

This text is re-worked in preparation for my sharing with Barrhead URC on the first Sunday of Lent.

Imagine *Christmas*, if all you had was Mark and John's Gospels: no shepherds, no wise men, no manger. No Herod, and therefore no Massacre of the children.

You wouldn't be challenged by the Holy Family as refugees. And refugees, right now, are people worth praying for. And your community might not be built up so much in their joy and devotion at the season.

But if this is to be a season worth celebrating, what would we fill it up with?

You might have done, and often people nothing to do with churches talk about ...giving something up...as if that were just good in itself.

A couple of years ago, I managed to offend the Farmers' Union by giving up meat for Lent, which shows at least that small actions sometimes do get noticed.

But I doubt that we, in particular, for whom fasting is seldom as meaningful as it still is in other cultures, have any need to build up Jesus' macho credentials as someone who "ate nothing" (though interestingly nobody claims he *drank* nothing) during that period of Biblical shorthand for "long enough for change" (*40 days of rain for the Flood, 40 years in the desert to let the dissident Hebrews die off and so on*).

And yet we can grasp sufficiently the point of uphill conditions, and the sense in which, when we are under pressure, we may discover in ourselves something unexpected. - Be it even the dilemma of a local church whose gas boiler has died in Winter-time, and alarmed by the up-front cost of a sustainable option rather than tempting like-for-like replacement. Think about that in terms of how difficult it is to think of anything other than what seems to be the only sensible solution.

That's what temptation means. Refusing a cream cake is a doddle by comparison.

If, however, you want a meaningful launch to **Lent** from Luke alone, like Christmas without star and manger, you'll be lacking key points of the character of wilderness.

It's true that Luke does enrich the Lent experience with a concentration on the the priorities that drive the human impact on the planet. i.e: The glory, or otherwise of our aspirations to rule.

But in the Old testament reading, What does it mean to “possess an inheritance”? Certainly something rather different from just owning property!

Especially the property of land, the Earth, the planet.
Is this OUR planet? What do you think?

Inheritance is not an object to be bought and sold on a whim. Indeed the obligations both to previous and future generations implied in ‘inheritance’ are alien to capitalist buying and selling. There’s responsibility for justice in every transaction; and for the results of our giving and receiving. The results of our exclusion and our welcome.

Whether we remember, *or not*, that like the spoil heaps sound Scotland from mining or from shale oil - those strangely coloured hills you see as you approach Edinburgh , Whether we remember, *or not that* we are dust, and to dust we return. And in doing so, enrich the Earth.

The Biblical “jubilee cycles“ of Creation are not about holding power forever, but letting go of what has been held too tightly. Returning annexed property. Liberating those who have been enslaved,

What does Satan offer? In Luke, in particular, Satan’s junk-mail offer, is not the *Earth*, (which remains God’s own) but the human *regimes* and *their* aspiration to “possess”. Something we’ve been tragically reacquainted with with the news from Ukraine.

A familiarity with fraudulent trading helps us recognise that offer as abusively belittling of what it concerns.

Satan *claims* to have been given the glory of the human regimes of the world, though evades appreciation of the richness of what it means to ‘possess inheritance’,

“for it has been given over to me, and I give it to anyone I please”.

This is a sad echo of attitudes to fellow creatures, previously promoted by Christianity, but which, with the lead given by Pope Francis and many others, we must have courage to leave behind.

The indigenous witness, is that “our” Fellow creatures, even those to which we relate as predators, are “ours” as our family is “ours” and not simply

“that we may destroy them at our pleasure ... “for our own ends, for our own benefit or satisfaction.” [John Henry Newman (!!!), quoted by Ian Bradley in ‘God is Green’]

But what are we missing? There’s Jesus, there’s Satan, but who else?
In a few short words, **Mark** frees us to value, and not to waste, our wilderness.
“...he was in the wilderness forty days, being tested by Satan. He was with the wildlife, and angels attended him.” [Mark 1:13]

The value of wilderness clarifies in step with impact of environmental crises. Biodiversity, carbon capture, the management of waters, and more, become priorities in the prestige of nations, and feathers in their cap.

Whatever seemed merely beautiful, and therefore expendable, turns out to be indispensable to the life we share, and therefore, any inheritance we may aspire to possess.

Possess?

It’s an old **English** legal principle, that ‘Possession is nine points of the law’.

We begin Lent with readings that reflect on possession, property, inheritance, determine our behaviour towards fellow stakeholders in God’s rainbow covenant of care for **the Earth.... who**, both in the Exodus and in our day of Crisis, expresses in signs wonders, and terrifying power, the will of God for justice, the anger of God at oppression, the belittling and othering of life.

Our possessions impact on our identity. (*Am I a “man of property?”*) But so does the heritage that God so subversively offers, inclusively, irrespective of power, privilege, or property:

Out in the wilderness is from where : John the Baptist disillusioned privilege and exclusiveness based on heritage.

