

# WEEK 5

## **Exodus 17:1-7**

From the wilderness of Sin the whole congregation of the Israelites journeyed by stages, as the Lord commanded. They camped at Rephidim, but there was no water for the people to drink. The people quarrelled with Moses, and said, "Give us water to drink." Moses said to them, "Why do you quarrel with me? Why do you test the Lord?" But the people thirsted there for water; and the people complained against Moses and said, "Why did you bring us out of Egypt, to kill us and our children and livestock with thirst?" So Moses cried out to the Lord, "What shall I do with this people? They are almost ready to stone me." The Lord said to Moses, "Go on ahead of the people, and take some of the elders of Israel with you; take in your hand the staff with which you struck the Nile, and go. I will be standing there in front of you on the rock at Horeb. Strike the rock, and water will come out of it, so that the people may drink." Moses did so, in the sight of the elders of Israel. He called the place Massah and Meribah, because the Israelites quarrelled and tested the Lord, saying, "Is the Lord among us or not?"

Do you live in Grumbletown..... (Meribah)?

We know that a time of transition lies ahead of us. A scary caveat comes in the story of the prolonged existence of the Hebrews following the Exodus, in the wilderness, of which some could certainly be called 'desert'. A place of absolute and immediate hardship. Where tempers fray. And without hope, the only comfort is in the self-destructive attack - rather than encouragement - of our leaders.

The Exodus story involves the 'extinction' of a generation who weren't prepared for (or in agreement with) the demands of a life renewed as a nation. Our own time is far, far more urgent. 40 more years of the status quo, even with all the measures taken thus far, would be deadly to neighbours, fellow creatures, and maybe ourselves. And we've seen, so many times already, that change is brutal and sudden not conveniently gradual. We need all parts of every generation living to come together in a creative response. And right now, rather than in some unspecified time when other reviews and reorganisations have taken their course.

Under pressure, people lash out, and perhaps we have to be prepared for this as the implications of Net Zero aspirations become clear. Or even the implications of taking our faith seriously as a resource for survival.

What, for your own generation, would equate to that fraudulent security of slavery? What tempts people like you to pull out, go back, give up? Who or what makes environmental prayer, commitment and action look pointless and futile?

Do you really need something as extraordinary as water from a rock? Maybe it's there in front of you.

## **Psalm 78:1-4, 12-16**

Hear my teaching, O my people; incline your ears to the words of my mouth. I will open my mouth in a parable; I will declare the mysteries of ancient times. That which we have heard and known, and what our forefathers have told us, we will not hide from their children. We will recount to generations to come the praiseworthy deeds and the power of the LORD, and the wonderful works he has done. He worked marvels in the sight of their forefathers, in the land of Egypt, in the field of Zoan. He split open the sea and let them pass through; he made the waters stand up like walls. He led them with a cloud by day, and all the night through with a glow of fire. He split the hard rocks in the wilderness and gave them drink as from the great deep. He brought streams out of the cliff, and the waters gushed out like rivers.

### **Charlie Meiklejohn: Worker with Christian Aid Scotland**

As I reflect on this psalm, I visualise the young people who have been at the forefront of the climate justice movement, calling for change, action, and accountability. For many, it is their future wellbeing that they see hanging in the balance, fearing the loss and damage of their homes and livelihoods. For young people in the Global South this isn't a future worry, but a very present one, as drinkable water, arable land, and breathable air all come under threat from pollution and climate chaos.

Indeed, even for older climate activists, a common refrain is that they want to leave a better planet for their children and grandchildren. The psalmist speaks of this same desire to pass something down - learning spiritual wisdom from ancestors and sharing the good deeds of God with the next generation. In our care for creation (or lack thereof) what things have we forgotten 'from of old' that those who will come after us would urge us to remember?

