



## **EcoChaplain Sermons for Westray, Papay, Kirkwall East, Shapinsay, Eday, and St Magnus Cathedral, with the extended version of a talk for Kirkwall Council of Churches.**

NB Some themes may recur, as these were prepared for differing contexts and audiences.

### **First Sunday**

A sermon for Award-winning congregations: Westray and Papay ( Papa Westray)

#### **GOSPEL Matthew 10.24–40**

Jesus said to the twelve disciples, "A disciple is not above the teacher; nor a slave above the master; it is enough for the disciple to be like the teacher; and the slave like the master.

If they have called the master of the house Be-elzebul, how much more will they malign those of his household!

"So have no fear of them; for nothing is covered up that will not be uncovered, and nothing secret that will not become known. What I say to you in the dark, tell in the light; and what you hear whispered, proclaim from the housetops. Do not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul; rather fear him who can destroy both soul and body in hell. Are not two sparrows sold for a penny? Yet not one of them will fall to the ground apart from your Father.

And even the hairs of your head are all counted. So do not be afraid; are you not of more value than many sparrows?

“Everyone therefore who acknowledges me before others, I also will acknowledge before my Father in heaven; but whoever denies me before others, I also will deny before my Father in heaven.

“Do not think that I have come to bring peace to the earth; I have not come to bring peace, but a sword.

For I have come to set a man against his father,  
and a daughter against her mother,  
and a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law;  
and one's foes will be members of one's own household.

Whoever loves father or mother more than me is not worthy of me; and whoever loves son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me; and whoever does not take up the cross and follow me is not worthy of me. Those who find their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it.”

[BUT]

‘Whoever welcomes you welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes the one who sent me.

There's something very appropriate that when, today I'm visiting congregations who have built into their life and work and prayer the robust challenges of the **gold award**, that our reading is as robust as this one.

Tough stuff. That we can expect to take the flack for where our faith leads us. To be blamed for the Gospel. But a few verses on, and we're reassured: disciples, will be welcomed too. The smooth **with** the rough. Blessing with the threat.

Tough, but also encouraging.

As Jesus sends his friends out to teach, heal, and live lovingly, Jesus gives them both warnings and permission.

They are to act **responsibly**, though above all, they are to **act**. Setting fear aside.

Which also means allowing for falling flat on your face once in a while. That possibility shouldn't make us afraid to try.

It's OK to get things a bit **wrong** as long as you get things **done**. Chickening out is worse for everyone.

As later Jesus talks of how his yoke is easy and his burden is light - there **is** a yoke, there **is** a burden. And they're not beyond you.

But permission is also encouragement.  
To get on with it!

I like to unlock this - so folk don't then forget - that that's the meaning of 'Amen' - not a full stop, but a good shove to follow up on whatever you've prayed.

Jesus began his teaching saying 'Amen' not once, but twice. Jesus, giving permission to listen, to take notice and to respond. To get on with it.

**Permission is commission, like the Commission of the Christ risen, to preach Good News to all Creation, to every Creature.**

As Chaplain, I'm obliged to risk saying that those are words you won't find in these pew bibles, because the folks who put that version together believed Creation was only **about** people, though people do **not** exist without total interdependence with the land and the creatures around us; without the family of sky sea and soil we're made of.

Like many good pious Christians, our beloved family in faith, those translators thought 'all people' was so valuable it had to hide 'all creatures'. That's what we do in reality. Whenever we keep them out of sight, out of mind in our prayers. But **we're** Creation. Speak of Creation, you speak of yourself. Care for Creation, you care for those you love. And nothing is hidden that will not be brought to light.

In a way, that question is also raised by Jesus in what he says about the sparrows; about the wildlife. Perhaps right **here** he might have said puffins. Not a puffin falls....

When people don't get it about carbon footprints, I ask: would it get through if we measured it in dead puffins instead? What gets through? Especially to those you love most?

But there is **no** English language version of the Bible in which Jesus cannot be seen to protest against how shoddily human beings treat their fellow creatures.

Two for a penny. Though not one falls to the ground outside the knowledge and attention of the same God Jesus **intentionally** identifies as '**your**' father.

Whatever the fault, the fate is linked. Our fate and that of fellow creatures. Injustice of whatever kind is **at the cost of the Earth**, who eventually holds us to account. That's what the prophets said. And today that makes sense.

**This** is how valuable sparrows are.

In China just before I was born, the authorities **eradicated** sparrows because of the small amount of grain they were believed to eat. Within two years, with no sparrows to eat them, swarms of locusts were exacerbating the famine already caused by deforestation and misuse of poisons and pesticides.

That was an extreme utilitarian and **atheist** approach - value only what **humans** value. But if we're the church, if we're followers of Jesus, we have not just permission, but perhaps obligation, to see things differently.

To realise how so much that once seemed merely beautiful and expendable is vital to our survival. And make that different vision visible.

And make that different opinion heard. Where? Close at hand. Not the easy option of somewhere else far away.

In our families, in our churches, in our communities.

Even in our own minds. Wherever the demon of denial still lurks and twists the truth we need to know.

Whatever the value of our species, Christ gives neither permission nor the right to disregard our relationship, with fellow-stakeholders in God's rainbow covenant. Christ gives not just permission, but obligation to speak out, and even if we're not listened to, then to live in a way which brings out the value of our own place and purpose in God's great web of life.

If Karen and I visit a church that's still serving Nescafé in plastic throwaway cups after church: do we bite our lip and carry on? Or do we love them enough to point out what in all probability these lovely people haven't realised applies even to them: the inconsistency in the hospitality they're offering in the name of the world God So Loved that God's beloved one was given.

Our reading leans still more heavily in that direction.

It's relatively easy to stand up to your enemies, and indeed, that might seem quite enjoyable, but it's rather more difficult to encourage change in your friends and family. In the people you let off the hook. In your church. And yourself. For whom do **you** make most concessions?

Not only because you may love them, but because, being close, you may know and understand all those good reasons they still do what they do, though other paths **are** open to them.

Ecological conversion, to use the Pope's words, is far more of the heart than the head.

So our reading might seem stern, but *read through, as I have*, the whole of the books we call 'Gospels', that is, 'Good News' and an amazingly large portion **is** taken up with warnings.

