

WEEK 4

Exodus 16:2-15

The whole congregation of the Israelites complained against Moses and Aaron in the wilderness. The Israelites said to them, “If only we had died by the hand of the LORD in the land of Egypt, when we sat by the fleshpots and ate our fill of bread; for you have brought us out into this wilderness to kill this whole assembly with hunger.”

Then the LORD said to Moses, “I am going to rain bread from heaven for you, and each day the people shall go out and gather enough for that day. **In that way I will test them**, whether they will follow my instruction or not. On the sixth day, when they prepare what they bring in, it will be twice as much as they gather on other days.” So Moses and Aaron said to all the Israelites, “In the evening you shall know that it was the LORD who brought you out of the land of Egypt, and in the morning you shall see the glory of the LORD, because he has heard your complaining against the LORD. For what are we, that you complain against us?” And Moses said, “When the LORD gives you meat to eat in the evening and your fill of bread in the morning, because the LORD has heard the complaining that you utter against him—what are we? Your complaining is not against us but against the LORD.”

Then Moses said to Aaron, “Say to the whole congregation of the Israelites, ‘Draw near to the LORD, for he has heard your complaining.’” And as Aaron spoke to the whole congregation of the Israelites, they looked toward the wilderness, and the glory of the LORD appeared in the cloud. The LORD spoke to Moses and said, “I have heard the complaining of the Israelites; say to them, ‘At twilight you shall eat meat, and in the morning you shall have your fill of bread; then you shall know that I am the LORD your God.’”

In the evening quails came up and covered the camp; and in the morning there was a layer of dew around the camp. When the layer of dew lifted, there on the surface of the wilderness was a fine flaky substance, as fine as frost on the ground. When the Israelites saw it, they said to one another, “What is it?” For they did not know what it was. Moses said to them, “It is the bread that the LORD has given you to eat.

[ECS STAFF: The Fleshpots Test....](#)

Sometimes it seems we really would rather put up with pain and injustice, rather than do something about it. But what is the moral tipping-point? Ans what’s the ‘budget of irritation’ beyond which the most heartfelt activism will fall on deaf ears?

For a story of about three thousand years ago, the wilderness experience of transition offers amazing solidarity - but no answers - for anyone struggling to convey the urgency of transition and the possibility that having left the Fleshpots of Fossil Fuels, there might be a better, healthier, more just way of life somewhere beyond the 'meanwhile'.

Of course it's not, nor does it need to be, a direct parallel. Slavery might continue indefinitely, as the Pharaohs seemed to have succeeded in decapitating any semblance of leadership from the Hebrew workers, though the exacerbating factor was a 'hostile environment' campaign of additional repression which pushed the everyday moaning which had continued even through the attempt to murder male babies, up a notch to 'crying out to God'

The story also offers insight into the burdens of leadership: Moses was following a calling rather than pursuing a selfish interest, hugely hampered by the practical difficulty of communicating to his community even the basic details of what that involves. Pray for your leaders every day, when they are the 'meat in the sandwich' between circumstance and the wilful ignorance of their people.

These people whom suspiciously outcast Egyptian brat Moses is trying to lead, have for generations been deprived of risk and self-determination, knowing nothing but the brutal infantilisation and abusive dependency of slavery. Then they found themselves in the desert wilderness, a "wilderness of snakes and scorpions and hostile tribes," having been taken there out of the certainty of slavery by an unfamiliar ancestral God.

Freedom, in the sense of somewhere to settle down, was promised, but not yet particularly on their horizon. Not part of their 'today'. They were in "limbo", not having learned the dance. And so, to comfort themselves, and perhaps with irritation combined with common sense, they harked back, in a somewhat ridiculous way, to the times of the very same slavery from which their cry had come to God in the first place.

