

Climate and Conflict

You may or may not like the heat we are currently experiencing. But it was interesting to hear that cathedrals, including our own York Minster, have been posting messages on social media encouraging visitors wishing to escape the heatwave to seek refuge in their buildings.

Many years ago when I was a student I spent a term in the French city of Bordeaux and I was not used to the level of heat there. It was lovely to go into the city's cool medieval cathedral. Though I expect that in winter it would be rather too cold.

The thought crossed my mind as to whether there is any correlation between climate and conflict. And indeed research seems to suggest that there is. One study, for example, found that a one degree increase in temperature increased interpersonal conflict by 2.4% and intergroup conflict by as much as 11.3%. I do not know how much such a finding is accepted by the academic community, but it is an interesting thought.

That is not of course to claim that conflict only occurs in hot countries. Far from it. But one can perhaps understand why hotter physical conditions might lead to hotter emotions and reactions.

One important effect of climate is on the natural resources that are available, and particularly water. Water is certainly more regularly abundant in more temperate climates and is thus less likely to be a cause for conflict than in parts of the world suffering from a scarcity of water.

The answer is of course for the resources of the world to be shared more equitably. That makes sense from both a human and a religious point of view. But as we know that comes up against human greed and selfishness and vested interests.

Whilst much about climate and weather is beyond human control we know that it is affected by human activity. The same drive of greed and selfishness can damage the ecosystems and the air quality that in turn adversely affect the world's climate.

It is right that Christians should be concerned for the environment, for God's creation of which we believe we are stewards. We should be concerned for the right sharing of the earth's resources, so that Isaiah's vision in our reading just now (Isaiah 49.8-10) might be realised for all people: "they shall not hunger or thirst, neither scorching wind nor sun shall strike them down ... and by springs of water will [they be] guide[d]".

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