For it's the truth in love which gives a fellow creature the chance to avoid pain, to avoid catastrophe. So if you have friends **prepared** to warn, it's wise to listen and act on the warnings **of your friends**.

If - and this is what we **do** meeting together in this way - if we identify ourselves as **those** friends, **those** disciples -baptised into Christ's household- then we **have** permission, and it's not me, but Jesus who has given it.

All I do is point out the gift of Jesus who came that your joy may be full.

Joy like a heat-pump: you put one kilowatt in, get three or more out! It's about time we blessed heat-pumps. They're doing a holy job.

The Good News is: Christ gives us above all the permission to be and become ourselves, as the gift God gave us to be: we don't need to **be** Jesus, just be **like** him. Just a sign of him, a QR code who takes you straight there. To be the church you are here and now. And **then** even more so. Because our faith is one resource God gives to face the threats and challenges we share with the life of the world.

We don't need to worry about whether we'd do **less** than Jesus would, or even worry that, we might offensively do more. He said he looks forward to that. There is no competition.

But more **or** less, to be like him is enough.

I'm sure that you, of all people have discovered that the challenges of responding in faith to urgency of the Nature and Climate crises bring with them, amongst all the hassle and paperwork, something Jesus described as 'reward'. Your gold award is rewarding**ing** for the whole movement....

Because the church is a community, a family, and though families can also be a right pain in the backside, when they finally get round to do what they **have permission to do**, then the burdens are shared, the joy runs over. Not just here but **around the world**. Your joy is theirs, their is yours, and hope is shared.

We are sisters and brothers to those whose homelands are sinking, whose crops have failed, the migrations of whose relatives, *as they see them*, the animals and birds are disrupted.

We can no longer take it for granted that God's will is done in the heavens, the sky, the climate, as we pray it be done on Earth.

But still- and all the more in crisis, it makes spiritual sense to pray.

Thanks to the honesty of scientists, we know beyond reasonable doubt - that for our culture of the global north to carry on regardless with the exploration of new oil and gas - is directly to cause ever more alarming extremes of weather and harm to these sisters and brothers, together with the nature on whom **we** depend in our farming, our fishing and in every other aspect of our economies. Yes, there are jobs involved, livelihoods, though we have permission to ask- is this the only way to live?

We have permission, and sometimes in the churches as in wider society, we're the **only** ones who exercise that freedom that duty, that joy, that vision, that hope, that there might be another way. We shouldn't be. We claim no monopoly. But that's the gap we fill. Which you fill.

To be enough. Though enough isn't a limit. Enough doesn't enforce a message of 'stop' here', but rather, enough says 'well done, for now!' - what next?

Nothing you've done here will completely fix the planet, the climate or nature as a whole, and yet its value is immense because you have realised that being church, here in this place gives you that permission to be who you are, to offer what you can, to the glory of God.

With the help of your generating partners the wind and the waves, whom Jesus elsewhere told, rather bluntly, to get in line, you are letting a light shine, which it's my job to share that others may see what you do and praise our Father in Heaven. Because we're followers of Christ, dependent on grace, and the point of the awards system is encouragement far more than it's achievement.

Taking nothing for granted. By the grace of God. AMEN

## **Second Sunday**

2 mini-sermons for Award-winning congregations: Kirkwall East and Shapinsay

### **Acts 18: 1-4 NRSV**

*After this Paul left Athens and went to Corinth. There he found a Jew named Aquila, a native of Pontus, who had recently come from Italy with his wife Priscilla, because Claudius had ordered all Jews to leave Rome. Paul went to see them, and, because he was of the same trade, he stayed with them, and they worked together —by trade they were tentmakers. Every sabbath he would argue in the synagogue and would try to convince Jews and Greeks.*

To have persisted is to have weathered change. Sometimes subtly, sometimes abruptly.

Throughout our lives we remain ourselves **because** we're prepared to grow and age, rather than indulge in futile and grotesquely painful cosmetic surgery.

Oscar Wilde's horror story '*The Picture of Dorian Gray*' plays with what happens when the choices and mistakes are not allowed to make their mark on us: first we become gleaming monsters, leaving havoc in our wake, then, inevitably, it does catch up.

The harm we do hits others first, but we are not immune. That's the '**global north**' economies in a nutshell.

But to adapt and evolve from day to day, from cycle to cycle; maybe from life to life, that's the way God made the world.

In which endless growth, single-use consumption and changeless permanence are not only alien but toxic.

With a choice of readings in the Lectionary you're following, I felt attracted to this story from the '**Second Missionary Journey**'.

But first of all, from an **environmental** point of view, congratulations, for to choose a '**Women's Lectionary**' is timely.

As is anything and everything which encourages us to unlock and repurpose the spiritual treasures and insights which might have been sidelined or overlooked under the influence of economic colonialism, and other powerful cultural forces which still dictate the ways we read and interpret the **Bible...**

That collection of spiritual responses to crisis, so much of which is written **by and for** the powerless, which by the power of the Spirit becomes available as a powerful resource for survival.

Is it only when survival is at risk that we begin to see how coherent and practically valuable is a living faith, dependent on grace, inspiring hope, as it did for those whose stories it shares?

When I visited COP26 in Glasgow, the agenda for the United Nations climate conference included a '**gender day**', in which abundant and convincing evidence was presented to powerfully support the truth, previously hidden,( perhaps, with traditional feminine modesty?), that the education and global empowerment of women is amongst the most urgent and **effective** measures in reducing harmful greenhouse gas emissions. Inequality is not just morally bad, it harms the planet.

And for those who persist in blaming the poor for having children - *though the footprint of one wealthy person in the west will likely exceed that of a village elsewhere* - as poverty is defeated, so the birth rate drops too.

It's not the poor, not their babies - it's consciously chosen and perpetuated injustice that keeps nature and climate emergencies on the boil.

Some Christians - *and some dear friend in every congregation I visit* - might grumble: "**What has that to do with the Gospel?**" - but the short and truthful answer is "everything".

For the manifesto and assurance of Christ, **building on** the Hebrew heritage "*out of the mouths*" of disregarded infants, is that the last **will** be first. The seeds of salvation are given to the least and the last and the poorest.