Psalm 105:1-6, 37-45

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. He led out his people with silver and gold; in all their tribes there was not one that stumbled. Egypt was glad of their going, because they were afraid of them. He spread out a cloud for a covering and a fire to give light in the night season. They asked, and quails appeared, and **he satisfied them** with bread from heaven. He opened the rock, and water flowed, so the river ran in the dry places. For God remembered his holy word and Abraham his servant. So he led forth his people with gladness, his chosen with shouts of joy. He gave his people the lands of the nations, and they took the fruit of others' toil, That they might keep his statutes and observe his laws. Hallelujah!

See week 1 for a different selection of verses from this Psalm. This note is likewise a slightly different 'spin'

The "Linked-In" spin on the Exodus... all positive.....

It's a comforting, life-saving, edifying (*and to the privileged, irritating*) habit of oppressed people, or those conscious of their own material poverty, defiantly to claim and reclaim what God has done **for them**. God has a "face" which can be sought: a relationship to cultivate.

It builds the self-esteem, related to hope, which is needed to confront despair, so that chances for liberation are not passed by. And it's defiant: 'how dare those we have oppressed not be destroyed by it!' As COP 28 comes into view, we note that whatever the failings of the global gatherings on the climate crisis, those which (unlike G&, G20) include the voices of the smaller, poorer "nations" are more likely to make some progress. The United Nations resolution on the legal protection of the oceans was sponsored by the tiny nation of Vanuatu. <https://news.un.org/en/story/2023/03/1135142>

This psalm is one of many powerful linkages of God as Creator - and Sustainer - with the *creation of justice*. Is 'sustainable' also always 'just'? If not, why not? Should that be literally unthinkable?

From verse 41, the reference to the wonderful transformation of dry landscape by water also refers back to Exodus 16. What events in the history of your own community define your identity as a people who express their love for God in their care for Creation, for neighbours, for fellow creatures?

Jonah 3:10-4:11

When God saw what the people of Nineveh did, how they turned from their evil ways, God changed his mind about the calamity that he had said he would bring upon them; and he did not do it.

But this was very displeasing to Jonah, and he became angry. He prayed to the LORD and said, "O LORD! Is not this what I said while I was still in my own country? That is why I fled to Tarshish at the beginning; for I knew that you are a gracious God and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love, and ready to relent from punishing. And now, O LORD, please take my life from me, for it is better for me to die than to live." And the LORD said, "Is it right for you to be angry?" Then Jonah went out of the city and sat down east of the city, and made a booth for himself there. He sat under it in the shade, waiting to see what would become of the city.

The LORD God appointed a bush, and made it come up over Jonah, to give shade over his head, to save him from his discomfort; so Jonah was very happy about the bush. But when dawn came up the next day, God appointed a worm that attacked the bush, so that it withered. When the sun rose, God prepared a sultry east wind, and the sun beat down on the head of Jonah so that he was faint and asked that he might die. He said, "It is better for me to die than to live."

But God said to Jonah, "Is it right for you to be angry about the bush?" And he said, "Yes, angry enough to die." Then the LORD said, "You are concerned about the bush, for which you did not labor and which you did not grow; it came into being in a night and perished in a night. And

should I not be concerned about Nineveh, that great city, in which there are more than a hundred and twenty thousand persons who do not know their right hand from their left, and also many animals?”

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This is a wonderful, subversive, and humorous story, and one in which the entertainment potential (whales, worms, and repentant animals) should be shamelessly exploited, rather than held respectfully in check. It's really worthwhile briefly summarising the rest of the Jonah story, not taking for granted that everyone even knows the outline.

The multi-faith environment of the story is also useful for us in a culture in which Christianity does not dominate, though our faith has vital things to say, as bearers of God's word of love for all. Where these things may be stern or scary, we need look to Jesus rather than Jonah: every hard truth must be offered in love. Our expectations of being heard do not determine how worthwhile it is to speak.

Whales and worms aside, by far the most 'miraculous' aspect is that, without waiting either 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.

God loves those who are messing up their world. Enough to throw them a lifeline they don't understand, but grab hold of anyway.

