

## Sermon in Iona Abbey, late April



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### Romans 8:19-25

For the Creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the children of God; for the creation was subjected to futility, not of its own will but by the will of the one who subjected it, in hope that the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to decay and will obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God. We know that the whole creation has been groaning in labour pains until now; and not only the creation, but we ourselves, who have the first fruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly while we wait for adoption, the redemption of our bodies. For in hope we were saved. Now hope that is seen is not hope. For who hopes for what is seen? But if we hope for what we do not see, we wait for it with patience.

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We're on Iona, where: George MacLeod said '*We've forgotten that God is in nature*'.

But churches are taking a hell of a time to re-member.

Maybe a prayer of St Basil might help.

*O God, enlarge within us the sense of fellowship **with** all living things, our siblings the animals to whom you gave the Earth as their home in common with us.*

*We remember with shame that in the past  
We have exercised the high dominion of humanity  
with ruthless cruelty  
So that the voice of the Earth,  
Which should have gone up to you in song,  
Has been a groan of pain.  
May we realise that they live not for us alone  
But for themselves and for you,  
And that they love the sweetness of life.*

That **4th century** prayer expresses the calling of many grassroots churches I've visited in six years of full-time environmental chaplaincy. Not least that totally subversive final line

**“that they love the sweetness of life.”**

A lecturer who trains ministers asked me if I thought non-human creatures capable of sin. Why didn't he ask me first whether I thought that they were capable of love?

As a resource for Green churches, that prayer acknowledges the blessing of human responsibility.

A responsibility massively reinforced the more you take to heart the implications of Christ as God-with-us. The Word made not-just-human, but **flesh**. Emmanuel, 'God-**with-us**' is necessarily 'God-**with-Earth**'. That's what we're made of.

This year's global theme for the Season of Creation, enjoyed by many churches around the world, is "to hope and act **with** Creation".

Yeah, well you expect churches to be waffling on about hope. Even action if you're lucky. No big deal. Except that preposition. **WITH**. Solidarity rather than exploitation, however benign.

**Praise be to you my Lord, WITH all your creatures**, sang St Francis of Assisi in his Canticle, recycled by Pope Francis in 2015

in Laudato Si, *the pope's* letter to all people of goodwill. You **shouldn't** be able to get much more *mainstream* than that. Pope Francis included the saint's still more shocking and realistic words, that *Creation is Mother Earth who sustains and governs us*.

'**Governs** us'. [wow!] A bitter pill to swallow for the colonial Global North, struggling with a crisis we can't simply fix and be done with. Not **without** listening **and** negotiating **with** those personalities of Creation....

Without whom **our** lives will **not** praise God **any more than they do** when we exclude on ground of race, ability, gender or orientation.

Neither Sabbath nor Jubilee, those Biblical jewels of liberation and refreshment are complete unless fellow creatures - even the wildlife - are **acknowledged** .

Jesus in the wilderness was **with** that wildlife, sharing the habitat that was theirs.

The **gift** is not God's own Earth, but the right to live here. Tenants rather than landlords, **with** so many forms of life on whom we also depend. The Hebrew Bible doesn't **have** a word for animals *as opposed to people*. Just "living creatures", beloved of God.

The prayer we began with proclaims the **reality** of God-given underlying, **kinship**. Without which relationship we are less than humans ought to be.

But then, the prayer considers how some **parts** of humanity have chosen **to be a curse for Earth** and their creatures. Making a present reality out of that ancient warning from God.

I still have friends who look at the wilder stories, and sayings of Scripture, eager to consign them to the landfill of faith. Along with some quaint customs and festivals.

Maybe they've got the wrong bin. Not landfill but recycling. Because, like the powerful conviction of the major prophets that injustice *causes* environmental devastation - Now it hits home. **Now it makes sense.**

The crises of nature and climate are unprecedented in human history, but the need for spiritual resilience, for hope, when despair might seem rational - that is far from unique. And that's what this place is for.

But we've spent a couple of centuries trying to look like we've grown out of all that. We're scared we lack permission to enjoy how our faith is so comprehensively grounded in relationship with fellow creatures. Even though poetry brings it together. Re-members it.

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Now, knowing how even the best response to the Nature & Climate crises is messy, I don't talk about "solutions". But rather responses.

That way we enjoy the open-ended adventure of healing, rather than the soul-distorting despair of control freaks doomed to failure.

**Governed by the Earth**, we're not in charge, though we do have a decisive place and purpose. In urgent need of repurposing, recycling.

Last month I was invited to what George MacLeod would have called a ***Pentecostal*** gathering in St Francis' hometown of Assisi. Aimed at making Creation ***mainstream***. People from five continents and five global communions. Bishops, professors, people with funny hats.

I came away unshakeably *re-membered* of the authentic historical, spiritual grounding of Christianity in kinship ***with*** the personalities of Creation.

But the last words in my conference notes were “***How do we go back to people and tell them to reconnect to the nature we tried to detach them from?.....***”

When I first came to Iona, I was struck by the wholesomeness of a prayer in morning worship, to bring **Good news to all Creation.**

It took years to discover that was a verse from Mark's Gospel, which accompanied churches all the way up to the time when someone found a scholarly reason to leave it out of what is read and preached in churches.

It's with the leadership of ***indigenous*** and rural cultures that we're re-membering how this deep green relationship with Creation goes right the way back. Well past Columba of Iona, whose Communion with Creation was essential authentication of his stature as a saint. Welcoming exhausted birds on migration. Blessing a whale that seemed a threat to sailors.

That global theme of the **Season of Creation** is ***inspired*** by our reading from Romans. And re-membering the intense hours I spent as a birth-partner to my late wife, the image of groaning in childbirth is wildly appropriate.

Even ***before*** the current crises of Nature & Climate, birth is always a crisis of life and death.

I'm drawn to see the place of humanity as an ***ongoing*** role of birth-partner; part of the team led by God the Midwife, striving towards the healthy delivery of Mother Earth; birthing every species in the holy web of life.

Technology has transformed that spiritual threshold of ***our*** childbirth: anaesthesia blessedly takes the edge off the worst of the pain, but taken to an extreme, can disenfranchise the mother herself; her ownership of a process which concerns her above all.

It becomes birth by 'stewardship', inflicting "*control passed off as care*", transforming the **collaborative** labour of birth into a commercial 'commodity'.

The best birth-partners, prioritise the Mother. The best midwives develop a relationship of trust before the 'groans' begin.

The Crises of nature and climate **additionally** inject a criminally disruptive element to the holy mystery of birth: with full knowledge of the damage being done, fossil fuels and associated injustice, have sponsored **a deadly rampage, like a marching band or a pack of hounds through the birthing-room**, in which the mother is otherwise free to swear and groan according to her need, quite rightly the centre of attention.

It's said you can't love God unless you love your neighbour. So in this week with wildlife, starting with puffins, working up to midges, let's re-claim our permission to love. Remember God is in nature. And see what that makes us. AMEN