

Eco-Congregation Scotland

Creation Time Resources 2017: Journeying with God



INTRODUCTION

Worship material for Creation Time 2017 comes from an ecumenical writing group, with contributors from the Church of Scotland, the Roman Catholic Church, The Salvation Army and Scottish Episcopal Church. It follows the theme “Journeying with God”, linking to the UN international year of sustainable tourism for development. It explores God’s invitation to join us in the journey of faith leading us into care for all creation.

Readings from the Gospel of Matthew are emphasised, which appear in the Revised Common Lectionary in September.

THE MATERIAL

| | | |
|------------|----------|--|
| Week One | 03/09/17 | Pilgrimage: God’s invitation to get moving (Matthew 16: 21-28) |
| Week Two | 10/09/17 | Guide for the journey: God’s commandments (Matthew 18: 15-20) |
| Week Three | 17/09/17 | God’s companionship on the journey (Matthew 18: 21-35) |
| Week Four | 24/09/17 | Food for the journey: God’s provision (Matthew 20: 1-16) |

THE WRITING GROUP

Members of the Creation Time 2017 Writing Group:

Jenny Adams is Church of Scotland minister of Duffus, Spynie & Hopeman Parish, in Moray, in the north-east of Scotland. As part of an Eco-congregation, and through many other connections, she is trying, failing, and keeping trying to live out creation care and concern for social justice in all of life.

Basil Clark is the Parish Priest of Our Lady of Loretto and St Michael Catholic Church, in Musselburgh, East Lothian, a new Eco-congregation. As a former Anglican Franciscan and one time director of the Rock Trust he has an ongoing interest in justice, peace and environmental issues.

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Richard Murray is a Lay Reader in the Scottish Episcopal Church and a member of its Church in Society Committee, where he has a focus on environmental issues. He is a board member of Eco-Congregation Scotland.

Callum and Emma Newton are lieutenants in the Stornoway corps of the Salvation Army. The sheer beauty of the island on which they live make them appreciate and strive harder to do all they can to appreciate and protect God's creation. They are the first Salvation Army corps to become an eco-congregation.

Editor: Miriam McHardy is a freelance writer and editor, with a particular interest in the area of faith, justice and the environment. As part of a relatively new eco-congregation she is particularly interested in exploring how faith and spirituality can support our care for our planet.

ABOUT CREATION TIME

Creation Time started in the Orthodox Church in 1989 and has been supported by a growing number of churches across Europe since then. The European Christian Environmental Network has urged churches to adopt a Time for Creation, stretching from 1 September to the feast of St Francis on 4 October. This was endorsed at the European Ecumenical Assembly in Sibiu, Romania in 2007, when it was agreed that Creation Time "be dedicated to prayer for the protection of Creation and the promotion of sustainable lifestyles that reverse our contribution to climate change".

ALSO AVAILABLE

Resources for World Day of Prayer for Care of Creation - September 1st 2017

In 2015 Pope Francis established September 1st as the World Day of Prayer for the Care of Creation, encouraging the Catholic community around the world to pray for our common home. Now, for its third year, the aid agency, CAFOD, provides a prayer in union with creation at:

<http://cafod.org.uk/content/download/25371/182321/version/5/file/A%20Christian%20prayer%20in%20union%20with%20creation-%20Laudato%20Si!.pdf>

And resources for organising a prayer vigil at:

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<http://cafod.org.uk/content/download/29948/340910/version/7/file/Prayer%20vigil%20for%20the%20care%20of%20creation.pdf>

The Columban Missionaries also offer a range of resources at:

<http://www.columbans.co.uk/creation-time/>

CREATION TIME 2017 - WEEK 4 - SEPTEMBER 24TH

“FOOD FOR THE JOURNEY: GOD’S PROVISION”

THOUGHTS ON THE READINGS

EXODUS 16: 2-15

Deserts are testing places. The people of God having just escaped Pharaoh’s armies are now journeying onto Sinai and are being tested by the conditions. Not surprisingly food and drink are the issue and Moses and Aaron’s leadership under question. We meet them at the second test: water having been provided food is now running low. Their ‘murmuring’ is heavy with sarcasm: ‘Could the Lord not have killed us as well filled slaves rather than you drag us into the desert to kill us of hunger’. The human condition exposed and further exposed by the leadership team’s reaction: ‘What are we?’ or ‘don’t blame us’.