The Book of Jonah speaks powerfully to the institutional inertia of our churches and governments in the face of continuing climate emergency, and indeed, following the 'sackcloth and ashes' of lockdown.

The humblest creation is on side with God, who 'ordains' the worm to do its stuff and deprive Jonah's arrogant despair of its shelter.

The God presented in the Book of Jonah presides over a world in which disasters are both possible and avoidable. This is no peevish tyrant, nor should we see any such thing in 'natural' disasters. Saving life - including animal life - is more vital than getting things right, or even than right belief.

So every suggested, large, or small, response of churches to climate and environmental emergency is for the good of all, seeking the will of God, which is also for the health of beloved Creation, in which our species has never played a neutral role.

And if, for now we have been Jonahs, well, the patient but firm nudging of God, for a prophet who has done their job, but can't cope with the outcome - this is for us!

386 WORDS

Roberta Ritson: completing training for URC ministry at the URC Scottish College

A SONG WITH QUESTIONS, LOOKING AT THEMES IN THE BOOK OF JONAH

The folk tune 'Early one morning' may be suitable

Jonah lay sound asleep
While breakers lashed the sturdy ship,

Wrecking the confidence
of seasoned sailor folk.
"Why are we destined so?
What, Jonah, might you know?"
"I was called to prophesy and gladly take God's yoke."

Jonah looked overboard,
He'd run away, ignored the Word.
Storms brewed within his heart -
Such deep remorse and rue.
"Don't dodge the call divine,
Pray, let your truth now shine,
Change your ways, commit your days
As God requires of you."

Jonah was swallowed whole -
He hurtled like a ton of coal
Down into the belly
of a most gi-normous fish.
Weeds danced around his head
Words rose, as from the dead:
"Bring me to your Presence, Lord",
Came Jonah's trembling wish.

Jonah, he got spewed out;
For Nineveh he made, no doubt.
A hundred thousand people now
Should heed what he would say.
Each one from kerl to king
U-turned from evil's cling.
Ev'ry creature, ev'ry human
chose the better Way.

Jonah was fuming cross,
Why had the city been let off?
He sulked about,
Redundant now, as
people chose what's right!
Lay down such vanity,
God wants humility.
A task fulfilled is ample
And such change of heart shows might.

Accompanying questions and devotions:

- In what ways do we continue to sleepwalk (individually and collectively)?
- Are you aware of bypassing the urgency and 'taking trips to Tarshish'?
- Given that we all find ourselves on 'a dangerous ship' who currently bears the worst suffering? Do we support them meaningfully?
- How might we best give time, resources, prayer and energy to such a predicament? Are we doing what God requires?

- How can we join with others, sharing our particular faith perspectives and listening to them so that voices are joined up and amplified?
- How can we transform our own remorse into constructive, vibrant and inspirational living?
- Can we celebrate simpler life styles, interconnection and shared responsibility in ways that attract and do not repel?
- Where is God in these decisions? (Do we pray, avoiding the temptation of 'going it alone'?)
- How do we sustain connection to God when surrounded by darkness and despair? A short prayer might be 'knit me to thyself'.
- Is it easier to face up to large scale calamity than to admit our personal errors and faithlessness?
- When there's a genuine change of heart why ever not share God's delight?
- We heard how God's mind changed. It is the nature of God to be merciful, gracious, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love. Do we recall this frequently? Might we adopt these characteristics ourselves?

"Let mercy, grace, forbearance and steadfast love temper our clarity."

Psalm 145:1-8

I will exalt you, O God my King, and bless your Name for ever and ever. Every day will I bless you and praise your Name for ever and ever. Great is the LORD and greatly to be praised; there is no end to his greatness. One generation shall praise your works to another and shall declare your power. I will ponder the glorious splendour of your majesty and all your marvellous works. They shall speak of the might of your wondrous acts, and I will tell of your greatness. They shall publish the remembrance of your great goodness; they shall sing of your righteous deeds. The LORD is gracious and full of compassion, slow to anger and of great kindness.

