
LENT 1: A Baptism in Biodiversity

Old Testament

Genesis 9:8-17

God said to Noah and to his sons with him, "As for me, I am establishing my covenant with you and your descendants after you, and with every living creature that is with you, the birds, the domestic animals, and every animal of the earth with you, as many as came out of the ark. I establish my covenant with you, that never again shall all flesh be cut off by the waters of a flood, and never again shall there be a flood to destroy the earth." God said, "This is the sign of the covenant that I make between me and you and every living creature that is with you, for all future generations: I have set my bow in the clouds, and it shall be a sign of the covenant between me and the earth. When I bring clouds over the earth and the bow is seen in the clouds, I will remember my covenant that is between me and you and every living creature of all flesh; and the waters shall never again become a flood to destroy all flesh. When the bow is in the clouds, I will see it and remember the everlasting covenant between God and every living creature of all flesh that is on the earth." God said to Noah, "This is the sign of the covenant that I have established between me and all flesh that is on the earth."

Mark 1:9-15

In those days Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptised by John in the Jordan. And just as he was coming up out of the water, he saw the Skies torn apart and the Spirit descending like a dove on him. And a voice came from the Sky, "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased."

And the Spirit immediately drove him out into the wilderness. He was in the wilderness forty days, tempted by Satan; and he was with the wild beasts; and the angels waited on him.

[Sequence: Holy Communion, either in a [Multiple] church setting or with other creatures in the background]

Jesus says: | this cup, or chalice is New Covenant in my Blood, which is poured out for you and |therefore | for many.

Covenant: -- almost literally - is DNA - it's a viscerally defining relationship you're meant to take at least with the level of seriousness appropriate to marriage. It's one answer to the question of who you are. And once entered into, to violate covenant does real and far-reaching harm not just to ourselves. As some hundreds

of mentions in Scripture make clear. We are Creation, with whom God makes Covenant.

For *you*, and therefore - because of that very deep-rooted, connectedness, that interdependence - for you and for *many*, for diversity, for life beyond our own sort of life. Which yet still is life. Which yet still is the flesh the Word became; incarnate as Earth, redefining both holiness and idolatry as some of the Old Testament writers conceived it.

In Mark's Gospel, reflecting this enmeshedness of God in Creation, Christ is Baptised not just with water, but within the Creation: from the water to the Earth, with the Spirit from the Sky, from human society on into the people-free wilderness to encounter the plausible temptations of Satan, the immersive fellowship of the *wildlife*, and the care offered by those other fellow creatures, the angels.

It's ostentatiously thorough. Eloquently concise.

Though you could ask, Does Mark - because, unlike Matthew and Luke they don't *fill out and dramatise those temptations - does Mark minimise them?*

Indeed, does Mark permit Jesus to look a tad less completely *heroic* because of the angels' support rather than a bold independence?

So what? Does God have to submit to that rather toxic model of heroism?

Even if that were the case, the bonus is a profound realism undergirding the storytelling medium.

The bundle of wilderness survival skills Jesus is forced by the Spirit to exhibit are first scepticism of satan, then respect for the ways of the wildlife into whose habitat he has been blown by the wild wind of the Spirit, then finally and graciously to receive hospitality; to *foretaste* something of that true pinnacle of Creation the Sabbath, where holiness does not lie in achievement.

Not even achievement, himself of every single good thing. Because that's the snake on the 99th square: getting *everything* right, or waiting till you've sorted it all out before you even begin.

Even the most ardent environmental campaigner has to receive, recharge, reset once in a while.

Moreover, in Mark, Jesus departs this life with a sense of abandonment, unfinishedness.... which resurrection shows was nonetheless sufficient.

But the beginning is immersion in water, spirit, wilderness; in the opposition Mark labels 'Satan', in wildlife and angels. All of that.

And it's only after all that that Jesus returns to proclaim the *within-reachness* of the Reign of God - the genuine hope and possibility of the repurposing of a world

distorted by abusive injustice, which speaks to us with such power and urgency for here and now in the crises of Nature, Climate, Biodiversity, Sea level rise.... etc

There's a conference this year in March in Assisi, the home of that saintly friend of all God's creatures St Francis, which will be looking at how we can make sure we put all those pieces together.

Maybe the traditions -and even the committees- which gave us the appointed readings for today were already truly guided by the Holy Spirit to bring together Jesus immersed first in water then in wildlife - and wild places - together with the divinely inclusive Rainbow Covenant which overarches all others in our Scriptures: life emerging from the recycled primeval floodwaters to the Covenant with the Earth, with every living creature of all flesh. The cute and the clawed, the foul and the fragrant. The tuneful and the deafening.

And if anyone says 'what about life in the waters, the fish? -or the penguins? for that matter - or what about the trees?', well, verse 12 "***God and the Earth***" has that covered. '**As the waters cover the sea**' In the Bible, the sea is a hole on Earth with water in it. And the all the "world" that we're concerned with is the Sky and Soil/ Heaven and Earth. But let's resist the temptation to split hairs for now.

God *does* covenant with just *two* parties: God and every-*body* else. Every creature, every plant. Even within the confines of the Ark, the *wild*life is there, valued in their own right alongside the domesticated exploited creatures and those valued companions who share our daily lives.

Whose feelings rights and affections we're so often encouraged to discount.

Because in the wisdom we claim to cherish, but also aspire to, our lukewarm wishy-washy thoughts or coldly exploitative thoughts are seldom God's generous and robustly compassionate thoughts.

Though it's through God's thoughts *we* came to be. Through Divine thoughts expressing the need for a caring and intentional species that we're called into being as creatures in partnership with creatures.