God's 'power and wonders' are often revealed through the natural world. I personally feel closest to God in creation - when I am surrounded by a sweeping landscape, observing how an ecosystem fits together, or marvelling at the tiny details of a plant. Surely we can count caring for God's creation as wisdom worth passing down, honouring and preserving these glimpses of the divine.

The passage goes on to describe God's miracles towards the Israelites in the wilderness. Natural elements like water, wind and fire are used to provide shelter, protection and guidance to people on the move.

Christian Aid's humanitarian work, through our local partners, seeks to provide these same necessities to displaced communities around the world. However, rather than being protected

by the natural world, we're seeing people forced to leave their homes because of climate disasters like floods, droughts, and wildfires. The Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre estimates that since 2008, over 318 million people around the world have been forcibly displaced by floods, windstorms, earthquakes or droughts, 30.7 million of them in 2020 alone. \*

This is why Christian Aid is joining the call for the UK government and devolved nations to contribute to a Loss & Damage fund, because communities living in extreme poverty cannot adapt to extinction. We see this as a living out of our faith and values – because we believe that all people are made in God's image, and have a right to a full and dignified life. This dignity is threatened by the climate emergency and we must all raise our voices to challenge this injustice.

\*[The concept of 'climate refugee' \(europa.eu\)](https://europa.eu)

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As a Christian community, our most powerful and immediately available resource is found in the resources of scripture, praise and tradition. Climate Crisis drives us further in, giving us all the more reason to value this heritage, rather than abandon it: no more than we should abandon a life-raft in a storm! We still have to add, though, the need for honesty and openness - that however we have heard and received and rejoiced in such stories and treasures and wisdom and encouragement, it will have been via human interpretation: thanks to the well-meaning and conscientious employment of an expected idiom. Of course, the climate crisis cannot but transform that, even as electric lighting and amplification have transformed the experience of our worship.

Just as, in times gone by, female saints were “corrected” to male, and indeed, the Greek word for ‘human’ was meticulously rendered as ‘man’ despite available and specific vocabulary for men and women, so too, the widespread Biblical acknowledgement of the value and the personalities of Creation as a participant and agent of God's works has been downplayed. Because that's what we thought we had to do. The benefit of the Sabbath and the Jubilee to wildlife as well as human life has been rendered all but invisible, let alone the all-embracing scope of the Great Commission of the Risen Christ in Matthew 28 and Mark 16: ‘Good News to all Creation’.

So make the most of that divine gift of Scripture and of the legends and tales of our own culture, but as you do so, pray for the inspiration of the Holy Spirit in your presentation and interpretation. Remember, you are part of the story, all the more as those who tell it. And so is suffering Creation.

### **Ezekiel 18:1-4,25-32**

The word of the LORD came to me: What do you mean by repeating this proverb concerning the land of Israel, “The parents have eaten sour grapes, and the children’s teeth are set on edge”? As I live, says the Lord GOD, this proverb shall no more be used by you in Israel. Know that all lives are mine; the life of the parent as well as the life of the child is mine: it is only the person who sins that shall die.

Yet you say, “The way of the Lord is unfair.” Hear now, O house of Israel: Is my way unfair? Is it not your ways that are unfair? When the righteous turn away from their righteousness and commit iniquity, they shall die for it; for the iniquity that they have committed they shall die. Again, when the wicked turn away from the wickedness they have committed and do what is lawful and right, they shall save their life. Because they considered and turned away from all the transgressions that they had committed, they shall surely live; they shall not die. Yet the house of Israel says, “The way of the Lord is unfair.” O house of Israel, are my ways unfair? Is it not your ways that are unfair?

Therefore I will judge you, O house of Israel, all of you according to your ways, says the Lord GOD. Repent and turn from all your transgressions; otherwise iniquity will be your ruin. Cast away from you all the transgressions that you have committed against me, and get yourselves a new heart and a new spirit! Why will you die, O house of Israel? For I have no pleasure in the death of anyone, says the Lord GOD.

Turn, then, and live.



