

Give God what's God's.



Exodus 33:12-23

Moses said to the LORD, “See, you have said to me, ‘Bring up this people’; but you have not let me know whom you will send with me. Yet you have said, ‘I know you by name, and you have also found favour in my sight.’ Now if I have found favour in your sight, show me your ways, so that I may know you and find favour in your sight. Consider too that this nation is your people.” He said, “My presence will go with you, and I will give you rest.” And he said to him, “If your presence will not go, do not carry us up from here. For how shall it be known that I have found favour in your sight, I and your people, unless you go with us? In this way, we shall be distinct, I and your people, from every people on the face of the earth.”

The LORD said to Moses, “I will do the very thing that you have asked; for you have found favour in my sight, and I know you by name.” Moses said, “Show me your glory, I pray.”

And he said, “I will make **all my goodness** pass before you, and will proclaim before you the name, ‘The LORD’; and I will be gracious to whom I will be gracious, and will show mercy on whom I will show mercy.

But,” he said, “you cannot see my face; for no one shall see me and live.” And the LORD continued, “See, there is a place by me where you shall stand on the rock; and while my glory passes by I will put you in a cleft of the rock, and I will cover you with my hand until I have passed by; then I will take away my hand, and you shall see my back; but my face shall not be seen.”

Matthew 22:15-22

The Pharisees went and plotted to entrap Jesus in what he said. So they sent their disciples to him, along with the Herodians, saying, “Teacher, we know that you are sincere, and teach the way of God in accordance with truth, and show deference to no one; for you do not regard people with partiality. Tell us, then, what you think. Is it lawful to pay taxes to the emperor, or not?” But Jesus, aware of their malice, said, “Why are you putting me to the test, you hypocrites? Show me the coin used for the tax.” And they brought him a denarius. Then he said to them, “Whose head is this, and whose title?” They answered, “The emperor’s.” Then he said to them, “Give therefore to the emperor the things that are the emperor’s, and to God the things that are God’s.” When they heard this, they were amazed; and they left him and went away.

Give to God what is God’s.

Does that sound controversial?

I still encounter the expectation that, if as a visitor to a church I’m preaching on Creation, the Earth, the Environment - and, verging into the state of the planet - it’s presumed the parts of the *Bible* I’ll be on heading for will be *the bit at the beginning* and *the bit at the end*: the Seven days of Creation full of God’s Goodness, and the notable biodiversity of the *Nation-Healing-Trees* at the far tip of the Book of Revelation. Two valuable insights, separated, but

more importantly, *connected*, by a thousand pages in between.

Sometimes too, and not unlike most reporting of the terrible attack on Israel by Hamas, the environmental story is presumed to start *without* a history.

Just as in previous centuries Europeans declared the homelands of other humans to be uninhabited and fair game for the brutalities of colonisation. We were quite happy. Driving, flying, burning and destroying habitats of what seemed to be beautiful but ultimately expendable fellow creatures. And exploiting the homelands of neighbours who lived near mineral wealth. Seldom to the benefit of locals.

And so every incremental impact or cost of environmental action is *hailed over the coals* without reference to the previous *century* of what Pope Francis described as the *war against the Earth*. It's a sobering truth that although we've been burning stuff for a *couple* of centuries, the greater part of the damage thus far has been in *my own* lifetime.

Like all wars, the layers of injustice and responsibility are extremely complex. What of the poor on the streets of a rich polluting nation? What of the *civilians* for decades confined to the tiny territory of Gaza, when, suddenly, *other civilians* are brutally murdered by Hamas militia?

It's so easy to be green if you can blame the poor for having children. Or export your pollution to the people who make things for you.

Do you blame the oil worker feeding their family, or the chief executive, or the prime minister who makes their decisions, knowing full well that further fossil fuel development, - rather than considerate phasing out of existing projects - *will*, somewhere down the line, kill our neighbours, human or otherwise. And knowing that if jobs were *really* what mattered, a serious level of sustainable investment would bring more.

Who is *your* emperor, who is *your* god?

Back in Matthew's Gospel: maybe those people trying to put words in Jesus' mouth which would provoke the Romans to do their dirty work... maybe they were the ancestors of such decision-makers. Or of Donald Trump with his absurd lies about wind turbines killing whales. Or the ancestors of anyone who talks about "*national* security' and then goes ahead and endangers the planet which is *still* home to that 'insecure' nation as well as to sisters and brothers in Christ from the Pacific who've been warning us for the last two or three decades.

Everything is connected, *all* the way through. It's the *global* temperature which *has* exceeded 1.5 degrees for a third of this year. It's the holiday destinations Scots fly to that *have been* on fire. It's the already flooded landscapes of Scotland that suffer a downpour too many.

As Jesus said to the disciples: what you do on the ground *makes a difference to the sky*. That's never been more true, given the scale of human activity.

Though we've spent a couple of generations reassuring *worshippers* that "heaven" is a science fiction dimension of detachment, rather than part of God's unified creation.

We've separated out *the things of God* who *sustains* us and the *Emperor* who *exploits* us.

We've given the surrounding society the chance to imagine that churches teach a fairy tale, rather than a deep truth about God's Created Reality...which means that, alongside other people of faith and goodwill, we have a real gift to offer, a real light to shine.

