

## Speech for Exeter Cathedral Sunday 8th September



My name is Jess Nicholls. I'm a 15 year old climate activist and school student here in Exeter.

I've been involved in the Fridays for Future school strike movement since January this year. Before this began I was a typical secondary school student who was keen to do well and was focused purely on going to college and university.

I've always been very politically aware and interested in current affairs and I'm active on social media to keep up to date with what's going on in the world.

One day, I saw a tweet from a Swedish school-girl named Greta Thunberg who was on school strike to raise awareness of the climate crisis. I started to follow what she was doing

and when, in January, I heard her speech to the World Economic Forum in Davos, I decided this was something I need to be a part of.

Greta's words were not sugar-coated and hopeful, they were desperate and full of fear. It was refreshing and eye opening. For the first time I saw the raw reality of the climate crisis, that soon the effects will become irreversible – and that humanity's steps so far are a pale imitation of the true reformation that needs to happen. 'Our house is on fire', Greta said, and we must act now.

Feeling inspired, I looked into what was happening in the UK. I saw the early stages of a group called the UK Student Climate Network emerging – and so I signed up. The government tell us we must value our education above all else - but how can that be true when they don't listen to some of the most educated people in our society - the climate scientists and economists. I have never been a rule breaker, but striking from school one Friday a month seemed like a proportionate response to the unprecedented climate breakdown we are facing.

At that time the UK student climate network was a single WhatsApp group. Now there are thousands of members across the country and a complex system of online planning and networking groups surrounding it.

I joined forces with two college students from Exeter – Sophie and Natasha – who too had looked into Greta's campaign and were beginning to start school strikes here in the city. We set up social media pages, gathered like-minded people interested in being involved, and

began publicising ideas and sending out press releases. We set the date for our first strike as February 15<sup>th</sup> in solidarity with other strikes planned around the world that day. The night before, we were content with the general response from social media that maybe 60 or 70 people were planning to come, possibly 100 if we were lucky. We saw that as a great achievement for our first strike. So, you can imagine our disbelief when – at 11am that cold, foggy morning - over 700 young people showed up - we later found out that we were the 4<sup>th</sup> biggest strike in the UK.



It is important to remember that we are children. We are not scientists or politicians or policy makers; we are purely messengers of the truth, asking those in power to act now to save our futures. We believe that as human beings we have a moral responsibility to do all we can to save our planet. This is especially true living in a developed country such as ours, where our average carbon footprints are larger than most. The carbon footprint of the average UK citizen is about 138 times that of the average Ethiopian.

According to the IPCC report from 2018, we now have 11 years before the catastrophic change we've thrown on our planet can no longer be rectified. We school strikers will only be young adults by that time.

I am terrified to think about what may become of the rest of my life if we fail to do something about the climate and ecological crisis now. It is horrendous to think that future generations - our children and grandchildren - may not know of many species alive today, and will see whole ecosystems die out in front of their eyes.

It is terrifying to see that - under a veil of articulate words and promises - politicians are doing next to nothing to combat this existential threat to our world. An estimated 200 species go extinct each day - that's 10,000 times the expected and acceptable rate. This is largely down to deforestation and habitat loss as a result of careless, reckless human expansion.

It's our species that is destroying our planet for our own selfish gain, and it is only us - humanity - that can turn this around now to protect future life on earth.

By 2050, 1 in 10 people in the world are forecast to become climate refugees. Huge parts of Australia are expected to become uninhabitable. By 2048, there will be no fish left in the sea at current levels of pollution and overfishing. And yet we continue to act as though we don't know, or worse still, that we don't care. How can it be ok that, at times this year, it has been cheaper to fly from London to New York than to take the train from London to Manchester? The carbon emissions used for one person to fly from London to New York is equivalent to the average yearly carbon consumption of someone living in Paraguay.

When you hear these facts, it's almost too easy to decide that we are fighting a losing battle. But we can't stop fighting. Because if I stop fighting, so might other school strikers, and if they stop then maybe the governments won't listen and they won't prioritise legislating for climate justice soon, before it's too late. It's a huge amount of pressure. And we are children.

Since the first UN summit on climate in 1995, global emissions have risen by 60%. Facts like this make us want to scream at the top of our voices; this is why we strike and lobby to bring about change, and turn that anger into empowerment. Just imagine how future generations are going to feel. They're going to think we gave up on them, that we didn't care, that the vast majority of us were selfish and greedy. And they'll be right. We stand no hope of solving this crisis unless we treat it like a crisis. So that's what we must do.

Greta and I - along with many other climate activists- both have Asperger's syndrome, we're naturally introverted. We don't necessarily want to be the ones giving speeches and meeting hundreds of new people, but we are. We have heard the facts and we can't unhear them. Because we see the world in a different, polarised way, for us, almost everything is black and white. If we need to stop burning fossil fuels, then why do we not stop burning them? If we need to cut greenhouse gas emissions to curb the graph and keep below 1.5 degrees global temperature increase, why aren't we doing so? In an age of extinction, we cannot afford to have grey areas.



Our movement is growing at an unprecedented rate. Just two months after the first strike, I was invited to Brussels, along with five other Fridays for Future climate activists from around Europe, to meet the Vice President of the European Commission to discuss climate

issues. I also met Greta for the first time that week. I learnt quickly how to do TV and radio interviews to get our points across as quickly and effectively as possible.

