

**SERMON: "THE WORLD IN OUR HANDS"**  
**by Geoffrey R Usher**

In March 2009 I went to Japan for the Council meeting of the International Association for Religious Freedom, held at the Tsubaki Grand Shrine near Suzuka. While in Japan I was given a copy of a book by Ervin Laszlo, entitled You Can Change the World:—The Global Citizen's Handbook for Living on Planet Earth.

Ervin Laszlo is a leading figure in the field of systems philosophy and general evolution theory. He is the author of more than 40 books; a Visiting Professor at the University of Stuttgart, in Germany; and the Founder and President of the Club of Budapest, which is an informal association globally and locally active opinion leaders in the fields of art, science, religion and culture.

Founded in 1993, the Club of Budapest is dedicated to furthering and facilitating the evolution of more responsible and timely values and ethics among people in all societies and every walk of life, as the best and ultimately only dependable avenue toward peace and sustainability on this planet.

The first chapter is entitled "The World in Our Hands", and I have taken that as the title for this sermon, in which I want to share with you some ideas from Laszlo's book.

It sets out the simple message that we must not wait for fundamental change to come from "above", from the elected or appointed leaders of contemporary society. Meaningful change must come from "below", from the people - the ordinary people like us - who live in those societies.

Two parallel developments in recent years have greatly enhanced the prospects for such a grassroots movement. The first development is that the need for fundamental change has become increasingly urgent and apparent.

The second development is that people all over the world have become increasingly willing to pursue such change.

Laszlo claims that change will come, because humankind cannot just keep going on as it has done until now. War and terrorism are only the tip of the iceberg. The body of the iceberg includes the growing stress, frustration, and hatred which are generated by the way our life-sustaining environment has been impoverished, and by the imbalance which has been created by the workings of the world's economic and social systems.

The coronavirus pandemic was the stimulus for some major shifts in government / political thinking, even for our conservative Federal Coalition government.

Laszlo wrote:

The challenge facing us is to create a positive future. If we act wisely and effectively, we can create a more peaceful and sustainable world over the span of the next few years. We are not obliged to go on living in crisis and conflict. The world need not remain violent, and economically, socially and ecologically unsustainable. We can progress towards harmony, cooperation, livable communities, and a value system that nourishes and sustains us and all things that live on this Earth.

The first step is to be clear what is wrong with our world at present.

The current international economic and social system has brought huge wealth to a few people, and has brought poverty and misery to many. Production, trade, finance and communication have been globalised, but the system has created national and regional unemployment; it has widened the gap between rich and poor; and it has led to increased degradation of the environment, both locally and globally.

One fifth of the world's population become richer still. That includes us. At the same time, one fifth of the world's population are in absolute poverty, trying to survive on something like a dollar or two a day, and scratching that bare existence in slums and shanty-towns and depressed rural hinterlands.

These conditions are explosive. They fuel resentment and revolt. If people harbour resentment and hatred and the desire for revenge, they cannot co-exist peacefully and cooperatively.

Attaining peace in people's hearts is a pre-condition of attaining peace in the world. And inner peace depends greatly on creating more equitable conditions around the world.

Laszlo wrote:

The contemporary world runs on money and is hooked on economic growth. Money might make the world go round, but it is not ordinary money that does the work: it is primarily "debt-money".

Most of the money in the world - all but the three or four percent that we use in banknotes and coins in everyday commerce - is not issued by central banks and guaranteed by central governments but is created by commercial banks in the form of credit.

People ask for credit when they need more money and are confident that they can repay it; businesses borrow when they want to expand and believe that they can do so profitably. Economic growth fuels economic confidence and leads to an increase in borrowing - which means an increase in the amount of debt-money that divides the system.

The system is self-fuelling: debt, if it is to be repaid with interest, requires economic growth; growth leads to more lending and thus to more debt-money, which in turn leads to more growth - and more debt-money. In this system, rich people and multinational corporations are the main beneficiaries: they can qualify for credit and obtain debt-money. Poor people and small businesses are left on the margins.

The self-perpetuating cycles of the world's monetary system mean that the rights endorsed by the world community - rights to things like health care, nourishment and employment - are enjoyed by fewer people. Although governments pay lip-service to such rights, they can't make them a priority because they need to work closely with banks and major businesses to try to maintain the momentum of growth in their economy.

The attempt to maintain the momentum means more borrowing and more debt-money. It leaves poor people out of play. It widens the gap between the rich and powerful and the poor and powerless.

