

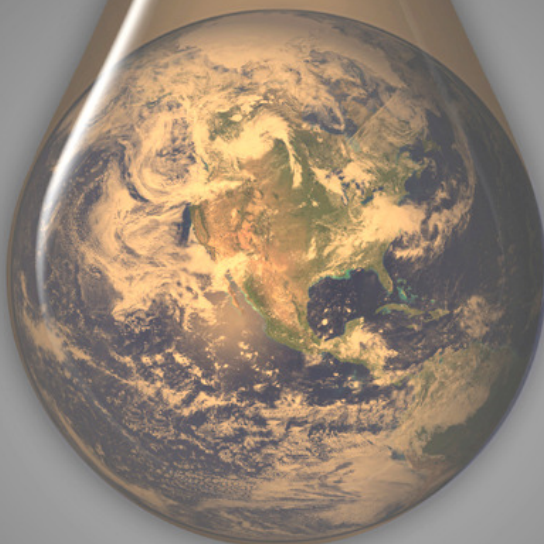
# Just So

Vol 9 April 2009

# Let us be human

## Prophecy, Peak Oil and the Path for the Faithful

### The Revd Sam Norton



**Just So**

stories and critical comment  
on social justice themes

**Let us be human**  
**Prophecy, Peak Oil and**  
**the Path for the Faithful**

The Revd Sam Norton

Copyright © Sam Norton 2009

This work was commissioned and published  
by the Worcester Diocesan Board of Finance Ltd

## **Prologue: Jeremiah**

I would like to suggest to you that the prophet Jeremiah is *the* Biblical guide for our time. He lived through a time of great upheaval and he warned the people of Israel that they had fallen away from the living God and that, if they didn't do something about it, great suffering would descend upon them.

We are living in similar times.

In 586 BC the Babylonians conquered Jerusalem: "On the tenth day of the fifth month, in the nineteenth year of Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon, Nebuzaradan commander of the imperial guard, who served the king of Babylon, came to Jerusalem. He set fire to the temple of the LORD, the royal palace and all the houses of Jerusalem. Every important building he burned down." (Jeremiah 52:12-13 ) The King of Judah was brought to the steps of the Temple, whereupon his family were slaughtered in front of him and then he was blinded and bound, taken into

captivity to Babylon itself. Along with him were taken all of the upper classes in Judah's society, beginning what became known as the Exile: "by the rivers of Babylon we sat down and wept, when we remembered Zion".

We in the West do not face a direct equivalent of a Babylonian army camped outside of our gates; nor do we enjoy the direct presence of the LORD in the temple of Jerusalem. Our idolatries are different - yet our predicament is very similar. A great calamity is coming upon our civilisation, a calamity that has been foretold and warned against for nearly two generations, and those warnings have been ignored. We too have enjoyed the comforts of an idolatrous society and allowed injustice to flourish unchecked. We have sold our inheritance for a mess of pottage and we have forgotten who we are and how to be human. Sadly, we have now left behind the time of decisions and

have entered the time of consequences.

### **Peak Oil: a resource constraint**

The specific issue I want to draw attention to in this booklet is the geological phenomenon known as Peak Oil, but before describing that in detail it is worth emphasising that Peak Oil is simply one example of a *resource constraint*. The Club of Rome researchers, who published 'Limits to Growth' in the 1970's, predicted that in the early decades of the twenty first century, if matters continued in the way they had in industrial civilisations in the previous two hundred years or so, then these economies would bump up against physical constraints. These could be in many forms - pollution, overpopulation, disease and lack of resources. The essential point was that it was impossible for there to be never-ending physical growth within a finite environment - and nobody doubts that the earth is a finite environment. Sadly

these prophetic voices were marginalised and ridiculed. Our society preferred to listen to the Hananiahs of our time.

Peak Oil is a well understood and widely observed geological phenomenon. The phrase refers to that point in time when the flow rate of oil from a particular well or formation of wells hits a maximum and thereafter declines. Peak Oil does NOT refer to "running out of oil", at least, not in a simple sense. It refers to the quantity available at a particular moment in time; even after the peak, there is as much oil available as has been drawn down up to that time.

Let me give two images which should help to convey the nature of Peak Oil.

The first relates to a typical hot water tank in the loft of a house. If you want to run a hot bath then you will open the taps on the bath and draw down the water from the tank. At the beginning

of the process you can control the flow of water through the tap by adjusting how open or closed it is. As time goes on, and the bath begins to fill up, the amount of water in the tank starts to decline; at the same time, the pressure also declines. There comes a point when it doesn't matter what you do to the tap, the rate of water coming out of the tank will slow to a trickle. In the same way, at the beginning of drawing down oil from a particular reservoir, the high pressure will mean that the flow of oil can be actively controlled. As the field gets older, that control is reduced.

