



Week 1 :

Romans 12:9-21. Matt 16:21-28

**Genuine Love meets the Devil's
Business-as-Usual.**

Locations: Dunbar, Dunbar battlefield, Doon Hill
(where the Scots troops assembled before the battle)
and New College Quad, by the Assembly Rooms

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Today, [3rd Sep] theology can kill....

On 3rd September 1650, here, on fields near Dunbar, there was a **bloody** battle. English and Scottish forces. Trampling the Earth, carving their flesh, War.

On the face of it, over the interpretation of Scripture. Because Satan -God's opposition- can and does quote scripture. So convincingly that scripture is not enough to save you.

Because look around and as Jesus noted, Satan is "on our side". Satan's a disciple. Satan gives to charity. Whatever weakens the resolve or undermines trust in the change love longs to embrace. The life love longs to lose. Ah!

Near Dunbar on this day, Lives **were** lost and ruined. Were either side **right?** Or if they **were**, did they fight out of love. Or like Peter, standing up for the Devil's business as usual. No horns needed. Just common sense. Was **that** for love?

War doesn't decide such things. War only decides who wins. Yet as war tragically rages between Russia and Ukraine, the war of humanity versus Earth goes on and on.

Denying not the priority of **Self**, but the **personality** of the Earth. A war against our common home, against our beloved relative. Against all we need to live. Against ourselves as God's creatures. With casualties already of half the wildlife since 1970. **And** the refugees, **and** those suffering more and worse heatwaves. Way over 40 degrees in Europe this year. Where's the love in that?

Would a love, which looks the enemy in the eye, and allows them to look back into ours kindle urgency, to live a different way? Do we even love ourselves as a model for our love of the Earth? And what does it mean to deny that **idol** of self which usurps God's place?

To answer, I'm wary of the authority of big names, because Satan also loves to pull rank. Big names can and do sell their soul to Big Oil.

Yet, as Rowan Williams put it more clearly than any theologian I've heard this year:

*“The story ... is of an insanely unbalanced account of human entitlement ... 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.*

*The life that matters has been...defined as **human** life – and human life lived in a **specific** mode, that of expanding consumption,”*

That’s the life that needs let go of, if Earth’s life is not to be lost.
How? “R”

The watchwords of the environmental movement generally **begin** with an “**R**”. Re-use, recycle, repurpose. But as churches, as followers of Christ, the I-word belongs with every other. Reduce, re-use, recycle, repurpose. **In love**. With Justice.

And throughout the Season of Creation, these are guiding principles: so that we can look, to be **still more the church**, rather than discard, in shame, the abused and neglected resources and gifts of our faith.

Gifted for our visceral response to threat, rather than preservation in glass cases.

Gifted to the powerless, even when they’re stolen by Empire.

Gifted that we be creatures of genuine love, even as the magnitude of the Nature and Climate crises sinks in..... and we find our perspectives and priorities reshaped in response to emergencies which overshadow every other issue.

If today we are church: our obligation is to the Truth - in love. And our task of discernment is therefore twofold.

Firstly, without fear, or embarrassment, to lay claim to that wisdom attributed to Solomon; recycled by Job and then by Jesus: To dialogue with Earth; to be **taught by** God’s creatures; to learn from the birds and all the trees; and, without distinction, to **hearken** to every genocided voice, that the witness of the last and least, may truly be first. And to hearken with love. Genuine. Visceral. Love. For our Creation neighbours, as for God. By whatever path this may take us.

Including gratitude and respect for the honest witness of science.

And subversive reassessment of some scandalous ideas. Even from that awful battle I mentioned at the beginning.

In the college where I trained for ministry - *and for friends in some churches, this may be scandal enough* - there was a portrait of Oliver Cromwell on the wall. It gave my first best taste of how stories **can** be repurposed. And how there's little from which we cannot learn, whether positively **or negatively**. Scripture and history especially included.

One day the most trusted and beloved of our lecturers quoted to us, trainee ministers out of his expressed fear we might end up as tub-thumpers, Bible-bashers and bigots ..he quoted Cromwell's letter to the Church of Scotland, before that gut-spilling battle of Dunbar..... that we might **“consider in the bowels of Christ that we might be wrong”**.

*That rebuke, back then, did the job of making us deeply wary of what love, in I Corinthians **doesn't** do. Insisting on our own way.*

Though the danger was also, that we were being conditioned to stand down if truth can be portrayed as offensive.

“consider in the bowels of Christ that ye may be wrong”.

So the burden we face, when it's beyond reasonable doubt that the Nature and Climate crisis follows from the satanic business-as-usual which we're persuaded to perpetuate; that burden is daily to consider, by the cross, and the guts of Christ, the cost of what it means **to be right**.

That burden which can't be set aside by politeness. Not by deference to tradition or social status.

Nor defer to that teaching on the absolute priority of human entitlement to **“gain the whole world”** which may have been commonplace in the church and the economics of our lifetime.... but now has to be faced down for the love of the Earth, which is the love of our neighbour.

This burden of love isn't one-size fits all. Love rightly takes account of local circumstance, of justice and of equity as we face up to transition to a net-zero church and a low-carbon economy. But concessions are not exemptions.