It’s a dangerous moment, the people and the leadership have compared the Lord’s provision to Pharaoh’s and found the Lord wanting. Surprisingly the Lord accedes to their needs without rebuke – they are not yet a people under covenant – and with a daily provision of meat and bread. Worth noting at this point is that in the sociology of the day this is the task of the mother and wife. Yahweh the warrior is now Mother Yahweh tenderly responding to the needs of her children. The narrative builds up a picture of God as trustworthy: one who will meet the needs of the people, one who will be

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present to them. We may not here go into a discussion about the miraculous or natural provision of quails and manna - the miraculous is in the natural - but we might do well to reflect that God's provision doesn't come pre-packed; 'What is it?'

PSALM 105: 1-6, 37-45

Judea's 6th century exile in many ways is the great moulder of biblical tradition. The loss of temple, city and land to Babylon is the historical cataclysm which shapes the remembering of past saving events. We are reminded that there was a time when the Scriptures were still in process, open to change, open to new experience.

How can we sing the Lord's song in an alien land? This, Israel's song in exile, is responded to in psalm 105. Yes we can sing: 'Remember the wonderful works he has done, his miracles, and judgements he uttered'. It invites the people to praise the Lord for past wonders, prompting them to believe that he will act to bring them home.

Verses 1 – 6 are a summons to praise and seek the Lord's presence, an invitation to remember.

Verses 37 – 45 is the fourth and last in a series of promises kept. They take us from Egypt through the desert to Canaan, and for our purposes reinforce the first reading. The singer is to reflect on God as Saviour and Provider, encouraged to trust in a better future.

However, just as the Bread of Heaven doesn't come quite as we expect - 'What is it?' - so it might be worth reflecting that God ends the exile by a perfectly human process. He saves because regimes change: Babylonian defeat at the hands of the Persians and a subsequent change in how provinces are managed. They are no less under a foreign yoke but they will come to speak of Cyrus the Great in almost messianic terms.

PHILIPPIANS 1: 21-30

Have we ceased to be disturbed by the gospel? In our conventional religiosity have we lost sight of that most surprising of Messiahs, Jesus, Nazareth's carpenter? Can we ever re-capture the revolutionary impact of the gospel to re-echo Paul's startling opening line, 'For me living is Christ and dying gain'?

No matter which prison Paul happens to be in (Rome or Ephesus) he is writing conscious of the possibility of martyrdom. While there is a tension in this reflection it is not what we might think. The dominant background note is joy and the tension for Paul is what would be for the best: To live completely in the Lord and so live for the Lord's people in whatever circumstances the Lord places him or to accept death not as a welcome release from bodily suffering but as a means of intensifying his union with Christ.

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In many Christian traditions, something of that intensity of personal relationship with Christ is witnessed in God's Saints. Not perfect people, but women and men who, even if they have only been one step ahead of their generation, are reminders to us of the revolutionary demands of 'living a life worthy of the gospel of Christ'. Surely all our traditions have heroes who fulfil the same task and should be celebrated as reminders of 'the wonderful works of the Lord'.

The Saints then are those men and women who re-capture in different times, cultures and traditions the revolutionary impact of the gospel and live it out, proclaim it and challenge the world with it. Some have local impact, making a difference for their time. Others have a more universal influence continuing to challenge us to surprise ourselves and to move beyond convention. They are God's work of art.

The call to holiness is not a call to piety divorced from the real world. It is the call to be truly human and embrace the humanity Christ exemplifies. The Christian community needs Saints in every age because they remind us that the journey is possible, that it can be done and that personal and social change can happen. Saints and prophets, frequently taken by the worldly as fools, are God's catalyst for change.

MATTHEW 20:1-16

While much of Matthew's Gospel is drawn from Mark (and other material shared solely with Luke), this parable is unique to Matthew's Gospel presumably drawn from the oral memory peculiar to his community. One clue to the community's location is hinted at in the *denarius* given as the wage for day labourers. As few *denarii* have ever been found in Palestinian excavations it presumably points to origins elsewhere in the eastern Empire.

The writer takes this parable told by Jesus and uses it to illustrate two sayings. The first irritatingly to be found in 19:30 'But many who are first will be last, and many who are last will be first'. He then completes the parable with the same text but in reverse order 20:16 'So the last will be first, and the first will be last.' Verse 8 gives us a further clue: 'Call the workers and pay them their wages, beginning with the last ones hired and going on to the first.'