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Whilst stocking up on the awe and wonder of Creation, we also learn that the 'blame game' is not the choice of those who would ingratiate themselves with God, whose majesty is made all the more evident by his neglect of knee-jerk retributive fervour, for God is "slow to anger", and this very slowness is a sign of strength.

In an age of climate emergency, and following on from the virus crisis, finding a culprit and taking it out on them should be one of the many luxuries we set aside.

God is referred to as 'King', which, like 'father' brings some problems, given the miserable Old Testament experience of human 'kings like those of other nations'. [Samuel Chapter 8]. Given Jesus' critique of 'the rulers of the gentiles' [Mark 10:42, Matthew 20:25] should we consider whether this form of address is one which is worthy only for God? And what might be the implications for what human rulers should aspire to live up to? The absolute dictators of Europe culture in recent centuries are in any case, a travesty of the accountable, 'shepherding' ideal of biblical kingship.

The singer of the psalm clearly derives great personal benefit from the regularity of the praise they offer. They are not diminished by acknowledging God's greatness, indeed the contrary seems to be the case. Claiming our place and purpose, ourselves, as word and acts of God, grants dignity.

This is enhanced as they join in the chorus of Creation (marvellous works themselves) and God's action for justice. It is noted that this is worthy not only of led and immediate praise, but also of pondering, thought, discernment.

Over and above the thrill of the beautiful words, how is their power and the benefit they bring to sink in and do its work on our lives?

God is 'big enough' to be compassionate. Jesus says we can be likewise. (Luke 6:36). The multi-generational scope of the Psalm begs the question of our responsibility for those generations to come: will we have been seen to praise God in our care of Creation?

In the 600 congregations of EcoCongregation Scotland as a movement, the love of children and grandchildren has been a powerful motivator for change of lifestyle and outlook, for speaking out, and indeed, for whatever action lies within our power to care. This comes always with global justice and concern for human poverty, never separate from the Creation of which we are part.

415 WORDS

Philippians 1:21-30

To me, living is Christ and dying is gain. If I am to live in the flesh, that means fruitful labor for me; and I do not know which I prefer. I am hard pressed between the two: my desire is to depart and be with Christ, for that is far better; but to remain in the flesh is more necessary for you. Since I am convinced of this, I know that I will remain and continue with all of you for your progress and joy in faith, so that I may share abundantly in your boasting in Christ Jesus when I come to you again.

Only, live your life in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ, so that, whether I come and see you or am absent and hear about you, I will know that you are standing firm in one spirit, striving side by side with one mind for the faith of the gospel, and are in no way intimidated by your opponents. For them this is evidence of their destruction, but of your salvation. And this is God's doing. For he has graciously granted you the privilege not only of believing in Christ, but of suffering for him as well-- since you are having the same struggle that you saw I had and now hear that I still have.

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

Paul is writing from imprisonment, to the Christian community he, Silas and others founded in Philippi. Their first visit is described in Acts 16:6-40, including the public arrest, beating and imprisonment of Paul and Silas, after freeing an enslaved girl was seen as disruptive of the status quo. Despite the danger of following Jesus Christ, Lydia, Euodia, Syntyche and other women (4:2) have continued to gather as a Christian community.

This is therefore communication between communities facing life-threatening situations, in a political context that doesn't welcome challenge to exploitation for power and wealth (e.g., Acts 16:16-21). That resonates with the world just now. So many communities are challenging how things are because they are seeing the consequences of exploitation in the climate emergency, habitat destruction, pollution of land, water and air, and other threats to life and Earth. Many speaking up are from faith communities, who recognise the value and belovedness of what is being exploited. Many are women.

However, in verses 21-26 Paul acknowledges how difficult it is continuing to live like this. It is labour to keep working for others, bringing suffering for him and the Christians in Philippi. If he considered his own preference, Paul would choose to depart this life to be with Christ. However, Paul makes it clear that his ease is not the deciding factor – he considers what “is more necessary for you.” Therefore, he must live and “continue with all of you.”