And it's hardest to let go of the life you trust as things are. To let go of the devil's business as usual. To receive all the life God is prepared to give.

On Orkney this Summer, I looked over from the Italian Chapel, recycled from prison huts by prisoners from Fascist Italy, and saw in the bay of Scapa Flow a rig which - flying in the face of the United Nations, and the UK Government's Climate Change Committee - is under contract for **new** exploration of oil and gas.

There's also Rosebank: the new UK oilfield with a carbon footprint dwarfing that of those 28 poorest countries in a given year. Those already suffering from the crisis knowingly inflicted by the powerful of the Great Polluters. If we just sit back and swallow that, where's **our** love? Not in an easy place.

Looking **over** at that rig and looking it **up**, I discovered the workers had graciously and lovingly raised money for local charities, to the extent that a local paper had quoted a local as "proud the rig was in the bay". Satan rubbed their hands with glee.

At my wit's end, I turned to colleagues for advice, and one of them reminded me folk **can** be grateful for help from employees without endorsing the employer. Workers raising money for charity is good but the same workers if employed in renewables would also raise such money.

There are so many such challenges. Jobs for the Cumbria Community with the new coal mine. We don't have to accept that story. If we need jobs, why not sustainable jobs? You then get more jobs, research shows, for a given investment.

Genuine love, seeking the best for all, finds their habitat to be a sense of realism, when there is bad news to share, or a 'cross' to be faced.

Even when 'until' is added to what we blithely assumed was open-ended and eternal, like seasons and migrations that this year cannot be said to be normal or regular. Like the flooding of Pakistan which could not be said to be 'natural'. Genuine love does not confuse a loving insistence on truth with satanic pig-headedness.

How then do we love our congregations and our movement enough to peel away if not all then **sufficient** of the deception, complacency and business as usual which is our response to the **beginnings** of the nature and climate crisis?

What do we do about - as a friend in an Orkney congregation put it - the workings of the Church which block the horizon of the work of the church? Or, those partial responses we reach for as a holding strategy. So that our first wee steps become the last and only. And the low-hanging fruit just makes apple pie today.

Genuine love differs from wishful thinking, which does no more than kick cans a few inches down the road. Or move further up the beach from the incoming tide. If it's not the truth, is it loving at all?

You could argue Jesus didn't quite tell his friends everything, though he told them what they needed to know to face what lay ahead. And the proof of that is that this is when knee-jerk-Peter said, "enough is enough."

Which showed something just hadn't sunk in. How devilish, how satanic is that: that **"you just don't get it"?** All those camp old horror movies are going to have to re-think. Satan the Lord of **'just don't get it'**.

But that's all it needs to put one spanner in God's works of healing. One stick in your spokes. The stifling or postponement that action by a local -or national - church, to respond with care for Creation which is not just the right think to do, (though that should be sufficient) but comes with rewards too: of meaning, of hope, of joy. (Sometimes you even save money too!)

And by grace, even Peter is repurposed as the rock on which Church is built. We are Church: gathered around the words and actions of Christ. In this fellowship, the scariest decisions are not something we're abandoned to. Not un-prepared. The fellowship of Christ expressed in local and grassroots churches must retain the calling to offer 'sanctuary' - to be a place of the Good News where we come to be refreshed. 'Let love be genuine' - who will disagree? But do we have the guts of Christ, for such love?

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WEEK 2:

Ezekiel 33:7-11. Matthew 18:15-20

Repurposing minds and hearts in the crisis of Heaven and Earth

LOCATION : ITALIAN CHAPEL , ORKNEY

Changing minds and hearts in the crisis of heaven and Earth.

In a crisis, in times of threat and uncertainty, then all the more: Re-use, recycle, repurpose:

I'm marking the Sunday on which the EcoChaplaincy of EcoCongregation Scotland enters an exceptional third term by recording this reflection in one of the most deeply moving places of worship I've ever encountered, and one which, perhaps despite appearances, exemplifies much of what our movement is about.

Recognisable and sustaining Christian faith, sustained by assertive beauty in vulnerability: a Hosanna, a Hallelujah anyway, with ripples of inspiration

The Italian Chapel on Lamb Holm island, Orkney, where the faith and determination of Italian prisoners of war took the functional ugliness of two Nissen huts, and the scrap materials and metal that were available to them and from the still deeper ugliness of wartime exile shaped what has become not just a tourist attraction, but a place of pilgrimage, loved and cherished; not just a museum, but a living place of worship, reaching way beyond the desperate spiritual need that gave rise to it.

I don't know what local people would have thought back then.

But at the time, the people who created it were hated, mistrusted, dressed in clothing which included targets to be shot at should they try to escape, dragooned into what seemed to be illegal forced labour, and starved and harassed when they tried, in protest to withdraw that labour. It was a wretched existence that I pray we wouldn't wish - though it was inflicted - on those the war had made enemies.

But in the squalor those captive enemies, whose faith remained part of their identity, with the permission of a camp commander and goodwill of islanders, this building happened.

As in the liturgy of the Scottish Episcopal Church, where God is said to shape beauty out of chaos, people cruelly caught up in the conflicts of nations recycled and repurposed what came to hand.