[Sculpture, with poem by Rev Dr Urzula Glienecke, Associate Chaplain, University of Edinburgh.](#)

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“You’ll die of old age, but we’ll die of climate change” - is one of the grimmer and more popular banner slogans you’ll see in protests by youth movements such as Fridays for Future. I’ve encountered those in older generations who - sympathetically - agree with this general point: that generations born after the 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. We know, too, that EcoCongregation Scotland has attracted those who take seriously their responsibility to generations to come.

But maybe it’s not that simple.

It’s tempting just to look back to the choking pollution of the industrial revolution over two hundred years ago, leading into ‘Victoria’s inferno’ as experienced in some of the more intensive industrial sites, but that would be to miss the scale and urgency of our current situation, with vastly greater human populations and levels of industrialisation and use of fossil fuels, let alone the obscene waste of lives and resources in every military conflict: not just Ukraine, but also Iraq.

In amongst the ‘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 is mine.”

The speed of change and the urgency of action - as well as the value of a 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’, but neither is anyone excused from care and consideration for fellow creatures - including human ones!

Finally: there is what feels like a similarity between the increasingly strong and urgent warnings from the UK climate Change Committee and the IPCC ( United Nations climate body) and God’s address to Ezekiel. God does not ‘cry wolf’ : warnings ignored do indeed lead to disaster, and what matters is the practicalities of current and future action, rather than getting bogged down in what might have been.

## **Psalm 25:1-8**

To you, O LORD, I lift up my soul; my God, I put my trust in you; let me not be humiliated, nor let my enemies triumph over me. Let none who look to you be put to shame; let the treacherous be disappointed in their schemes. Show me your ways, O LORD, and teach me your paths.

Lead me in your truth and teach me, for you are the God of my salvation; in you have I trusted all the day long. Remember, O LORD, your compassion and love, for they are from everlasting.

Remember not the sins of my youth and my transgressions; remember me according to your love and for the sake of your goodness, O LORD. Gracious and upright is the LORD; therefore he teaches sinners in his way. He guides the humble in doing right and teaches his way to the lowly.

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More emotional honesty from the Psalmist, squirming not just from the fear of violence, but of the emotional and spiritual annihilation of the 'bad magic' of humiliation. The stuff that drives us over the edge. This time, though, the anguished prayer stops short of the enemies' destruction. The frustration of their "schemes". and the survival of the supplicant. For that, we can still pray with love and with wisdom. And that there's scope for friendship after, as we unite to face common threats.

If you've discredited a movement, and idea, or a group of people, there's no need to follow up with violence: the job is done, and their previous supporters join in, embarrassed at being associated. It's easy and it's fair to join in a precautionary prayer to avoid such discomfort.

People of faith alongside others who care for Creation are still -and maybe increasingly - vulnerable to mocking laughter. And as the psalm clearly acknowledges, our own mistakes and flaws are daggers in the wound. Unaddressed, they fester.

Against the reputational weapons of humiliation, we do have the defence of mutual support, but also honesty about those mistakes. To lie, deny, conceal - or refuse to attend to - inconvenient truth, plays into the hands of those who choose to make themselves our enemies. The juggernaut of momentum from right-wing media against anything which can be labelled 'woke' (and especially care for Creation) has reached the level where, like 'Christian' - and indeed, 'Methodist' and perhaps even 'Queer', it can be a badge of pride. If you're not a happy treehugger, why not?

Once more, take joyful pride in the mature and responsible revisiting of churches historic links with slavery, and be prepared to acknowledge where we've played our part in the fossil fuel story. As well as what we can learn of the strategies of those who delayed abolition, and the light that shines on the delay of transition.

Government officials and church office-holders with a personal history in fossil fuels have the strongest chance, in their well-informed change of heart and mind, to lead the way in transition. We need them: don't write anyone off because of their past.

It was long ago acknowledged, and every wise preacher will concur that "no saint is without sin, no sinner without a future" That includes you. And me. Thank God.

