

Being the Church in Climate Crisis



A script for a seminar of preaching to the converted.

Most of you will remember when Creation was a really soft option. ***All things Bright and Beautiful***, strictly as a children's hymn. Not that we'd really take notice of the concerns of striking children about the planet. The teaching was strictly one-way.

The flowers in green cyanide foam, placed, with a certain irony, in my first pastorate, on the Communion Table, where I might have looked for a cross.

Then Harvest: perhaps most of all in city and small town churches, had an emphasis on what God has given into our hands to do with as we will.

What are ***your*** early memories of how Creation was presented in churches? And how might you ***recycle*** what was good about them?

I could waste a lot of time going on about "how previous generations got it wrong, but now we know different." That ***would*** be a waste, because we both do and we don't.

Maybe ***they*** did, maybe ***they*** didn't. Though unless the result of their choices was harm and abuse to Creation and to fellow creatures including human ones, that's none of my concern. My concern as Environmental Chaplain ***is*** with what's right for now. With asking that question: until Christians grasp the magnitude of the state of the planet and the threats to life, will we will just carry on ***playing at being the church***, rather than getting on with the job?

But that said, ***"the job"*** might involve a certain amount of what's been looked down on as playful, and insufficiently serious or rational. Or primitive. Or to be eradicated, as once the attempt was made to erase Highland culture,

Being the Church in climate crisis demands courage to assert that we do have something of value to offer - and really, really, we do.

This **requires** faith, meaning both that we live in the world with eyes wide open, knowing like the Servant in Isaiah, that the little we've seen so far will not be the whole story.

*I 1:3 His delight is in the fear of the Lord,
And He shall not judge by the sight of His eyes,
Nor decide by the hearing of His ears;*

Delight in the **fear**...?

When you first read that, you might start looking the words up to see if they make any sense at all.

And yet, when **you** go home and read the Bible once more, or when you hear a Scripture reading in church, make a note, a wee tally, of every time you hear a **warning**. Warnings are a huge part of the Good News. No less loving than words of comfort. More so, if comfort simply misleads, like claims we're going to "fix" the planet.

Stephen asked whether I wanted a capital or a lower-case C for the Church in the title of this session. I definitely opted for the **Big C**, because although we gathered here today are church, we none of us constitute or exhaust everything that the **Church** is or involves.

I have a degree in "theology", more honestly described as *white western male straight enlightenment human-centred theology*. Christianity has always been culturally and theologically **diverse**, and the presentation of Scripture has always and everywhere been **interpreted**. Discernment is always required. Reliance on the Spirit. Yes, that! Devotional, as well as scholarly. Poetic as well as systematic.

That's something to accept, embrace, and celebrate, not regret. For Church, purity is in participation. You're not shackled to the Good News Pew Bible, but with moderate broadband you can compare and contrast what thousands of scholars have slaved over for years.

The Word of God is like an IPCC report: an ongoing joint effort, which we still handle with care. And of course, always - because we're the Church - **with love**. But do so responsibly, in community, testing the spirits, aware of agendas, and owning up to the appropriateness of our own.

It means that new green insights which come our way, and fresh recyclings of familiar readings and traditions enrich and add interest to the deposit of our faith, rather than departing from the main ... stream, though mainstreams are seldom as monocultural as the grass on Donald Trump's golf course.

Being the **Church**, as a minimum, means attending prayerfully to our calling in any given place and time, as followers of Jesus Christ crucified **and** risen. The place is the Earth, and the time, when we listen to voices like those from southern Africa, when decisions were to be made on investments...

[Rev Canon Dr Rachel Mash: Anglican churches, Southern Africa]

Churches made a profit out of slavery ... because they did not see the face of human suffering on the other side of the world.

We do know of the suffering caused by fossil fuels.

It is no longer moral to make a profit out of the misery of others

I like the way that Rachel put that "**it is no longer moral**". Not impugning the integrity of those who did their best and offered their expertise to the church in the past, but firmly pointing out the **current moral case**, given facts that are staring us in the face. Stones not just shouting, but screaming.

I should also mention **this** banner: which was arguably the single most effective bit of church publicity during COP, before some public-spirited person tore it down.

[Banner: "the world's most urgent need is churches preaching Christ crucified. Not climate change"]

In terms of the spirituality of this particular congregation, the first statement is unarguable: there's no point in suggesting otherwise than that "the greatest need is of the church preaching Christ Crucified": - God, incarnate in the Earth, sharing and confronting the sufferings that arise through injustice.

My problem is with the second phrase: "*Not climate change*", when the crisis is exactly why the need for Christ is so urgent and acute. In their own terms, the crisis, which is fundamentally a moral one in its causes, comes about through a globally sinful industrial scale neglect of what "Christ crucified" might mean. But in crisis, the Church, and our stories, and even the narrative of sin, damage, and healing, finally makes sense, in a way that it might not when all is well, and all we have to worry about is further decline and delapidation of historic buildings.