But like so much it could have been single-use.....

The Chaplaincy is a full-time ministry provided by the United Reformed Church for all the churches of Scotland, though the aim is that every 'general practice' local leader and preacher will fulfil their calling with a determinative awareness of the Nature and Climate Crisis. Training and education of church leaders in Scotland is beginning to take up this baton.

From now on, all preaching everywhere, at least under the umbrella of 'Season of Creation'/ Creation Time has something of Ezekiel's 'sentinel' about it. An awesome and scary responsibility before God to promote alertness and awareness; to place before God's people sufficient truth and warning in a time of threats and crisis for **them** to decide on their direction. The responsibility of the preacher is not to make the decision for the people, but to leave **them** open to judgement and ready and able to choose the way of Life, even in a culture of determined hopelessness and a belief in the futility of any action to heal society or the Earth.

Ezekiel's God cares deeply that even the 'wicked' get the chance to change, though offers no complacency or immunity should the 'righteous' stupidly choose injustice.

Sometimes we may seem to be a lone voice, or an 'unwelcome source of hope', when churches (like Ezekiel's own people) have allowed generations of decline and the illusion of irrelevance to

define their identities. The burden of programmes of reorganisation in some denominations block the horizon and drain energy to such an extent that the message of 'the end of the world' - but also the associated 'closeness of the Kingdom' come across as light relief!

And yet we can grasp that in days of Nature and Climate crisis, even the expected grim and boring future is off the menu. To live by a different story may lead to a different outcome.

Yes, our message IS for the churches, as Ezekiel's was for 'the House of Israel', and it may as well -or *far better* - be proclaimed by a whole

congregation committed to environmental prayer and action as by any individual.

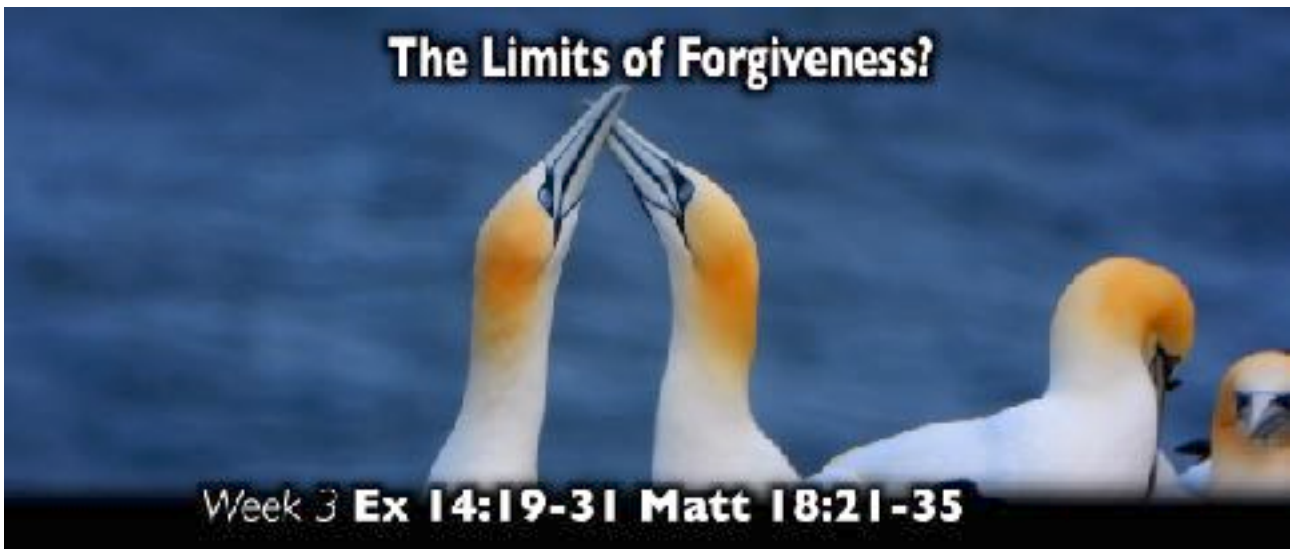
The awards programme of EcoCongregation Scotland offers something like that, and if the Romans passage for today is included, we note the completely appropriate place of 'Christian competitiveness' : to outdo one another in showing honour, which is a reality I once experienced as a guest of churches in American Samoa. Can we outdo one another in showing honour to the Earth?

The Ezekiel and Matthew scenarios differ: Ezekiel has the uphill responsibility of informing a whole community; the advice given in Matthew is on the loving attention to dissenters and deniers within the community: those who might without determined care, do harm to the resolve and the mission of the church.

In recent months we have seen a growth in the availability of 'climate-denying' material, some of which is very competently written or filmed, though the starting points and conclusions are completely bonkers - like the suggestion that greenhouse gases, already at a dangerous level, should be doubled. In most congregations, *someone* will have been taken in by the bogus authority of such material. It's a pastoral task, not to beat them down or bully them, but lovingly take them in hand. We need everyone on board, and the gifts and commitment even of those who begin as sceptics and deniers. We've seen that hearts and minds can change. In fact, that's the business of the Church!

