. “Why do you persist”, the child replied, “why do you persist in your silly games, letting the gifts that God has bestowed on you go to waste?”

According to Bede, these words “pierced Cuthbert’s heart”. From that day on he was a changed man. He devoted himself to those he lived among, and to God.

A consumer society is an infantilized society. By allowing the market and our search for gratification within it to define us we reduce ourselves to an infantilized condition. If we want to free ourselves from the emotional and moral shackles imposed by that condition, we must in a sense experience together what Cuthbert experienced with the small child.

The child is within each of us now. We just have to open our hearts to him.

What has all that got to do with climate change?

The condition that now defines humanity is the way in which globalization has tangled our destinies so tightly together. This degree of interdependence is completely new in the human experience. Nothing will shape the next stage of that experience more than how we respond to its consequences.

Climate change is an objective problem in its own right. It is also an aspect of that interdependence and a window on it. You could even say that we should be thankful for the clarity it gives us, all of a sudden, about our new condition.

It is the status quo, the first of those two views of what it is to be human that has carried us into that condition. We arrived here in consequence of myriads of choices by individuals. We

never asked where those choices were leading and whether we all wanted to go there. There was no moment when we decided that it would be a good idea to tie our fates together as surely as if we were all passengers on a single ship, sailing rudderless across an uncharted and stormy sea.

The question now is: can we manage - can we even survive - the consequences of our interdependence? We won't survive if we simply carry on as before. Now we must learn to anticipate where our choices will lead and take responsibility for what they do, both to people we will never see nor know, and to the natural fabric of which we are all part.

We stand in other words at a threshold as significant as any that human beings have ever crossed. It is the threshold of collective self-awareness, and collective responsibility for our actions.

We have struggled since the dawn of time as individuals to be good. This is the struggle to be good together.

As any child knows (but as adults we tend to forget this) every threshold is guarded by a demon: a troll, a three-headed dog; the Devil. The only way to avoid a life and death struggle is to turn back. And we cannot turn back.

The small child in ourselves is now crying at our feet. He wants to wake us up so we can see the threshold in front of us.

A subtle demon guards the threshold. He too is inside each of us. We can keep having what we desire without regard to the consequences, he tells us. We have to vanquish him so we can walk across.

Your role, in the Ecocongregation movement, in communities of faith, will be critical. Your task is to make us heed the child and face the demon.

Earlier I quoted a line from a poem by R S Thomas, *The Moon in Lleyn*:

*....the parish / has a saint's name time cannot / unfrock*

The full passage reads:

*.....the parish*

*has a saint's name time cannot*

*unfrock. In cities that*

*have outgrown their promise people*

*are becoming pilgrims*

*again, if not to this place*



*then to the recreation of it*

*in their own spirits....*

Pilgrims again. Our cities have outgrown their promise and we must all become pilgrims again, as we used to be.

You in this movement know that this is about who we are not what we do. And you know that by the very smallest of acts we can start to recreate the place in our own spirits, the place from which the goodness in our souls streams out like water from a spring.

When you take responsibility for how your church is run, for example how you heat and light your buildings, when you do that looking outwards as well as inwards, when you do it with passion, reaching out your hand to other congregations and the communities you serve, you are raising a banner and inviting people to follow. Change starts with what you do, not with what you ask of others. Cuthbert knew that.

I could stop talking now. Perhaps I should. But I would if you will allow me like to end in a slightly different place, quite a personal place.

I am not well versed in the scripture. But my friend Alastair McIntosh, sitting at the back there, has drawn my attention to a passage in St Paul's Letter to the Romans which seems uncannily relevant to what I have been trying to say. It was incidentally Alastair who also introduced me to *The Moon at Lleyn*.

I said I was not a member of a congregation. I should now come completely clean and confess that I have never considered myself a Christian.

One reason for that - not the only one, but nevertheless a significant one - was that it has always seemed to me that you cannot separate human beings either from each other or from Nature. We are all part of the same whole and if any part of that whole is harmed we are all harmed.

Ever since I began dwelling on such matters that has been how I experienced what it is to be alive. I don't mean that as intellectual observation but as a spiritual state of being.

And as I read and listened to Christian teachings it always seemed to me hard to reconcile them with this way of being in the world. A few great Christians - like St Cuthbert himself and of course St Francis - seemed to stand for something with which I felt more affinity. But on the whole there seemed, at least in the mainstream doctrine, to be a separation if not from the rest of humanity then certainly from Nature. And not just separation from Nature but dominion over it.

So to end, here are St Paul's words. To me he seems in this passage at odds with the notion of separation and dominion. He doesn't draw me all the way into your community of faith. But he makes me feel a lot closer to you. And he shines a searchlight along the path we now need to follow.

“We know” he writes<sup>1</sup> :

*We know that the whole creation has been groaning in labour pains until now; and not only the creation, but we ourselves, who have the first fruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly while we wait for adoption.*

*John Ashton*

**29 March 2014**

*John Ashton is an independent commentator and adviser on the politics of climate change. From 2006-12 he served as Special Representative for Climate Change to three successive UK Foreign Secretaries, spanning the current Coalition and the previous Labour Government. He was a cofounder and, from 2004-6, the first Chief Executive of the think tank E3G. From 1978-2002, after a brief period as a research astronomer, he was a career diplomat, with a particular focus on China.*

*John is a Fellow of the European Climate Foundation; a Non Executive Director of E3G; a visiting professor at the London University School of Oriental and African Studies; a Distinguished Policy Fellow at the Grantham Institute for Climate Change at Imperial College; and a Trustee of the UK Youth Climate Coalition and Tipping Point.*



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-ShareAlike 3.0 Unported License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-sa/3.0/).

> \_\_\_\_\_  
<sup>1</sup> Romans 8.22-24