The second image is this: imagine you have found a marvellous new pub, which serves an excellent beer for the miraculous price of £1 a pint. You are the first customer, and you delight in your discovery. The next night you bring a friend, and the two of you enjoy the beer together. The night after, you each bring another friend each, and the four of you enjoy the beer. The

night after, the same thing happens, and eight of you enjoy a pint. So the clientele of the pub expands exponentially. The trouble is that the landlord faces the same problem with his beer supplies as was faced with the hot water tank in a loft: there comes a point when he cannot increase the flow of beer beyond a particular limit. At this point not every customer is able to purchase beer when they want to, and so there are three options, and a choice needs to be made: either

- a. the price of the beer goes up;
- b. the customers start to fight over the beer; or
- c. a rationing system is put into place.

What we face, as an industrial civilisation, is essentially this choice with regard to our energy supplies.

### **Supply and Demand**

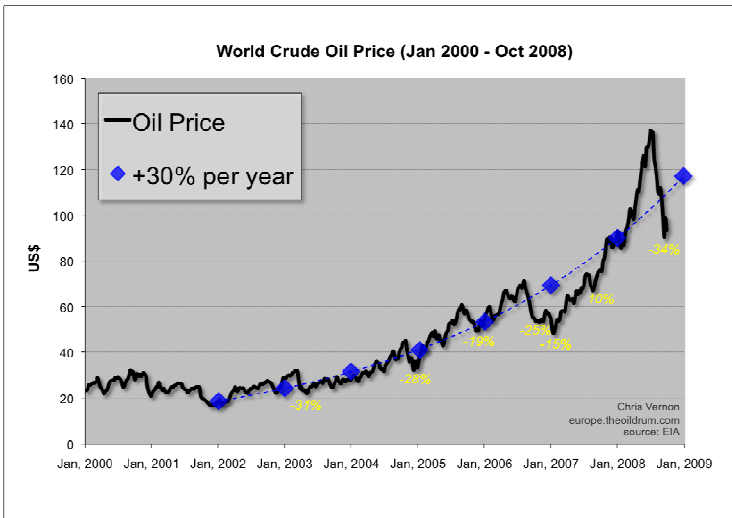
The phenomenon of Peak Oil was first described by the US geologist M King Hubbert, a researcher for Shell, in 1956.

As a result of his research he predicted that the flow of oil in the 'lower 48' of the United States would peak in around 1970. He was widely ridiculed for this suggestion, for the assumption amongst his fellow oil professionals was that further exploration would simply keep on providing new oil fields to be exploited. Oil production did, however, peak in the United States in 1970 and, even if Alaskan oil is now included, is now running at around half the rate that it was in 1970. The US presently produces around 5 million barrels a day of oil (5mbd), down from a peak of more than 10mbd.

The same thing has happened in more than fifty other oil producing countries around the world, including the UK. Oil production from the British sector of the North Sea peaked in 1999 and has since been declining at around 7.5% per year (just one of the reasons why the British state is rapidly sinking into bankruptcy).

The million-dollar question is simply: at what point will oil production in the world as a whole reach a peak? It is possible that the supply of oil worldwide reached its peak in around 2005 but a wider consensus exists for a date of around 2012, given what we know about projects that are now coming on stream.

The crucial issue economically is supply and demand. The demand for oil - the most convenient and effective form of energy presently known to humanity - underpins industrial civilisation as a whole. If demand continues to increase, whilst the supply of oil remains static or, eventually, goes into absolute decline, then the consequence will be economic havoc - which we have had some intimation of already.



*(Graph produced by Chris Vernon of The Oil Drum, reproduced under creative commons license)*

Whilst there was undoubtedly an element of speculative 'bubble' that drove up the price of oil to the all time record of \$147 a barrel in the summer of 2008, there is a corresponding element forcing the price down at the end of 2008 - the price is under \$40 at the time of writing - as the credit crunch forces the liquidation of financial positions in order to generate cash. The underlying fundamentals, however, support a long term trend towards higher oil prices.

What will happen is that a reviving economy with rising demand will provoke a renewed rise in the oil price - and that will prevent the economy from getting back on its feet after the finance-induced recession that we are now experiencing.