And if we're predators? - then can we be good predators?

Can we keep the balance, allowing, for instance, our food ruminants to maintain the health of the soil, without cruel factory-farming flooding the atmosphere with excess methane, pushing us permanently over the 1.5 and 2 degree thresholds we glimpsed in 2023, with extremes of weather we could no longer pretend were just happening in a galaxy far far away.

This isn't new: justice and creation belong in God's one breath in millennia of Scripture and tradition, albeit

overlayed in recent years by a strange but powerful temptation to see it all as ‘only for us, our family/ nation/ species. Right or wrong.’

It’s *biodiversity* which is the glory of King Solomon’s wisest utterances, even though, as Jesus subversively taught, the lilies of the field so far outshine him. All valued. All loved. Predators, prey, grin shoots and decay: the long-familiar beautiful webs of dependence which science is now so powerfully displaying in high definition. Showing us beauty is not simply expendable. But also the harshness, the wildness. Start with kittens and puffins and work up to midges.

Don’t waste time with all those silly questions “what did God make such and such an annoying creature for?” as if the rest of Creation were a gift signed over in totality to us, rather than *we* as God’s special gift of Creation for Creation. For this living planetself who is also the common habitat gifted concurrently in so many ways to many of creatures God asks them to bring forth.

We need diverse ways of looking, diverse eyes to see: eyes that see in the dark or sharply from way up in the sky, even eyes that because of much darkness, no longer see, but rely on other senses we might neglect. And the eyes of many creatures see a different spectrum from our own.

In merely human terms there’s the “eyes” of science and faith and poetry, all of which we need, whilst recognising how these are complementary, not exclusively definitive, though they sometimes work best

when they're not watered down artificially to accommodate each other.

That way you don't learn, you don't give space for experiment, or you fall back prematurely on attitudes which, seemingly tried and tested, have nonetheless led to the alarming depletion of the biodiversity we're discovering we depend on - because, in the sense of covenant, biodiversity is what we are.

It was therefore good to hear and therefore also to be shocked by the view quoted in a Scottish Parliament debate [whose view on the introduction of Sea Eagles and Beavers was that they were wiped out because they were vermin,] with the implication by the same speaker that that's the essence of good stewardship. Language which, thank God is *becoming* obsolete in the churches' response to the nature and climate crises.

The essence of temptation is where what truly harms the Earth and all who find their how there is dressed up as sensible, profitable, good for jobs, best for our own, prudent, cautious- or what we conscientiously have to do because apparently we have no choice. Perhaps that's why the Baptism in the wilderness was good preparation for Christ's ministry in the colonial oppression of the Roman Empire: a chance to seethings more sharply, but also more inclusively than in the hustle and bustle of daily life.

We note that Jesus also returned to the *wilderness*, that is, to a place describes as deserted - or at least *free of people* - and took his friends there for refreshment and reflection. respectfully into that habitat of other

creatures, and a place where they suffered no obligation to take account of us. Like the mountain we climb, that doesn't care.

We're also becoming ever more aware that what we might have seen as waste land - including the peatlands and wetlands of Scotland - have the potential to be a treasure of carbon capture. That is, now we've stopped trying to drain them or plant the wrong sort of trees on them. Now we've moved on from the temptations of just a couple of decades ago to what we pray may finally be the wisdom of working with the powers and personalities of nature for the beauty of our common good. As title of the European Churches Environmental Network put it: 'Every part of nature matters'. Once that's accepted, there's still the test of discernment, of being informed, of reaching out and listening to voices, natural and human, whom we might easily have been tempted to dismiss as primitive or naive in their close - covenantal - relationship to the web of life. But for that, we also need God's help. To build up our relationship, our resilience, our covenant and our identity as children of God, in whom all Creation can delight.

And if you don't yet recognise yourselves in that description, we'll see how we go throughout this season!

LENT 2: REPURPOSING SELF: THE SELF WE NEED TO LEAVE BEHIND

Genesis 17:1-7, 15-16

When Abram was ninety-nine years old, the LORD appeared to Abram, and said to him, “I am God Almighty; walk *before* me, and be blameless. And I will make my covenant between me and you, and will make you exceedingly numerous.” Then Abram fell on his face; and God said to him, “As for me, this is my covenant with you: You shall be the ancestor of a multitude of nations. No longer shall your name be Abram, but your name shall be Abraham; for I have made you the ancestor of a multitude of nations. I will make you exceedingly fruitful; and I will make nations of you, and kings shall come from you. I will establish my covenant between me and you, and your offspring after you throughout their generations, for an everlasting covenant, to be God to you and to your offspring after you.

God said to Abraham, “As for Sarai your wife, you shall not call her Sarai, but Sarah shall be her name. I will bless her, and moreover I will give you a son by her. I will bless her, and she shall give rise to nations; kings of peoples shall come from her.”

The Gospel

Mark 8:31-38

Jesus began to teach his disciples that the Son of Man must undergo great suffering, and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests, and the scribes, and be killed, and after three days rise again. He said all this quite openly. And Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him. But turning and looking at his disciples, he rebuked Peter and said, “Get behind me, Satan! For you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things.”

He called the crowd with his disciples, and said to them, “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, and for the sake of the gospel, will save it. For what will it profit them to gain the whole world and forfeit their life? Indeed, what can they give in return for their life? Those who are ashamed of me and of my words in this adulterous and sinful generation, of them the Son of Man will also be ashamed when he comes in the glory of his Father with the holy angels.”

There’s a movement originating in conflicts over the religious denial of science, which led me over many years to *celebrate* with congregations the overwhelming evidence of how our creating and sustaining God is at work in the evolution of life.