How much **sense** this Gospel makes, as we finally begin to value the wisdom of indigenous peoples against whom capitalist colonialism has so widely and systematically committed cultural or actual genocide. Not only in those Pacific islands not quite as far south as this one is north, but even in Gaelic Scotland.

Remember that the hoped for 1.5 degree upper limit which nations began to work for eight years ago **is what it is** and not catastrophically higher, because of the intervention of the **Small Island Developing States**, when prime polluters would have set it much higher, postponing action even further.

In our reading: the focus is on Paul's **own** faith community, and even his profession as a **tentmaker**.

This is something EcoCongregation can identify with: being prepared to **argue with those you love and care for**; those whose objections you understand, and likely sympathise with, but whom you love enough to try. Because change of thought and mind will shift patterns of power and behaviour.

So we read of this daring ministry of encouragement, ruffling religious feathers, and the cost, for those missionaries, of enduring violence and humiliation .

I rather hope our own missionary journeys don't come to that, as we pamper churches with attention, and honour their hospitality, looking **to you to give a lead** in your **own** communities, though also to have the humility to **follow one** when that's best for all.

Just as Paul looked in the first instance, but not exclusively, to **Jews, to give him a hearing** , Christians who care for the Earth - *(and in a congregation with a long-standing commitment to such care ,I hope it's in order to say "we" Christians ) who care for the Earth* -do not neglect to make the case amongst sisters and brothers in faith.

## **Acts 18: 24-28 NRSV**

*Now there came to Ephesus a Jew named Apollos, a native of Alexandria. He was an eloquent man, well-versed in the scriptures. He had been instructed in the Way of the Lord; and he spoke with burning enthusiasm and taught accurately the things concerning Jesus, though he knew only the baptism of John. He began to speak boldly in the synagogue; but when Priscilla and Aquila heard him, they took him aside and explained the Way of God to him more accurately. And when he wished to cross over to Achaia, the believers encouraged him and wrote to the disciples to welcome him. On his arrival he greatly helped those who through grace had become believers, for he powerfully refuted the Jews in public, showing by the scriptures that the Messiah is Jesus.*

We're here today as travellers, with a message. For you and the folks last week in Westray, it's primarily to **support and encourage** your direction of travel as an EcoCongregation - that is a Christian church with eyes wide open, which has been recognised with our awards.

On that journey, many of us are at different stages, or waiting at different bus stops or ferry ports.

The delight here, is in the co-operation between people at different stages of a journey of faith and insight, in the outreach to their wider communities who might not even have got to the first bus-stop. We need Paul Apollos and anyone else of good will, but we also need them to get on, and listen to the voice of the wild wind, the Holy Spirit, who in Acts, is another ever present character.

The mission, following from the Great Commission of the Risen Christ, to bring Good News to every creature, is not our own, but that of the Spirit alive within the church. When changes come, how do we listen and discern, rather than just defend. Though those active and combative skills of argument and refutation, alongside the snake-like craftiness which Jesus commended to the apostles, as he sent them out to teach and heal, these too are gifts and tools of the Spirit.

I've had to change over these first five years of my job, the way I speak and think of the global threats and urgencies.

From the cosy and comforting Creation theory and spirituality that got me into trouble at college, seeing the world as a mere gift, moving on towards looking Creation in the eye. Discovering the Earth to be, as even the Pope reminded us in 2015, like a beloved relative, even parent, on whom we depend, and whom we do not rule, for it's they who govern us.

My responsibility is sometimes to stand at the shore and call across the water - as the Celtic island saints used to do when the wind permitted - to those who might be just setting out, all the while keeping an ear to the voices of those ahead of me on father shores. To shout out the liberating, terrifying truth I hear from the scientists, whilst holding on to the life-saving gift of Jesus' gift 'not to worry about tomorrow' - not to be overwhelmed and overcome, but still, by the grace of God go through each day with hope. And even joy, such as I gain, and the whole movement gains from seeing churches who put their Christian faith into green practice

The thing about times of emergency is that we're exempt from having to go through every stage, to stop at every stop. Sometimes we just need to leap. In the parable Jesus told - about the speck in our neighbour's eye and the log in our own, if we tell that in a day of emergency, both need attending to right now, rather than first one then the other. We can't wait to be perfectly green before encouraging our neighbours to set out, or before learning from where they've already got to.

The longing of older folk to bequeath to their heirs a safe and beautiful home, a longing which has empowered our movement across the shores of Scotland, now faces the compression, the telescoping, of deadlines, tipping points and more brutal change than we ever imagined growing up. Things which will not be conveniently gradual, but for which, both spiritually and practically, God's people can prepare.

Just before I began this work, I heard an MSP speak, and I was really grateful for how their speech moved me on from the harmless, cosy tap of climate change to climate crisis and emergency. A few weeks ago, I had the chance to return the

favour, because, as a church member, his faith-inspired speech had not kept pace with his politics.

I read a book by a nigerian presbyterian, who in a similar way dealt with the wishy washy way of Christians describing their relationship with Creation as ‘stewardship’ - which in English language areas runs the crushing danger of treating Creation in a grossly unbiblical way as property or assets without rights, without voices, or personalities. As a woman at our annual gathering in May put it: we don’t steward our children.

At a gathering of my colleagues in URC ministry, it seems the best contribution I could make was to suggest that folks begin to spell Earth with a capital E and see what that did to the way they thought about our living planet, given by God as habitat to so many other species than our own.

Just now, listening even to planners and industrialists, embracing the call for their developments to be not just low-impact but “nature positive” I’ve been reminded to speak of the crises of Nature AND climate. To whom and of whom spoke Jesus the Messiah, commending our alertness to the signs of the times, and the state of the skies, even as he spoke with realistic robustness - but undeniably *personally* - to the unruliness of the wind and the waves.

## **“Sunday” Plus: visiting the congregation on Eday, after the visit to the European Marine Energy Centre**

**Note: on the day, we only used the first half of this text.**

Readings Job 12:1-10, Matthew 6:25-33

We came here to this island today looking for hope. For which it's right to praise God. For things which, unlike just worrying, might indeed add an hour or two to the span of our life as the energy we use comes clean rather than contributing to extreme weather, and those disasters we now know can't simply be dismissed as 'natural'.

