

A **draft** sermon for Trinity 2, Pentecost 3 Year C on *1 Kings 19:15-16,19-21 Luke 9:51-62*

## *A costly message*



*“Let the dead bury their dead,  
but as for you  
GO and proclaim the kingdom of God.”*

We don't know what the outcome was of that exchange, or the others.

Jesus looked at that person and thought it worthwhile to issue an invitation, - which in their own mind, they **were** willing to accept - with a dignified concession to family and custom.

But the evidence is, *I believe*, that Jesus didn't give up there, and that the extreme urgency already driving his deeds and sayings was one which preferred to

**grapple with** the messiness of our circumstances, rather than write off gifts and goodwill. To think hard, but not long.

Where when one door slams irrevocably - as will be **have** to be the case with fossil fuels sooner or later - people of faith, hope and love immediately get out the crowbar to work on the next one along. The best possible outcome, rather than the perfect one.

So: **“Yes or no”**... and yet **not** “yes or no”, if ‘no’ means writing off the contribution that might still be made. Jesus says elsewhere, of course’ **“Yes or no, anything else comes from Evil”**.

But **immediately** ‘yes or no’ **is** decided, we’re free to consider the modified situation, rather than indulgently digging in to one which fact has made irrelevant. **Evil** prefers we cling on to moral impossibilities. Like new oil, gas, or nuclear, *which take years to come on stream*, rather than just transition, and sustainable energy and transport, **with all speed**.

For Jesus there are only responses, not solutions. That makes evangelical sense . As Ruth Valerio of Tearfund pointed out the other day: *“He’s the saviour: we don’t have to be”* .That’s a liberating, enabling perspective.

We will not save the world, because that’s **God’s job**. And yet we do have a part to play which Jesus won’t do for us. We have his continuing work to do, if not in one way, then another. **God’s job involves and values us**.

**“Letting the perfect be the enemy of the good”** is was what **I** was accused of by colleagues when Christian Aid, whose truly wonderful work is now in the adaptation to and mitigation of environmental crisis, ( despite vigorous objections at a consultation stage) came out with the tremendously unhelpful strapline of **“Together we’ll stop this climate crisis”**.

We won’t. It’s not loving or honest to suggest otherwise; indeed, it helps to perpetuate the idea that we’re in charge or even in control , and that this is one more thing that can simply be fixed. So if we’re not in control then we’re worthless.

Not at all.

But that doesn’t mean that I withdraw from Christian Aid or discourage anyone from supporting them.

Nor does Jesus write off the bereaved. But accepts, without pleading, and rapidly proposes another way.

Perfection **doesn't** get us moving, and the **demand for perfection** is maliciously used to torpedo worthwhile initiatives, though the other side of that coin is that **concessions do not let us off the hook.**

A concession **-which enables-** is no excuse to offend.

**“Go and sin no more!”**, said Jesus, neither condoning adultery nor condemning the woman who was captured by his opponents when her partner in immorality had escaped Scott free.

Note that word **“go”**. We'll return to it momentarily.

Concessions... are ways to *get on with it*, rather than evade with despair a responsibility which we all share.

The Scottish concession of free bus travel for young folk like my daughter, are building valuable habits of public transport use.

Just as access ramps (*and good toilet provision, and the chance to be married, whoever you are,*) enrich our community as a whole: wise - rather than premature or trivial- concessions make the most of goodwill.

How do we embrace change for the good of all, without introducing new inequalities and injustices?

We've settled meanwhile into the concessionary mindset of **'offsetting'** as if our CO2 and methane emissions could be made not to count by planting trees out of sight out of mind. But CO2 sticks around for centuries.

It's great to plant a tree - as long as they're the right tree in the right place. Not on peatland, for instance, where they'd do harm.

But don't pretend that offsetting cancels the harm you're doing in the first place. If you want to plant trees, then do it. If you want to stop flying, do that too!

I certainly could not be with you today if perfection was a prerequisite for my work as EcoChaplain.

At the same time, that work would be completely undermined if I didn't even bother with that environmentalists call the low-hanging fruit: changing the light-bulbs, attending to diet and use of energy and transport. I've planted eight trees in recognition of this outing. Not pretending I'm cancelling anything out. The best time to plant trees is twenty years ago. The next best time is now.

As someone living on the mainland, ***I will not fly*** to London or ***mainland*** Europe for meetings, though I'm intrigued by experiments in electric flying in Orkney at present, and how close things might be to connect Fair Isle in a low or zero carbon way.

Which is why I want to know: what is Jesus really saying to the man whose father needs burying?

I couldn't find any translation into English ***at all***, ***going back to the sixteenth century*** which rendered the imperative from Jesus as anything other than 'go' or '***having gone***', which suggests Jesus' ***acceptance*** of the bereaved one's circumstance, albeit with the modification of the first option.

'Go' is ***movement away***, rather than towards. So say thousands of scholars over hundreds of years.

Some online articles reshape and wantonly misquote, as if Jesus had then said "come after all" and some translations [NLT] insert "spiritually" before the dead who do the burying, which waters things down to get Jesus off the hook.

What if Jesus is neither laying down an absolute alternative between the demands of family decency, and accompanying him on that urgent road, but rather, in the practical circumstances of his non-availability, combining the two. ***"You may not be able to follow me right now, or in the way I hoped, but you certainly still can and should GO and proclaim the loving warnings and ultimatums of the Good News."***

Just as there is nothing too holy, in our churches, to be green: not even baptisms weddings and funerals( - *the full set, as it was put to me once by a man who only turned up when I was doing such things* -) not even baptisms weddings, funerals, Advent, Christmas, Lent, Easter, Ascension and Pentecost should be presented as if they were taking place on a planet whose life-cycles are not urgently threatened. Truly, there is ***nothing*** too holy to be green. Though presenting that takes love and pastoral sensitivity as well as stubbornness!