We made a badge: thank God for Darwin!
That strange, sad lonely man, who, like
Abram, became a father of many sciences, a
root of many encounters with Creation as
teacher.

Evolution, in which life finds fullness in the
letting go of those prosperities and fruitfulnesses
which may well have been *perfectly* adapted to
times that *now have passed*. *What do we learn?*
How do we learn, when we speak to the Earth?
Above all, that nothing will be 'put back the way
it was'. God does not 'restore' but repurposes,
makes new.

Hills and mountains once forested are now home
to a different community of life. You don't
simply throw trees, or any life-form at a
landscape as if they were a tool, a means to an
end, a bullet in a gun, without rights and
personality of their own. Even with the recent
reintroductions of beavers, wildcats and eagles,
all of them transformative of landscapes and
ecosystems, *the wound of their absence* will
have healed over. Therefore extreme sensitivity

is required not to do more harm than good. Like planting trees on wetland, creating a carbon time-bomb.

Ever and again, we see the need to seek out God's thoughts for all creation, and how life knits together, rather than our own, inevitably narrow-minded ambition. I hope that came across in the '*Dinosaur Sundays*' my churches enjoyed:

Assisted by my young autistic son's consuming fascination with dinosaurs, we were able both to reassure folk in the churches that evidence-based science as the honest observation of Creation can be -quite simply and positively -nourishing of and complementary to faith and a deep sense of wonder, in which we have the courage to reflect on how identity itself changes.....

Our identity, both as human beings and as Christians: as those who aspire to faithfulness to the call of God in Christ. A calling both costly and life-giving.

How there *is* indeed a self to *be* denied, if "*to our own self we are to be true*", though as a pastor seeing how people - *and especially women* - who are already ground down, have received the idea of self-denial like a further nail in their coffin of submissive self-sacrifice,

I've always tried to handle that scripture with care.

So that *whatever costliness we sacrifice* is well-informed **for the sake of the Gospel**, rather than, unwittingly, to sustain *the life that must end so that life can be born*. So that our heartfelt investments, in currency, commitment and prayer are not simply counterproductive. Not, like the Common Sense of Peter, playing into the hands of Satan.

Is this seen perhaps in the emergence of 'transition investment' - based on the belief that, instead of simply cutting ties with high-emitting companies, investors like those who hold our pension funds should help polluters either phase out their activities or put them on a so-called emissions-light pathway. "To go where the emissions are and try to bring those down."

Or, given the urgent warning signs we've experience last year, when the global temperature spiked both at 1.5 and 2 degrees of warming, is that far too satanically soft an approach? An affirmation of the identity that needs denied, if we are to have life and have it in abundance?

It may not be long before we discover the answer. But no one can be complacent.

We may recall that Jesus did say 'I did not come to call the righteous to repentance, but sinners' - perhaps because the essence of righteousness, of justice, is being open to a re-think/change of heart. The repurposing of righteousness. As at Christmas we saw in the inspired decision of Jesus' own foster-father St Joseph. The man who tried to do right, but found that, in his own life, the goalposts had changed. To dig in to his righteous identity and abandon Mary pregnant with the Christ child would quite possibly have led to both their deaths. Instead, the message of justice - perhaps something like the blamelessness God commends to Abram - becomes a tipping-point, a branching-point in the story which makes us the church. A tipping point which for Joseph would have been the denial of what, even reluctantly, he's convinced he has to do. Thank God, that the angels have other ideas. Thank God for the messengers of nature and science and the witness of our senses, which give us other ideas.

We give labels to different species, both living and breathing and dead and fossilised. We define them, put them in boxes, as it were, and yet every species is a snapshot - like a frame of film, part of an ongoing story, which deserves the chance to run its course. But it's not just straight-line linear. Charles Darwin, way back, was inspired to visualise the story of life as a tree: with branching-points, perhaps tipping points. The thing is with evolution, is that it's an interpretation of how life is sustained *because* life encounters and responds to changes in the environment. Where such changes are ignored or resisted, as it were, like a tree that can't bend to the wind, extinction follows. Whether the snapping of a branch, or the wholesale uprooting of a habitat and community of life. And of course, where changes are so brutal and sudden as we've made them.....

Because it's at the crossroads of decision, where even a wee bit of justice goes a long way, that Satan truly lurks to snuff that out with intimidation and an appeal to "common sense".

The most diabolically effective tool of oppression is the manipulation of the conscience of the oppressed.

Amongst the greatest danger to the birthing of a nature-positive human culture is the *democratic* election of populist deniers of the cross on which the Earth is crucified.

Since you *have* a vote, you also have a responsibility, though it may not be clear-cut to discern who will do least harm, let alone who may do most good. There's the obvious deniers. But then there's those who *seem* to acknowledge the crises but just as diabolically counsel hesitation, postponement, even of the inadequate measures we've begun, as if such brownie points of unredeemed wisdom and moderation would save you. That's what we hear. And that's what fits so well into what Jesus describes as "human thoughts" rather than those inspired by God.

But by that standard, what could possibly be respectably moderate about a call to a community take up a cross and follow Christ? To let go of the things you *think you have to do*, that the fragile vulnerability of life may be

renewed sustained, reborn, and not die in childbirth or infancy?

Here's that very sharp call, at the crossroads of Mark chapter 8. Here too, for Abram, is a promise of the renewal of meaning and continuity beyond what seemed sensible, possible or remotely likely. That promise that a wee bit of justice goes a very long way.

And, friends, never more than at *this* time when science translates, interprets and presents an urgently groaning and suffering Creation.