And that's exciting. Empowering, and a cause to find joy and even a certain sort of pride in our faith. We're about more, than heritage values. We're a training ground for spiritual resilience.

It's a time to learn, as we might have once more in recent weeks to say "Hosanna" - God Help Us! - and remember that we treat Hosanna as a joyful, hopeful shout.

I used to teach multimedia for new ministers in the URC. I'd know it was worthwhile if my students, having spent the weekend, gave up white writing on a yellow background, or black writing over a dark portion of a picture, however much they loved that picture. Some, of course, carry on to this day.

I'll know something has been worthwhile today, if when you yourselves speak pray sing and write about the Earth, Creation, and fellow Creatures, you **begin to leave behind** the pronoun which enables us to ignore and look down on fellow creatures. To move on from "**it**" to "**who**", or put in grammatical jargon, for those whom it might actually help:

to remember that the **Earth is a subject, rather than an object.**

And if you do so **every Sunday**, not just on Earth Days or in the Season of Creation. Not just at our lovely gathering. You probably have the resources already. If not, help me make them... or recycle them.

I'll know it's worthwhile if **you** talk, sing and pray less as if fellow creatures are voiceless plunder and property, rather than relatives and partners and fellow participants in the web of life.

In which, to be realistic, there are predators and prey. But as we've seen, not only **the right tree in the right place**, but even **the right predator in the right place** can lead to a healing balance and the flourishing of life. Which may be how, in practice, "**the wolf lies down with the lamb**".

Think of the difference that a similar leap of consciousness made to the slave trade, to south Africa. Think of **Black Lives Matter**, and what it means that the first knee-jerk reaction to that saying was usually "**but all lives matter**", followed by the dawning reaction that until then, we hadn't behaved as if that were the case at all.

So from now on, - **but as has actually always been the case in Scripture** - from now on, and especially since **Laudato Si** and the **Paris Agreement of 2015**, let alone **COP 26 in Glasgow**, the Earth is **a character rather than merely a location**: think of that **every single time** the Earth, or the World, or Creation comes up in the everyday life of the church. Let it ring bells and see what the echoes and the ripples reveal.

This hope is not just mine, though I sometimes have the misfortune to be the first messenger of it, as if it were some silly novelty I had dreamed up myself.

The greatest spiritual gift of COP was the respect and visibility given to indigenous groups who exercise moral guardianship, if not legal ownership of 80% of the Earth's biodiversity.

Some of them, like our friend Rev James Bhagwan, [General Secretary of the Pacific Conference of Churches] who has contributed to our work in the past, are Christians who bring the insight that Christianity amplifies and enhances the spirituality of closeness to the Earth which is the gift of their context.

They are at least as much Big-C Church as we are here in the global North, but their choir, as it were, is more inclusive.

Maybe that's just how it looks because the Church is, so reassuringly, always greener on the other side of the world!

=====

(Allowing for the historically shameful participation of chiefs in the clearances...)

"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..."

Rev Rory MacLeod, Isle of Skye.

=====

Nothing is too holy to be green.

But if you work really hard on the green, how do you safeguard the holy?

I hope that folks who attend this event will be well on the way to an answer something like this:

That for people of a profoundly incarnational faith in God as Creator, and with the roots of that insight firmly entangled in a concern for the holiness of justice in all things, then this will; be the wrong question to ask, because like "**environmental abuse and injustice**", "**green and holy**" are more than closely related.

And there will be times when you won't always be able to tell one from the other. Nor, by the grace of God, be **bothered** that you can't tell one from the other.

Not everyone will see it that way, nor the decisions we make about the words and actions we choose in worship, which feed and undergird our words and actions outside.

Like it or not, worship prayer and liturgy do define the church, even if, for many, the Church's value is primarily in our good works.

There's remnant fear and anxiety in our churches about anything which might appear to be "worship of what is created rather than of the creator." Now, even though this is a bit like men in the churches telling women to be quiet in case they end up worshipping them instead of God, this may not be without foundation, and Laudato Si, for instance, goes out of its way to avoid such confusion.

But could the horror of Old Testament writers at the part played by trees and mountains in the abusive cults of their neighbours be related far more to the abuse of the self-evident and God-given holiness of the trees and mountains themselves?

Trees have such a part to play, in the hosting of God's meeting with Sarah and Abram, and as markers of holy places, that I'd like to suspect this is the case. If you have time, re-read - for instance - the Book of Isaiah **with this in mind** and tell me what you think.