English speaking churches, perhaps uniquely, have to be reminded that whilst denying nothing *else* you might - legitimately - mean by "*heaven*", heaven is also always "sky". The atmosphere, the climate. The signs of which the wise take note. Heaven. Which

Jesus said is “*vulnerable to violence and attack*”¹.
But we just skim over that.

Everything in *God’s* creation is interconnected,
interdependent.

And that truth is what underlay Jesus’ response to the
Pharisees and Herodians who hated each others’ guts.
But not so much as they hated this rabbi from the
backwaters. Jesus threw back at them their false
separation of what is holy from what is not.

As certainly all of the churches in EcoCongregation
should feel justified in throwing back at anyone who
protests that the care of the Earth and the partnership
with their creatures might not be a priority for
Christian witness, mission, discipleship and
evangelism.

All of which is resourced by scripture: not just by
“*the bit at the beginning and the bit at the end.*”

What has all this tree-huggery got to do with Christ? -
who said “look at all the trees!” Everything.

As regards Christian *Scripture*, I’ve been delighted to
confirm that the intervening thousand pages are
enriched when we stop working so hard to exclude
and ignore the participation of the personalities of the
Earth and fellow Creatures and the rollercoaster of
our relations with them.

¹ Cf Matt 11:12

The more we insist that Scripture is concerned with realities rather than abstractions, the more meaningful and enjoyable and powerful becomes our relationship with it.

So we *could* pick a reading out at random, but a text without a context is a pretext. Yes, we've read the passage, but if I'm writing the sermon, *I need to have read the preceding chapters.*

And this reading from Exodus comes after the failure of a detailed religious programme, of pandering to the peoples' need for reassurance, rather than telling them the truth, and providing resources for them to respond.

That's of course, is what EcoCongregation Scotland is about. The *truth* about the planet - and the urgency thereof - sets us free to respond in hope and faith and love. Now.

Truth and freedom. Another connection.

I mentioned that failure of a religious programme, because of a pandering to the peoples' need for reassurance, rather than their need for truth.

From time to time this is also the way things look when good faithful people imagine that the cosy duty-based approach to Creation from way back is still sufficient. - Or maybe science will just fix things.

Maybe not so “way back” - but way back *when* what is now beyond reasonable doubt about the unjust human causes of the crises of nature and climate would have seen like wild apocalyptic fantasy.

When Creation seemed something to fob off on the children. Or those completely unbiblical prayers on the lines of “*God’s in charge so everything will be all right*”. Straight from the mouth of the one who tempted Jesus to jump off the pinnacle of the Temple. Jesus knew better. That’s why so much of his teaching in the Gospels takes the form of warnings. To take or leave.

Just as in the letters of John, we hear you can’t love God unless you love your neighbour. So too, *can* you love God without caring for fellow creatures? Including human ones? Course not!

Cherish *for* God who and what *is* God’s!

In our reading, the Hebrews are on the brink of losing their special relationship with God, because God requires an integrity which -following the abuses of slavery - they haven’t yet had the chance to develop. Moses argues on their behalf; in response God gives him resources of personal experience of who God is and what God’s about. Personal.

When Moses looks to see God’s “*glory*”- and glory is also an attribute of human kings, God offers a vision of “*goodness*”- which is the delightful, enjoyable,

wonderful stuff God has invested in Creation.
Goodness is the personality of God.

But as a resource for dealing with the challenges of life, God also gifts to Moses that truth that you can't speak God's name and deceive yourself that you're in charge. God whose name is '**I am who I am, or *I will be who I choose to be***'.

That's the true idolatry of the false security of the golden calf, or indeed of the internationally scandalous decision² to go ahead with Rosebank oilfield and all the rest.

Because from then on, all your decisions are based on a lie, and that lie is that you yourself can *invent* truth, rather than receive it and respond to it. But everything is connected. In God the maker of Heaven and Earth.

This last month or two has some disturbing similarities which go beyond the standard preacher's stock in trade of making vague connections.

Because although it may not have felt like it, from COP in Glasgow 2 years ago, The UK as a collection of nations - even if only relative to the sluggishness of others - had been in a position of leadership with reading the signs of the heavens, and acknowledging God's Goodness by taking note of the facts of climate

² <https://operationnoah.org/featured/400-christian-leaders-call-on-prime-minister-to-stop-rosebank/>

crisis. A *beginning* was being made to begin that transition, with fairness and justice, to the promised land of a low-carbon economy, looking for a healthier and fairer society, which also took note, for the good of all, of the cost of our way of life both to wildlife and to human beings who suffer most and pollute least.

But now there's a cascade of retrograde measures: the go-ahead for new oil and gas and the raft of u-turns on green policies which look costly *only* from their economic *text without a context*. Which astoundingly ignores the realities of this year. Floods, droughts, wildfires, heatwaves. Oh, and floods. Extremes made more extreme by the knowingly chosen continuation of our slavery to fossil fuels and our refusal fully to embrace -rapidly - an Exodus from that way bondage. Which we've begun.

As the Hebrews *began*. But lost faith and languished in the wilderness of transition until the generation of grumblers had died out.

We don't have the luxury of that timescale.

Give to God what is God's. Amen.