I remember being a birth-partner to my late wife: some of the most arduous and demanding hours of my own life; because birth is always a life and death crisis. In the letter to the Romans, which will inform the Season of Creation this year, those who would assist and partner through this crisis are gloriously identified as the children of God.

What parenthood do they choose, who, seeing and knowing the vulnerability of God's living Creation, nonetheless abuse and exploit? Do we continue as most of us have all our lives, just to '*walk along*' with them, or **deny that self** and choose a different path? For if anyone

says they want to know Jesus, friends, that's the sort of question Jesus confronts us with.

And perhaps I should say: that *these* cries and groans of the Earth - and all her living children - are not to be confused with those natural healthy and expected - though dangerous - pangs of birth; not the groans of the Earth's *constant* labour of love and life; but rather, in the midst of that crisis of life's adaptive sustaining, an *additional* and *cruel* and *lethal* intervention.

And yet we are told. Repeatedly. For the sake of a few years prosperity. At the cost of our neighbours. To sit back and let it happen. Get behind us all, Satan!

The COP conferences: remember when that circus came to Glasgow? - great gatherings of many nations which advance with a pace we used to call glacial, though it's now far outstripped by the *retreat* of Earth's glaciers - COP has struggled towards agreements *which every signatory knows* to be inadequate, to end reliance on fossil fuels.

So it's in the face of what these agreements *imply* rather than the like-warm letter of the documents, that it becomes the observation not of unhinged extremists, but of sane, wise, well-meaning moderates: of good pious church folk. But the goal-posts have changed. The no-go areas become the habitat of faith.

It becomes like the cooing of doves to observe that new oil is a choice of death for fellow creatures both human and related, as we so surely are at a cellular level. We can't pass it off as 'love for our neighbour'.

Young people who got together across the world to discuss the Season of Creation were drawn too to the idea that ***“they’ll know we are Christians by our love for Creation/fellow Creatures”*** and although this was vetoed by a scholar who feared that it was a leap too far from the context of the scripture it was based on, because it was originally a description of the love within the Christian community, it begs the question: what fellow creatures are we prepared to exclude from the family circle defined by the Rainbow Covenant between God and all life? or are we trying to find an identity outside that?

Not on this planet!

LENT 3: TEMPLE EARTH: HOW TO CLEANSE YOUR TEMPLE

Exodus 20:1-17

Then God spoke all these words:

I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery; you shall have no other gods before me.

You shall not make for yourself an idol, whether in the form of anything in the sky above, or that is on the Earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth. You shall not bow down to them or worship them;

for I the Lord your God am a jealous God, punishing children for the iniquity of parents, to the third and the fourth generation of those who reject me, but showing steadfast love to the thousandth generation of those who love me and keep my commandments.

You shall not make wrongful use of the name of the Lord your God, for the Lord will not acquit anyone who misuses his name.

Remember the Sabbath day, and keep it holy. For six days you shall labour and do all your work. But the seventh day is a sabbath to the Lord your God; you shall not do any work—you, your son or your daughter, your male or female slave, your livestock, or the alien resident in your towns.

For in six days the Lord made heaven and Earth, the Sea, and all that is in them, but rested the seventh day; therefore the Lord blessed the sabbath day and consecrated it.

Honour your father and your mother, so that your days may be long in the land that the Lord your God is giving you.

You shall not murder. [kill]

You shall not commit adultery. [

You shall not steal.

You shall not bear false witness against your neighbour.

You shall not covet your neighbour's house; you shall not covet your neighbour's wife, or male or female slave, or ox, or donkey, or anything that belongs to your neighbour.

The Gospel

John 2:13-22

The Jewish Passover was near, and Jesus went up to Jerusalem. In the temple he found people selling cattle, sheep, and doves, and the money changers seated at their tables.

Making a whip of cords, he drove all of them out of the temple, both the sheep and the cattle. He also poured out the coins of the money changers and overturned their tables. He told those who were selling the doves, "Take these things out of here! Stop making my Father's house a marketplace!"

His disciples remembered that it was written, "Zeal for your house will consume me." The Jews then said to him, "What sign can you show us for doing this?"

Jesus answered them, "Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up." The Jews then said, "This temple has been under construction for forty-six years, and will you raise it up in three days?" But he was speaking of the temple of his body. After he was raised from the dead, his disciples remembered that he had said this; and they believed the scripture and the word that Jesus had spoken.

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The non-violent direct action of Jesus, usually called the Cleansing of the Temple, in John's Gospel introduces the idea of bodies as temples, and of a temple as a protected habitat.... a sanctuary ...for holiness.

The implications for our faith are far wider than sustaining the life of beloved buildings, which nonetheless, in human society, may have value - literally - beyond price: inspiring awe, **offering** sanctuary and hope for our faith communities, though of course, it's still the community, not the architecture, that makes Temple something more than a lifeless shell.

If we do invest in buildings, then for God's sake, let them wholeheartedly express and embody those values commissioned by the risen Christ, of Good News for All Creation.

Let them joyfully showcase evangelistic projects of insulation, low energy lighting, solar panels, radically minimising waste and energy use, with a welcome for wildlife -

The Zeal of Jesus for our Father's House recycles the protests of the prophets, that authentic devotional activity is **seen** to feed the hungry; seen to bring fruitfulness to the land.

These tangible, visible blessings tied up with the commandments of Sabbath and Jubilee in many and varied ways: a holy space of refreshment, repurposing, recharging, which it's for God to assess and value, but **without the all too real benefit of which**, everything will grind to a halt.

In our day, without precedent, **each** day's news reminds us of the endangerment and extinction of our fellow creatures.

Confronts us with how natural beauty **and** diversity is so much more than ornamental and expendable, but sustains **Temple Earth**, body and soul.

