

# **Sermon Notes collection**

## **Season of Creation**

### **2023**

## **WEEK 1**

**Let love be genuine/ the Devil's "business as usual".  
Romans 12:9-21 & Matthew 16:21-28**

Genuine love, which wishes the best for all, must coexist with a sense of realism, when there is bad news to share, or a 'cross' to be faced. Genuine love differs from wishful thinking, which might temporarily comfort those not at the sharp end, but does no more than kick cans a few inches down the road.

We note the importance to Jesus of the support of his closest friends and followers. And how important that they were fully and clearly informed about Cross. ... though then the Resurrection.

What motivates us to withhold truths about the impact on sisters and brothers in Christ elsewhere in Scotland or the world?

But we are Church: gathered around the words and actions of Christ. And in this fellowship, the scariest decisions are not something we should be abandoned to. No congregation on Earth will evade or postpone the spiritual and practical challenges of the Nature and Climate crises in our

lifetimes. To **attempt** to do so - for whatever 'kind' reasons, risks the rebuke Peter received.

What are your best (or worst) experiences of the loving sharing of "bad" news? When my wife was diagnosed with serious illness, the surgeon began with the words "Would you like a cup of tea? They didn't evade the task in hand or the urgency of action, because things had reached a stage of no return, with no painless options, but both better and worse choices.

Colleagues in preaching have said they don't dare raise with farmers the clear global imperative that we eat *less* meat, or speak out in a locality where oil and gas - or the prospect of a new coal mine - dangle the temporary temptation of jobs. Even though these things are now demonstrably at the cost of others. Local circumstances genuinely differ - e.g. transport of goods and disposal of waste - in our island communities, but these responsibilities need to be shared with the **whole** nation. Transition is a must, but transition must be just - otherwise the sheer unfairness will fuel 'satanic' delay and loss of momentum.

If not in church, then where else are we going to find the spiritual support and encouragement to face what does lie ahead, in a time when so many tipping points pass, and the rise in sea levels is already 'locked in' during our lifetimes?

Preachers - look to the solidarity of a movement like EcoCongregation Scotland.

Congregations: remember to encourage your preachers to tell the truth we need to hear, rather than whatever encourages 'the devil's business - as usual'.

Some might be squeamish about the name 'Satan'. Get over it. Forget horns, pitchforks and the smell of sulphur. We're talking here about the opposition to the healing intent of God, when 'business as usual' is killing the balance of life on Earth. Is Peter 'evil'? Hardly, as he seems to be trying to be a friend to Jesus. But his words, undermining resolve, sowing, potentially, the seed of doubt in the need for radical change, are 'satanic' in a technical sense.

The fellowship of Christ expressed in local and grassroots churches must retain the calling to offer 'sanctuary' - to be a place of the Good News where we come to be refreshed.

It's a valid criticism of some less than thoughtful environmental preaching that it offers only 'doom and gloom. But hope, with faith and love, is a choice and a gift of churches, who find joy in engagement. Where truth is told in love.

We do congregations no favours by allowing that the Nature and Climate crises are 'opinion', nor that they can be 'fixed'.

'Let love be genuine' - who will disagree? But do we have the courage, in Christ, for such love?

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## WEEK 2

**Changing minds and hearts in the crisis of heaven and Earth.**

**ECS Staff**

**Ezekiel 33:7-11    Matthew 18:15-20**

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This is the Sunday on which the EcoChaplaincy of EcoCongregation Scotland enters an exceptional third term. The Chaplaincy is a full-time ministry provided by the United Reformed Church for all the churches of Scotland, though the aim is that every 'general practice' local leader and preacher will fulfil their calling with a determinative awareness of the Nature and Climate Crisis. Training and education of church leaders in Scotland is beginning to take up this baton.