What Peak Oil means for the world community is the existence of a resource constraint. We simply cannot keep going on 'business as usual'. As the supply of oil starts to diminish, and the price rises, we shall see - indeed we have already started to see - what economists call 'demand destruction'. What this means is that some things that were previously affordable are no longer affordable. For the rich this means an impact upon our lifestyle. For the poor it is a matter of life and death.

In 2005 the US government commissioned a report on Peak Oil, commonly known as the Hirsch Report, and its conclusion was stark: "The world has never faced a problem like this.

Without massive mitigation more than a decade before the fact, the problem will be pervasive and long-lasting. Previous energy transitions (wood to coal and coal to oil) were gradual and evolutionary; oil peaking will be abrupt and discontinuous." (My emphasis.)

### **How should we respond to Peak Oil?**

In simple terms, our industrial civilisations have been premised upon the possibility of continuous growth. Our economies have been built around it, our politicians pursue careers by promoting it, we all enjoy the fruits of it. In the way in which it has structured our civilisation, 'growth' is our idol, it is the contemporary clothing of Mammon - and we must bring back to mind Jesus' teaching that we cannot serve both God and Mammon.

What Peak Oil means - and Peak Oil is simply the most salient of the various physical and resource constraints that we are now encountering - is that

physical economic growth will cease. We will no longer be able to accumulate more and more 'stuff'. That form of human organisation represented by the industrialised civilisations will have to adapt or die, and we face that choice today.

Many groups, aware of the problem of Peak Oil and related issues like climate change, have already embarked upon the radical changes of life that are necessary within this new context. One of the most exciting is the 'Transition Town'<sup>a</sup> initiative, begun by the permaculturist Rob Hopkins in the small town of Totnes in Devon, but now spread to dozens of towns, villages and parts of cities throughout the country. The transition town movement is essentially a bottom-up process of preparing communities for the transition away from a society built around growth to one built around sustainability; it is about cultivating a greater degree of resilience at the local

level, in order to withstand the shocks (that have already begun) associated with meeting the physical constraints on economic growth.

There are a great many practical solutions that can be pursued in order to minimise the potentially dire consequences of Peak Oil; there are alternative ways of generating energy, there is great scope for reducing our consumption, there are many ways in which cooperative patterns of working can minimise the shock. There is no doubt, though, that this transition will be painful, and that the church in particular has a task on its hands.

### **The Prophetic Imagination**

I believe that the church is called to a prophetic ministry at this time of crisis; specifically we must cultivate our 'Prophetic Imagination' (see W Brueggemann, *The Prophetic Imagination*, Fortress Press 1978). As Brueggemann describes it, the

prophetic perspective centres on a distinction between the “Royal Consciousness” and the “alternative community”.

Consider the experience of the Hebrew people in Egypt. The dominant classes established and promoted an ideology which allocated the Hebrews a particular role in that system – they were the slaves, and this denial of human freedom, this destruction of human nature, was a cause of tremendous pain and anguish – which the Lord hears. Brueggemann gives three elements of this Royal Consciousness, which he explicitly links to our modern life:

- i. it is driven by an *economics of affluence* “in which we are so well off that pain is not noticed and we can eat our way around it” – we are fed sufficient Pablum<sup>b</sup> to be tranquilised into acquiescence;
- ii. the dominant politics are oppressive, “the cries of the

marginal are not heard or are dismissed as the voices of kooks and traitors”; and

- iii. the dominant religion is one of immanence, God is made domestic and safe: “God is so present to us that his abrasiveness, his absence, his banishment are not noticed, and the problem is reduced to psychology”.

This is the situation in which Moses, the archetypal prophet, is called to serve the Hebrew people, and to lead them towards freedom in the promised land. This emphasis on freedom is crucial, as it is for a free life, a fully human life, that the Hebrews have been released from Egypt. Brueggemann points out that at the centre of Moses’ ministry lies not a cry for social justice (criticism of the status quo – the ‘liberal’ idol) nor a reaffirmation of a familiar God (the idol of a comforting conservatism) but a radical call to become acquainted with the living God, who cannot be

captured in our understandings but who is the only God who can set us free: “the point that prophetic imagination must ponder is that there is no freedom of God without the politics of justice and compassion, and there is no politics of justice and compassion without a religion of the freedom of God”.