So this is our pilgrimage, to your home, which undoubtedly has so much more of interest than we will see today. Your place of living. The Earth's place of hope. Or one of them. Hope is not copyright. It doesn't come as a monopoly. We've heard that Eday is a place of at least experimental partnership, even friendship with those natural forces to whom Jesus was prepared to speak, however robustly, to save the lives of his friends. This is a place of conversation with wind and waves.

A place where it might be perceived that though [Psalm 118] it's the hand of God that turns the tide, it's that same hand in which are also held the life of every living thing and the breath of every human being. Neither without the other. As too, Jesus does not expect human wisdom or beauty to exceed that embedded in Creation.

Every age, every movement has their maxim, their watchword. Some of these erode with time, or prove, like the trite wisdom of those who came to comfort Job in the book which gave us our first reading, to be empty and trivial.

The terminal wisdom which will die with those who complacently mouth it, rather than evolving to the benefit of future generations. Recycling takes effort. Participation. And occasionally the active choice to step back.

Christianity has not been immune to assurances that "God's in charge, so everything's going to be alright and nobody has to change a thing". Misreading 'don't worry' as "don't even bother looking, don't listen, and above all, don't act or change". Letting 'Amen' be a full stop, rather than a proclamation of determination to get on with it.

The life of Christ, full of danger, conflict, and determined response, suggests almost the opposite: not least the Temptations: jump off this high

building just because I say you can. Jesus walked away, as he also did from the temptation to be co-opted into leading a military rebellion in which faith was enlisted by five thousand angry men, in what would have been a catastrophic response to the oppressive injustice of Roman imperial occupation.

As we must needs find courage to walk away even from those promises of jobs and prosperity which come so unambiguously and causally at the cost of the nature and the environment of which we ourselves are part, and lacking a listening, learning relationship with whom, we cannot reasonably hope to survive. The mega-profits of the oil and gas companies notwithstanding. As Job might add: "for now".

God, give us courage in the consideration of beauty, commended by Jesus in the weeds that even as they grow outside our control, nonetheless contribute to the web of life!

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The strategy of the giving of permission by a party who maliciously or complacently presumes upon that right can get us into a lot of trouble.

And Jesus, who had trouble enough to deal with could do without the wasted effort and pain.

One of the most demonic of all bogus permissions is that intimidating permission to continue wilfully and selfishly to exploit and abuse the habitat we share with so many other forms of life.

For centuries humanity presumed on the permission to enslave our own kind too. Propped up by the permission to regard what is other than ourselves as unworthy of value, dignity or respect.

Or, as it might otherwise be perceived 'business as usual' which even without that need for additional permission, legitimises the wisdom of the unthinking.

The wisdom which, worse still than that of Job's attempted comforters, not only dies with them, but destroys the lives of other creatures, human and otherwise, whose friendship, prosperity and wellbeing is actually essential to our own. Whatever the fault or the foolishness, the fate and the fortune are shared. Whatever the deception of the time lag between cause and effect.

Or as the Old Testament writers generally perceived it: the lag between the provocation of injustice and the wrath of God reflected in the outcry of the Earth.

Within the churches, though, many good, pious faithful people will more often than not hesitate to respond to bushes blazing or even to half-dead travellers on the road to Jericho, because they're scared to be the fools who rush in where angels fear to tread.

Dare I break the glass case of my faith in the global emergency already well beyond the stage of threat or mere possibility?

But God's not crying wolf here. The Earth is not crying wolf. There's a classic cartoon of people at a conference where a speaker is proposing sustainability, renewables, green jobs, clean water and air. An irate delegate turns round and says "what if it's a big hoax and we create a better world for nothing?" Like the scariest of humour, it even underplays the truth, that things are already so far gone that denial of the nature and climate crisis now does real harm, not just to deniers, but to their neighbours seen and unseen, the future of their children and grandchildren.

That cartoon now belongs to history. No one with wisdom or integrity can call the recognition of the nature-and-climate crises 'a hoax'. Though it's fear that holds us back.

We're more scared to "speak to the Earth and be taught" than we are of what we are learning rather too late, that Earth unlistened to is struggling to remain our friend. Creation indecorously groaning, longing for us to get the point.

We worry about image, buildings, institutions food and other sensible things to such an extent that we miss out on the witness, the evangelistic mission opportunities, the enrichment of discipleship that might result even from small changes to our speech and thought, like moving on from 'it' to 'who' when talking of Earth, or spelling Earth with a capital E and then seeing what that does to how we think. Like looking the personalities of Creation in the eyes rather than pretending that fellow creatures are in some way children of a lesser God, and that the praise of all who have breath is inferior to our own.

But maxims and principles can be of help.

Within the environmental movements you can buy t-shirts emblazoned with 'Re-use, reduce, repurpose, recycle, in that order or another. Where the greenest flight is the one you realise you don't have to take. But if you do have to travel, what are your options?

What we're only beginning to grasp, is that these are not mere practicalities, but spiritual principles, with a vital relevance to the living out of faith - or perhaps I should say the faithing out of life, for the rest of our time on this Good Earth.

Maybe what we're most scared of is that we find ourselves acting on a faith that makes sense after all.

Our friend Kathy Galloway, as hymn writer, recycled one of her hymns when I began work as EcoChaplain. Of that process, she remarked that the demanding thing was to find a balance of blessing and threat, threat and blessing. But both of those are based on realities that impact deeply on human and other life. To take seriously those findings, now well beyond reasonable doubt which, like those books full of warnings which we call the Gospels....

And in the work I do, that balance, based on awareness of the crises of nature and climate, balanced by our concern as churches to build what we like to call a spiritual resilience, which will enable people and their communities not just to survive as the changes already locked in take hold, but to live with a sustaining and adaptive hope. Come what may. Praise God. Hallelujah. Amen.



## **Third Sunday: for the Orkney city congregation at St Magnus' Cathedral**

### **Song of Songs 2.8–13**

Arise, my love, my fair one, and come away.

The voice of my beloved! Look, he comes,

leaping upon the mountains, bounding over the hills. My beloved is like a gazelle or young stag.