From now on, all preaching everywhere, at least under the umbrella of 'Season of Creation'/Creation Time has something of Ezekiel's 'sentinel' about it. An awesome and scary responsibility before God to promote alertness and awareness; to place before God's people sufficient truth and warning in a time of threats and crisis for **them** to decide on their direction. The responsibility of the preacher is not to make the decision for the people, but to leave **them** open to judgement and ready and able to choose the way of Life, even in a culture of determined hopelessness and a belief in the futility of any action to heal society or the Earth.

Ezekiel's God cares deeply that even the 'wicked' get the chance to change, though offers no complacency or immunity should the 'righteous' stupidly choose injustice.

Sometimes we may seem to be a lone voice, or an 'unwelcome source of hope', when churches (like Ezekiel's own people) have allowed generations of decline and the illusion of irrelevance to define their identities. The burden of programmes of reorganisation in some denominations block the horizon and drain energy to such an extent that the message of 'the end of the world' - but also the associated 'closeness of the Kingdom' come across as light relief!

And yet we can grasp that in days of Nature and Climate crisis, even the expected grim and boring future is off the menu. To live by a different story may lead to a different outcome.

Yes, our message IS for the churches, as Ezekiel's was for 'the House of Israel', and it may as well -or *far better* - be proclaimed by a whole congregation committed to environmental prayer and action as by any individual.

The awards programme of EcoCongregation Scotland offers something like that, and if the Romans passage for today is included, we note the completely appropriate place of 'Christian competitiveness' : to outdo one another in showing honour, which is a reality I once experienced as a guest of churches in American Samoa. Can we outdo one another in showing honour to the Earth?

The Ezekiel and Matthew scenarios differ: Ezekiel has the uphill responsibility of informing a whole community; the advice given in Matthew is on the loving attention to dissenters and deniers within the community: those who might without determined care, do harm to the resolve and the mission of the church.

In recent months we have seen a growth in the availability of ‘climate-denying’ material, some of which is very competently written or filmed, though the starting points and conclusions are completely bonkers - like the suggestion that greenhouse gases, already at a dangerous level, should be doubled. In most congregations, *someone* will have been taken in by the bogus authority of such material. It’s a pastoral task, not to beat them down or bully them, but lovingly take them in hand.

We need everyone on board, and the gifts and commitment even of those who begin as sceptics and deniers. We’ve seen that hearts and minds can change. In fact, that’s the business of the Church!

A final thought: in a Unified Creation of Heaven-and-Earth/Sky-and-Soil, **of course**, what we ‘bind or loose’ impacts on the climate of the whole. The crisis of Climate and Nature is in the most real sense a crisis of Heaven and Earth; for whatever else we need to mean by ‘heaven’, in Scripture, it also always remains ‘sky’.

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## WEEK 3

**No refuge for the rich  
or the (vindictive) wronged**

Exodus 14:19-31 Matthew 18:21-35

ECS Staff

From time to time, we still hear the damaging suggestion: 'God's in charge so we don't need to worry about climate change'.

But perhaps that's why we do!

God's chosen mode of "being in charge", from the first Days of Creation, so conspicuously and consistently involves delegation and collaboration. For Jesus, when Tempted by Satan's twisting of Scripture to jump off the pinnacle of the Temple 'because God's in charge and everything will be all right' - sends the Opposition packing.

The Red Sea crossing presents the Lordship of God over the elements, who collaboratively carry out God's task of holding unjust humanity to account. Accountability is sternly emphasised concluding the parable of the unforgiving slave. Accountability - justice and righteousness - is intentionally built into God's Creation [Psalm 89:14]. Which today makes as much sense in reality as ever in scripture.

The narrative of the Plagues and Exodus brutally affirms the connection now so clear: of human injustice and environmental disruption. But there's the other side of the coin: the remedy and intervention God chooses involves the intervention of those who hear God's Word. Moses' outstretched (created) hand is as much part of the event as the water 'who' overwhelms the Egyptians.