A final thought: in a Unified Creation of Heaven-and-Earth/Sky-and-Soil, **of course**, what we 'bind or loose' impacts on the climate of the whole. The crisis of Climate and Nature is in the most real sense a crisis of Heaven and Earth; for whatever else we need to mean by 'heaven', in Scripture, it also always remains 'sky'.

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Week 3

Ezekiel 14:19-31. Matthew 18:21-35

Limits of forgiveness

Location: Cliffs of St Abb's Head, opposite a stack with nesting gannets: inserts from other visits to seabird colonies: opening shot: Hermaness gannetry Shetland

An additional quote: Jeremiah 12:4

HOW LONG WILL THE LAND MOURN,
AND THE GRASS OF EVERY FIELD WITHER?
FOR THE WICKEDNESS OF THOSE WHO LIVE THERE
THE ANIMALS AND THE BIRDS ARE SWEEP AWAY
BECAUSE PEOPLE SAID
GOD IS OBLIVIOUS TO OUR WAYS.

From time to time, we still hear in some form, the damaging suggestion: 'God's in charge so we don't need to worry about climate change'. Nor does the world as a whole.

But perhaps that's why we do need to worry!

To worry in such a way that we shift off our backsides and get on with it. For time is short, and effect unsurprisingly follows cause.

We don't like to connect **fear and faith**, but it's no reflection on your faith, if **justified** fear is where you start from.

Especially if that fear arises from honest and informed reading of the signs of the heavens in our day.

Those of us, and those in our families suffering **climate anxiety**, need the welcome, understanding and spiritual solidarity that even the most humble church community may well be able to offer.

Or, God willing, a movement of mutual support and prayer, like EcoCongregation Scotland.

The prophets saw Earth suffer when **people** chose injustice. More precisely, when the **powerful** chose it, then the poor and powerless first suffered along with the Earth.

For Old Testament writers the "wrath" of God expressed through Creation follows reasonably, not perversely, from loveless stupidity.

Together we are repaid - as a variant reading puts it - not for what we have done, but for **what has been done**. Whatever the fault, the fate is shared. [Matt 16:27]. Forgiveness rather than revenge is for the good of all.

That's the way the universe seems to be built, the way Creation is shaped. And Christian faith **should** teach us to mindfulness and wariness of such things.

As indeed do those Gospel ultimatums which well-meaning preachers are still softening as we softened and saccharined the folk tales of our heritage into 'fairy tales' that as a result simply bore the children on

whom they're inflicted, encouraging us to **'grow out'** even of sacred story and imagination.

Yet even as no sparrow falls unnoticed, as Jesus said, God is neither oblivious to, nor unmoved by the harm and injustice our global economy justifies for the profit of a few. Cause and effect.

And the time for push to follow shove, when harm **can** be prevented or at best diverted, mitigated, or adapted to, is **just as soon as** we open our eyes to what confronts us.

That's why Jesus, when Tempted by Satan's twisting of Scripture to jump off the Temple *'because God's in charge and everything will be all right'* - sends the Opposition packing. Entitlement is toxic arrogance. Though sometimes it has a long fuse.

God's chosen mode of **"being in charge"**, from the first Days of Creation, so conspicuously and consistently involves delegation and collaboration.

We can't do it all.

But to sit on our hands and do nothing pending full and clear understanding of what at best we'll see through a glass darkly, that sort of caution cannot be dignified with the name of wisdom.

God's ***in-chargeness*** is expressed, in those powerful ancient stories, through co-creation, as some theologians have dared to notice. The sun to rule the Day, the moon to rule the night. The Earth to bring forth plants and beasts.

And us: humanity: likewise to express **God's** rule by bringing light and life. Not to be hands-off, not but to **intervene** to **express** God's sovereignty **as an expression of** God's love.

Christ, who came not to be served but to serve, is the corrective for everyone who twists **'dominion'** into **'domination'** within the economy of Creation on Earth.

The Red Sea crossing, celebrated so widely in Scripture, presents the **Lordship** of God **over** the elements, who collaboratively - and ingeniously - carry out God's task of holding unjust humanity to account.

But forgiveness is costly. Why should that be a surprise?

Matthew's Jesus pushes the consideration of **limited** forgiveness so far that the wronged church member is expected to lose count. A tally reaching 77 or 490 **forgivenesses**, waiting patiently for the chance to get your own back, is exposed as mean and ridiculous.

Being wronged is no more a legitimate refuge than being rich. Both call for - **and benefit from** - gracious action.

Whilst this **must not** descend into renewed blaming of victims, does any genuine forgiveness wait eagerly for the chance not to forgive?

So in Matthew 18 accountability is more than sternly emphasised concluding the parable of the unforgiving slave thus:

So my heavenly Father will also do to every one of you, if you do not forgive your brother or sister from your heart."

Now, although we do need to hear that full strength, there remains a very firm health warning in this teaching.

Because the survivability of the offence plays a part in the **nature** of the forgiveness. Strictly to forgive what you **can afford** to forgive, and strictly to place anything **more** in God's hands.

Did **Jesus on the cross** forgive those who nailed him there.

We don't know, though we **do** know he prayed that the **Father** might do so.