Day labourers worked a 12-hour day 6.00am to 6.00pm. Jesus, or the writer, is presumably not illustrating wage policy. The parable is constructed with shock as its objective. Verse 8 builds up the expectations of the 'first called' raising their hopes when they see the 'last called' getting a day's wages for one hour's easy work in the cool of the early evening. No wonder they're angry, it's one of the few gospel stories that continues to get under our skin. Now it's not that the last don't need the day's wage, they want to work, they need the money to put daily bread on the table. It's just that we, no less than the characters in the story, expect the first to get more.

Jesus uses parables like this one to challenge the Pharisees' religious superiority. Why, however, does this writer choose to add it to Mark's narrative? Matthew is the favourite gospel of the Catholic Church, it's the gospel that most shapes its theology and yet here is the writer choosing a parable that

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better illustrates Paul. It is the landowner's unmotivated generosity that is the key: God's generosity is not won, not earned but given, religious endeavour does not earn anything. God's generosity is not proportionate to human merit, all is Grace. Might we reasonably presume that reward for service was a hot topic in Matthew's community and, while never overtly alluded to in our churches, how many of us secretly await the 'Well done good and faithful servant' found elsewhere in the Gospel?

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SERMON THOUGHTS

At a universal level change is nearly always a journey through the desert. There is safety in what has always been. The unknown always carries risk. You might think that given the power of this epic saga in the Christian tradition we might be better embracers of change. But we are as tested and in need of daily reassurance as we have always been. The desert is a necessary part of the journey to the land of promise as every generation, every person needs to rediscover our reliance on the Lord, draw near to the life-giving presence of the Lord: real food and real drink.

The writers of Scripture read history through the prism of theology, they encourage us to look for the presence of God and to look in unexpected places and rather surprising people. Perhaps it would surprise these writers that their poetry or histories also became bearers of presence. In present world circumstances, we must continue to look for the supernatural acting in the natural, look for divine solutions already implicit in human aspirations and endeavours. For example, who would have thought in the 80's that change in South Africa or the USSR was possible, never mind happen without violence?

However foolish this might sound if we get involved we might turn out to be one of God's surprises! St Paul encourages all of us to active holiness, participators in the arena, not spectators. Rather strangely our lives - lived well- can be food for others, part of God's provision.

In the Roman Catholic tradition the 4th October marks the feast day of Francis of Assisi, seen as an example of a "participant who changed the game". Francis tried to live out, in his own time, Paul's 'for me living is Christ'. By a detachment from the things of this world he embraced the broken of the world: the leper, the poor, the natural world and even the broken Church. His holistic view of creation as integral to faith "Praised be You, my Lord, through Sister Earth our Mother who sustains and governs us" is pertinent to us as eco congregations, striving to protect our environment as part of our Christian faith.

Today as we consider the degradation of the environment, and the continued struggle to convince some world governments and individuals to take it seriously, we need to draw on God's provision to resource and nourish us in our work. People like Francis, by their example, can be part of that provision.

Perhaps the hardest thing of all for religious people to accept (even if they firmly believe it) is that God's provision is always gift. Jesus frequently lampoons a closed religious mentality, Matthew feels he needs to remind his readers that they should not be motivated only by reward. In the vineyard of the Lord we are all day labourers. We are to ask for 'daily bread', reliant on the Lord not independent of him. Grace is the last word, indeed all is Grace.

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ALL - AGE ADDRESS

Ask the congregation how they feel when they are given a gift? What do they do with it?

How do they think the person who gave them the gift would feel if they treated it badly?

Today's story is about gifts we are given by God, tho it may not seem like that!

In some ways it's a bit of a difficult story. Jesus tells us that the landowner gives all the workers the same pay even when some have worked longer than others.

Ask the congregation how they feel about that? Do they think it is fair?

Remind everyone that Jesus isn't telling us a story about fairness. He is telling us about God's generosity.

The landowner is fair as he gave the workers what he promised but then chooses to be generous by paying the workers who came late more than he needs to.

Jesus uses this story to tell us how God gives us what we need for our life journey, and it is often more than we expect!