Building or no building, it takes faith - it takes trust in God, to let go and therefore **not** just let be. Not let supposed need for support overwhelm the holiness of life.

To seek the disciplined balance of the unique and holy contributions **both** of weekday and sabbath, of apparently profane and ostensibly sacred, space for the nurturing of life, which marketplace and temple **both** should sustain. In a balance which may be called holy.

That's why the way we read the Bible is important, **if**, as people of faith, we allow that reading to influence our choices, our decisions. And because we're the yeast in the dough of the wider communities of the world, then by the grace of God, that matters.

As matters too the way we read what science and honest observation of nature can present: it was a **medieval Jewish** philosopher [Maimonides] who said that those :

...who know how to calculate the cycles and planetary courses, but [do] not, then of [them], Scripture says ' they regard not the work of the Lord, nor have they considered the operation of his hands(Isaiah 5:12)

Scholarship of all kinds provides an indispensable assortment of building blocks, and often speculative help with the **original** context and meaning of our scriptures, but it's for the community of faith - *including your local church* - then to join in the urgent task of interpretation: of asking and listening for the answers to the question of what the Spirit is saying to the Church today.

Particularly in the culture of **our** churches, I can't emphasise strongly enough the need for todayness in the expression of our faith. That we respond with holy urgency to the real and **present** threats to Temple Earth.

Which will mean valuing and repurposing; validating and activating, rather than discarding or even **merely-preserving** our spiritual heritage.

Can we risk being "**consumed**" by a Christlike zeal and love for Creation? Christlike devotion, expressed just as radically in **confidential** prayer as in **public** protest which cannot be ignored.

What are **you** called to?

If **prayer**, then pray that **protest** may have integrity.

If protest, then urgently seek the guidance and encouragement of **prayer**.

As diverse communities, churches can with integrity affirm the whole complementary gamut of response encompassed by the teaching and example of Christ.

Turning tables, disrupting business, even as he also counselled prayer and the justice of generosity in secret, safeguarding the dignity of those who are helped.

Do not prematurely judge your siblings in faith for the part **they're** called to, but allow that your own way may not be the only one.

And if **you have enemies**, pray for them too.

Jesus **had** visited the Temple a number of times, as a faithful Jew, without incident.

As a child, he delighted the scholars with his questioning. But this was the first of two boiling-points, when circumstances provoked - and perhaps *justified* - this technically criminal melt-down. The time had come. No more pussyfooting for the carpenter from Galilee.

A line needed to be drawn. Drawn far and firmly enough. Because his vision is not single-use, we can be inspired - and re-inspired. As we often do see in the churches of our movement.

Elsewhere, I wonder, are churches waiting for permission - and from whom - to do likewise? And how far to go? Or are we nervous of taking a first step in case it's a step too far?

Do not be afraid, because in the nature and climate crisis, there things far more worth being afraid of!

Nonetheless...

It still takes more than a gentle shove to turn a table.....And minds change with time. For those of you old enough, consider what you would have thought thirty or forty years ago of **anyone** demanding an absolute end to oil and gas exploration?

But that's the declared wisdom of the International Energy Authority today.

Just 15 years ago, I took my son marching with thousands of others calling for a measly 10% reduction in emissions. How pointlessly pathetic that would seem now, though the science was already in place which would have set it in that context.

Back then, few dared put it that clearly. We didn't risk acting on what was before us. Left the tables unturned. Now, to our horror, we cannot **but** see more. Whilst meantime, the money-changers are dug in.

Good pious people have, with the best will in the world, resisted, postponed minimised or diverted Christ's gift of zeal for Temple Earth.

Which now offers... such a constructively fruitful joyful expression of our faith. Friends, green commitment is a gift, not a threat.

The **threat** is injustice. The **threat** is new fossil fuels. The **threat** is neglect of just transition.

So when Jesus protests; Jesus turns tables; Jesus causes a commotion, will we sit tight in embarrassment hoping that it's the nice sensible, compliant Jesus who will return in glory, rather than this hot-hearted campaigner for integrity in faith and life?

Will we dig deep in our emergency reserves of 'being reasonable' when every shred of reasonableness about a just transition to a low-carbon culture has been trampled and the tables of the money-changers set fast in the concrete of 'prudent postponement' even of initial and inadequate change to get us off the starting blocks?

Or will we **let** his attitudes and actions into those courts of our lives we've hitherto anxiously cordoned off? And in so doing, protected ourselves - to our peril - from warning signs?

Will we let Jesus loose on what constitutes good citizenship, good neighbourliness?

On how we creatively respond to being part of a global economic system on which we're told we rely, and yet which in its current form perpetuates an exploitative injustice against which the Earth is so zealously crying out with extremes of weather and the crisis of nature... on whose balance relies every living thing.

And every form of human economy. Our own as well as those hit first and hardest as without precedent the rising seas overwhelm or droughts desiccate their fields of growing things.

Once more: What, in our Gospel reading does Jesus say:

Stop making my Father's house a marketplace!"

- Says the same Jesus, who elsewhere points out that even as laid down in the Ten Commandments- the Sabbath is made- though not exclusively - to serve people, rather than people the Sabbath.

Maybe, in a way we might have to stop and think about, that's the essence of his protest. It's the untrammelled **service industries** of the Jerusalem temple - the exploitative suppliers of sacrificial sheep, birds and cattle, as well as currency required by Temple regulations - which Jesus so furiously, disrupts.

Businesses which would claim they were a necessary part of the traditions Jesus in such reverence, which, yet for him, were overwhelming the life of the Holy Place.