<https://scmpress.hymnsam.co.uk/books/9780334061533/young-woke-and-christian>

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### **Philippians 2:1-13**

If then there is any encouragement in Christ, any consolation from love, any sharing in the Spirit, any compassion and sympathy, make my joy complete: be of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind.

Do nothing from *selfish* ambition or conceit, but in humility regard others as better than yourselves.

Let each of you look not to your own interests, but to the interests of others. Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus, who, though he was *in the form of God*,

did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness. And being *found in human form*, he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death-- even death on a cross. Therefore God also highly exalted him and gave him the name that is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bend, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father. Therefore, my beloved, just as you have always obeyed me, not only in my presence, but much more now in my absence, *work out your own salvation with fear and trembling*; for it is God who is at work in you, enabling you both to will and to work for his good pleasure.

## **Jenny Adams, Minister of Duffus, Spynie & Hopeman Church of Scotland**

Philippians 2:1-13

As summarised in last week's notes, the imprisoned Paul is writing to the Christian community he, Silas and others founded in Philippi (see Acts 16:6-40). As they all face the threats that come with challenging the status quo, seeking God's ways of love instead of power, this passage suggests some of the values associated with following Jesus Christ.

They are to put others' interests first, recognising the status and value of others. The way of love is not about selfish ambition or conceit. One early church expression of Jesus' way is found in the hymn of verses 6-11. That emphasises a way of humility and humanity, except without humanity's tendency to exploit whatever power or status we have in the eyes of others. That way leads to death and seeming failure, which God transforms into new life, hope and greater status in the eyes of God.

In Creation Time, we are reminded that the "others" whose interests we should put first include the rest of creation – life is not just human life, and selfish ambition and exploitation have caused, and are still causing, catastrophic damage to the web of life on Earth. What interests do we consider? Is our life in human form remotely humble within our global context? Do we expect others to accept the consequences of enslavement, exploitation and death – perhaps appeasing ourselves with the idea that their humility and suffering are Christlike - while we protect lifestyles in the global north?

Of course, living out these values is difficult. So, Paul also reminds us how we can be transformed by God at work in us (v13) – we are not left to work this out alone, in our messy humanness. We do so with God - there is "encouragement in Christ," "consolation from love," "sharing in the Spirit," "compassion and sympathy."

God also brings us together with others, "having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind." Through the love of God, we are brought into communities where God is at work – so with God and with others we can find the will and get on with living in God's ways. To transform the Earth, those communities will need to be global, with the interests of those least heard by economic and political systems put first – not always easy for those of us who need to relinquish status, but with the promise of God's loving encouragement.

Are we looking with God's eyes to see the value and interests of the other beings in the web of life? Are we open to God working in us, so that God's compassion and love will gather us with others, encouraged

to follow different ways to live, with God's values? What consequences must that have for the status we seek for ourselves and give to others?

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Go on sinner- make my day!

Whether for nations, cultures or individuals, selfishness is over-rated. Like any lie. It's a haemorrhage in the circulation of goodness. And the life of our planet as a whole is endangered by the outworking of what is now nothing other than consciously damaging injustice. The age of innocent pollution is past. Though we know well what they do, selfishness and gr

But so, to the extent that you might read this passage as the knee-jerk opposite, is bleak and empty selflessness. Simply giving up rather than assessing your place, your contribution, and your reliance on grace. Don't hide from the scary truth

The message here is that our own and only true interests lie in the common good. And we're discovering rather late in the Age, that this is global wisdom. No predator will live long if they eradicate their prey. But, as the Old Testament so frequently attests, injustice sometimes persists long enough for the oppressed to cry out to God.

