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Christ Church West Wimbledon
Sermon : February 23rd 2020
“Sunday before Lent”

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I wonder how many of you caught the recent BBC film documentary called ‘The Windermere Children’? It is August 1945. A coachload of children arrives by Lake Windermere in the Lake District. They are child survivors of the Nazi Holocaust that has devastated Europe’s Jewish population. Carrying only the clothes they wear and a few meagre possessions, they bear the emotional and physical scars of all they have suffered. Charged with looking after the children is a gifted child psychologist along with his team of counsellors, including an art therapist, a generous philanthropist and a sports coach. They have four months to help the children reclaim their lives. By the lake, the children learn English, play football, ride bikes, express their trauma through painting - and begin to heal. Some locals taunt them, but they are embraced by others. Haunted by nightmares, they yearn for news of their loved ones. When the Red Cross arrives with letters about the fates of their families, none of them receive good news. But in the absence of relatives, the children find family in each other – and that has continued to this day.

It is a remarkable true story about hope in the aftermath of the Holocaust, based on the powerful first-person testimony of survivors who began their new lives in the UK.

Why do I speak about this today? Well a few years ago I met one of those children. Now in his 90’s, Harry Olmer is a dentist in Potters Bar. He, the 4th of six children, and his family left their home in 1940 and went to live some 30 miles from Krakow. During the War he was incarcerated in 4 camps. The conditions in the camps in Poland were especially grim for 6 million Jews perished in the Holocaust. At a talk I heard him give someone asked him how his faith had been affected after all he went through. Quite matter of factly, he said he never stopped believing in God and the beautiful world God created – and he even continued saying his prayers in the

camps. His, perhaps surprising, reply that he never stopped believing in God despite all he saw and experienced, reminded me of those extraordinary lines which were found scrawled on a cellar wall where Jews had hidden during the war:

"I believe in the sun even when it's not shining. I believe in love even when I don't feel it. I believe in God even when He is silent".

The inspirational talk by Harry Olmer spoke to many of us of the certainty that evil cannot quench the human spirit – that human beings must continue to do what makes them unique – that is, their belief in good, their faith in God and his beautiful world.

I thought about this amazing transforming story as I was looking at the readings set for this morning which are all about transformation: the transformation of our lives, of our world.

In Matthew the story of the Transfiguration points ahead to Jesus's resurrection glory but also underlines that he is the successor to Moses and Elijah who were, in the Old Testament, Israel's two greatest spokesmen for God. As we prepare for the season of Lent we think about the unbreakable bond between God and ourselves, his beloved creation and his people. And it is God's creation that we are particularly thinking about during Lent. It is precisely because we know that this world is – or at least has the potential to be – a beautiful place that we are working hard to become an Eco-Church and why our Lent Course is linking in to the Church of England Lent Campaign for 2020: **LIVE LENT – CARE FOR GOD'S CREATION**. We are following 5 related topics: **CREATION, STEWARDSHIP, FALL AND REDEMPTION, MONEY and LIFESTYLE**, studying and discussing Bible passages, and relating these to our care of God's world.

But there is more. Recently the General Synod of the Church of England (the Church's Parliament) passed a vote to bring forward the net-zero carbon target for the C of E from 2045 to 2030. That is only 10 years away – and the clock is ticking. This means the C of E is one of the most ambitious institutions in the world when it comes to decarbonisation, and a tremendously tough challenge has been set. The policy lacks a detailed implementation plan and it will undoubtedly be tough to produce one - but this is urgent – and not just for those who are committed environmental campaigners. What it means for churches like ours is that it becomes more even more important to make progress as far as we can with our Eco-church project. Lucy Christie and the Eco-church team she's leading has made a very good

start. But we need to up the ante. The more we can weave eco-action into our everyday life at CCWW the better. That is why we are launching our Lenten Fast for Creation with the weekly plan. Don't worry – it's not so much about giving up food and drink – though you can still do that. It's more about changes in lifestyle, values and habits, and about our voices being raised to make it clear to MPs and councillors that the climate crisis matters to us. So have a careful study of the Weekly Plan that you were given this morning and see if you can follow it religiously during the 6 weeks of Lent – and there's a 7th suggestion for action when the challenge ends. There is no reason why we can't all take part in this simple Lenten Fast for Creation – and work together towards a better world.

Someone said to me recently: "we live such comparatively comfortable lives that it does us good to be reminded of the harsh reality of the lives of many others in our beautiful world and good to be able to do something – however small – about it."

We know that God gave us our world, that God gave us our lives so that we can live in harmony with others and, because we can depend upon him for everything, we have no real need to worry. But maybe we should be worrying about our world. Maybe we should be doing what we can to make it a better place in whatever way we can and not just leaving the action up to others. Being aware of a story such as the Windermere Children; trying to imagine what a refugee family are going through; having the opportunity to welcome and host a hard-pressed priest from Zimbabwe – all of these can help us see our world with fresh eyes and give us the opportunity to deepen our insight and broaden our knowledge. And there is nothing more important than caring for and changing how we treat God's creation.

Will you resolve with me to change now, to transform the way we live our lives – so that we all take greater care of the world God has given us? May we never forget that we are the stewards, not the owners, of all we enjoy.

Above all, like a responsible tenant vacating a property, we need to realise we have the duty to pass on to the generations to come a world which is in a far better condition than when we entered it.

Almighty God, give us reverence for all creation and respect for every person, that we may mirror your likeness in the glory of Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.