

Holding our feet to the Climate Fire

**Words for an address,
from EcoChaplain Rev David Coleman,
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Isaiah 5:1-7 Luke 12:49-56



Isaiah 5:1-7

Let me sing for my beloved my love-song concerning his vineyard: My beloved had a vineyard on a very fertile hill. He dug it and cleared it of stones, and planted it with choice vines; he built a watchtower in the midst of it, and hewed out a wine vat in it; he expected it to yield grapes, but it yielded wild grapes. And now, inhabitants of Jerusalem and people of Judah, judge between me and my vineyard. What more was there to do for my vineyard that I have not done in it? When I expected it to yield grapes, why did it yield wild grapes? And now I will tell you what I will do to my vineyard. I will remove its hedge, and it shall be devoured; I will break down its wall, and it shall be trampled down. I will make it a waste; it shall not be pruned or hoed, and it shall be overgrown with briars and thorns; I will also command the clouds that they rain no rain upon it. For the vineyard of the LORD of hosts is the house of Israel, and the people of Judah are his pleasant planting; he expected justice, but saw bloodshed; righteousness, but heard a cry!

The Gospel

Luke 12:49-56

Jesus said, "I came to bring fire to the earth, and how I wish it were already kindled! I have a baptism with which to be baptised, and what stress I am under until it is completed!

Do you think that I have come to bring peace to the earth? No, I tell you, but rather division! From now on five in one household will be divided, three against two and two against three; they will be divided: father against son and son against father, mother against daughter and daughter against mother, mother-in-law against her daughter-in-law and daughter-in-law against mother-in-law." He also said to the crowds, "When you see a cloud rising in the west, you immediately say, 'It is going to rain'; and so it happens. And when you see the south wind blowing, you say, 'There will be scorching heat'; and it happens. You hypocrites! You know how to interpret the appearance of earth and sky, but why do you not know how to interpret the present time?"

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We are, I pray, and the **EcoCongregation** movements have contributed to this, **now** some **small** distance beyond the time when members of churches, could attend a meeting on zero-waste, circular economy, the switch from fossil fuels to sustainable investment, or anything else environmental, and people would say:

*'Oh, you're the church? Nice to see you, but what are **you** doing here?'* I've heard that, but thank God, it's a while now.

That bizarre attitude - which nonetheless has been encouraged, at times, by the churches - of "What has the church got to do with what God has made?" [Genesis 1:1]

Which **ought** to be strange: not only because of the very ambitious aspiration that churches might be **Net-Zero** in prayer work and worship just a few years from now....

And , if **that's** going to happen, it will need to be a positive response of faith, rather than a reluctant surrender to secular box-ticking; ...

Not only that, but for any church **not** to be passionately and urgently committed to “Care of Creation” [Genesis 2:15] is really really odd, because ours **is** a faith founded on God’s choice to be **one with** Creation; to feel in the flesh what it’s like to share, down to to a cellular level with everything that has breath, the pull of the Earth; to wake up each day to the wonders of the heavens. The Word became... Flesh. [John 1:14]

The vocabulary was there, of course, to say in John’s Gospel, that the Word became, with a significant exclusiveness, **human** flesh, but that writer made the choice of an inclusive way, reminding us of God’s Rainbow Covenant not just with Noah, but with All Flesh; with the Earth. [Genesis 9:9-11 & 13]

Sharper focus can be quite brutal.

A couple of centuries later, the historic creeds of the Church delighted in the **humanity** of Christ, but some then got carried away [cf some writings of Augustine] and devised ways of viewing women as derivative and inferior beings, with the injustice which unsurprisingly followed.

Like greenhouse gas emissions - and CO2 sticks around for centuries - injustice takes a lot of cleaning up after!

In the Gender Day at **COP** [‘the 26th Conference of the Parties to the intergovernmental framework Convention on Climate Change’] last year, that is, at the United Nations Climate conference in Glasgow, *which I was able to attend*, the objective case was compellingly made, that the education and empowerment of

women is one of the most powerful measures for cutting down global human impact on the life of the planet.