"Because the Temple's here' -I'm sure someone said - **"we have to** conduct business in this way".

Because we need jobs and prosperity and energy security for our own country, -we've heard several **someone** say recently - **we have to** squeeze every last drop out of the North Sea.

That wrong-headed masquerade of conscientious responsibility, which so satanically results in the spoiling, or to speak Biblically, **corruption**, of the Holy House of Creation. The Great and Holy Temple Earth, **who** thus far has been providentially able, within limits to rebuild themselves, to the good of all. Within limits we're likely to exceed before we take it in.

God help us. And turn today whatever tables obstruct our path to the holiness of life and the praise of God within the living Temple Earth.

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LENT 5: COVENANTED? WHAT HAVE WE BOUGHT INTO?

Greyfriars Kirk in Edinburgh has many claims to fame: not least a graveyard full of names that , inspired the characters of the Harry Potter Books, and something of a non-human patron saint in Greyfriars Bobby the faithful friend of a poor human.

It's also been the location of the signing of the **National Covenant**, a commitment which, having

been bought into, led the covenanters into war and violence. For many of them to death, in the hope of life after, but also to the deaths and not to the love of their enemies.

The Covenant led to plenty of good things too, of course, which others could certainly argue, but I would like to conclude this series of reflections, with a question about those covenants, those life-defining agreements relationships and binding commitments we may find ourselves enmeshed in;

The question; - what have we bought into? What are we propping up? What is it, for which we are, *whether we own up to it or not*, prepared to look on and let fellow creatures, including humans, die for, and done so *without* recognising as Jesus did, that a time can come to cash in all your chips, load your musket with the power you've kept dry, and blow those reserves you've kept for a rainy day, because you stepped outside and dashed back in like a drowned rat. So never mind what's in your *head*: if I cut out your heart and examined it, what would I be able to read?

If you spend a bit of time - but because of digital media, rather less time than that would once have required -searching for Biblical references to

‘Covenant, and even before you read in the King James version of Judas *covenanting*, as it were, his thirty pieces of silver,... you come across the hero **Phinehas son of Eleazar**, who in his outrage at an Israelite man consorting with a foreign woman kebab-skewered the two of them together with his spear, earning thereby the reward for his descendants of a *‘covenant of perpetual priesthood’*.

In terms of the writing, he’s a foundational hero, because that bogoff murder also coincided with the end of a plague, but also a reminder that religion and spirituality and culture, though life-defining, are not inevitably life-giving.

Though that said, they ought to be. They can be. Church *can* be *good* for the Earth.

I’m utterly fed up with a destructive slagging off of the potential of the whole church, due to local misuse of spiritual resources.

Unless we’re building up the church, we harm first those who need it most, but we only do so in reality - *indeed, we deceive ourselves unless-* we build with integrity.

Unless the Lord greens the church, they labour in vain who green it.

Because otherwise we'll have built something every bit as defensive and self-important as most of the nations of the world. The power of religion, spirituality and culture; the power of nations and communities needs discernment, direction, intention and understanding in order ***to be*** channels of the Kingdom, the Reign of God, and to ***fulfil*** our part in the Rainbow Covenant of God with the Earth. With all living creatures including human creatures.

So I don't know whether the story of Phinehas, like the divinely sanctioned genocide of the Amalekites might be added to the list of ***Christian 'satanic verses'*** - of the things scripture gives precisely for us to be shocked by, rather than to find exemplary, but it should certainly jolt us into the most alert mode of discernment. In the commitments we make, in the covenants which define us, what are we locking in, what tipping points are we overturning: what heritage are we imposing on future generations of every species when we're still covenantally committed to our ongoing War on Creation - ***or*** when we imagine both that we are both powerless and not entitled to respond?

The National Covenant grew out of grassroots response all right. For good or for ill, at St Giles Kirk down the road, the market trader Jenny Geddes threw a stool at the head of the preacher when she believed the church was being steered in a harmful direction. Though I've had some kickback, I hope no one will ever throw a stool at me, but how often -and how lovingly rather than stool-throwingly - how often do we let ourselves consider whose voice *is - by unwritten covenant* - excluded from or marginalised in the everyday life of our churches? What might we need to recycle and repurpose ...

So that those who find value and indeed love in the fellowship of the friends of Christ, will act to seek the truth *in love* for the good of all, bringing and being the Good News for all Creation for which the risen Christ calls.

That's why talk of Covenant, like most of the green stuff which I'm discovering Scripture is full of, needs to go with care and discernment: a bit like conscience..... which some see as the voice of God, yet others -notably Dietrich Bonhoeffer - see as a highly malleable power in the hands of the rulers of the nations. In the hands of what Jesus called 'the ruler(s) of this world'. Not to be dismissed as an

empty figure of speech, but to be taken as seriously as the most trusted news.

On this final week of Lent, yet again, the challenge before us is for those who would be faithful to God to respond to the evolution of circumstance. Persistence and perseverance, indeed, faith itself, are gifts, qualities, which require to be well used.

And for Jeremiah, even in his own time, God very much turns out to be in the business of recycling and repurposing; of recognising that the most noble of gifts and projects and friendships can fail; upon recognising which, the most hopeful and faithful course of action is to acknowledge such failure, rather than dig in to defend it *at cost of life and Earth*

Not a Sunday passes when it's *not* necessary for someone in every worshipping community not to *chuck a stool at the preacher*, but to ask of almost every *word*, every *name*, every *supposedly exemplary story* in Scripture: what does this mean now?