Even for Paul, who looks forward to death, living matters. As Christian Aid say, “We believe in life before death” - this life matters, this Earth matters, for the sake of all creation together. Living well, “in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ,” includes standing firm with others, “striving side by side with one mind” for God’s ways (v27). This also challenges any romanticised notion of suffering being good in itself – plenty of struggle does come to those living God’s ways, but plenty also comes through exploitation and violence, which is not God’s will.

For those of us who benefit from the way the world currently works – who have enough to eat, access to clean water and toilets, disproportionate and unsustainable use of resources, and often much more – it could be easier not to engage with the struggles of the Earth and those harmed by the status quo. We could be tempted to hope that Earth will “see us out,” turning away from the stories of extinction and emergency already devastating creation and communities, believing unproven promises of technical solutions for the future. But what is necessary for others? What is needed for life before death, for living well? Who should we be standing firm alongside? What is God doing?

Are we tempted to give up on living well, seeking justice, standing firm with our sisters and brothers, because it is such difficult labour? Or will we learn from those challenging the ways things are, using what privilege we have to join in?

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Paul’s apparently morbid fixation on ‘getting away to a better place’ is a ruse to express the depth and value of living your life right now in hope and in justice. Living - the more demanding option - is “Christ”.

Nonetheless, the intense and relaxed consciousness of mortality adds a valuable corrective and urgency to our unwillingness to contemplate the fragility of the world - further corrected by the realisation that, within our own lifetimes, we will not be able to solve every problem. Back in the Garden of Eden, the most damaging lie told by the snake was "you will not die". But the point is not to live, unchanging, for ever. In whatever time is given to us, the contribution we do make, known or unknown to the world, will be valued by God.

We should also be cautious about the 'privilege of suffering'. The gift is not in pain, but in solidarity: we more readily face the often unavoidable trials of our lives upheld by the prayerful support of others. Togetherness also mitigates against intimidation, and many churches' experience this year of a very real togetherness despite lockdown and separation, chimes with that of Paul and his friends. We have discovered that relationships conveyed 'virtually' are nonetheless real. Prayer has long been a medium of relationship, supported by the letters, emails, or whatever else, that hold our communities together. Finally, Paul is never under any illusion either of his own value or the dependence of that value on the support of others. In the EcoCongregation movement, we have had to address the problem of humility with regard to the visibility of good and encouraging church initiatives: boasting, of the sort Paul encourages, certainly has its place" letting our light shine before others "(Matthew 5:16) "so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven."

311 WORDS

Matthew 20:1-16

Jesus said, "The kingdom of heaven is like a landowner who went out early in the morning to hire labourers for his vineyard. After agreeing with the labourers for the usual daily wage, he sent them into his vineyard. When he went out about nine o'clock, he saw others standing idle in the marketplace; and he said to them, 'You also go into the vineyard, and I will pay you whatever is **right**.' So they went. When he went out again about noon and about three o'clock, he did the same. And about five o'clock he went out and found others standing around; and he said to them, 'Why are you standing here idle all day?' They said to him, 'Because no one has hired us.' He said to them, 'You also go into the vineyard.' When evening came, the owner of the vineyard said to his manager, 'Call the labourers and give them their pay, beginning with the last and then going to the first.' When those hired about five o'clock came, each of them received **the usual daily wage**. Now when the first came, they thought they would receive more; but each of them also received **the usual daily wage**. And when they received it, they grumbled against the landowner, saying, 'These last worked only one hour, and you have made them equal to us who have borne the burden of the day and the scorching heat.' But he replied to one of them, 'Friend, I am doing you no wrong; did you not agree with me for the **usual daily wage**? Take what belongs to you and go; I choose to give to this last the same as I give to you. Am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me? Or are you envious because I am generous?' So the last will be first, and the first will be last."