So, rooted in this commitment of response to the living God, this acceptance of pain, the prophet Moses embarks upon the road of freedom, freedom for God's people, the path that will allow them to become fully human. This path begins with the imagination – setting the understanding of the people free so that they can discern that the Royal Consciousness, the status quo, is not permanent and given (it is not God) and that **it can be overthrown**. Thus, as Brueggemann famously puts it, “The task of prophetic ministry is to nurture, nourish and evoke a consciousness and

perception alternative to the consciousness and perception of the dominant culture". This involves some element of prediction about the future, but those predictions have interest only in so far as they stand as criticisms over against the present; they do not stand independently of that context and are open to revision (e.g. Jonah's message to Nineveh). Ultimately, the alternative community, brought to life through the prophetic imagination, is sustained only through the practice of its worship, for "Doxology is the ultimate challenge to the language of managed reality and it alone is the universe of discourse in which energy is possible." Only worship sustains the hope which sustains the community, which enables the community to taste what it means to be human, on its journey through the wilderness towards the promised land.

### **The Path for the Faithful**

When one has fully understood the teaching of the ecologists as

represented in the original Club of Rome documents nearly forty years ago, the temptation to gloom can become overwhelming. The human population on earth is in a state of 'Overshoot', in that the population has grown beyond the capacity of the earth to sustain. It is therefore inevitable that there will be a reckoning. Yet here, too, is where I believe Jeremiah has something to say to us. He too foresaw times of terror and suffering, yet he was consoled by God's promise of redemption. I find particular comfort in Jeremiah 29.11: "For I know the plans I have for you," declares the LORD, "plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future."

As Christians our first task is to follow our Lord's command to love God with all that we have - which means not just preventing other gods from gaining our affection, but pointing out when those idols have been raised too high around

us. That is the path to our full humanity, in God's image. The analogies to our present situation, are, I trust, reasonably clear. We live within a Pharaonic system of oil based consumerism, and we are taught that it cannot be challenged, for to do so is to threaten the prosperity on which we all depend. It seems to me that the task of the faithful Christian in this situation is to renew our prophetic imagination and to speak words of praise and hope which enable the development of a community which reflects the freedom of a loving God. We must abandon any sense that obedience to the false god of Mammon (perpetual economic growth) is in any way compatible with the Christian life.

Specifically, I think we must:

- i. identify the Royal Consciousness in all its aspects, most especially the delusion of perpetual growth;
- ii. articulate the pain of the marginalised and oppressed who

- have no present voice or witness;
- iii. challenge the claims to power made on behalf of the Royal Consciousness, with a view to demonstrating their emptiness;
- iv. labour with confident expectation towards the dismantling of the present structures;
- v. develop new communities, along the model of 'Transition Towns', which break away from obeisance to the Royal Consciousness, and which offer the opportunity of free life in the image of the free God;
- vi. articulate a vision of hope, a promised land, on the other side of Peak Oil, which will sustain us through the transition period in the wilderness; and, above all
- vii. trust in God.

This is the path that we are called to take. It will not be easy; there will be many who long for the fleshpots of Egypt and the oil wells of Saudi Arabia as we wander through the desert; and

yet, at the end of the process, if we keep the faith and hold true to God's good intentions for us, we shall gain our promised inheritance and be enabled to enjoy our fully human life as His children. Let us be Human!

Sam Norton

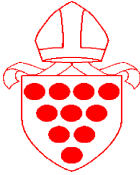
More of my writing on this topic can be found here:

[http://  
elizaphanian.blogspot.com/2008/04/  
my-peak-oil-posts.html](http://elizaphanian.blogspot.com/2008/04/my-peak-oil-posts.html)

End Notes

- a. Evesham, Malvern and Worcester are part of the Transition Towns movement.
- b. Pablum is a bland soft cereal for infants

Sam Norton is the Rector of West Mersea in Essex. Prior to ordination he spent several years working in the then Department of the Environment looking in particular at nuclear energy issues. He maintains a blog at <http://elizaphanian.blogspot.com> where he has been exploring the theological implications of Peak Oil for some years, and he hopes to finish a book on this subject in the second half of 2009.



**Just So** is meant to be read and studied by a wide range of people, both within the faith communities and in wider society. It is being circulated to churches and other faith groups, voluntary and community agencies, statutory organisations and local authority departments.

If you have any comments about the contents or want further copies, please contact John Paxton, Worcester Diocesan Social Responsibility Officer, at The Old Palace, Deansway, Worcester, WR1 2JE or by email [jpaxton@cofe-worcester.org.uk](mailto:jpaxton@cofe-worcester.org.uk).

Further copies of the **Just So** can be obtained at £2 each. Cheques payable to Worcester DBF Ltd.

The Social Responsibility Officer  
is principal officer of  
Church Action Within Society