A murder victim, or an extinct species cannot forgive, nor should a survivor of abuse feel any such pressure: though neither is forgiveness

forbidden, where this genuinely gives closure and allows the survivor to rise with dignity above the abuser.

Such forgiveness from the heart is a wonder, a miracle, a gift and above all a liberation for those who reach the point of being able.

And for **all those reasons**, it cannot be commanded or taken for granted. Just as marriage vows are **no** licence for abuse, losing count of trivial offence is not the same as saying there's **no limit** to serious harm.

But **bitterness** is the trap which must never be encouraged, though sometimes it will be understood.

Bitterness, unlike cancer, is chosen. May God give me the friends and the strength not to choose that path.

Politics, **this** year, **prefers** to lose count. The phrase 'green crap' has unleashed that lethal illusion that action for nature can **safely** or even wisely be delayed or avoided, especially if such action requires effort and ingenuity to spread the burden of change, and spread it with a concern for justice it seems we're not remotely accustomed to, nor do we seriously expect.

Transition is a must, though transition must be just, or recalcitrant leaders will feign solidarity with the most vulnerable, who suffer **from** those leaders' refusal to build the justice in.

The Earth, thus far, has proved to be amazingly **forgiving**. And the recovery of habitats and populations, - for instance - thus far - of the great whales have been seen to bounce back from the precipice of extinction.

But as 1.5 degrees of warming approaches, as scientists at COP made clear, we're **closer to** that still-**remaining** limit of 490 or 77, whichever, than we've ever been.

Accountability - justice and righteousness - is intentionally built into God's Creation [Psalm 89:14]. Which today makes as much sense in reality as ever in scripture.

For Isaiah and Jeremiah, the direct connection of moral and environmental pollution screams out loud.

There's so much, so powerful. So intentionally and meticulously disregarded and sidelined when we uncouple our faith and the physical reality we inhabit.

But there's the other side of the coin: the remedy and intervention God sovereignly chooses involves the committed intervention of those who hear God's Word. The tiny contribution of Moses' outstretched hand is as much part of the event as the living water 'who' overwhelms the Egyptians.

Both are called in person, to express God's justice. And it's God who owns justice, not any one of us, not any nation of ours.

Living justly is its own reward.

Receiving **justice** absolutely does not entitle **injustice**.

In the drama of this defining liberation story, of God as just Creator, and so scarily, of **Creation as enforcer**,... in this story **injustice and oppression makes of some humans** (in this case, Egyptians) **enemies** of the Earth on whom all else depends.

The outcome - in terms of who suffers - differs from experience, thus far in our lifetimes, of an absence of that 'climate justice' that our young protesters demand 'now'.

It begins to look as if the powerful **can** pursue their profits - and even the huge tax-breaks authorised by government - with complete impunity and immunity from the harm they cause the Earth and all their people. But how long for?

The talk has been talked, but instead of walking the walk... they've climbed in their stretch limos and driven away.

Polluters - as yet - seldom pay for the predicament of the poor. But there's only so far you can run from heat over 40 degrees.

So to friends in the churches:

How does all that feel? Will it influence your prayer, preaching, and decisions in daily life? Will you feel more or less justified in the good you long to do or the harm you choose?

But equally, is it right to risk taking into our own mouths the most 'strenuous commands' of our Lord Jesus Christ.

Can we risk ourselves appearing to be the ones assuring of **anything but pardon** for those who do not **"forgive your brother or sister from your heart."** Hmm. But justice is God's, not ours.

The empowering liberation of forgiveness **is** offered so frequently by the Jesus of the Gospels long before any restitution or compensation is complete. But never to justify further harm. Forgiveness is on credit: but with conditions.

To know and believe ourselves set free and enabled by forgiveness rather than paralysed by guilt is basic to the spiritual bonuses of Christian life.

It's the liberating hope of anyone who has prospered in the societies of the Global North.

Nations have **accused** nations in the climate crisis, and, before God, as it were, looked to hold to account those incurring a 'debt' of pollution and habitat destruction.

The concept of 'Loss and Damage' was loudly highlighted in Glasgow at COP26, but even after a boost at COP27, the amounts offered for the fund are a fraction of what's needed to help poorer nations prepare for effects which cannot be evaded.

As I speak, it's clear such obligations to help, even when accepted, are being wriggled out of.

Any **acceptance of what's offered already** amounts to spectacularly gracious forgiveness of the 'trillions' extracted by the Northern empires. Even in this century, let alone in the past.

So how can such 'aid' be given joyfully and with gratitude as an investment in the security of all, rather than grudgingly and evasively, seeking to find ways not to bear even that cost?

And in daily life, and in the work and worship of our churches:
How can we **invest what is precious to us** in peace, and in love of the Earth who is our home and our neighbour?

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Week 4:

Jonah 3:10-4:11. Matthew 20:1-16 Repurposed perspective

Locations: the slopes of Stob Binnein [1174m : I got up to about 700m].

NB The access to the planned path was blocked, by a wall. I also started late in the day, and, although particularly short of breath that

week, I had forgotten my inhaler. This gave a different perspective to 'another mountain sermon'

One of the benefits of wandering up a mountain or two is simply that you see things differently.

Come with me today, and we'll see where that takes us.

Does what matters to us matter to God?

And if not, whose is the problem?