Look, there he stands behind our wall,

gazing in at the windows, looking through the lattice. My beloved speaks and says to me: 'Arise, my

love, my fair one, and come away; for now the winter is past, the rain is over and gone. The

flowers appear on the earth; the time of singing has come, and the voice of the turtle dove is heard

in our land. The fig tree puts forth its figs, and the vines are in blossom; they give forth fragrance.

Arise, my love, my fair one, and come away.'

### **GOSPEL Matthew 11.16–19, 25–30**

At that time Jesus said, 'To what will I compare this generation? It is like children sitting in the market-places and calling to one another,

"We played the flute for you, and you did not dance; we wailed, and you did not mourn."

For John came neither eating nor drinking, and they say, "He has a demon"; the Son of Man came eating and drinking, and they say, "Look, a glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax-collectors and sinners!"

Yet wisdom is vindicated by her deeds.

I thank you, Father, Lord of Heaven and Earth, because you have hidden these things from the wise and the intelligent and have revealed them to infants; yes, Father, for such was your gracious will. All things have been handed over to me by my Father; and no one knows the Son except the Father, and no one knows the Father except the Son and anyone to whom the Son chooses to reveal him.

Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me; for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light.'

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Christian Scripture is a puffin's beak: a multi-spectral rainbow - but also like those bird colonies of Orkney, a cacophony - of voices, and cultures. That's even before we begin interpretation for our day and global circumstances.

That serious, seductive calling: of courting and flirting with the environmental economic and spiritual wisdom for which children and grandchildren may thank us.

If we can reasonably hope for such continuity.

For hope, you need faith, and for faith, you must also needs attend to love. The sort of love which we grow into after childhood with its games, some annoyingly foolish, some so deeply valuable and beautiful.

That so noble aspiration of mature people, which is such a valuable motivation to our movement: to bequeath to future generations a beautiful just and safe home; ... this has telescoped with the deadlines now coming thick and fast; the realisation that the inseparable crises of Nature and Climate are a clear and present reality. Now!

The sea that we see from this church, will continue to rise. And it's beyond reasonable doubt that the cause of unjust human activity led to the effect of eradicating - so far - half the Earth's wildlife since 1970. Remember 1970, anyone? I do.

We will not 'see things out'. This is not one of those temporary problems we fix, or which just goes away if we ignore it. So how to see things through? That's what faith is for. Hallelujah Anyway! Who would have thought?!

All current generations are involved, are threatened, are responsible. To change what they can change; adapt to what they can't .

Some of us may be to blame, though whatever the fault, the fate, and the need to respond is shared.

Shared with the diversity of fellow creatures too.

To whom as much as to us, God gives the Earth as habitat.

On whom, in ways we're only just beginning to realise, we vitally depend.

We need everyone on board. The sick, not the healthy, need the doctor.

"Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me, a sinner."

Last Summer's brutal heatwave in the UK, turning green hills brown overnight spoke inescapably of the disruption of seasons, migrations and cycles on which our cultures and religions have relied since the ice age. Those cycles sights sounds and smells which delight and sustain the lovers of the Song of Songs.

For now those laws ( in the Psalms) that never should be broken - by knowing human choice - are transgressed left right and centre. It's the wanton shaking of the foundations of the real Earth we're made of, and of the real sky above us we've dressed up as an abstract science fiction "heaven"; those foundations which Bible poets so insightfully drew together with justice and righteousness as the pillars of God's throne. When we pray for God's will to be done on Earth, don't take it for granted that's the way it is in the skies, in heaven.

When God is the maker of the unified Creation of heaven and earth, sky and soil, all Creation needs your prayer and its working out in the concrete decisions of your daily lives.

What will help, what will harm? And what might make things better? Never let those questions slip from your agenda.

We've reached the stage at which the despised hyperbole of the prophets and poets; their causal link between injustice and environmental catastrophe, has blossomed into observable reality. And those embarrassing apocalyptic outbursts even of that sensible man Jesus in the Gospels, begin to sound like news reports.

So today as a set reading... hmm ... we read the Song of Songs. A song of love, set amidst the love of wildlife. It's happy, delightful, sensual, and therefore deadly serious. Like the environmental commitment of many churches.

The lovers are encouraged and strengthened in relationship, aspiring to define their whole lives, by immersion in the beauty, fruitfulness, and dependability of the seasons and migrations. They find fulfilment by

connection. And I hope, whether you're visiting Orkney or live here, you make friends with the nature you find here.

The lovers take note of this: Creation does not exist solely for them. Yet in their openness to know Creation without aspiring to rule or control; and to find their place and purpose amongst the undespised wildlife... therein their lives are enriched.

It's taken far too long for the poets and scientists to find common ground. But of that we see more and more each day. As science confirms the languages of trees, the intelligence, emotions and societies of animals. More and more, that we depend on nature and their diversity far more than ever they depend on us. That childish human game of "king of the castle of Creation" falls apart.

And it's now above all the dispossessed and despised voices: voices dismissed as 'infants' who give the lead and bear the burden of wisdom - in the child climate strikers on the streets of the global north - and those indigenous peoples from pole to pole who were targets of cultural genocide.... together with those who share their voice with a nature not just beautiful, but indispensable to our own survival; those who voice the wisdom given to Solomon, described explicitly only in these terms: that when God gave him wisdom, he spoke of trees, animals, birds, insects, reptiles and fish. Not of profit.

In our lifetimes, and until now in our churches, the voices of women, of other races and identities, but also fellow creatures and indeed, that most prominent character of Scripture, Earth-self, have been conscientiously ignored and sidelined. And with them, Jesus, for whom the last really will be first.

It's worth enquiring who has seized control of the Biblical narrative, to the extent that every other approach seems inferior.

To our peril, and like those children in Jesus' pointed marketplace, we've peevishly - and even pathetically confused dominance with definitiveness.

As if there's no other way but our way. But God is green notwithstanding.

We've let the narrow-minded childish selfishness of colonialism strangle our spiritualities. So we play the pipes of profit and dance the deadly dance of throwaway consumerism and wonder why grown-up Creation - who has better things to do - doesn't join in, who after a century of friendly toleration now shows increasing signs of boiling over in irritation as we approach 1.5 degrees of warming. This year, next year, who knows?