When I returned, I was asked to record and send a speech to policy makers in Washington DC. Things seemed to be hurrying along at such a pace that it felt like we were beginning to get through to people already, but in many ways I now see that that was false hope.



Last month I was invited to Switzerland to attend the first ever Fridays For Future European summit. It was an amazing opportunity for us all to meet together to discuss our common aims and how we can work together more effectively over the coming months. It was wonderful to be with other school strikers and to be a part of conversations which I really feel will make a difference.

Greta was there, and therefore so was almost every media outlet on earth. It was surreal, and incredibly invasive. Journalists would ask such personal, and irrelevant, questions. It left us all in disbelief. We kept saying surely, if your house is on fire, and you're told, constantly, that your house is on fire, you look to the house and try to stop the burning, you don't look at the people telling you that? It's weird how the media want to corrupt even the purest of messages. We are not spouting new ideologies or trying to brainwash anyone - we are quite simply asking law-makers to read the science and act on it before it's too late.



Whilst the support we receive can be great and heartfelt, young climate activists also receive an astounding amount of hate. Whether it's guilt, or lack of understanding that leads to it, I don't know. But it's scary. I've seen my friends receive death threats, I've seen them called terrorists. And whilst we do not want any pity for this, we do want people to open their eyes to the true reality we are facing.

Of course, any campaign such as this will not be free from opposition. There's no escape from that and we are fully aware of it. But climate issues should not, and cannot afford to, be divisive issues. The climate crisis does not pick sides. It doesn't care who you are or where you come from, it will affect you regardless.

Anyone who is committed to telling the truth about the climate emergency is welcome to join our movement. There are people from all walks of life involved in Fridays for Future, and that is as it should be. Every day I turn on the TV and hear constantly on the news, stories of racism, sexism and homophobia. This movement actively works to dispel that, and breaks the precedent the past tries to impose on us.

Of course Brexit is currently dominating our news and stifling our parliament. And there's no sign of that slowing until they find a solution. But the truth is, none of this will matter if we fail to adequately cut emissions and keep below the agreed 1.5 degree rise. There will be no Brexit, or EU for that matter, on a dead planet. Our island will eventually become barren and lifeless, like every other part of the world.

Action needs to be taken, and taken now. We will continue to strike until our politicians listen to us; until they understand that this matter surpasses any other that we have or will ever face. All our futures are in jeopardy, but with most of our lives still to live in the future, we are the ones that will feel the predominant effects of climate breakdown. We've got precious little time to save the future, and if that entails us missing school, so be it.

We are the first generation to know what to do, and the last generation able to stop it.

There's a lot of accusations of hypocrisy in our movement, people telling us that we're 'fake' activists because we don't practice precisely every little detail that we preach. And whilst the majority of us don't fly, try to eat as sustainably as possible, and avoid fast fashion and anything else that has a negative impact on the planet, it's not possible to solve this purely via individual change.

Neither is it possible that everyone is in a position to do all of these things. And that's alright. For now. Because what we are fighting for is for governments to commit to change whole countries and economies, to implement Green New Deals which will not only decarbonise our lives but will also create green jobs and more sustainable lifestyles, available to the everyday person. Worrying about which bamboo toothbrush has the smallest environmental impact, whilst very worthy, is less important than the activism which might just make our government start to act.

Just 100 companies are responsible for 71% of global emissions. Just take that in for a minute. 100 companies - each who are seeking to make profits for their CEOs and

shareholders. The change that needs to happen will be unprecedented. The days of mindless over-consuming will have to come to an end.

A recent poll showed that over half the UK population thinks the climate crisis entails a threat of human extinction. This is good - people are hearing the message. But where I see this in black and white, too many others are still seeing in grey. Their cognitive dissonance allows them to hear the hideous reality of imminent climate breakdown, and then to go on living their lives as normal. I just can't do that.

The ongoing fight is not going to be easy, but we can't afford to bury our heads in the sand and hope someone else takes the reins. There is nobody else. We are it. We are the current inhabitants of Planet Earth.

So my message to you is, please don't just thank those of us standing up now and shouting for Climate Justice - join us. Many of you may be aware that the youth strikers are currently part of a group working with Extinction Rebellion and Earth Strike, as well as many others, to plan the general strike for September 20th. This date was chosen in solidarity with the school strikes, but this time we'll be joined by workers and adults, striking from their jobs to raise awareness of the climate crisis.

If your activist journey hasn't started yet, this is the perfect way to get involved. Some companies and organisations are encouraging and supporting their workers to join the Climate Strike on the 20th. Talk to your work colleagues and friends and help us increase the groundswell of local, national and global activists pressing for change.

Please feel free to speak to me afterwards or follow the Fridays for Future Exeter Facebook page if you want to know more.

I have heard that some people feel that it's now too late to join the movement; that they'll always be several steps behind. That's not true. Those that join now are the pioneers of this incredible mobilisation.

I will leave you with some words from Greta,

"We children are doing this to wake the adults up. We children are doing this for you to put your differences aside and start acting as you would in a crisis. We will never stop fighting for this planet, and for ourselves, our futures, and for the futures of our children and grandchildren."

Thank you.