In the drama of this defining story of God and just and active Creator, injustice and oppression makes humans (in this case, Egyptians) enemies of the Earth on whom we depend.

The outcome - in terms of those who suffer -, differs from our own experience, of the absence of that 'climate justice' that our young protesters demand 'now'. Polluters - as yet - seldom pay for the predicament of the poor. How does that feel? Will it influence your prayer, preaching, and decisions in daily life?

Matthew's Jesus pushes the consideration of limited forgiveness so far that the wronged church member is expected to lose count. A tally reaching 77 or 490 forgivenesses is exposed as mean and ridiculous.

Being wronged is no more a legitimate refuge than being rich. Both call for - and benefit from - gracious action. Whilst this must not descent into renewed blaming of victims, does any genuine forgiveness wait eagerly for the chance not to forgive?

But equally, is it right to risk taking into our own mouths the most 'strenuous commands' of our Lord Jesus Christ in such a way that we ourselves appear to be the ones assuring of anything but pardon for those who do not "forgive your brother or sister from your heart."

To know and believe ourselves set free and enabled by forgiveness rather than paralysed and disabled by guilt is basic to the spiritual bonuses of Christian life. It's the liberating hope of anyone who has prospered in the societies of the Global North.

Nations have accused nations in the climate crisis, and, before God, as it were, looked to hold to account those incurring a 'climate debt' of pollution and habitat destruction. The concept of 'Loss and Damage' was loudly highlighted in Glasgow at COP26, but even after a boost at COP27, the amounts being offered for the fund are a minuscule fraction of what's needed to help poorer nations prepare for the effects which cannot be evaded. Any acceptance of what's offered already amounts to spectacularly gracious forgiveness of the 'trillions' extracted by the Northern empires.

So how can such 'aid' be given joyfully and generously as an investment in the security of all, rather than grudgingly and evasively, seeking to find ways not to bear even that cost?

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## WEEK 4

**Jonah 3:10-4:11    Matthew 20:1-16**

In our readings, the spirit of Scripture mounts an attack on every variation of entitlement and complacency. Firstly in the satirical narrative of the success of the mission of the prophet Jonah, sent unwillingly to pagan foreigners and animals for whom he himself has no love or concern, and then in the presumption expressed by the day-long workers in the vineyard that superior opportunity equals superiority, and that 'levelling-up' is a scandalous injustice.

How far we allow this radically egalitarian direction of travel to progress will be a matter of discernment, but the 'making of **equality**' by the intervention to ensure **equity** might seem a step too far for many in our culture.

Are we indeed 'worth more than **many** sparrows'?[Matthew 10:31] - but if so, how many, given that Jesus in that phrase is addressing a crowd of **many** people. The 'exchange rate' of life becomes less self-explanatory the more closely we enquire.

Exceptionally, it's worth quoting this soundbite from Archbishop Emeritus Rowan Williams, speaking at the 2023 Congress of European Churches, who sums up meticulously some 'public domain' insights we all should be able to arrive at, but might not have bothered or dared.

*"The environmental crisis overshadows every other issue: The story here is of an insanely unbalanced account of human entitlement and human capacity that has consistently, in the last three centuries, ignored any sense of the interdependence of human life and the life of the organic order as a whole: the life that matters has been, explicitly or implicitly, defined as human life – and human life lived in a specific mode, that of expanding consumption,"*

If you'd noticed, or notice now how our speech and even your prayers imply an unspoken hierarchy of life, often with our own race/species/class at the top, then in that sense, you're "equal" with Baron Williams of Oystermouth. You have permission to claim that public domain insight as your own, and not to feel as scholars are often encouraged to, that you are 'dwarfs on the shoulders of giants'. Even if that were so, you see further. with each passing day.