We now have **solid evidence** that only justice is green. That the transition which lies ahead of us is a must, but that transition must be just. [See, for instance, anything to do with the Just Transition Commission set up by the Scottish govt.]

These are the signs of our times. The things that for Jesus, only a fool would ignore. And God **doesn't** protect against **chosen** foolishness. [e.g. cf Matthew 7:24-27]

We're in a time when our spiritual pendulum needs to swing in the direction of the **shared earthiness** of Jesus, and all that opens up, whilst still valuing the reality of specifics. Of every sparrow that falls. Of the drowning of a poor woman called Nonhlanhla in Durban, in floods **caused to be** more frequent by fossil fuel burning, as our recent heatwave **is** made worse by that same cause. [example cited by Rev Dr Rachel Mash of Southern African Anglican churches]

Now therefore - just as we value every prayer of words or thought - now is the time to value the embodied prayer of every small commitment or change of mind in the face of the warnings - those **signs of the times** [in our reading today Luke 12:cf vv 54-56] - with which God out of love has confronted us, both in our daily experience and in the prophetic voice of the suffering Earth, interpreted for us by the disciplined honesty of science.

Now is the time to be “**kindled**”, in a way which might seem novel for a civilisation dominated by the violent power that comes with money and scale, of the neglected and despised voices, of the Earth, and of the wisdom of those still surviving indigenous humans. These peoples who care for most of the

biodiversity even more vital to our survival than a balanced climate, though of course they are linked.

Those who live close to the Earth speak the same experiential, relational language as the Bible writers. We should not despise either.

For every local church, there remains, if we are to *'have life and have it in abundance'* [John 10:10], a need for **discerning choices**, as to what, in our prayer and life and work, we take and what we leave. All the more as we have before us the spectrum of all the slants, biases and directions of interpretation to which the Holy Spirit has led us through the centuries.

These ways inspired, in the face of particular crises, to recycle the spirit and the Scriptures which themselves arose in times of trial.

And in Jesus' own **crisis-driven** words today, ["what stress I am under"] we glimpse the context and value of those Gospels: full or urgency, full of warnings to recycle for this day, this place, this age. The transformation, the recycling and refertilising power of fire, as it's been used in the management of land over millennia. ["to bring fire to the Earth"]

Not the sick, twisted, unbridled wildfires overtaking so many places on earth, but an emergency. Which will test the nature of how well we love our friends, neighbours... fathers sons, mothers, daughters, in-laws and more. [Luke 12:53]

Whom do we love well enough to stand up to them because we **can** see the harm they are doing?

Whom do you love well enough to ask if they'd thought of walking rather than driving to the post-box? Of taking the train

rather than flying to a meeting in mainland UK? Of eating less meat?

When I'm gathering material for the Season of Creation, which involves asking people whose views I respect to spend time thinking and writing for riches in heaven, [[Matthew 6:20](#)]

I know I have a limited "budget of irritation".

And yet, in terms which cannot but speak to us directly of climate and weather and the groaning of Creation, Jesus insists we be prepared to cash in and max out that budget. Out of love. [[Luke 12:53](#)]. Because what else is Jesus about?

But "my country or my church or my family right or wrong" is an attitude which, without spiritual discernment, leads to the **destruction** of that country, church or family, and the world of life to whom God has gifted this habitat we share. [[cf e.g. Job 38: 5-8](#)]

We have no time to waste worrying about how or ancestors got it right or wrong. At times they may have been completely on target! Frequently, it's hymns and prayers of previous centuries, which were untroubled by recognising feelings and personalities of Creation, which do the job. The antiquated language of King James does not, like the Good News Bible, presume that when the **Greek** talks of 'every creature' [[Mark 16:15](#)] it must be 'correctively diminished' to "all people".

Though of course, 'every creature' **includes** all people.

Look online at the widely differing approaches to translating the Bible, even into English, and realise that we only ever receive the Bible in a community of interpretation, where some voices, for a while, are dominant, but no voice is definitive for all situations.

One **Word of God**, *interpreted through the Spirit*, but not one version of the Bible, fits all.

So, urgently, “What is the Spirit saying to the churches today?”