If the last will be first, where does that leave *us*?

And it's all very well to speak and act prophetically, as our movement certainly does from time to time, of which we can be proud, and for which we give thanks to God.

But prophecy is God's message, more than it is ours.

Without a monopoly of faith or species.

Prophets have their day. But also their limits.

That's why Jonah, for all the fantastical elements of the story, is a wonderfully and intriguingly *realistic* character.

We know him better than we know the flawless heroes of the comics.

-Given the chance of fulfilment.

-Choosing the way of childishness.

After all he'd been through, Jonah was granted the chance to sit back and bask in the satisfaction of a job well done.

To feel it had been worthwhile. The outcome was the safety of the people. And, of course, the animals who share their fate.

But, lacking love for any of them, Jonah chose peevishness.

The whole-day workers in the vineyard could likewise have rested content after a good day's work.

Content - *If* they hadn't been piqued by that sense of injustice that someone who's worked less than you have can be "made equal" to you.

When it comes to *levelling-up*, God is the past master, who sends the blessings of rain and sun on the just and the unjust alike. looking to us for equity, not just superficial equality.

Though sun and rain can also get out of hand; and as we *know* now beyond reasonable doubt: the Elements too can be peevish and queasy when they're provoked with more plastic and greenhouse gases than they can swallow.

For environmentalists, the events of this Summer, with heatwaves and wildfires - genuine danger, and crucially in those places that Scottish folk might like to fly off to on holiday - this might have been an occasion for that other rather unlovely emotion of '*told you so*'.

But that's a sentiment that will do us neither credit nor good.

Whatever the fault, the fate is shared.

Rather, be prepared to weep with those who weep, rejoice with those who rejoice, *and* in that emotional solidarity, stand up to

those, even your friends, even your family, even your church, when they need a sense of proportion.

Perspective.

On this outing, starting too late in the day, and having forgotten my inhaler, I realised the need to change course- and turn back- whilst I was still able to do so before nightfall. I sat down on the very steep grassy slopes, and noticed the beauty and exquisite complication of the minuscule ‘flowers beneath my feet’. This in itself made the outing worthwhile, along with the genuine experience it involved of changing plans.

If we’re not waking up to these brutal wake-up calls, and indeed, if it seems our fellow citizens are somehow encouraging our leaders to back-pedal, where does that leave churches just beginning to come to terms with Net-Zero as a response of faith?

Not a response to the *wickedness* of Nature, but to the cries of nature suffering *wickedness*.

Maybe we’re still way back at the beginning of Jonah’s tale.

That call to preach against “wickedness”, to which Jonah responded by running away. Which wouldn’t have ended well for Nineveh. But that wasn’t where God and God’s collaborators in Creation were prepared to leave it.

Do you think God if God ever speaks to us, then God doesn't still speak to whales? And other sea-creatures? Or those around me just now, for whom the mountain is their God-given home?

And if there's a neighbouring church in Scotland near you, which hasn't yet been persuaded of the divine justice of an urgent and just transition from our dependence on a way of life which kills wildlife and human life alike, then maybe that's where we are too.

Hoping we can run away. When there's a job to be done, however small, however insignificant that might be. It might be just a word in the right place. But it's ours to speak it.

Maybe we're so nervously polite that we don't dare to bother our neighbour with our surely unreasonable and apparently costly suggestions. Friends, the worm has been and gone. That old bush has been well nibbled. There's no further shelter. Grasp the nettle.

Wake up. Reach out. Encourage, be good neighbours, and remember, with love, there's nothing too holy to be green.

As followers of Christ, we are exempt from none of the responses we might propose or endorse to the nature and climate crises, though some fellow creatures may benefit far more than we do from our care for the Earth.

Globally, some nations, especially those we've never considered our equal, would benefit financially if 'loss and damage' ever became a reality.

What do we believe about who owns what, and who has the right to decide?

Can we live with that? Because life itself is at stake from the business as usual of our Global North culture.

A way of life full of things we could do without. And let go of. We are a people who, as, COVID taught us, like Nineveh, *can* rapidly make changes when an emergency is grasped.

Of course this is complicated by the internal layers of injustice, which satanically click in as soon as change is called for.

The rich berate the poor to tighten their belts.

Or those in places where infant mortality is high, to have fewer children.

Women come under greater pressure to fill the gaps, rather than realising the equality God gives.

The employed protest at provisions for those without a livelihood.

And motorists are outraged at any sense polluters might pay at the pump.

Are you a motorist? But if so, do you, the minute you get behind that wheel, cease to be a living breathing child of the Earth?

And in all of this, the privileged never stop handing over the burden of change to the disadvantaged, instead of helping it to happen, for the good of all.

Yes, yet again, wherever that happens, Satan rubs their hands with glee.

In these, entertaining and intentionally humorous readings, for those with ears to hear, the spirit of Scripture mounts an attack on every variation of entitlement, self-importance and complacency.

Including even those politicians' darlings "**hard-working families**" and those pious folks who find themselves noble bearers of God's Good News of Warning.

In which they're alongside such a diversity of prophetic voices: the great creatures of the sea, to whom God speaks; alongside the green things of the Earth, through whom, if only for a day or so, God gives shelter, and the worms also appointed or even ordained to do God's bidding. What good company we're in.