Christ's way of letting go to let life thrive is already and explicitly the Way Creation Works ***"in heaven and on Earth and under the Earth"***. **None of this is abstract. Creation - which for the purposes of Scripture really does mean this planet and the experiences of their inhabitants - is a unity. Sky and soil** Of course, therefore, the global scope of the crises we're continuing to exacerbate as a Global North culture very reluctant and once more, there's a game or a role to be played. The survival and the thriving not of the strongest, but of the community and the ecosystem whose members are rewarded in finding their place and purpose to the greatest benefit of all.

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## **The Gospel**

### **Matthew 21:23-32**

When Jesus entered the temple, the chief priests and the elders of the people came to him as he was teaching, and said, "By what authority are you doing these things, and who gave you this authority?" Jesus said to them, "I will also ask you one question; if you tell me the answer, then I will also tell you by what authority I do these things. Did the baptism of John come from heaven, or was it of human origin?" And they argued with one another, "If we say, 'From heaven,' he will say to us, 'Why then did you not believe him?' But if we say, 'Of human origin,' we are afraid of the crowd; for all regard John as a prophet." So they answered Jesus, "We do not know." And he said to them, "Neither will I tell you by what authority I am doing these things.



“What do you think? A man had two sons; he went to the first and said, ‘Son, go and work in the vineyard today.’ He answered, ‘I will not’; but later he changed his mind and went. The father went to the second and said the same; and he answered, ‘I go, sir’; but he did not go. Which of the two did the will of his father?” They said, “The first.” Jesus said to them, “Truly I tell you, the tax collectors and the prostitutes are going into the kingdom of God ahead of you. For John came to you in the way of righteousness and you did not believe him, but the tax collectors and the prostitutes believed him; and *even after you saw it, you did not change your minds and believe him.*

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King Charles has just inherited the role of ‘Defender of the Faith’. All well and good, but like those irritating security systems on your computer - protecting it against what you bought it for - and the multi-stage authentication systems for buying a small item online, there comes a point when the project of protection and defence overtakes the life. And where the dubious ethic comes into play, of crossing the red-line standards of integrity and non-violence, transforming the institution into an idol rather than a servant of the Creator God. Thus the entitled who choose corruption, even “with the best intention” find themselves at the back of God’s queue behind those against whom they would warn others. Those in most immediate moral need can be attended to first

This exchange between Jesus and “the chief priests and elders of the people” seems at first glance to be a PR battle. But we also see it in some academic debate. Those beautiful games where the truth is valued less than winning. And where, alarmingly, sincerity and loyalty can be twisted into opposition to truth. It should be tragically familiar.

Hypocrisy is *not* redeemed by being “in the best possible cause”. Energy security is not guaranteed by renewed investment in what needs to end. Nor can short-term economics or offers of jobs in new fossil fuel exploration excuse what the UN Secretary General called such “moral and economic madness” <https://press.un.org/en/2022/sgsm21228.doc.htm> .

Jesus clearly knew, as he entered the Temple, that he would face ‘credible’ opposition and the prime intimidating strategy of the undermining of his credibility. Climate scientists and activists the world over have been subjected to such things for decades - alongside death threats and character assassination. It’s well known that this opposition has been funded by fossil fuel interests. Indigenous activists have been murdered, standing up against the violation of their homelands and forests. <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2022/9/29/over-1700-environmental-activists-killed-in-past-decade-report>

Of course the climate crisis, and positive Christian responses to it - including the joy, the deepening of faith and the strengthening of community that these things can bring - must be a challenge to the particularities of how we spoke and prayed before it was beyond reasonable doubt, as it now is, that we’re in a crisis, and that it was caused by human activity. Today Jesus scrutinises the motives of every delay or evasion of rapid and radical change, both in the economy - and the churches! But he brings us closer - deeper in- to what faith is really for.

It may well be that your favourite hymn prayer or translated passage already does the job of strengthening and encouraging you even as you're aware of what we face for the rest of our lives. But if it holds you back - inspired recycling (not just concessionary tweaking) unlocks the spiritual treasure of resilience and hope that faith should release

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