I hope that at Christmas, even as we sang of Bethlehem and a King of Israel, no-one was able simply to ignore the horrors of the conflict bursting into our news reports, which from October re-kindled the touch-paper in the already explosive holy lands

and places whose names and titles so densely populate our Scriptures. Texts the Church may share with other communities, but must reserve the right to interpret them according to a discreet inspiration. Although open to the wisdom and interest of others.

It's the polite enquiry of the Greeks, - aka the solidarity of the Geeks, that - pushes Jesus over the edge:

Greeks asking for 'this' Jesus. And that hit a nerve, it unlocked something. A trigger written into Jesus's heart. Folk from a very different culture - who came, nonetheless to Jerusalem for worship, seemed *-and I'm presuming this from their conspicuously respectful approach* - to have grasped that Jesus was now part of the sights to take in. The things to do. Even in in his protests, becoming established.

Did he resist the powerful disablement of integration - and I have to say, you only have to attend a Garden Party down the Road in Holyrood to experience what a pleasantly powerful dampener of subversion a bit of gracious condescension can be - **did he see the danger to prophecy of becoming part of the scenery? Of an unwritten but very powerful covenant which *preserves* but doesn't *sustain* the call to healing?**

And this season, though some *have* made commitments and investments in people, time and money towards net-zero, what written and unwritten rules and inhibitions thus far have *held back* our churches, our loved ones, and perhaps our nation even more from wholeheartedly embracing the glorious revolution of just transition, and from a *joyous* repurposing, in all our diverse traditions, of word-and-body language, fully to unleash the spiritual resources of our faith for spiritual resilience and faithful change of mind?

As we prepare to pray and act through the next two weeks, of what emerged from this break out from Jesus's routine : his career of teaching and healing..... What remaining covenants in our plain sight constrain us, like the chains of Jacob Marley in a Christmas Carol, from love and friendship with fellow creatures on whom the most inspired poets *and* preachers have long known we depend, even as this late in the day the scientists finally profoundly and authoritatively confirm it.

In the action by Paperboats .org, a grouping of environmentally motivated poets and artists, at the Scottish Parliament, the Scottish Makar Kathleen Jamie observed that those who've put their heart into

green action tend to be almost universally exhausted, at the end of patience, or tether...

You or someone you know will know what she means.

Is this season therefore a time to discover and reboot a covenant of God's people written on our hearts, so we don't need to waste the deepest energy of our souls on the charades of arguments whose outcome we already know?

In God's name, let's also give thanks for those outside our own circles whose solidarity builds a covenant of resilience so that even in the face of the crises of Nature & Climate

Covenant means: you're not alone.

Easter Sermon 2024: **TIPPING POINT**

Mark 16: 1-15

When the sabbath was over, Mary Magdalene, and Mary the mother of James, and Salome bought spices, so that they might go and anoint Jesus. And very early on the first day of the week, when, the having arisen, they went to the tomb. They had been saying to one another,



“Who will roll away the stone for us from the entrance to the tomb?” When they looked up, they saw that the stone, which was very large, had already been rolled back.

As they entered the tomb, they saw a youth, dressed in a white robe, sitting on the right side; and they were greatly amazed. [Some would say alarmed.] But he said to them, “Do not be amazed; you are looking for Jesus of Nazareth, who was crucified. He has been raised; he is not here. Look, there is the place they laid him.

But go, and tell his disciples and Peter that he is going ahead of you to Galilee; there you will see him, just as he told you.” So they went out and fled from the tomb, for terror and amazement had taken hold of them; and they said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid.

Now Jesus having risen early on the first day of the week, he appeared first to Mary Magdalene, from whom he had cast out seven demons. She went out and told those who had been with him, while they were mourning and weeping. But when they heard that he was alive and had been seen by her, they would not believe it.

After this Jesus appeared in another form to two of them, as they were walking into the country. And they went back and told the rest, but they did not believe them.

Later Jesus appeared to the eleven themselves as they were sitting at the table; and he rebuked them for their lack of faith and stubbornness, because they had not believed those who saw him after he had risen.

And he said to them, ‘Go into all the world and proclaim the good news to all creation.

When you sneak into a habitat, even a nature reserve around sunrise, there's a different atmosphere; a different etiquette even.

The wildlife don't expect your appearance, so they stick around a few moments longer; or don't even bother flying away.

And your own experience is different too.

If it's quiet, your other senses get a chance to shine. As in lockdown, without car fumes the fragrance of Gorse, could rise up and surprise you.

How much life surrounds us without us noticing. Without our bothering to look?

When you sneak in.... Make **your** appearance, quietly, respectfully, yes, lovingly, before the joggers and dog-walkers, even the long-lensed twitchers, then you might just be rewarded with the greetings or the scoldings of fellow creatures who become the more wary as the sun comes up in earnest.

Some are still sleepy, others rounding off a good night's work. You discover what it is, other than the sun, that has risen.

You discover what it is that has changed since you were last here. Our seasons, for now, continue their fragile succession. Though we know this is no longer the case for some of our global neighbours. Here, for now, plants begin to blossom, insects make their first appearance. How reassuring.

Except that this is Easter morning. When things are far from what you expected. That's why, to start with, they look worse.

So it's dark. And in the particular way that we storytellers of northern Europe would put it, there's certainly a darkness to be faced: a darkness, both in us and around us to be acknowledged and stepped into which enfolds the whole living Earth, even as the crises of nature and climate are encountered in every land.

With storms overshadowing every light we thought we could count on. Storms which are not just figures of speech. We give them names and look back on the havoc they leave in their wake.

The crisis is well beyond speculation. And yet we approach this challenging era not alone, but with friends.

With people of faith, and especially in the churches around the world, praying for and themselves embodying hope, within what my friend Mathew in the Church of South India calls 'a pivotal era of environmental awakening'.