Do not begin to say to yourselves, 'We have Abraham as our father.' For I tell you that out of these stones God can raise up children for Abraham. [Luke 3:8]

I thought about that when I visited those slowly rewinding heaps of ash. What will arise out of land we have wasted?

A full observance of Lent insists on ***the rights and authority and contribution of Wilderness***, and how we relate to that impacts on how we rise to the challenges of our day and age and living planet. ***Our*** planet?

The relationships with those entities of which we say they are “***mine***” also vary greatly. Marriage vows may allow that we ‘*have and hold*’ a partner, though we’ve also - and happily - moved on from ideas that the partner thereby sacrifices all personal freedom and self-determination.

Partners in marriage ***belong*** to each other, but to see a partner as ‘private property’ crosses the line to abuse. The same is true of the land we call home.

As I was reporting on presentations in the COP Campus, our friend Rev Rory MacLeod of Skye provided this insight from Highland culture, which says much about a human relationship with a homeland.

When a chief was installed, he was viewed as being "married" to his people and their territory; fruitfulness was seen as an endorsement of his leadership - therefore degradation of the land would be considered a judgment on him personally and to the detriment of his people...

If the Earth is ours, then what's the state of our relationship?

Hmm.

In Scotland, where most land ***is*** considered private property, nonetheless, it's now ***accessible***, subject to the three principles of the ‘right to roam:

‘Respect for interests of other ***people***, care for environment, and take responsibility for your own actions”.

-Principles which, one could say, would have got Jesus through the testing that Satan had lined up for him. Even in a land laid waste like this!

For Luke, though, apart from Luke's acknowledgement that wilderness is a frequent and intentional place of prayer for Jesus, it looks as if the prime significance of wilderness was its *emptiness..... of people*.

How would Luke grasp the place of the small, but ecologically significant populations of indigenous people in whose moral care, if not legally certified possession, is 80% of the Earth's biodiversity, within what we see as wilderness.

That's a figure used by many reputable speakers at COP in Glasgow 2021.

Mark, by contrast, makes clear that - as will be familiar to anyone who has immersed themselves into any sort of wilderness - Jesus lived *alongside the wildlife*, and that angels looked after him. Fasting or not, Jesus found *hospitality* in wilderness.

Wilderness, even if it's avoided by people, is the inheritance *possessed* by the wildlife. Angels being agents of and dwellers in Creation and servants of God, who is so emphatically the sustainer of Earth and *Heaven/sky both*. Who gives possession, who stands with the *dis*-possessed.

Angels -in the wilderness- are perhaps, - if I can say this *without* romanticisation - like human participants in so many wilderness landscapes.

Made me think, too, of the ravens who fed Elijah, [1 kgs 17] and the repeated, though futile attempts of theologians to identify them, instead, as "local people."

If they *were*, then human hospitality sustains and embodies the will of God.

If they were *not*, as most scholars agree, we see the hospitality of Creation; hospitality being the oldest and most fundamental of all sacred and ecological duties *of faithful people*.

Wilderness is the place given by God as a habitat and inheritance to those whom an Inuit woman at COP described, without artifice, as 'our animal relatives'.

Even if land *is* given by God to us, it is *not ungiven* by God to them.

Those same Inuit people gave their home address as *'where the caribou give birth'*. What meaning do we find in the address we give? Or does that just not crop up on our radar?

So although Luke presents a landscape "void of human domination", the idea of a 'wasted land' becomes the more horrific through colonial history, where Europeans landed with guns on the shores of an ancient homeland and declared that habitat *'terra nullius'* - a void and vacant property ripe for exploitative possession.

Perhaps God alone can create a wilderness, but "waste" land - that's a human prerogative. Though, as I noticed on these five heaps of industrial waste, now claimed by wildlife it may not be a permanent one.

A *dry* wilderness, into which come streams of living water, explosively becomes a *blossoming* wilderness. Still wilderness when life bursts forth in green and active fruitfulness.

A species, *given* a wilderness habitat as their inheritance, may add to its richness, but does harm if they merely dominate. Monoculture - where even the diversity of the hedgerows is banished - is the true *desert*.

The "*fitness*" of our survival happens through negotiation. An ecosystem is a sensitive web of interdependence.

And the result of that - again, an indigenous view consonant with the Bible, is 'wealth'.

"Our territories are not given other than to be conserved" said a leader from the Amazon. Not as an economic commodity, but - and listen carefully - as a source of wealth. They even went so far, and felt so unthreatened in doing so, as to invite observers like me to see the Amazon as my wealth too. My *inheritance*. For which I have responsibility. I hope we are humbled by such an invitation.

In Deuteronomy, it is taken for granted that there will be foreigners, and those in need, and that possession of the land requires attention to their needs too.

Not in any merely concessionary fashion, but so that they may eat and be satisfied.

The result of just and careful living of the promised homeland is not exclusion, but generous hospitality. And that way, and no other, lies wealth that is worth celebrating.

Welcome to the season of Lent!