As EcoChaplain, I’m not restricted in the scope of my work with Christian congregations to the “bit at the beginning” [Genesis 1-9] and the “bit at the end” [e.g. Revelation 21:1-3] of the Bible. For that sharing of our life, and therefore of Jesus’ life with “Life writ large” is so magnificently, mind-stretchingly broad.

Trees, in their own way, breathe: **we** couldn’t if **they** didn’t.

And as science has more recently reaffirmed, trees ‘talk’ [cf Isaiah 55:12] and given the chance, care for their own. The mountains, in their own timescale, and not just in earthquakes [Psalm 114] certainly dance. Those of us who have cared for non-human creatures, be they plants in a vineyard or cats and dogs at home, know of their thoughts and feelings after their own fashion: such ‘sentiment’ is God’s gift, rather than something to be ashamed of.

All the more because love is the difference **we** bring into any situation. [cf 1 John 4 7ff] Love is why the Church **is** involved. Love is why we contribute reconciliation and transformation of conflicts where others prefer blame-games and revenge. [cf Romans 12:19] Which are luxuries we can afford less than ever, the more we become aware of the complete connectedness of all the Earth.

Into the worries and fears and desperation about the state of the planet, we bring the proclamation that this is the world God so loved that God gave of Godself that which was most beloved, that those who hope and trust might not be lost. [John 3:16]

And binding the Old and New Testaments together, this is reinforced by the insight that the sabbath, and the jubilee, those times of rest and recovery and celebration, were for the land and the wildlife **as** for the people. [cf Leviticus 25:6] Though of course, they also **are** for the people.

But that's also one of the mysteries; how western and global north capitalist culture has bullied Christianity into a forgetfulness that what we see when we step outside and look up is not only sky, but also that the birds make sky heaven.

[Mentioned many times in OT] How an archbishop can share a post on social media that talks of the sky as if it were a neutral dumping-ground, rather than the medium of the Word of God which comes down with the rain and snow, side by side with the equally life-giving water cycle to do the job, before the next cycle? [cf Isaiah 55:8-13]

The poetry of Scripture - all the way through - quite rightly and wonderfully blurs the lines - between the actions of the creator and their outcomes in Creation. Do not ever be embarrassed or ashamed when confronted by the beauty of a mountain or a sunset or a blade of grass, by a robin or a puffin, to say 'O my God...' And whatever, as a church, you actually 'do' - insulation, changing lighting, cutting down waste, getting rid of plastics, tending your grounds for wildlife rather than tidiness - make sure you go for the "*low-hanging fruit*": the easy enjoyable stuff first as the **first** steps so that they won't be the **last** steps, so that joy will sustain you.

What is never said in scripture - in fact rather to the contrary - is that human beings have neither the calling nor the capacity for good or ill, to intervene in these fruitful cycles.

We are part **of** them, from Adam on, that name which means 'the Soil'. We have, and with close to 8 billion of us, it can't be discounted, a place and purpose. To nurture protect, enhance - or disrupt this whole great family of the living Earth.

And as with that garden prepared for the Beloved, which in the God's love-song of Isaiah referred **initially** to Israel, injustice always has environmental impact [cf Jeremiah 2:7]. Whether in terms of neglect or the toxicity of pride and greed, those thromboses in the circulation of the goodness of Creation. Human injustice hurts every fellow creature whom God gives life.

If nothing else, next time you speak a prayer or sing a hymn which mentions the **Earth**, try thinking "**who**" rather than "**it**". Or spell **E**arth always with a capital letter, as you would the name of a beloved relative. See what difference it makes to your **thinking**.

That's what that churchy word '**repentance**' ["meta-noia" = change of mind] needs to mean. Not just saying "sorry", but **choosing** to **change** the way you think, when you've recognised the harm which your previous thought led you into,

Whatever else we **choose** to understand by that word 'heaven', we're not taking the atheist science fiction route of a mysterious and separate dimension. Many many times, God is referred to as **Maker** - *and in Scots, perhaps we might say **Makar** - that word for the Poet of poets* - of heaven and Earth, of Sky and soil **both**. In Christ, it all holds together. [Col 1:17]