

LENT 4: THE CIRCLE OF JUSTICE

For Granton United Church (Methodist/URC) 27th March

In local ministry, I've usually have to disrupt any continuity in Lent because of Mothering Sunday. As it happens, the readings this week touch on some themes which might work well with that bit of the calendar. Parental relations, the responsibility of different generations to each other and more. Generational justice is a huge theme motivating older people for green action and commitment.

When it comes to the story of the prodigal son, for the last few years, people have gone a bit overboard from a famous painting by Rembrandt, where the father seems also to have a mother's hand. I'm going to take a very different, but I believe, also viable approach, in the global context of climate crisis.

And what is global is also always very local. If it's about fellow creatures the far side of the world, it's also down our street. And with climate crisis, especially as close as we are today to the sea, that's surely the case.

Luke's Gospel spends a lot of time with the idea of heritage, where , heritage is rather different from mere private property. It comes with dignity, and with obligations to generations before, but even more, after me.

It's heritage that is irrevocably trashed by the Prodigal Son, to the detriment of the prosperity of the whole family business.

The older brother, after all, in a farm abruptly stripped of half its wealth, ends up 'working like a slave'.

So perhaps the Prodigal Son fable is a great picture of where the throwaway fossil fuel-obsessed culture of the global north is heading. That addiction which, according to an American Admiral, caused the war in Ukraine. We're living somewhere in the story of the prodigal.

But maybe we're still in the middle of that story. Before the penny drops, and we're fighting the pigs for lunch.

We're daily blowing that shared inheritance, making sure there's no tomorrow. At war with the Earth, without even bothering. And considering making it worse as we feel the pinch. But could we still, if the cost comes home to us, head for home?

The trouble is, through the action of the most unjust in the global north, our siblings in the common home of Earth are there already.

Ancient cultures we've looked down on.

And how do you think they feel? How do you think the Earth feels? At COP, scientists said, up to 1.5 degrees, the Earth could still be our friend. Beyond that, and the Earth might not be **capable** of friendship.

Some of the folks I have met in the world church would see everything I'm saying today as a cop-out. Am I taking the father's forgiveness for granted?

They have a point. But that's where I pray, desperately, for their grace and dignity; their forgiveness and understanding, but also their continued loving moral pressure for us all to get on with a response to a very real and very present crisis. How can they best help us to help them? Not by the older brother giving up his grumpiness? He is invited to the table.

Add to that the situation of the homeless on **our** streets. Millions heading into fuel poverty, because we have so long lived on borrowed time and delayed the just transition to a better life.

For us, as for any creature of God, home is for living, not for wasting. Money is a very poor substitute for wealth: or for the celebration of life in its fullness. And the dignity that comes with finding your place and purpose, by the grace of God. But like money, dignity can be stolen. And that hurts.

It takes a long time for a people, or a race or a nation to rise above humiliation and degradation. For the last domino stone to topple after even one generation of abuse.

War, or a sectarian tradition once started, carries appalling momentum. Shame becomes our identity. We fear to make peace, in case face is lost.

Unless, in the shame of our own making or that's inflicted on us, we nonetheless find something to celebrate, which lifts us. Despite outward circumstances.

In Scripture, the denial of dignity and identity cuts at least as deep as the violence or hardship that may accompany it. The prayer of the Psalmist is at least as much 'let me never be put to shame' as 'let me never suffer harm.'

But there is, a compensation, for those who acknowledge the hurt that is done. Forgiveness is offered by God in Christ, before, though definitely *as a part of* the process of healing those who have chosen injustice.

Forgiveness as the opportunity to remake the dignity of fellow creatures from whom we have stolen it. Before it's too late.

Maybe we're further on in the story: the fatted calf is eaten; the robe is on our back, the ring on our finger. And it's time to make peace with our siblings before the older generation passes away.

Time to offer whatever we still can.

Processes of truth and reconciliation -for instance in Northern Ireland or South Africa, are incredibly painful, not least because they require the letting go of the compulsion to keep the pain going. As well as the acknowledgement of the truth *that it was wrong*, from those who caused it.

Joshua chapter 5 is a rare sign of hope. It offers a brief interlude from all the violence in which the marauding nomadic tribes of Israel

become involved, both through their own initiative and those who pre-emptively threaten them; violence which in conspicuous violation of the Commandment, they blame on God...

Nonetheless, in the extract we heard, the people gather in a sacred space - marked by a stone circle.

(That's the meaning of the name 'Gilgal' -)

a circle of similar antiquity to this one, and likewise, with twelve principal stones.

There they celebrate every peculiarly defining aspect of their identity as a nation. Circumcision, the Passover, the stories, the Law.

