

WEEK 1

Writers: ECS Staff, Val Brown: Head of Christian Aid Scotland, Fintan Hurley: Scientist and ECS Board member, Revs Justin Taylor and Jenny Adam, Church of Scotland Net Zero too. Jenny is also a Board member.

Exodus 3:1-15

Moses was keeping the flock of his father-in-law Jethro, the priest of Midian; he led his flock **beyond the wilderness**, and came to Horeb, the mountain of God. There the angel of the LORD appeared to him in a flame of fire out of a bush; he looked, and the bush was blazing, yet it was not consumed. Then Moses said, "I must turn aside and look at this great sight, and see why the bush is not burned up." When the LORD saw that he had turned aside to see, God called to him out of the bush, "Moses, Moses!" And he said, "Here I am." Then he said, "Come no closer! Remove the sandals from your feet, for the place on which you are standing is holy ground." He said further, "I am the God of your father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob." And Moses hid his face, for he was afraid to look at God.

Then the LORD said, "I have observed the misery of my people who are in Egypt; I have heard their cry on account of their taskmasters. Indeed, I know their sufferings, and I have come down to deliver them from the Egyptians, and to bring them up out of that land to a good and broad land, a land flowing with milk and honey, to the country of the Canaanites, the Hittites, the Amorites, the Perizzites, the Hivites, and the Jebusites. The cry of the Israelites has now come to me; I have also seen how the Egyptians oppress them. So come, I will send you to Pharaoh to bring my people, the Israelites, out of Egypt."

But Moses said to God, "Who am I that I should go to Pharaoh, and bring the Israelites out of Egypt?" He said, "I will be with you; and this shall be the sign for you that it is I who sent you: when you have brought the people out of Egypt, you shall worship God on this mountain." But Moses said to God, "If I come to the Israelites and say to them, 'The God of your ancestors has sent me to you,' and they ask me, 'What is his name?' what shall I say to them?" God said to Moses, "I AM WHO I AM." He said further, "Thus you shall say to the Israelites, 'I AM has sent me to you.'"

God also said to Moses, "Thus you shall say to the Israelites, 'The LORD, the God of your ancestors, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob, has sent me to you':

This is my name forever,
and this my title for all generations.

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What's the part Creation plays in this story? And having said that, what is and isn't "Creation"? (Hint - who made you?). Why do some hymns and prayers separate 'heaven and earth' as if one or other were not 'Creation'?

The Call of Moses should ring many bells for busy people, shackled to Business-as-Usual, and those who have withdrawn from areas of conflict where they had a part to play, but things got too much, perhaps because they were isolated and alone. But even 'beyond the wilderness' God speaks and calls.

What are our own - or our congregation's - particular gifts for the situations we find ourselves in? What are you good at? How can you use that? Little is made explicit, in the narrative, of Moses' unique qualifications as a bridge between the cultures of oppressor and oppressed, but do we really need to be told in so many words that he's the one for the job? Perhaps. Even God sometimes has to state the obvious.

We could ask: what if Moses had been a touch more conscientious? "Never mind that bush - I've got the sheep to take care of!" How blinkered and constrained are we by daily tasks and duties - oblivious of the warning signs and wonders around us. Apparent conflicts of obligation need further attention.

We are told that no "Voice" was heard, no words pronounced *until* it was clear that Moses had taken some notice. Maybe we shut it out until we feel either we have 'permission' or we're so far away ("beyond the wilderness") that we're free to respond. The God of the Exodus might well be almighty, but resolutely refuses to perform every detail of the response to injustice and human suffering without human involvement. Liberation is God's gift, but not given without participation.

We note that the bush, though not consumed, is blazing. It's not "fireproof", and indeed, is on that borderline of distress where intervention might make a difference; it seems its' "too late" though the curiosity, the wonder, is that contrary to expectations, it's not -yet- burned up.

In that sense, the Bush is a sign of hope beyond hope. A sign for us as the key - and frightening - threshold of 1.5 degrees of Global Warming edges rather closer this year and next with regular global climate fluctuations.

The medium of God's communication is a living thing in distress: Creation is God's mouthpiece, and indeed, although Moses is ordered to 'come no closer', nonetheless, the holiness of the Earth is respected in the removal of protective layers from his feet, is to closer, contact with the holiness of the Earth.