How hugely we do benefit from the work of those humble life-forms who break down what is dead, to make food and drink and prepare the air for all that lives. And breathes. And therefore praises God.

Are worth more than them?

Are we indeed 'worth more than **many** sparrows ?[Matthew 10:31] - but if so, how many, given that Jesus in that phrase is addressing a crowd of **many** people. The 'exchange rate' of life becomes less self-explanatory and more pointless the more closely we enquire.

Are we worth less? in Christianity, do we really need to quantify such things when we've also got that teaching to hand about the different parts of the body.

The Body of the Earth, as well as of Christ.

The full-day workers in the vineyard, who actually got what they wanted anyway, are the only ones who bring up that sore point about comparative status.

For the one who pays them, a worker is a worker. A creature is a creature, though some may need to embody the image and likeness of God.

We are part not apart from Creation. Nor the only ones with a part to play. And as a friend in the South Pacific remarked recently “We are the biodiversity we destroy or protect.”

Reflecting on these readings, we find “Global” Justice and a sense of individual fairness to be related but not necessarily identical.

To be complementary, and therefore like it or not, not in competition, even though decisions do have to be made, when resources are scarce.

It’s tearing them apart that does the greatest harm. Setting the offer of fossil fuel jobs up against the lives they will cost.

Survivable private irritation is real, and the labourer never **ceases** to be worthy of their hire, but a danger to the lives and livelihoods of fellow creatures overrules this. Differences of degree are real differences.

The convenience of plastic packaging for me could be the death of a seabird, accidentally feeding to to their young. I might complain when it’s no longer available. I might even threaten to vote for a party that lacks the courage and imagination to embrace the just transition which is now so much more than urgent.

But how are we called? - Simply to read the signs.

Where these things may be stern or scary, we look to Jesus rather than Jonah: every hard truth must be offered in love.

Our expectations of being heard will not determine how worthwhile it is to speak.

Whales and worms aside, by far the most ‘miraculous’ aspect for

Jonah, is that, without waiting either for for the impending disaster, or for the religious conversion of the Ninevites, indiscriminate life-saving change for all creatures is embraced, to the disgust of the prophet of doom. The pagans of Nineveh get on with it.

And God ? God loves those who are messing up their world.

Enough to throw them a lifeline they don't understand, but grab hold of anyway.

On this outing, not for the first time, I changed course and plans.

And was happier as a result.

That's the Good News. Get used to it. It will save you.

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Week 5:

Ezekiel 18:1-4, 25-32. Matthew 21:23-32

Too green to be holy?

Location: the gorge of Finnich Glen, near Loch Lomond, with the feature known as 'The Devil's Pulpit'

Over the five years of this post so far, it's emerged as an imperative to encourage churches to appreciate the **personhood and the personalities** of Creation.

On whom we depend, by whom we are governed. And to cherish love **for whom** transforms our outlook, our values, our behaviour. We do not "steward" an object called the Earth, any more than we "steward" our children or our parents. We look for ways of mutual health, justice and wellbeing.

This ministry is therefore not to **give** permission, but to point out that permission **is given** to find joy and hope in recognising the

value of our Christian faith, indeed, as a protective clothing in the storms we increasingly face.

So that we urgently and happily find our place and purpose not only in the communion of Saints but the Communion of Creation so apparent to our ancient British and 'Celtic' churches.

Human beings reason most wholesomely and effectively when our gifts of relationship are fully engaged, both to embrace the good and to stand up courageously to what causes harm.

Throughout this Season of Creation, because I'm obliged to pay close attention to scripture it's been difficult to evade - *as I was brought up and trained to evade* - all mention of the **Adversary**: that Spirit of Opposition to the will of God: who, in 1 Peter 5:8, quoted in traditional night prayers. **"Wanders around seeking whom they many devour"**.

Or perhaps, with satanic economy: seeking whom they may enlist to othering, injustice, prejudice, apathy and other blinkering powers.

I'd love to pretend otherwise, but of the Tempter, Satan, or Devil there are more than 70 mentions in the New Testament alone, to say nothing of a similar character's profound part in the Book of Job, which presents such powerful wisdom both of the reality of suffering, and of humanity: *within*, rather than *above* God's sustaining of Earth's life. ***This is the wisdom of recognising the relationship of the God we claim to worship... with fellow creatures.***

For this, awe and wonder are completely appropriate responses. Even the sort of respectful **fear** that keeps a hillwalker alive on a mountain.

And yes, over and above all that, the recognition of natural powers and forces properly beyond the moral control of humanity.

With whom, at the best of times, we may need to grapple, even without crises caused by injustice.

As Jesus implies in Matthew 18:7 crises may come, anyway but woe to those who go out of their way to bring them on. Or, keep them going.

This devilishly inescapable presence pops up in our defining scriptures - even in Matthew's Lord's prayer - acknowledging a reality subverting God's will, a reality wickedly bringing **such** harm to Creation, as the prophets divined is hard-wired to injustice in every human nation. That one...

Who inveigles themselves into common sense, into the invisible prejudices which fuel racism and other evil discriminations.

