

DIVESTING FROM DESPAIR

Ben Lomond

As a local minister, I have buried plenty of lovely people, faithful and wise, who not only longed to visit somewhere special or do something beautiful,

they actually did have the time and the money to do so,
if they had got round to it.

I fully understand why they didn't. Missed opportunity is always tragic.

Though Easter, now growing so close, allows us to inhabit the sort of spiritual tipping point when fulfilment of longings and prophecy can come together.

So we don't have to bury any more species. Nor commit any friends' homelands to the waves, nor stand back as a village is cremated.

I wish this were just poetry. But you know none of those things are made up. Scary.

But When Prophecy is fulfilled and made real, and you have to take Scripture seriously

.... It's the sort of thing that nearly got Jesus thrown over a cliff in his own home town. How dare we suggest that cherished visions, a spiritual response to the threats of the past, might be recycled and repurposed with power for today?

What gets you up out of the pew,
to praise or punish

to protest or pay homage?

Is it the cross that will shift you?

Is it a great love for the Earth, spilling over into your church and community, as Mary's great love for Jesus as filled the whole house with that delightful fragrance?

Is it the empty tomb?

Is it the wildfires and the storms

Is it the butterfly and the green blade rising?

And if none of these things steer your life's course in a still greener direction, what help do you need to get there?

Or who do you need to get there with?

Go easy, Be kind.

Remember then, that Jesus himself needed the support of fools like Mary to face what lay ahead?

And Isaiah's people, in exile, needed something more dangerous than the tedium of mere survival, looking back on the good old days when God stood up to violence and abuse.

And I can't look down. I know I'm still piling things up for a rainy day though I can see it's pouring, just as houses are being built in Scotland, up to 2024, with fossil fuel heating systems.

And I know this is because years ago, before our awareness of extremely urgent climate crisis, gas really was cleaner and more economical than what came before.

And good people probably exhausted themselves with battles in committees and boardrooms even to make such limited progress.

Like the ridiculously draining and long-winded process of convincing ourselves that since it really was Jesus who said 'where your treasure is, there will your heart be also' and that this pretty obviously applies to the investments we had been relying on in fossil fuel companies, with or without economic pressure as Investors and even banks are increasingly questioning the long-term viability of the entire sector.

Including the spectacle of how ready those companies are to cut jobs following market forces, with or without the support of church funds.

The poor will always be with us.... just so long as we do nothing to unsettle the injustice that keeps the poor poor.

Just so long as we don't rock the boat that inevitably makes things worse through avoidable climate damage.

And jobs will always be at risk.... and far more so, unless we encourage our timorous leaders wholeheartedly into that adventure of a fully just new exodus from a money economy of fossil fuels to a low-carbon welfare economy.

As for disinvestment in favour of sustainable energy, the meticulous homework has been done by Operation Noah, but we know it takes more than facts to change minds.

More than sticking plaster to stop the abuse of the Earth.

Scripture, Jesus says, should be enough.

In Lent, we hope a cross and an empty tomb will *be* enough, but will you *let it be* enough?

And many of you *do know* how good it feels, how liberating, to be convinced that you have permission to move out of a corner you had boxed yourselves into.

Or look around your congregation, or our movement or EcoCongregation Scotland, and you'll certainly find someone who's there because of that Moses moment. The blazing bush, on the brink of destruction, which says what you do makes a difference.

That the heady foolishness of devotional extravagance shown by Mary can give light and fragrance to our common home.

John hedges their bets by reporting that it is Judas, the thief who puts the 'sensible point of view':

that coal and oil and nuclear weapons bring jobs, that we can't afford to change, that the reserves and treasures we do have should be squandered on business as usual, or kept on the shelf.

But you don't need to be a thief and betrayer to be shackled by common sense no longer fit for purpose.

COVID has shown us, in a relatively acute crisis, how much we can change and how fast, and those few days of clear water, clean air and birdsong you could hear in city streets, have become like scripture, reminding us that change might not be all bad.