We might ask what makes a particular spot "holier" than any other? Simply that holiness happens - or is recognised - wherever God is encountered?

And the antidote to injustice? - To live in a fruitful relationship with a God-given homeland. With our Common Home, our shared habitat: God's Earth.

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Psalm 105:1-6, 23-26, 45c

1 Give thanks to the LORD and call upon his Name; make known his deeds among the peoples. Sing to him, sing praises to him, and speak of **all his marvellous works**. Glory in his holy Name; let the hearts of those who seek the LORD rejoice. Search for the LORD and his strength; continually **seek his face**. Remember the marvels he has done, his wonders and the judgments of his mouth, O offspring of Abraham his servant, O children of Jacob his chosen. Israel came into Egypt, and Jacob became a sojourner in the land of Ham. The LORD made his people exceedingly fruitful; he made them stronger than their enemies; Whose heart he turned, so that they hated his people, and dealt unjustly with his servants. He sent Moses his servant, and Aaron whom he had chosen. ... Hallelujah!

Reflection: Val Brown, Head of Christian Aid Scotland

When I read this passage I think of provision. God the creator giving people what they need, and that need being the most basic of all human needs: freedom, water and food. Much of the world is still crying out for those basic needs, while others accumulate possessions that are not only unnecessary, but are often harmful both to mental well-being and the life of the planet. There are plenty of websites now dedicated to encouraging people to live simply, which goes well beyond merely decluttering your home, cathartic as that can be. The encouragement is to focus on what matters most to you, and to rid yourself of the distractions which add little value. One of the things that I enjoy, is my two cups of (decaf) coffee a day – especially if I can sit in the garden and get some sun on my face while I drink my post lunch cuppa. I seem to enjoy it less if I drink it while sitting at my laptop. But the pleasure I get from that cup of coffee is under threat, as the farming communities producing coffee beans struggle with the impacts of climate change.

Honduras is one of the countries that is experiencing the extremes of climate change - prolonged periods of hot, dry weather that have caused acute water shortages, and more intense storms that wreak havoc and bring flooding. This combination has had a dreadful effect on those who grow coffee for a living. Coffee needs to grow in very specific conditions so the plant doesn't develop 'leaf rust' and to preserve the taste of the bean. These are really challenging conditions for coffee growers, and people have to be able to diversify their crops – often growing cocoa instead as it is slightly more resilient to hotter weather. But equally, people need to have an alternative source of income to ensure that when the next climate event happens, they'll not lose everything. Christian Aid partners have been supporting women in Honduras to install solar energy as a means of making a good living. Not only does this provide employment, but it provides people with clean and cost effective electricity. Many people were unable to access electricity and were burning wood for light and heat, which not only contributes to deforestation, but means people are breathing in smoke all the time. This project has also served to challenge gender norms, as the women take to the roofs to install panels for people.

The project has also enabled coffee farmers to install solar driers to dry their beans, so they can command a better price for them when they sell. Previously they had been dried on the ground but that impacted the taste and so the solar drier increases the value of the crop. The farmers have also been supported to plant timber and fruit trees to prevent soil erosion and to provide some shade for the coffee plants.

This work is vital to supporting people to stay on their land and make it viable, however the next storm will damage the crop again and people's yield will go down which will have an impact upon their ability to provide for their families.

It is these kind of climate related losses and damages that Christian Aid is now campaigning on – as, despite the symbolic contribution from the Scottish Government, there is no international fund to support people and communities when devastating climate incidents happen. The last couple of COP meetings have accepted the fact that a loss and damage fund is necessary and the question now is, how much does each country need to pay into it and how do people access it. Those questions are currently being worked on by a transition committee, however each government will need to work out how to raise the revenue needed. Christian Aid is calling for the polluter pays principle to be adhered to, asking for those who have done the most to contribute to climate change to pay the most towards supporting people to get back on their feet when disaster strikes. The need for a loss and damage fund is an expression of a systemic failure to steward our earth well enough. It is likely that the UK government will need to find somewhere in the region of \$15billion per year (3.5% of the global fund) and Christian Aid is keen that this money is raised in a way that doesn't put more pressure on the vulnerable.

