

Lydia Perris: COP27 reflections 5/4/23

Trigger warning: some people may find the mention of sexual assault and violence distressing.

My friend Doreen, a mother, business leader and climate activist from near Nairobi, told me three stories at COP27 that have really stuck with me. Due to repeated droughts in Kenya, women and girls must walk further and further to new water sources, often via unfamiliar and dangerous routes. This makes them even more vulnerable to rape, sexual assault, and violence. I asked if we could include statistics about that in the newsletter that I was writing with Doreen, and she asked me why, why do you need numbers? That really convicted me, why *do* I need statistics to prove a point, when this is the terrible reality for thousands of women across Africa? As if that isn't bad enough, she told me the story of Mary, a young girl who was forced to move from her hometown due to flooding. She went to live with her uncle. He raped her. And now at 11 years old she is a mother. Doreen also knew Peter, a young boy who was seen as the hope of his community. Whilst helping his family move their livestock to more fertile ground during the severe droughts, he was killed by gang members.

So when people ask me 'How was Egypt?', that's what I think of. It's also left me feeling really angry about the total mess our world is in.

In the UK, the language we use to understand climate change does not do justice to the lived reality of it for millions of people around the world. Hearing first-hand the personal stories of climate change impacts, whether that's more frequent and severe droughts, floods, sea-level rise, unpredictable weather patterns or biodiversity loss, was quite emotional. Even the phrases 'climate crisis' or 'climate emergency' make suffering sound abstract, far away, and disembodied. The truth is that we in the Global North are now fully desensitised to the real-world impacts of a changing climate on people's lives, even while young girls are raped on the way to the water source and boys are murdered by gangs.

Attending COP expanded my understanding of the complex and interconnected injustices at play, and therefore my view of true 'climate justice'. That's a phrase that's often banded about, but what does it actually mean? To me, it's not simply that the nations who have contributed least to the causes of the climate crisis are being disproportionately affected. That's true, and unfair, but climate justice is way bigger than that. At COP I questioned the fairness of the structure of the negotiations themselves; the democracy of the decision-making processes; the financial decisions that were being made; the terms and conditions of the loss and damage fund; the disconnect between the people most affected and the people making decisions; the fact that 636 fossil fuel lobbyists were in attendance under the guise of country negotiating parties; global debt policies; that the UK continues to heavily subsidise fossil fuel companies; and ultimately a severe lack of accountability for structural processes. I found myself asking: what is *really* going on here?!

I was surprised that I was, and remain, very sceptical about the climate work I learnt about at COP. I doubted most of what was said, especially when it was just 'blah blah blah', ticking all the buzzword boxes, and lacking integrity or meaningful action. I think it's important to be analytical, critical, and curious about the bigger picture and powers at play, especially when fake news, greenwashing and miscommunications are rife. But I also think it's important to trust what others say, to listen and to not write everyone and everything off instantly. I'm figuring out that balance regarding the climate crisis.

For me, this is where faith comes in. Jesus wasn't desensitised to suffering, nor was he passive in His response. Apathy is the biggest threat to meaningful climate action. At COP, I found myself praying

for a soft heart, that would let the discomfort of what I was hearing settle in me, and for me to not just brush it off and forget those names, those stories, and those emotions, but to remember them and hold them, even in the discomfort. I would like to see more compassion and conviction in the wider Church in response to the climate crisis.

I am humbled by Jesus' example of grace and truth. And I invite Him to sit with me as I continue to wrestle with this experience and what it means for me, and for the wider Church. I invite you to do the same, to sit with the reality of climate change, and the uncomfortable emotions that will arise. That will be different for everyone, and a crucial individual and collective step that I think will set us on a better path. We need action that adequately addresses the scale and complexity of the climate crisis. So I encourage you to do your deep spiritual work.