Jesus tells us to **look at the birds**, and indeed to **look at all the trees**, even if we get bogged down with the fig-tree in Luke 21:29. On Palm Sunday, it's only Luke who mentions **palms** as such: the main point is that Jesus is welcomed with branches. Your local branches are just as good as imported exotic palms.

So, always, and especially outside of Creation Time, have the mischief, courage, craftiness, or foolishness to look under the surface, (sometimes not that deep), and delight that what's going on with our use of the Bible is a bit like wonderful things we're learning about how the mycelial networks of fungi allow trees, as it were, to talk, interact... clap their hands!

There are so many connections, real, but un-noticed, or, rather worse, intentionally erased, disregarded, excluded, as people of different classes, races, genders and orientations have been excluded, from time to time in different ways from branches of the church.

Churches invest heavily in -not insecticide, but - connecticide!!!! As we grow up we're sprayed with something which gives us blinkers, scales over our eyes, and stops us reading signs that really are there.

Like the women's names once changed by scribes to men, and in the Good News Bible, Creation changed to people.

Creation is like the Suffering Servant -despised and rejected.

Like Rosa Park on the bus, expected to keep in line.

Attending to the visibility of Creation in everyday Christian worship - and therefore in the speaking out and prophetic action of the Churches is very much like "keeping Christ in Christmas". Should be obvious, but somehow it isn't.

For many years -including this one- EcoCongregation Scotland has taken part in a global initiative called Season of Creation 'Creation Time' or Creationtide, and eagerly encouraged congregations to take part, in whatever way works for them.

The Season - which should be a great opportunity - is, beyond our control, shoved in the gap between Pentecost and Advent, along with goodness knows how many other special Sundays coming out of the woodwork, so it tends to look like those often short-lived initiatives.

But the idea was and is of a season "*dedicated to God as Creator and Sustainer of all life*", which in Scotland at least, is likely to overlap with harvest thanksgivings, which are surely one of the most fruitful opportunities for reflection on our relationship with Creation. Or are they?

Harvest services carry a burden of hymns that people always look for, the table laden with gifts and perhaps some garden produce.

Both for myself and my late wife, our very first celebration of Holy Communion was on a Harvest Sunday, and indeed, this is a very powerful combination of experiences for a congregation, though I did also come across folk in my churches who would far rather keep those things separate. Some things even Harvest, seem "too holy to be green."

I wonder if that's the fear of losing what is deeply spiritually cherished, when changes are made to take note of the urgency of the global situation.

It's a fear which is real and reasonable, and should be taken note of. Should be pastorally and creatively attended to. Because the people who fear are not wrong as such, and their spiritual commitment needs to be reassured and brought on board, rather than rejected and alienated.

I have also seen that there are times when other hugely pressing pastoral agendas completely block out any space for overt mention of the climate crisis. Like Ukraine.

At the installation of the Roman Catholic archbishop of Glasgow, the City of COP, where so many new partnerships and relationships had been made and deepened, the agenda, of attending to allegations of abuse completely dominated the archbishop's homily. We need to remember that these occasions do not mean the *rejection* of a green agenda, but an acknowledgement of other real concerns alongside, and not in competition.

Though the chronic urgency of climate crisis remains the overarching context. At every time of year.

I am always cautious about working - *as a visitor*- with local churches when it comes to the defining festivals, whatever these may be, of God's church in that particular place. These are things where a local group or leader with good support can really make the difference.

A delightfully green Easter or Christmas or Pentecost should be an enrichment, not abolition or dilution, of a fully recognisable Easter or Christmas or Pentecost. As Chaplain, I've "done" Pentecost so far only with churches I've already got to know through previous visits, and this last Easter with one where I used to be the incumbent minister. I'm looking to a green liturgy for Pentecost on Iona this year, which is a laboratory of worship, but also with an obligation to be coherent and accessible to those who merely drop by.

Lacking any huge or official authority at all, EcoCongregation Scotland have obediently fitted our resources in to the widespread ecumenical use of the Revised Common Lectionary. The prevailing wisdom was that we'd work harder to get churches to set aside the Lectionary, than to do something green with it.

About which there are two things to say.

Firstly, that the Lectionary is a wonder of Ecumenical co-operation, to make provision for a church year, and indeed, at local level, to mitigate against serial Good Samaritan sermons from visiting preachers. It is a treasure, to which Scribes of the Kingdom can turn. And wrestling with it can be rather worthwhile.

Secondly, since it was prepared throughout the eighties and launched in 1994, it totally predates any of the consciousness of global crisis which is part of our lives today. The choices, good or bad, were made in complete innocence of the planet we now recognise as our partner and our beloved common home.

I try very hard to encourage voices like yours from our movement to contribute, as well as ministers and lecturers and students involved in the training of Christian leadership. This very rewarding job is at its most stressful when facing a multi-layered crisis of confidence amongst our churches in their own ability to use the skills that make us what we are.