Yes or no?

In their headline quest for clarity, the polling company YouGov last week asked a truly horrible question:

*“do you think fairness should take priority over inclusion?”*

That question annoyed me, as I love to think that those aims should be complementary. With our proximity to Shetland Pride, **inclusion and fairness** to people and planet are adjacent colours on the rainbow of justice, though it takes inspiration, - that is, reliance on the Holy Spirit, the Wild Wind of God - it takes inspiration to see their closeness.

Rather like **‘do you want oil or sustainable energy’**.

Or, given that you do need energy from somewhere, will you cope with a wind farm on your doorstep, or someone else’s doorstep instead?... whilst oil and gas, are, **as they must be**, phased out with the maximum of justice in the process of transition, not leaving behind those most directly affected.

That much was clear from what I heard in Glasgow at COP : **transition is a must, but transition must be just**, and not merely because justice is a good thing, but because of the kickback where people are forced to let go of what still **seems** to offer security, without information or consultation.

From what I’ve heard and seen, we need with the greatest urgency to move on from the addiction to fossil fuels which an American Admiral said was the cause of the war in Ukraine.

And yet I came here on a lifeline fossil-fuel powered ferry. If I still had a father to bury, unless we were once more in the depths of lockdown, fossil fuels would doubtless play a part.

*(Or maybe not. Since there are, now, both electric ambulances and hearses.)*

We need - *I need* - to feel that tension, combined with a level of hope which keeps us alert for a different way, not prematurely mired in despair by the weight of current circumstance.

Prior to war and pandemic, much thought had been given to that process of just transition -for instance in the ‘Sea Change’ report from Friends of the Earth, and huge

*piles of research from the United Nations* - whose view is now, very clearly, that no **new** coal oil or gas projects should be begun **anywhere for any purpose**. Too much harm **has** already been done.

When 'yes or no' is *simply accepted*, minds hearts and economies would be set free, creatively to embrace a better life for all. We could, like the scribe of the kingdom, rummage through our other treasures to recycle and repurpose things both new and old. Including those considerable skills from energy industries which can be adapted.

In church life as well?

Working for four years with the Revised Common Lectionary, that list of readings which so many churches have infinitely greater allegiance to than any tree-hugger-hippy notions of 'Care for Creation', my initial fear: that I'd struggle, with integrity, to find a green perspective, has hardly been realised.

After all, the committees who cobbled the Lectionary together in the early nineties were 100% innocent of climate issues, but hot on **themes**, like **"parental farewells for God's sake"**, in a way which makes Elijah look kinder than Jesus.

What I didn't reckon with, was that Bible **writers** genuinely do take for granted a dynamic relationship with land and fellow creatures.

For Isaiah **the cycles and recycling of the Word of God** is mentioned in the same breath as the **water cycle**;

The famous minimum requirement from the prophet Micah for obedience to God 'to love mercy ,act justly and walk humbly' is witnessed to by **Creation holding us to account**.

For Jeremiah it's a matter of course that the land and their creatures are amongst the first casualties of war and injustice....

And Jesus, addressing the wind, the waves, and even the odd tree, is as blunt, direct and personal as ever he is with human beings in need of being put in their place.

As a linguist, I know that even the best translators only ever translate into the idiom they believe they're expected to, so in the use of pronouns, it's a matter of

**“it”** rather than **he, she, they or who**, and you’ll be lucky if the Earth and Creation are dignified with a **C**apital letter: that magic typographical way of making us sit up and look someone in the eye as a fellow creature worth talking to, rather than a mere mineral resource to be exploited at our whim.

But it gets worse than that: just as in the past, female Bible characters were changed to male because **surely** women had nothing of value to contribute, so Scotland’s favourite pew Bible, when it comes to the Great Commission of the risen Christ in Mark, changes “all creation” or “every creature” to “all people”!!!

How you read the Bible, and what use you make of those in your community who have **the skills and the study and the poetry and the storytelling behind them** to help you with that, will make a huge difference to how green your church looks in the most profoundly defining circumstances.

Today’s selection of verses in the Old Testament **misses out** a cascading chain of bloodshed as power is wrested from the hands of a toxic government.

It’s a bit like reading the Bible without the warnings and ultimatums which express the love of a God who leans over further than backwards - through the cross - to offer **chances to** respond, but will not do that for us.

God is not a safety-net remedy for pig-headed stupidity, but our best friend in solidarity through days of threat and uncertainty.

The writers of 1 Kings are not Christian. They are not burdened by love for enemies. But even from the bloodthirsty perspective of prophet Elijah, **there are costs to setting the world to rights, which grow exponentially with delay.**

On the path of transition from the currently unsustainable current position of war against Creation - a war so normalised it seldom makes the news, let alone the headlines,... on this path, there is no footstep **without** footprint.

The wind-resistant Polycrubb tunnels of Shetland, which feed communities and save power and pollutants **are** made of plastic, though their designers took the same advice as the builder of the house on the rock in Jesus’ parable, who, knowing that controlling the weather was beyond them, built **with resilience.**

Electric vehicles’ batteries require brutal mining of rare minerals; wind turbines are useless without grid connections and some sort of anchor, whether on land or

at sea, though it's clear from a lengthy experience of megaprojects like Whitelee near Glasgow, which **does** successfully juggle farming, conservation and recreation alongside close to zero carbon power generation, that cost and impact need to be very carefully considered.

Perhaps that's what prayer is for. What worship is for. What Eucharist is for. Taste and see. AMEN