Ask the younger members:

- What gifts has God given us? Encourage them to consider how our environment and all in it are gifts from God.
- Depending on the age of the group, introduce the concept of stewardship of creation.
- Are they aware of times when our environment hasn't been treated well, and how do they feel about that?
- If our environment is God's gift to us how should we treat it?
- How do we help others be aware of God's gift to us?
- Depending on the age range, introduce the idea of eco-congregations. Encourage them to consider how our faith in God helps us think about how we treat the environment.

Introduce the idea that there are many people who can help us think about the environment as gift from God. A very significant one is Francis of Assisi. Francis is called a saint in the Catholic Church.

Francis did many things to follow God. He cared for the poor and the sick, worked for peace between Christians and Muslims, and tried to help the church remember what Jesus had taught.

He is remembered especially for his care of the environment and although he lived a long time ago he had ideas about care for our world that we recognise today.

He believed God spoke to us through the natural world, and that it was wrong to destroy it. He wrote a famous prayer (or canticle) in which he called the sun Brother, the moon Sister and the earth Mother.

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Activity ideas:

Encourage the children to write a prayer like Francis of Assisi's, or read the Canticle of Brother Sun and Sister Moon and draw pictures to illustrate it.

Invite them to research and think of other people who inspire and support us in our care for the environment, either today or from our churches' history.

MUSICAL SUGGESTIONS

Hymn Books used

| | |
|---|-------------------------|
| Church Hymnary 4 (CH4) | Hymns Old and New (HON) |
| The Song Book of the Salvation Army (SB) | Singing the Faith (StF) |
| Hymns Ancient & Modern: New Standard Edition (AMNS) | Common Ground (CG) |

Hymns for this week

| | | | | |
|-------------------------------------|-------------------|---------------|---------|--------|
| For the gifts of his creation | AMNS457 StF124 | CH4 231 | HON197 | SB15 |
| Great is thy faithfulness | CG43 StF51 | CH4 153 | HON273 | SB26 |
| Holy Spirit, gift bestower | CH4 590 | SfF383 | | |
| How great thou art | CG53 SB49 | AMNS StF82 | CH4 154 | HON563 |
| If I were a butterfly | HON342 | | | |
| Make me a channel of your Peace | CH4 528 | HON499 | SB608 | StF707 |
| Now thank we all our God | AMNS205 StF81 | CH4 182 | HON532 | SB45 |
| Seek ye first the kingdom Of God | CH4 641 | HON652 | SB675 | StF254 |

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| This day God gives me | AMNS516 | HON754 | StF2 | |
| We plough the fields | AMNS290 StF130 | CH4229 | HON801 | SB70 |

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PRAYERS

CONFESSION

You are grace and mercy for the exhausted and weary.

Lord have mercy

You are saviour and giver of abundant life.

Christ have mercy

You are presence and provider on our journey.

Lord have mercy

THANKSGIVING

Bountiful and generous God

We give you thanks

For all you have provided for us.

For food to nourish us and drink to refresh us,

Bracing breezes and sustaining rain,

For the sun to light our days

And the moon guiding us by night.

From the midges who bite us,

To the whales that entrance us,

The smallest daisy to the highest Munro,

Generous provider, we are profoundly grateful.

Open our eyes when we fail to see your glory,

Open our ears when we fail to hear creation's song

And open our hearts to the cry of the poor

That we might work for a world

where all can enjoy your wondrous creation.

In the name of God our creator and provider,

Jesus our brother who walks with us daily,

And your Holy Spirit who pervades the whole of creation

Amen

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INTERCESSIONS BASED ON THE PRAYER OF ST FRANCIS

Lord make your Church an instrument of your peace in your beautiful, broken world

| | |
|---|------------------------------|
| where there is violence and hatred | may your Church sow love; |
| where there is injury and hurt | may your Church sow pardon; |
| where there is destruction of your creation | may your Church sow healing; |
| where there is doubt and distrust | may your Church sow faith; |
| where there is despair in life's struggles | may your Church sow hope; |
| where there is darkness in heart or mind | may your Church sow light; |
| where there is sadness in failure | may your Church sow joy. |

As your workers in your vineyard:

may we be consolation and strength to others;
may we seek to listen and understand other perspectives;
may we love the whole of your creation;

For it is in giving that we receive; it is in pardoning that we are pardoned;
it is in dying that we are born again to eternal life.

Amen.

"Church" can be replaced with "us/we" etc.