The greater the academic stature or theological standing, the more likely, by and large, people are to feel overwhelmed by the invitation.

Academics have a burden to carry, of a culture in which they feel obliged to back up any inspired thoughts with footnotes and references.

Somewhere in the middle, you get the folks who have a bookshelf of trusted if dusty commentaries and only ever dare regurgitate what's there. At the other end of the scale, as it were, everyday worshippers in local churches also feel that they lack permission to bring through the experiences that have touched their lives, into the well-resourced sacred space of worship.

There's a fear, too, that we might mess up something special by bringing our fears and concerns into the place which is given by God for us to bring our fears and concerns. Well.... let's try something else....

Ring a bell....

In the two years leading up to COP I sent and left, - I think about forty - bells like this one with churches to help rediscover, recycle and repurpose an aspect of our Christian spirituality, especially in Scotland. People got hold of them and played with them and made a racket.

This, eventually, is what was printed in the service sheet for the grand ecumenical service in Glasgow Cathedral:

to ring a bell...

...is to abandon detachment. The clanky bells of the Celtic Saints expressed their confrontation of injustice and evil, in their vulnerable dependence on the strength of God.

A bell ...

Disturbs the easy peace of injustice, Sounds an alarm.

Calls for action.

Gathers friends for urgent help.

A bell makes the connections.

When we ring bells, we know the sleeping dogs will lie no more and we call on God to sustain us in our commitments, come what may.

So, that was a wee campaign, based firmly, though creatively on Christian history and tradition, which became a resource for **being the Church**.

I haven't left bells around since COP. The price of bells has more than doubled, but also, for the time being, the bell thing seems to have done its job.

COP has come and gone, so I need to rethink, re-work, re-cycle, repurpose. And bring things together. Make connections. Which, somewhat to the dismay of those who only study, rather than practice Christianity, Church can be pretty good at. Because we're in good company.

We've just celebrated Easter, when the four Gospel accounts of the resurrection are all over the place. Who did what when where and how? Who got there first? Who believed, who did not? It's a mess, but praise the Lord.

And holding that mess in our devotional spaces, we find something wonderful there. A problem only for those who put precision before praise. And it's all done with integrity, faithfulness. And spiritual creativity.

In St Mary's Cathedral Edinburgh, in Holy Week, one service ended with.

"Unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies

it remains just a single seed

But if it dies it bears much fruit".

Later, we were exhorted to

"Behold the **wood** of the cross..."

There is so much, so powerful so fruitful, so green, planted even in traditional observance. The harvest is plentiful, and the workers are **....you!**

Then Christmas: imagine Christmas if you only had Mark and John? No manger, no Magi, no Herod, no identification of Jesus with refugees, which is such a powerful spiritual statement for our time.

That's why, in my work in Lent, I have made sure that Mark belongs in there with Matthew and Luke: **Jesus with the wildlife** in the living wilderness, rather than the barren desert. And **Good News for Every Creature** rather than just making disciples of the human foreigners.

For my bell campaign to make a difference, and indeed for EcoCongregation to realise our calling, we probably do need a certain responsible recklessness or reckless responsibility.

The state of mind entirely appropriate to an emergency, in fact. As we saw in the way that local churches just got on with meeting online in the Pandemic. During that time I was asked to preside online at Holy Communion, the Eucharist, by local churches, where people realised that emergency makes things real which previously were mere possibilities.

And that, too, from Jesus himself onwards, describing his recycling of the prophets as “fulfilment.”

It's easy to see “fulfilment” (and the Greek word really is about ‘fulness’) as a final finishing off, and indeed we've tended to read things that way. But must we assume that God's Word is in any sense ‘single-use’ (and not, at the very least compostable!)

I still get funny looks when people ask me as Chaplain, what books they should read to develop their appreciation of our relationship with Creation, when I say: first of all: the Bible: because from page one all the way, you'll find so many stories of partnership, of how the Earth and fellow creatures suffer from injustice.

But also, when they ask what green things they should do: I would say “Be the Church”. Look closely, urgently, and very honestly about what the Church really is for. And be that.

Pastors worship leaders and those used to just a wee bit of study **will** be able to give you a bit of a prod. For them: you have permission to look in places you never did before, either because nobody ever invited you to, or because they were seen as scary and in some way off-limits. Or, perhaps, even more, try to look again,

Never be afraid quickly to look things up in places like ‘Bible Hub’ and Bible Gateway.

And look at how green are the things you're **already** doing. The Church of Scotland in Granton has for some years become very involved as ‘Salt and light’ in the local community: unambiguously feeding the hungry, getting clothing to those in need of clothing; doing these things without any condescension or degradation of those involved, and of course, both craftily and appropriately, being able to count these things towards the reduction in their carbon footprint. That's Good News .Amen!