The people in our congregations have a better view, and the opportunity to be better informed than many great ‘authorities’ ( including theologians) of even the relatively recent past, as regards the progress of the Nature and Climate crises. Of course we need wise guidance, prayerful discernment and the ability to sift climate denials fake science from the honest projections of, for instance, the IPCC or even the UK Climate Change Committee: but what matters to the world God made, sustains and loves, is right now. In this a certain responsible recklessness, or a pious irreverence may be of use. We’d be in good company.

The whole Book of Jonah (whales, worms, and repentant animals) should be shamelessly exploited, rather than held respectfully in check. It’s really worthwhile briefly summarising the rest of the Jonah story, not taking for granted that everyone even knows the outline.

The multi-faith environment of the story is also useful for us in a culture in which Christianity does not dominate, though our faith has vital things to say, as bearers of God’s word of love for all. Where these things may be stern or scary, we need look to Jesus rather than Jonah: every hard truth must be offered in love. Our expectations of being heard do not determine how worthwhile it is to speak.

Whales and worms aside, by far the most ‘miraculous’ aspect is that, without waiting either for for the impending disaster, or for the religious conversion of the Ninevites, indiscriminate life-saving change for all creatures is embraced, to the disgust of the prophet of doom. The pagans of Nineveh get on with it.

God loves those who are messing up their world. Enough to throw them a lifeline they don’t understand, but may grab hold of anyway.

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## WEEK 5

Ezekiel 18:1-4,25-32   Matthew 21:23-32

## ECS STAFF

“You’ll die of old age, but we’ll die of climate change” - is one of the grimmer and more popular banner slogans you’ll see in protests by youth movements such as Fridays for Future. I’ve encountered those in older generations who - sympathetically - agree with this general point: that generations born after the (initial) damage has been done carry a disproportionate burden of the effects caused within the lifetime of those now looking to retirement, and the several generations preceding. And yet this responsibility is carried by every current participant in our culture of the Global North. Grandparents, in their youth, likely trashed and wasted less and used less plastic than the grandchildren who are already suffering the consequences.

EcoCongregation Scotland has attracted and benefitted from the commitment of those who take seriously their responsibility to generations to come.

But maybe it’s not that simple.

It’s tempting just to look back to the choking pollution of the industrial revolution over two hundred years ago, leading into ‘Victoria’s inferno’ as experienced in some of the more intensive industrial sites, but that would be to miss the scale and urgency of our current situation, with vastly greater human populations and levels of industrialisation and use of fossil fuels, let alone the obscene waste of lives and resources in every military conflict: (not just Ukraine, but also Iraq) where Creation is also the first casualty.

In amongst the disabling ‘unfairness’ a given generation might either feel or own up to, we need to hear God’s all-embracing concern: “Know that all lives are mine; the life of the parent as well as the life of the child is mine.” The life of all flesh, with whom God makes covenant; of the flesh that John’s Gospel says the Word became, and which we share with so much life.

Jesus' exchange with the Temple authorities "the chief priests and elders of the people" seems at first glance to be a PR battle. But we also see it in some academic debate. Those beautiful games where the truth is valued less than the skills and intimidating entitlement that ensure debate is carried. And where, alarmingly, sincerity and loyalty can be twisted into opposition to truth. It should be tragically familiar.

Today, hypocrisy of setting net zero targets - then evading or postponing them - is **not** redeemed by being "in the best possible cause". Energy security is not guaranteed by renewed and additional investment in what absolutely and morally needs to end. Nor can short-term economics or offers of jobs in new fossil fuel exploration excuse what the UN Secretary General called such "moral and economic madness"

The speed of change and the urgency of action - as well as the value of a change of heart and life - mean that all generations are engaged and affected by the challenges of our day. All are called together to embrace justice at all levels. Whatever the level of your burden and responsibility, and whatever the particular circumstances of your location, no one is exempt or 'off the hook', but neither is anyone excused from care and consideration for fellow creatures - including human ones! God does not 'cry wolf' : warnings ignored do indeed lead to disaster, and what matters for every generation now living, is the practicalities of current and future action, rather than getting bogged down in what might have been.