Who is seen in the greenwashing of commerce, the incrementalism of supposed environmental progress which strangles our response to the crisis.

Who has remained present within our cultures for centuries. Not least in the the pious demonisation of the goodness of Creation, which was a shameful part of the Witch-hunts of the inquisition in Europe and early Reformation Scotland, along with the wicked enslavement of Africans, the legacy of which our churches are just beginning to acknowledge.

For some this is a belief in a literal being, but for those who won't go that far, we nonetheless recognise in Scripture a reality whom we're wise to take every bit as seriously as we might an enemy in person.

Because it is through people- *and most often well-meaning people-* that they operate.

A character with the aspiration to domination of this world God so loves that God's heir is given, that flesh is shared, that what God loves might not be lost.

That's poetry. Human and divine.

Poetry and story are our most sophisticated responses to such reality: so it's a truly demonic strategy to dangle that reservation "only a story" Real or made up.

This is Finnich Glen otherwise known as the Devil's Pulpit. Like so many places of striking beauty and mystery, including the temples of prehistoric ancestors aligned with the dances of the Sun and the moon have accrued stories promoting suspicion between humanity, the children of Earth, and fellow creatures; even of Earthself.

Of Finnich Glen it's said the Devil would appear by this rock and address their servants as blood-red water flowed around their feet..

For us today, let this be the church built by nature in which. immersively, we contemplate the green and the growing;

Let's consider too how there's a growing **suspicion** precisely of the more desperate voices crying out against who is harmed by what. Of these voices, some are old and worried, some young and scared.

"You'll die of old age, but we'll die of climate change" - is one of the grimmer slogans on the banners of youth movements like Fridays for Future.

In amongst this disabling 'unfairness' a given generation might either feel or own up to, we need to hear God's all-embracing concern:

"Know that all lives are mine; the life of the parent as well as the life of the child..."

The life of all flesh, with whom God makes covenant; of the flesh that John's Gospel says the Word became, and which we share with so much life.

The speed of change and the urgency of action - as well as the value of every change of heart and life - mean that **all generations** are engaged and affected by the challenges of our day.

All are called together to embrace justice at all levels.

Whatever the level of your burden and responsibility, and whatever the particular circumstances of your location, no one is exempt or 'off the hook',

I've encountered those in older generations who do agree that those born after the (initial) damage has been done carry a disproportionate burden of the effects caused within the lifetime of those now looking to retirement, and the several generations preceding. It's borne out by the diagrams from the United Nations.

But the despair of one generation will impact on the next. So let's build hope on truth's foundation.

For unless they **themselves** rise to the challenges of their time and place, the rightfully resentful children of today will find themselves cast as the irresponsible grandparents of tomorrow.

Alternatively, as I've heard folk from indigenous groups put it: tomorrow's valued grandmothers. The encouragers, the mentors, the ones who embody the empowering stories which, like our faith, are spiritual resources for times of trial.

Hence the transformative value of protest, of prayer, of action, of speaking out, in solidarity for young folk, and for those who seem to be powerless, but all the more so when generations come together.

Has your church welcomed, facilitated, blessed or even just prayed for any such events?

Concern for Creation places us alongside those young folks horrified and devoid of hope at what the current pretenders to world rule have achieved.

Concern for Creation encompasses every aspect of discipleship. Witness. Mission. pastoral care, evangelism. For the rest of the lives of everyone in the churches now, and until further notice.

If you're not too old to vote, and not too old to pray, then get on with it, for the sake of your own and future generations, for the sake of the wildlife and nature now under such pressure, and their future too.

And remember: Grandparents, in their youth, likely trashed less and used less plastic than the protesting grandchildren who are already suffering the consequences.

There's a dubious distinction lurking in the challenge which Jesus craftily makes to those authorities eager to undermine the people's trust in John the Baptist: the disconnect between heaven and human initiative.

Between accepted spiritual reality and speculation. Between what is trustworthy and what merits wary suspicion.

Things 'from heaven' carry the double authority both of God, Creator of Earth AND heaven, and of that unified creation's self.

Heaven is sky, is experienced reality. heaven is where the climate lives.

The alarming warning signs of Creation, like John's Way of Justice, will be clear to those reprobates not blinkered by the safety-net of formalised morality. prostitutes, tax collectors - who, would you add?

Thus are judged those of whom it can be said: *even after you have been more than amply informed of the nature and climate crisis, you did not change your minds and trust those who told you*

Finally:

It seems I can't point out too often that sky and heaven - climate and heaven need to be spoken of in the same breath, thought of in the same thought. In our life on Earth, our experience. Like the Body of Christ in Communion, in Eucharist, at Mass: re-membered: bringing together what should not be apart. Like the diversity of our churches which we still present as division rather than difference. I wonder who or what is happy at the disunity of our churches. Fostered of course, by every pious intention that every aspect of church should look and sound the same.

We need each other. Our people need us. And the wildlife needs the active love and goodwill of people.

And neither is anyone excused from care and consideration for fellow creatures - including human ones!

God does not 'cry wolf' : warnings ignored do indeed lead to disaster, and what matters for every generation now living, is the practicalities of current and future action, rather than getting bogged down in what might have been.