

4th October 2024

Tragedy

“Anyone wishing to understand the formation of ... glacial land surfaces cannot avoid considering the processes and effects of glacier erosion and deposition.”

Wilfried Haag, *Glaciology and Glacial Geomorphology* (2022)

A couple of weeks ago, I quoted the 14th century Moroccan scholar, traveller and explorer, Ibn Battuta, when he wrote “Travelling – it leaves you speechless, then turns you into a storyteller.” On my recent journey on the Bernina Express through the Swiss Alps, I was indeed rendered speechless, but not only by the beauty and grandeur of my surroundings. I was struck dumb in the face of an environmental tragedy.

On the winding journey from St Moritz to Tirano, through some spectacular alpine scenery and amazing railway engineering, it was deeply distressing to discover that the *Lago Bianco* and *Lago Palü* glaciers, high in the Alps, are receding at an alarming rate, as a direct result of global warming. Given a similar experience of walking on a glacier in the Canadian Rockies some years ago, this should have come as no surprise. Yet the impact of it was profoundly moving and concerning.

While we might complain about changing weather patterns in our East Lothian location: “We had our Summer yesterday afternoon ...”; “I’ve never seen it so changeable ...”; “Spring flowers are early this year ...”; “It wasn’t like this when I was young ...” we are largely cushioned from the dramatic effects of environmental damage. We’re not aware of the worrying rise in sea-levels. We don’t watch huge chunks falling from massive icefloes. We’re not affected by years of drought that destroy our crops. And yet, all of that, and much more besides, was brought home to this alpine traveller as he passed by glaciers which were receding ever backwards into the Swiss mountain passes from whence they came.

I shouldn’t have needed a reminder of the damage we are doing to our planet. But it was timely and dramatic. Caring for our environment is a pressing issue. As Wilfried Haag reminds us, we “cannot avoid considering the processes and effects of glacier erosion and deposition”. As a metaphor for environmental destruction, this speaks loudly of the need to be more deeply concerned than ever for the fragility of our world.

A prayer for today

The Psalmist said, “The earth is the Lord’s, and all that it contains.” All! All! Amen

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