Rev Gillean Richmond, Minister in Troon (Church of Scotland)

(Who also undertook a placement with the EcoChaplaincy as part of her training)

So often, this passage is read and felt as a 'hard deal' for the first lot of labourers who are working in the vineyard who get paid the same wage as those who only worked 1 hour. The genius of Jesus is, of course, in the way this parable would have been received by his first followers. On a surface reading it very much appears that the protagonist of the story is the vineyard owner, yet it turns out that the system is the problem here, where people are not valued by the industry of harvesting the vines. Why, at a time when there is plenty of the work to be done, are so many labourers standing idle in the marketplace? Perhaps the irony is that there is a surplus of workers and the vineyard owner is able to pick and choose at will when and whom to employ..... Where is the justice for the many labourers when they are seeking work, even at sunset, yet the vineyard owner can decide when to hire them? Those workers who stood idle in the marketplace all day in the scorching heat whilst the others toiled and took on the burden of the day were powerless in the system they inhabited. The power certainly lies with the system of employment for the wealthy vineyard owner.

The challenge this parable throws up for us is the question of where are we seeing unjust systems, where all the advantages are in the hands of the powerful. Which systems in our world continue to exploit the resources of the earth? Which structures are we aware of that take advantage of our environment. Where are we also complicit in those systems? Is this challenge we receive from Jesus through this parable one to assess where we can effect change in our systems?

Where are the systems in our world that take advantage of the workers, the animals and plants that sustain life? Where are the systems in our world that have used resources recklessly and carelessly? Are we too, like the workers, standing idle and feeling powerless against these systems? Or is Jesus pushing us to recognise how we are part of the system and we are the ones to make the changes for the sake of the earth? Is Jesus challenging us to recognise the harm we do when we allow the system to say, as does the vineyard owner: 'Am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me?'

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This story is introduced to unpack the meaning of "the Kingdom of Heaven" - or the 'Reign of the Sky' - a prescription for the way Creation can and might work....Of which human activity is a dynamic participant part. Once more, Heaven is understood as part of the unified Creation of 'Heaven and Earth' or perhaps 'Sky and Soil', rather than anything merely abstract. Heaven is never disconnected from Earth, as we might be reminded by the Lord's Prayer. Are we praying for justice throughout Creation as we say 'on Earth as in Heaven' or do we take the second part for granted?

In this understanding we can come close to a literal or at least experiential understanding without needing to veer into fundamentalism. The "like" (cf the Kingdom is like) is a powerful statement, not incidental allusion.

God “makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the righteous and on the unrighteous”. [cf Mathew 5:45] . Our experience is that this really is truth.

Justice should not be restricted, in our understanding, to human cultures, or to such abstract transactions as are unaffected by climate, and by natural conditions. It's a hot day, but there's work to be done, and people to be paid. And the conclusion of the story leaves no one in need, though some angry and perhaps 'envious'. Dented pride is an acceptable cost for the wellbeing of neighbours.

One of the most distinctive, if challenging aspects of Christian participation in environmental campaigns and actions is the priority of grace - of 'undeserved' 'favour'. The evening-out and levelling-up that is a sign of God's involvement. All life is sustained by God - and indeed, depends on mutual involvement. We shouldn't be oblivious to the fact that this is a story of farming - of activity which nourishes and sustains beyond the lives of those directly involved. And is the landowner God? Not easy to be definite either way.

It shouldn't be necessary, though maybe it is, to question the difference - as well as the common ground in perceptions of 'fairness' and of 'justice'. God's justice is the acknowledgment of need, rather than the wanton disregard of handicap or the reinforcement of privilege, entitlement . The pay promised is “whatever is right”

Yes, it's a story Jesus told, so characters say what the storyteller wants them to say, but perhaps the most telling phrase is “you have made them equal to us”. Of course, 'equal' is what all the workers were from the start, as well as their willingness to work, though opportunity

428 WORDS