The Bible is a treasure-house of spiritual responses to threat, injustice and crisis, neither single-use, nor throwaway. With our maturing awareness and acceptance of crisis comes the realisation of the coherence and value of faith liberated from captivity as a tool of empire.

Jesus himself was already inspired to be recycling repurposing and weaving together the poetry of his people with their very real life experiences and skills for life on Earth.

If I'm reckless enough to summarise the body of Jesus' teaching in Matthew, which includes that wonderfully contemporary story of builders on rock and sand, neither of whom could fix their climate, but one of whom took notice and - by the skin of their teeth - survived, ... that summary would also be that of the earliest Christian hymns: "Wake up, take notice." "Read the signs of the times."

With the barbed addition that it's stupid to ignore the warnings and even ultimatums we're given in the honesty of science and the love of God. And that God is no safeguard against the folly you knowingly choose, especially at the scale we're perpetuating in the global north. Still sending out ships and seismographs to explore for additional oil and gas

Today some read the signs ... and regret it. All the more cause to seek God's help. By standards current in my lifetime, we've already passed tipping-points of "too late". Scientists and Statesmen, traditionally obliged to speak moderately have described us as being on a "highway to hell", swept along by our addiction to casual flying and the despairing fear that there's life other than by the addictive combustion of hydrocarbons, building greenhouse gases without precedent since before the dawn of human history.

When the nature we need for our happiness is so undervalued, then young couples getting serious - like the one frolicking through the love-and-nature-poetry of the Song of Songs - today are losing hope and pondering whether it's right to bring more children into a world with such terrifying prospects.

That's why for the church, and for anyone who even for a moment or as a visitor dips into what we're about, it's simply stupid to miss out on this God-given opportunity. Of partnership and love for fellow creatures. Not stewardship of property.

This gift, from the treasure-house of faith to discern the urgently needed wisdom and spiritual resilience to brutal changes afflicting the life of the Earth. To "Wake up, take notice." and "Read the signs of the times." The truth, in love. What else are we here for? AMEN.

## **Do, Dare, double-dare, kiss, love AND promise: An extended version of the talk for Kirkwall Council of Churches**

Having some sort of an idea what's going on is a great privilege. Though full clarity and certainty is seldom on offer, which is the value of faith.

Faith allows us **boldly to go** both, by a path of recycling and repurposing where folk **have** gone before and yet also where **no one** has. Jesus

welcomed the confused and imprecise welcome he received when entering Jerusalem when the young folk in particular cried out '**Hosanna**' - God help us. And in the churches we celebrate that welcome and that cry as *joyful*.

It's similar to the '**Hallelujah anyway**' of black and oppressed spirituality: a joy of defiance, rather than the default of '**lament**' that some Christians - *though not, it seems, this of other faiths* - seem to think is the only response to Nature & Climate crises.

But first of all, we need to consider our ways of speech, of pastoral practice, of public visibility.

I generally feel - and regret - that I do myself soften and tone down some of the scientific insights I've heard, and which for me were powerfully confirmed in the presentations on the floor of the Blue Zone of COP26. The looming crisis of the supply of water; the terrifying uncertainties of the cryosphere: by which I mean the creeping imbalance of a number of ice shelves. And of course, that one way or another, even here, the sea is rising.

3 mm a year in **these** waters doesn't sound much, though increased storminess concentrates our mind, even as if affects lifeline supply chains. Like most of the higher latitude lands Orkney is warming, faster than the landscape can adapt without intervention. The peatland carbon stores, which have only recently been recognised as a global treasure, may face a bleak future.

When I'm asked how I do keep going in this job, which involves daily familiarity with boringly sensible scientists voicing the sort of scenarios at which, in the mouths of street preachers, I might have been raised to sneer at, I might start with:

Matthew 6:34: "**Do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will worry about itself. Each day has enough trouble of its own.**"

As so often the case, this pivotal verse in the Sermon on the Mount is invariably gentrified in English translation.

Don't worry about tomorrow: you're up to your eyes in the 'kakia' today.

But: "Do not worry!"... From that saying of Jesus, in whatever form, I take the comfort and the aspiration not to be overcome by what might

already seem a completely rational despair. It's not don't look, not don't be alert.

Though I can't claim, in a macho Calvinist way, that my own faith will be sufficient and unaided for the day that's coming soon **when - not if** - 1.5 degrees of global warming is exceeded. The more we discover, the more we need the solidarity of the Church. This is why:

We grasp the sense of Scripture better when we look for its visceral, experiential foundation. The Gospel is what gets us moving; whatever allows us to hear 'AMEN' as 'get on with it, rather than as a full stop.

If we have a choice, go for the earthier, undiluted translations. Or at the very least try to get across to congregations that the Bible - even in their favourite version - never comes other than with slants and biases.

And the Scottish tradition of unthinkingly giving far too much authority to a pew Bible really should have died out with the digital age.

Like the Good News Version, so simplistically - *and now damagingly* - rendering '**all creation**' as '**all people**'. Or the unpardonable decision as late as 2001 to choose to pretend '**man**' can be the definitive word for human, though words for human, man and woman exist in Biblical Greek.

Whatever: what matters is not to find Scripture **without** any bias or slant, but to discern what offers least resistance in the situation we're in, to what the Spirit is saying to the churches. today

Which probably also leads us on to the sensitive business of claiming part of that interpretation ourselves. Of working towards a truly redemptive 'Treehugger Bible'. Not such a bad thing once the scale of the agenda of your previously favourite version comes to light.

Again, do we dare? yet if not us, then who? Of course this does require integrity and accountability as well as courage, faith, and cheerfulness.

Not simply making the many voices of the Bible **say what we want them to say**, but perhaps reserving space for those who have been sidelined. Like the Christians and the spirituality of the indigenous Global South. Like the forces of nature in Micah 6 called to hold humanity to account in the famous quote about what the Lord requires: "**to act**



***justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God.***”

Whom, and what creatures would you exclude from that justice?

Once we can accept that what has been dominant is not necessarily definitive, there's room for God to speak to our day. Reminding us that Jesus came that his joy might be in us and our joy might be as good as it gets. Because it needs to be, in times like these.