It comes back to provision – ensuring that each person has enough to live with freedom and dignity. To know where their meal is coming from and to trust that the earth and the waters will be able to provide. When the climate crisis threatens that, then we need to act. We are called to be in a relationship with God and with each other, to be accountable to each other. In a climate crisis that means we need to ensure that the resources of the earth are protected and shared equitably.

Jeremiah 15:15-21

O LORD, you know; remember me and visit me, and bring down retribution for me on my persecutors. In your forbearance do not take me away; know that *on your account* I suffer insult. Your words were found, and I ate them, and your words became to me a joy and the delight of my heart; for I am called by your name, O LORD, God of hosts. I did not sit in the company of merrymakers, nor did I rejoice; under the weight of your hand I sat alone, for you had filled me with indignation. Why is my pain unceasing, my wound incurable, refusing to be healed? Truly, you are to me like a deceitful brook, like waters that fail.

Therefore, thus says the LORD: If you turn back, I will take you back, and you shall stand before me. If you utter what is precious, and not what is worthless, you shall serve as my mouth. It is *they who will turn to you*, not you who will turn to them.

And I will make you to this people a fortified wall of bronze; they will fight against you, but they shall not prevail over you, for I am with you to save you and deliver you, says the LORD. I will deliver you out of the hand of the wicked, and redeem you from the grasp of the ruthless.

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A sermon (on rice-paper,) devoured in full view of the congregation, might be a good opening action! or maybe at the end of the sermon slot, so it doesn't dry out your mouth!

Jeremiah is remarkable - and valuable - for the uncensored honesty that creeps even into the cherry-picked passages of the Lectionary. He suffers the cost of being the bearer God's loving Word, - but not in silence!

This outburst is emotionally understandable, but not in the spirit of Christ who insisted on prayer for enemies. Though of course, defeat of enemies can bring to an end the harm we do, which is the aim of our involvement even in non-violent conflict. But how do you feel, what do you want to do to those who go out of their way to hurt and humiliate you? Why shouldn't God, for once, be seen to side with those who struggle to *do* God's will? So how would you think the Earth feel about our continued, and fully conscious exploitation? Is it out of order for the Earth to see the increase in extreme weather events etc in the same vein as Jeremiah's longing for retribution? - and yet those who suffer first and worst are seldom those whose unjust and inequitable actions are now seen to cause these changes. That can't be just. Blame is a blunderbuss, and the internal injustices even of the most affluent and polluting societies should dictate caution. As with the tendency to whinge about population whilst ignoring the association of poverty and high rates both of birth and infant mortality, it's inconsistent simply to hold responsible affluent societies, whilst ignoring those within them who also suffer injustice.

And then: *Eating* Words - perhaps when we can't *understand* them, or even when there's a different way of metabolising and integrating God's justice into our lives than just reading and doing nothing more. There are different kinds of blessing and of nourishment. Do we always have to win there and then when 'taking it to the Lord in Prayer'? I'd love to get everything sewn up in the ten or fifteen minutes of a sermon! - maybe I should learn to eat my *own* words..... it might be a nourishing experience!

369 words

Psalm 26:1-8

1 Give judgment *for me*, O LORD, for I have lived with integrity; I have trusted in the Lord and have not faltered. Test me, O LORD, and try me; examine my heart and my mind. For your love is before my eyes; I have walked faithfully with you. I have not sat with the worthless, nor do I consort with the deceitful. I have hated the company of evildoers; I will not sit down with the wicked. I will wash my hands in innocence, O LORD, that I may go in procession round your altar, Singing aloud a song of thanksgiving and recounting all your wonderful deeds. LORD, I love the house in which you dwell and the place where your glory abides.

Video Conversation reflection:

Denial, hypocrisy..... and love

by Rev Justin Taylor (CofS Guernsey) & Rev Jenny Adams
(Duffus, Spynie & Hopeman C of S.)

Downloadable video: <https://vimeo.com/850665969>

OR QR Code: opposite



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If our first first impression is of repellent smug wheedling, then let's get over it.