The sort of thing that indigenous participants at COP brought with them, engendering and claiming wonder and respect. Way beyond what Bonnie Colours of your football team do for you....

Asserting a dignity maliciously denied, and it with it, the wisdom born of a close relationship with a living planet. The incalculable stories lost when cultures and creatures are robbed of their common habitat.

In the sacred space of the circle, the crutches fall away. In Joshua, the Manna - the emergency provision for a time of distress, came to an end: they stood, as it were, on their own two feet, living off the produce of the land.

In receipt of a living, rather than what we're now embarrassed to call 'charity'. And as for the disgrace of Egypt, the inflicted shame of enslavement, as the stones are set in place, God, though Joshua, pronounces it 'rolled away'.

In celebration, they claim their freedom.

The dignity of people who enjoy the clothing exchange, and the food saved from waste in Granton -which also shrinks the carbon footprint

of the church - is paramount. It's not condescending 'charity' but a community initiative.

It's easy, if you have it, to give money. It's more demanding to let go of the celebrity entitlement of the donor and recognise your own need, and the grace of God to all.

At international church events, I have been painfully reminded that, even as the heir of a persecuted church, I'm there as the inheritor of a prodigal colonialism.

Though the crimes are not my own, I would add insult to injury by refusing all responsibility for them.

For I certainly still materially benefit, living in a city shaped by the crippling compensation paid to enslavers, but absolutely not to the enslaved, as the deal for their "liberation" and continuing impoverishment.

And it goes on. Even should the global temperature be held down to 1.5%, further rises in global temperatures and the catastrophic accompanying impact of extreme weather, disruption of migration, sea rises and more are rolling in that inherited injustice.

It's not just money, but money is the easiest way of quantifying the loss, which is also, morally, a debt, which more than offsets the debts incurred by small island nations cleaning up after cyclones and droughts and more.

This was one sticking point at COP - where the principle of 'loss and damage' - was loudly highlighted and lip-service paid, yet not sufficiently acted upon

Loss and damage refers to the harm done by the industrialised and colonialist global north to the Earth, often at immediate cost of the habitats and welfare of local people and wildlife. Damage from climate change is already widespread and sometimes surprising. Far beyond drought, melting ice sheets and crop failures.

But one thing is certain: over and above the strength of any moral case, whatever it costs, (and \$100bn is about a third of the cost of the UK's weapons of mass destruction) the leaders of the richer world stand to benefit, both in the maintenance of stability and the lessening of damage to their own home.

It's the principle that privileged and macho Christians often miss out on: that doing good does *you* good. On a local level, choose actions and even prayers that you like, that build you up, as well as move you on. Even move you on from an inheritance of exploitation.

But on the other side: revenge - even the revenge of the powerless on the powerful - though it might seem to satisfy, stores up harm for everyone.

Exodus 21:23–27 An eye for an eye.... is not one of the cycles of nature, but rather a desperate attempt to save us all from endless spirals of violence.

As if revenge followed as naturally as the climate falling out of balance after centuries of pollution and warming and greenhouse gases.

The key difference is that Climate crisis is cause and effect, which in the Old Testament often seems *indistinguishable* from the wrath of God, but revenge - is a choice, even though popular culture frequently presents it as an obligation, a necessity, or a matter of honour.

The yearning to get back at the abuser *is* acknowledged in several constructive ways in Scripture.

God offers to take on the job: Vengeance is mine, [**Deuteronomy 32:35, Romans 12:17-19**] says the Lord: I will repay (....so you may

stand back, released from any obligation). Let the wicked fall down the hole they have dug.

But in a world burdened by the needs of eight billion humans, all vengeance harms all life. Your avenging bullet ricochets.

There is restitution in a legal framework: (such as Leviticus) where fines are levied, or penalties imposed, though, you could say, life is thereby commodified. For us, Law is the substitute for justice, that we choose to live by.

But justice is the acknowledgment of need, rather than the punishment of offences.

Ezekiel's God speaks out against the crushing despair of the 'sour grapes' proverb "our parents ate the sour grapes, but we get the sour taste". Each generation should carry the responsibility for their own misdeeds and acts of faith and justice. Read the banners of some of our youth climate strikers, who feel betrayed by their forbears, beyond their control or reach.

Then finally, Paul, who shows how God gives to the followers of Christ the task of reconciliation, offers the rather attractive 'burning coals' strategy. Doing good to the offender both satisfies the need for vengeance and heals on multiple levels, enabling the victim to rise above the evil of the enemy. And, by the way, burning coals are the means of prayer, offering incense in the temple.

And as the cloud rises to delight God's nostrils, joy and laughter at the embarrassment of the persecutor are totally permitted.

Be committed. And enjoy it.

Thanks be to God. AMEN