Joy.

A while ago, I was at an interfaith event on the Nature & Climate Crisis. Various speakers made their contributions, then in the informal chat afterwards an angry man approached me: how **dare** I be so cheerful, he said, when confronted with such tragedy.

Fair enough. I've no excuses, but certainly make no apology either.

Especially at a time when many churches have contrived to be so bogged down with reorganisation that to consider the End of the World - seriously- comes as light relief. We have much over which to lament, but lament is a process to pass through, not a place to live.

But this is the silver lining: Our churches previous one-track future of seemingly inevitable decline and acquiescence in the mendacious illusion of irrelevance is off the table.

Has it been too easy to believe that we're obsolete and pointless? Not any more. Not when we make the connection with the world God so loves, with the humility to recognise we're part, but not the defining part - of **that** world. And smaller churches can move faster than bigger ones, by and large. Now we have not only the disappointment of our decline to cover, but the good of our neighbours and fellow creatures to *fight for*.

Alongside other people of faith - and certainly without any imperial aspiration to a monopoly on goodness - it's in the crisis that the churches find a place and purpose. Respecting diversity, reconciling division.

When EcoCongregation Scotland reviewed our mission statements, the phrase '**spiritual resilience**' emerged as something we think churches might be about.

An identity as a beacon of hope, of resilience, and permission and encouragement to embrace change. Or what else has our preoccupation with '**repentance**' been about these last two thousand years?

Change... which seems costly up-front, but the economies of salvation are like that. And with a purpose and a benefit for the common good, we needn't feel bad about the cost of our continued presence.

Concern for our relationship with Creation - even in a way that in living memory we would have been encouraged to dismiss as primitive or childlike - has implications for our witness, our mission, our discipleship, yes even evangelism.

Certainly for the deepening of faith, the claiming of joy, and the enrichment of a nourishing spirituality.

If you're making efforts to support your denominations' aspirations towards Net-Zero, then shout about it. Let them see, - as Jesus with amazing clarity and despite interpretation seems to have said- "let your light shine before others, that they may see your good deeds and glorify your Father in heaven." [Matthew 5:16] Do good stuff and shout about it. -Which should be at least as mainstream a Christian teaching as giving alms, that is, more precisely, the last-resort giving that because of its secrecy safeguards the dignity of the recipient, rather than adding to the prestige of the donor.

A church which is **seen to care** for the deep existential threats which assail the souls even of our youngest folks, is a church worth keeping on the scene.

This is a church which it's loving to our neighbours to maintain - or perhaps to recycle and repurpose, though given the proportion of what we might see as our legacy taken up with buildings and their care, the recycled church can expect to look a little different.

In saying that, though, we still need to be recognisable. An *identity* that can be *identified*. Last year we visited a retrofitted traditional church building in Shetland. As a warm, friendly community facility, it has discovered a new lease of life - but it still feels like a church. I often say that nothing is too holy to be green. And nothing too green to be holy. If you're committed to a journey of green faith, then you don't put away your

friends in the natural world when that time of the year comes by when some of us might bring ... a tree into church,

We deepen and enrich even our defining festivals like Lent Easter Pentecost, Christmas - and perhaps most of all Advent - with its traditional reflection on the end-times, when, like the Scribe of the Kingdom, we dig out from our treasure-box things both old and new.

You might have noticed I'm very wary of quoting big-name authorities of the churches - largely because that so often leads to things being slowed down or held back: there's a big report out from the European churches which quotes almost nothing beyond 1996, with the result that it reinforces the colonial imperial attitudes that have done so much harm to people and planet. Sadly, it's just what our global south friends would expect from Europe.

But - in the last few days Archbishop Emeritus Rowan Williams came up with the closest he might get to a soundbite on the crisis. It has several parts. [discuss]

- 1) The environmental crisis overshadows every other issue:
- 2) The story here is of an insanely unbalanced account of human entitlement and human capacity
- 3) that has consistently, in the last three centuries, ignored any sense of the interdependence of human life and the life of the organic order as a whole:
- 4) the life that matters has been, explicitly or implicitly, defined as human life – and human life lived in a specific mode, that of expanding consumption.”

You shouldn't need the intellectual prowess and the ecclesiastical prestige of Rowan Williams to come to these conclusions.

They are, when you recognise your permission to think them, fairly obvious public domain insights: things which are openly available for all to use without worrying about attribution.

But the barrier of perceived 'permission' is set about with barbs of many kinds. And I'm hoping that as I get the chance to talk to church leaders in training, I might impart just a wee bit of confidence to dare use the skills they are so expensively provided with: to think responsively, rather than anxiously quoting authorities well into mid-career. It's the truth - even the terrifying truth of the urgent crises - which should be setting us free to think what we thought we had no business thinking.

Put it this way: in our media, the only 'growth' that is allowed to matter is the growth of GDP, rather than of wellbeing. And when, a few days ago, the Labour Party was promoting their programme for a green economy, the benefits to nature and the planet were very much the last item on the list. As if they were embarrassed to value and help the life our life depends on.

Maybe it's strange that at COP26 it was the scientists, the supposed dealers in "fact", who were pointing out that the things we previously thought were merely beautiful -and therefore, for mature rational people, expendable - turned out to be vital and essential after all. It's the scientists who reassure us that none of the attributes previously used to bolster a superior image of humanity are unique: intelligence, language, feelings, are all shared in ways our own attributes allow us to grasp, not in insulting anthropomorphisation - pretending animals are people - but respecting the diversity and differences - according to their kind'.  
[Genesis 1:11-13]

Like the wisdom of Solomon as actually described in the Bible. Less of that tragic story toned down and made genteel for Sunday school use, of the two trafficked women and neonatal death, but rather that the God-given wisdom of Solomon was expressed when he spoke of "trees, animals, birds, creeping things and fish". [1 Kgs 4:33].

Jesus was no stranger to this wisdom, calling us to learn from the birds and all the trees, and - which people found scarier than the power of the storm - speaking robustly and personally to the personalities of the wind and the waves. Just as people need putting in place, we shouldn't be suprised that our interaction with fellow creatures might be tough at times. Even where we're predators, can we take our cue from the wolves

reintroduced to Yellowstone park and be 'good predators', which I might take to be the way the lion really does lie down with the lamb. But even as predators, we have our limits.