Our aspirations to integrity are fed by our trust in God, and though some strands of Christianity -*rather than the culture in which this poem arose* - have majored on the 'total depravity' of humanity, (that "all alike have sinned") nonetheless, the possibility of a life aspiring to justice is seldom lost sight of, and indeed, much of Jesus' own teaching takes the form of moral exhortation and warnings at the consequences of hypocrisy. Would Jesus **only** ask what is impossible?

But what if we do find some encouragement, hope, goodness beyond anything we think we've earned? is it time to celebrate, rejoice, or pretend we haven't benefitted from choosing what is loving? Do good stuff and shout about it! [cf Matthew 5:16]

The Psalmist needs help - but they're honest enough not to ask for it under any false pretences. Nonetheless, in Christianity, there's room for God's grace, which mobilises and enlists all the rest of us who haven't yet managed a life of complete green integrity. The imperfect are needed. Now.

The URC Synod of Scotland decided to pursue 'aspirations' rather than targets: directions of travel which might conceivably prove too demanding to achieve immediately, but in which any progress can be an encouragement and cause of thanks to God. Mainstream orthodox Christian teaching reminds us firmly that we are dependent on grace. Our good works are offerings as tokens of our participation in God's great work of justice and healing. Faith without them is 'dead', but their value is thrown away if achievement leads us to look down on others, rather than encourage them. [cf James 2:14-16]

<https://www.urcscotland.org.uk/about/synod-aspirations/>

292 words

Romans 12:9-21

Let love be genuine; hate what is evil, hold fast to what is good; love one another with mutual affection; outdo one another in showing honour. Do not lag in zeal, be ardent in spirit, serve the Lord. Rejoice in hope, be patient in suffering, persevere in prayer. Contribute to the needs of the saints; extend hospitality to strangers.

Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse them. Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep. Live in harmony with one another; do not be haughty, but associate with the lowly; do not claim to be wiser than you are. Do not repay anyone evil for evil, but take thought for what is noble in the sight of all. If it is possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all. Beloved, never avenge yourselves, but leave room for the wrath of God; for it is written, "Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord." No, "if your enemies are hungry, feed them; if they are thirsty, give them something to drink; for by doing this you will heap burning coals on their heads." Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.

Fintan Hurley - ECS Board Member and Scientist

Some thoughts on reading Romans 12: 9-21

My first thought when I read it was: "Paul, are you serious?"

Like, this stuff sounds great, it's the kind of thing we can admire, but *do you actually expect us to live this way?*

It would maybe work okay if *everybody* lived like that. BUT they don't and I mean, come on, we live in the real world, and it can get nasty. Oppression is baked in. And if we live like Paul says, we're going to get *really* done over. Like, crucified at an early age, say 33 or thereabouts. And none of us wants that kind of thing, do we?

Paul isn't well known as a practical joker, so we're best to assume that he *does* intend us to take this seriously and to live it out, every day. So what does that imply for us?

I think our only chance is to live it together. I don't mean that there's 'safety in numbers'. I mean that we need the fellowship and support of others trying to do much the same thing, despite how impossible it seems. Some half-formed thoughts there about the Holy Spirit; or "Where two or three are gathered together in my name..."

When I looked at the detail, there's so much in it. But the piece that stood out for me was "do not be haughty, but associate with the lowly; do not claim to be wiser than you are".

The first part reminds me of something our parish priest, Fr. Jock Dalrymple, said one Sunday at Mass in St. Ninians in Edinburgh in the 1980s: "The Kingdom is about sharing, not giving".

Giving can be impersonal, it can leave you untouched - a bit less well off maybe, but basically unchanged. “Associating with the lowly” is about making relationships, not keeping your distance; sharing, not giving. And that doesn’t just change the ‘objective’ situation; it changes *us*.

A strong version of it was and is “the option for the poor” of the Latin American churches. We don’t hear much about that any more. But that doesn’t mean it was a mistake. I think it means it was difficult.

There are echoes of it today in the worldwide climate movement, both secular and faith-based - we need to listen to “the cry of the earth and the cry of the poor”, the marginalised, indigenous people, women, young people, people of the global South.