In each place, in each life, in each church..... Perhaps that starts small, like the first dim light of morning. Perhaps the day is cloudy and we don't even know if the sun has risen. Which meantime spreads and transforms and enlists Gods' great diversity which makes today the day it's good to be proved wrong.

Wrong when we conclude that despair is the rational choice.

Easter is not a calling to be offloaded onto those powerful people, who live in fear they may lose that power, or measure their life by how much they're in control;

...but, rather, conveyed first by the messenger-boy in the empty tomb, the calling, - and maybe even the delight - of powerless, fragile friends of Jesus, who come fearful to the grave of their hopes. Those who come to surrender the single-use resources and responses of resignation yet stumble on a shocking diversity of possibility. Who learn to cry out with eyes wide open to the suffering of the Earth "Christ is risen indeed, Hallelujah anyway!" For what passes through death to bring life is not to be despised. And incarnation is only completed in resurrection.

Easter **is not** the denial of what has happened. Nor of what certainly **will** follow, now 1.5 degrees of warming is a reality.

Easter hasn't solved the problem, not taken it from us, but has equipped us to encounter it. To be part **-and maybe no more than a part, but a true part** - of Earth's healing, however long that takes. Whatever that involves.

Easter **will not be** the trivialisation of tragedy, not some anaesthetic self-deception we're fobbed off with to keep us quiet and manageable whilst the world goes to hell on the back of lies about security and prosperity; those satanic temptations to bow down and worship the failing idols of oil as if **they** could be with us to the end of the age.

No, Easter is a firmer foundation than that. For in the the spectrum of resurrection, the rainbow of appearances, messengers and messages, death itself is repurposed, remade for a responsive resilience beyond what can simply be solved and fixed. Indeed, beyond any lifetime I might hope for.

Easter is rooted in the Earth **who** alone cradled the broken body of Jesus, rooted in the real experience of those whose feet today will tread our common home as evening comes and morning comes once more. Rooted in the transformations we witness in those wakenings and sleepings.

Mark's Resurrection morning documents a very special *sneaking*: not like that thief in the night, whose evil deeds are covered by darkness, for there **is** light enough to see, and these three grieving women need that light, notwithstanding, they have come still "*very early on the first day of the week*", shielding their vulnerability from the scrutiny and the questions of strangers, *very early on the first day of the week*, in order to perform a last act of senselessly defiant love: of terrified courage: hoping against hope that they're in time for that small act to make a difference.

The sun is barely up...

Let's digress, consider what that difference might be.

Jews of that time did not practice *embalming*, in the way that the undertakers sold it to me before my late wife's cremation, as a convenience which gave us time to arrange her funeral. These three women's use of spices is not to **preserve** the body, not to prevent the Earth from reclaiming that into which the soil was formed, and where the breath of life for a while found a home, but rather, a reconciliation, a befriending of the ultimately life-giving processes we have branded decay, or worse, corruption.

It's a hands-on act of love to what's left of a tortured friend, so direct that someone of our death-denying culture can scarcely bear to contemplate it: and notwithstanding their classification as saints by the officialdom of churches, they lift us with them to the meaning of sainthood: the struggles of ordinary people with integrity in extraordinary events. For them, it's the best and the most and the most beautiful and therefore subversive thing they can do for their friend who was murdered by law. It reminded me of a banner at a Lent event in London : crucifying the earth .

In recent months there's been discussion globally of the idea of ecocide: the murder of a habitat or a web of life. Much of the hesitation has centred round the difficulty of framing such legislation, though in the meantime, whilst we fiddle, life burns, just as, when it came to moving beyond the lawfulness of slavery, the prudence of the powerful dragged things out for years on end. And so I wonder: In our distanced outrage at the **injustice** of the cross, have we missed out on the care taken that it was lawful?

To wait on the law to catch up with justice is not a calling appropriate to this time of urgency. Nor to hesitate until our own hands are clean. God's Good people need the freedom, the courage, the permission and the guidance of the Wild Wind of the Spirit. with all our heart and soul, to uphold just laws and call out the unjust.

Easter morning. Sun barely up. Wildlife looking on. 3 women.

So they've conquered their hesitation, but not thinking straight: they're neither capable of shifting the stone nor did they dare bring along anyone who could...

When worst of all: a stranger is there, with a message which, for them, makes everything scream.

A protracted jump-scare which like most jump-scares sets up a story to unpack.

Not least in that the appearance of the creature who gives the message. One whom churches might eagerly adorn with in the scary wings of an angel, is described as male, but not of the age or stature to be threatening to three women. A messenger-boy, not that mature and muscled man, whose willing help might have shift the stone, but with it, perhaps, the power dynamics of their mission.

He is not here. he has risen. So for all our sneaking, we've missed the boat. But look, here comes another speeding across the waves.

It might be early and it might be late, but at whatever age you discover or take to heart that for the vast majority of Christianity over two millennia, we've received scripture through translations and interpretations, it can be near as shocking as a tomb no longer reassuringly sealed.

That faith is built both on our trust in the fragile gift of a story we've heard from others - but equally on the discipline of recycling and repurposing and reinterpretation of that message relying on the Wild Wind of the Spirit.

Through whom we value and honour Scripture and Tradition, much as we might hope to cherish a **rare and vulnerable** species: who cannot be said to be preserved unless they are sustained.

And then we discover - and I pray it's just in time- that these fellow creatures we thought we were generously saving have their own indispensable place and purpose in our own survival.

For life and death and life recycled remain glorious mysteries; realities set about with uncertainties which by faith we can befriend or come to grief.

Christ is risen: Hallelujah anyway!