The ancient gravestones of Scotland carry the good and loving advice: memento mori : remember you will die. We are vulnerable, we are fragile, and it's the devil's delight to suggest otherwise.

Even those seasons and migrations of birds and animals , which in the Bible are testimony to the will of God, are fragile. The Laws which, in that hymn setting of Psalm 148 'Never shall be broken' are being trampled, globally, by the collective of humanity. In these circumstances of a crisis of heaven and earth, because these are also always sky and soil, the Lord's Prayer, that God's will be done both in heaven and on earth, morphs into a prayer for the integrity of our planet. Today we cannot look up and take it for granted that in the heavens, God's will is impregnably done.

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It's part of the historic task of churches to be custodians of bereavement. Perhaps even to have a role in palliative ministry: the positive and affirmative accompaniment of the end of life, even if this is the end of a **way** of life. Like our reliance on fossil fuels in all things.

So I hope I do not trivialise any bereavement which might be felt at the death of some dearly-beloved mythology: such as that humanity is in charge of Creation; that the world is made with us alone in mind; let alone the death of the myth of an endless, everlasting world whose resilience can be relied on both as a ground of faith and a justification of unlimited economic growth.

Exploitative extractive capitalism really does carry the seeds of its own destruction, yet perhaps not in the way Marx envisaged, but at far greater cost; not just to the workers, but to life on Earth.

It's the inevitable end of a single-use culture which greedily violates those cycles of goodness, of water, oxygen and carbon which a close reading of Scripture might lead us closely to associate with the Word of God. Cycles

which have limits and endings. And new beginnings which require those endings. New life requires that we do not deny death. Or our limits. .The enthusiasm which has led us to smooth over the cycles and ages of the life of the world into one tyrannical endlessness has tricked us into the assumption that because God is great, what is great must be godlike. Remember, in the microbes that enable the recycling miracle of decay, God is tiny too. And immortal. But our God knew death.

From the Cross onwards, perhaps from the resurrection, Christianity is the spiritual resource God makes available not just for times of trouble, but when, by expectation and experience, it's already too late. Which by the standards of a few years ago it is.

Tipping points have toppled. Warming, sea-level rise and more is locked in, little can be fixed though some things can be slowed, and a variety of outcomes are still possible. As well as the adaptation which characterises Gods people in changing times.

In such circumstances, never be afraid or embarrassed that faith makes more sense -that we access more meaning - the greater our awareness of crisis. Or that poetry and theological reasoning, which ought to be our stock in trade as churches, can link helpful story and reality where other disciplines might struggle.

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Today, Despair might seem rational, but it's also pointless and counter-productive. Despair is a slippery slope, but hope... hope is a foothold, which for people of faith does not require an entirely rational justification. Though its foundation is relationship. Our friendship with Christ, our friendship with one another, and our friendship, because we're fellow stakeholders in the Rainbow Covenant - with all life, and with the Earth, in which Christ is incarnate, with Creation into which Christ is ascended.

Hope's **false** friend, though, is denial. And of that there's a lot about. Like its close relative racism, it gets in everywhere. And again, tries to withhold permission to say what needs said.

First of all, there's that - technically satanic - pastoral intent. Like Peter to Jesus when he spoke about the cross, or like Jesus's own family who tried to intervene and get the young carpenter to see sense and drop all this healing and preaching business. Or like the congregation who tried to throw him over a cliff for suggesting that they take scripture seriously as a resource for the crises of today and here and now.

If we're just about holding things together by the skin of our teeth anyway, we don't want to stir things up, especially if change and action and response can be kicked a year or two down the road.

Not any more, it can't.! I've seen congregations look at more mundane threats and say 'It'll see us out'. Seldom does it. We don't want to share the hurt caused by painful truth, but as with global responses to the Crises, postponement of action inevitably adds to that pain.

There's a balance, of course, and island communities genuinely do have different circumstances and preoccupations from mainland cities, though all are far more directly connected and more directly dependent on what the economists of COP would call 'natural assets' than our recent ancestors would be prepared to admit. In church and in wider society.

Then there's the beautiful game of liberal debate, which is fine as long as the outcome doesn't matter, and Donald Trump's legendary reassurance that 'there are good people on both sides' can be taken for granted. We're used to the gracious capitulation to whomever can carry the debate, even if the starting point is complete nonsense, as for some of the more prominent and skilful denialist currents. We fear to say 'that's the way it is' even if it is. I suspect that the budget of the fossil fuel companies for misinformation and greenwashing exceeds by some margin that of all our churches. Possibly globally. If you can chuck some money at a retired academic to sell their soul and reputation as they bully and pull rank to silence opposition, that money's well spent, especially when we like to talk of things 'proven' in mythically watertight laboratory conditions. 'I'm entitled to my opinion' said a member of our Church & Society Committee, after having lapped up some cleverly phrased denialist website. And for those of you in leadership locally, as theologians too, you have this same challenge

It remains therefore a risk for me to have to say, that despite the criticism and disappointment of COP26 on our doorstep in Glasgow in 2021, for me that great circus definitively put in place sufficient of the missing jigsaw pieces of cause and effect, to the extent that I from then on I say with confidence, knowing how counter-cultural such an assertion may be, that it is beyond reasonable doubt that human activity has already gravely destabilised and continues rapidly to accelerate the ending of the balance which has cradled all our culture and even religion in that brief geological period since Orkney was pressed down under the glaciers.

That humanity *is* the key **cause** is a very different thing from saying that every human being is to blame, though I won't be so stupid as to say that no one is, and many societies and cultures carry heavy responsibility. Whatever the fault, the fate is shared.

Looking more closely, that's the failure of justice and equity, which in Biblical prophetic logic is expressed in the suffering of the Earth: in environmental and ecological devastation. We don't blame the poor for having children, when the footprint of one rich person is more than a whole village. And it's also in the realm of certainty, that attending to the education and empowerment of women is one of the greenest things of all.

Finally: if the last will be first: who and what are we not listening to? to whom is given the Word of God for our time, our place, our church?