And “do not claim to be wiser than you are”!. What a challenge to the arrogance of white Western “advanced” “civilisations”. We are masters of the Universe - the gender bit is informative - we think we can bend it to our will. And convince ourselves and one another that we don’t need fundamental change, we don’t need conversion, we just need the next technological fix.

Those ideas are running out of road. I love science, but I do not love the arrogance of science. “Associate with the lowly; do not claim to be wiser than you are”.

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A lot of ‘apple pie’ in this passage - a life lived well *is* well lived- but also a few traps which we need to step in, rather than skip over.

Yes, there is such a thing as Christian competitiveness. Don’t shy away from it. And Christian craftiness, appropriate boastfulness (of what God has done) . As with most gifts it’s what you do with it, and whom it benefits. As a northern European visitor, I once found the competitive hospitality of Samoan village churches overwhelming. I had something to learn: not how to be Samoan, but to think of what I nonetheless would have to offer a guest or a stranger.

The awards scheme of EcoCongregation Scotland does inevitably set some targets, and some get further than others, and will helpfully nudge congregations towards net-zero aspirations, but the encouragement given in Romans 12 never suggests doing others down or trampling on the weak.

We might recall the saying dubiously attributed to Nelson Mandela, who may also have quoted it “There is no passion to be found playing small - in settling for a life that is less than the one you are capable of living.”

When your church makes progress with a net-zero programme, share the credit and the benefits , but don’t minimise the achievement, which adds to that of your wider community. We should avoid the toxicity of arrogance, and seek the graciousness of being a church of whom our society and local community can be - rightly - proud. Though the values of that society may also need loving challenge and attention.. Not least any remnants of vengefulness.

266 words

Matthew 16:21-28

Jesus began to show his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and undergo great suffering at the hands of the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and on the third day be raised. And Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him, saying, "God forbid it, Lord! This must never happen to you." But he turned and said to Peter, "Get behind me, Satan! You are a stumbling block to me; for you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things." Then Jesus told his disciples, "If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it. For what will it profit them if they gain the whole world but forfeit their life? Or what will they give in return for their life? "For the Son of Man is to come with his angels in the glory of his Father, and then he will repay everyone for what has been done. Truly I tell you, there are some standing here who will not taste death before they see the Son of Man coming in his kingdom."

A caution: The idiom: the language chosen in some translations can add alarm -or even harm -to this most scarifying presentation of discipleship. To 'deny' the self God gave you is not a healthy option, either spiritually or for mental health. But to renounce 'self' as a priority [cf REB] can be liberating, freeing us to be a blessing to others and ourselves.

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The Flying Scotsman uses tons of dirty coal on each outing and the Red Arrows still flaunt pollution to the cheers of eager crowds. I've suggested we count the footprint of casual air travel in dead puffins rather than meaningless kilos of carbon. Do we see something in Peter of that "surely you can't mean" that we reserve for killjoys? But which 'joys' of our current way of life are not fatal to everything our life depends on? What joys can be liberated by facing now the changes which become more difficult with postponement?

Jesus' speech of the prospect of the cross insists that such things are far from trivial.

In a prayer [<https://vimeo.com/812224220>] I've called 'greenwashing' 'satanic'. I'm not photoshopping horns on those I disagree with, nor is Peter seen by Jesus as some sort of demon. But - and understandably - Peter just does not 'get' the seriousness of the path Jesus is called to, and thus the cost of any discouragement -even well-meaning- of that transition. How many -kindly, prudent - reasons have you heard - even within your congregation - to postpone action, investment, or even the slightest adjustments to worship, prayer, language and liturgy in those times and places which most define 'church' for you? Not just in the *Season of Creation/Creation Time*, but Harvest, Advent Christmas Lent Easter Ascension, Pentecost - and **this** Sunday! Peter discovers here that his friend Jesus is someone just a bit different from what he had understood. Do we want our friendship with Christ to survive such a realisation?

What is the world, or the church, we're trying to 'gain' or 'preserve' by our current attitudes and lifestyles? Whom do we trust to hold our hand? And whom can we encourage to give us leadership for Just Transition and care of Creation, by supporting them in that difficult task?

<https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2018/jun/20/a-world-without-puffins-the-uncertain-fate-of-the-much-loved-seabirds>

380 words