The economic and social unsustainability of our world has deep ecological roots, in the serious imbalance between human habitations and the self-maintaining cycles of nature. In the past, this imbalance was not critical, because human exploitation of the environment was relatively modest. With a smaller population, and with primitive technologies, the supply of natural resources seemed endless, and environmental damage seemed insignificant. If one area was unwittingly damaged or over-exploited, there were other areas to conquer and to exploit.

In the middle of the nineteenth century, the world's population reached one billion. The impact on the environment increased dramatically. Both population and the use of natural resources grew continually through the twentieth century. In the second half of the twentieth century - which is just a couple of generations - we and our parents and grandparents used more of nature's resources than were used in all of the preceding millennia of human history.

However, the load we place on the environment is not due simply to our numbers; rather, it is due to our irresponsible use of resources, which is hugely out of proportion to our numbers.

Not only do we over-exploit nature; we damage it. In the past, the success of technological development used to obscure the fact that the cycles of nature had become progressively degraded.

Chemically bolstered mechanical agriculture increased production; it increased yields per acre, and made more acres available for cultivation; but it also increased the growth of algae in lakes and waterways.

Chemicals such as DDT proved to be effective insecticides; but they also led to the poisoning of entire animal, bird and insect populations.

Well over three hundred million tons of hazardous waste and toxic chemicals are produced each year. Some of that waste and those chemicals reach the environment, where they poison people as well as plants and animals. The great majority of people around the world lack clean, safe drinking water and adequate sanitation. About an eighth of the birds of the planet, and a quarter of the mammals, are in danger of extinction.

Some countries can no longer grow their own food. A third of the world's remaining forests are degraded. Half of the world's wetlands have been lost over the last century. Half a billion people live in regions of chronic drought.

Ervin Laszlo wrote:

The ecological unsustainability of the world today is aggravated by the fact that ecosystems do not collapse piece-meal. We have been operating on the assumption that in nature cause and effect is proportional, so that an additional ounce of pollution produces an additional ounce of damage. This, however, is not so. Ecosystems may be polluted for many years without any change at all, then flip into an entirely different condition.

Gradual changes create cumulative vulnerability, until a single shock to the system, such as a flood or a drought, knocks the system into a different state, and that state may be considerably less adapted to sustain human life and economic activity.

The level of "hothouse gases" in the atmosphere is the highest it has ever been in recorded history, and possibly in the past twenty million years. Because of the sudden leaps that can occur in the development and change of ecosystems, climate change during the next few years could see global warming somewhere between one and a half and five and a half degrees Celsius, leading to the undermining of human settlements and ecologies throughout the world.

Laszlo wrote:

Forests may be consumed by fires, grasslands may dry out and turn into dust bowls, wildlife could disappear, and diseases such as cholera, malaria, dengue fever and yellow fever could decimate human populations.

So, the bottom line is that our global village is inequitable; it is full of frustration, envy and hatred; it is neither economically nor ecologically sustainable.

More than half a century ago, Albert Einstein said that we cannot solve a problem with the same kind of thinking that gave rise to it.

And almost two decades ago, in December 2001, a hundred Nobel Laureates signed a Declaration at the conclusion of the Nobel Peace Prize Centennial Symposium. In that Declaration they said:

The most profound danger to world peace in the coming years will stem not from the irrational acts of states or individuals but from the legitimate demands of the world's dispossessed.

That Declaration ended:

To survive in the world we have transformed, we must learn to think in a new way.

With new, more responsible thinking, we could start to move towards better, more peaceful and sustainable conditions on our planet.

The Introduction to Laszlo's book was written by the former Soviet leader Mikhael Gorbachev. I want to end with some of what he wrote in the concluding section of his Introduction:

We must not wait until society's crisis reaches the danger point. We must not! Every person can act. If everyone does his or her bit, together we can accomplish what is necessary. We can make an impact on those who decide the politics and the destiny of society, and motivate them to begin making the necessary changes.

The human community has reached the point where it must decide whether it allows events to take their course (and if it does we will all be put to a difficult test) or whether it manages to make the turning that changes the character and the content of development for the benefit of humankind. To make this decision, we must first become conscious that a turning is truly necessary. Then we must understand what we must do to avoid the worst, and how we must do it.

The future that confronts us is an open future. All of us - and that includes you ... can do our bit to decide it.

Amen.