I thank God for the memory of the fragrance of the gorse flowers which I first noticed in the short walks of lockdown. That and so much about nature, to which I've been oblivious for a far too sensible lifetime.

But global greenhouse gas emissions bounced back long before any all-clear on the virus, and whatever they said at COP, coal producers are planning and breaking production targets for the dirtiest fuel, even as the leaders of their nations made promises to the opposite effect.

As acute comes and goes, the chronic crisis of joined-up disasters demands a different sort of responsiveness; for churches, something like the declaration of an emergency to free us from an inertia which I don't mind admitting, may *well have served us well* for a while.

For now, this year, churches I know of, and love, and with whom I can't but sympathise, are still replacing gas boilers with gas boilers, and yes, alternatives at present may have a greater up-front monetary cost, but as the hike in gas prices, pushing so many into fuel poverty makes clear, that's not investment in the future.

At least, not in any likely future, rather than a boring, despairing fantasy of 'business as usual'.

But when even churches don't feel they can responsibly sow seeds of hope, or follow Jeremiah's example of buying land in a recession, then both the readings today, as part of our preparation to reap the greatest harvest through the emotional turmoil that comes with praying through crucifixion and resurrection... these are heaven-sent.

Like the rain.

Through the extravagant outrageousness of both, as God-given spiritual resources for the hardest of times. Sudden or continual. God is with us through both.

We really do know that 1.5 is already a disaster for many nations, farmers, habitats and wildlife, and we'd more than have our hands full, but maybe could live with full hands.

We've also really heard, as at least the more optimistic scientists assure us that that elusive maximum of 1.5 degrees of global warming certainly is technically possible, even with existing technology.

We really have been warned that continuing and very noticeable rise in sea-levels within our lifetimes is locked in?

What then is our jailer? What are the shackles, the chains that bind

As EcoChaplain for Scotland as a whole, and for what was always going to be a limited time, I strive to be present to congregations throughout the nation, though of course that will have implications for my carbon footprint. Judas would say, as no doubt he would of the entire of COP, that it costs the earth to heal the earth.

But grasping the nettle and stepping outside the daily round... is it so terrifying? is it something which somehow seems like a guilty pleasure?

After all, well-brought up Christians are shy of being seen to be extravagant, aren't they?

But a sense of urgency really does transform and repurpose our priorities. Enjoy yourself, it's later than you think!

I've looked up at Ben Lomond since first I came to Scotland in the late eighties. This is the first, and may be the last time I have the chance and the daylight to get right the way up this very popular mountain, though this early in the year, I've still had to watch my step with the weather. The wind and the Spirit both blow where they will.

Getting out and about, letting the landscape take the lead in the preaching, is a luxury, and I won't say I don't enjoy it more than I would something far less costly to me and others, sitting at my desk with the webcam.

But like any mountain of height, the reward is a different perspective: an insight into the layout of the land way beyond what maps can offer, along with an increased awareness of the respect due the Earth. And the hearing due their interpreters the scientists, and their immediate partners, the indigenous peoples from the north pole to the south, custodians of almost all the biodiversity on which, we're belatedly discovering, we depend.

All the more, as day by day, as even more bad news about the planet trickles into my inbox, I realise that I'm probably not close to taking in and digesting quite how bad things are and might be, and how little it seems I can do about it. or put it another way: of what value is the little I can do?

Before concluding: a wee note about the book of Isaiah: the majority of scholars support the idea that, as it were, Isaiah is a job, rather than just one person: several writers are involved over several lifetimes, and the one writing for us today is dealing with people who are downhearted, despondent and perhaps despairing.

So what does this Isaiah do? Confronted with despair, they recycle the sacrosanct good old days, the story of the Exodus, God in partnership with the waters, completely eradicating the threat, of the world-beating Egyptian army. Demonstrating how even the empires are not in control, not sovereign over God's Creation on which they rather depend, at whose mercy they remain.

Our fellow creatures can see it: the wildest of them all: the jackal, the ostrich....

Trust in an impossibility.

Who can still offer the hand of friendship.

So when are we going to take notice?

