



TO HOPE AND ACT WITH CREATION

SEASON OF CREATION 2024

The firstfruits of hope

(Rom 8:19-25)



WEEK 2. Sunday 8th September

Overview week 2

The consideration [Proverbs 22] of reputational value and damage, alongside yet another call for integrity in those who make decisions about others is a sobering opening: Psalm 125 appeals to the steadfastness of the mountains, though in our age of unjustly rapid transformation of our lived environment, how does this hold up? Isaiah 35 seeks to offer encouragement, pointing us to the drama of seasonal transformation, and Psalm 146 firmly connects 'God as Creator' with 'God of Justice'. James 2 continues a stringent moral audit of his beloved churches, and a very demanding cultural confrontation between Jesus and a woman his people would regard as inferior leads to a victory for his message that wisdom and the favour of God reside with the downtrodden and marginalised.

Guest Writers: Richard Murray, ECS Chair; Jo Chamberlain
Church of England National Environment Officer, Charlie Meiklejohn, Christian Aid
Scotland.

Proverbs 22:1-2, 8-9, 22-23

A good name is to be chosen rather than great riches,
and favour is better than silver or gold.

The rich and the poor have this in common:
the LORD is the maker of them all.

Whoever sows injustice will reap calamity,
and the rod of anger will fail.

Those who are generous are blessed,
for they share their bread with the poor.

Do not rob the poor because they are poor,
or crush the afflicted at the gate;
for the LORD pleads their cause
and despoils of life those who despoil them.

Proverbs 22:1-2, 8-9, 22-23: Charlie Meiklejohn, Christian Aid Scotland

I begin every Christian Aid talk by repeating our core belief: that poverty is an outrage, and that all people are created in God's image, and deserving of a full and dignified life, free from poverty. As the passage in Proverbs reminds us, regardless of wealth or status (or lack thereof), we all share the same Maker. Surely this universality should encompass access to clean water, healthy food, and a reliable livelihood. And yet for much of human history this has not been the case as we have failed, or often failed to try, to share the abundance that God has created. Today as we slowly awaken to the climate crisis and the nature emergency, it is once again who suffer. When the actions of wealthier nations and corporations pollute the water, dry out the land, and threaten the economies of our global siblings, we do injustice to this shared humanity.

Perhaps this is what it means "to sow injustice"? Here the word Sow is interesting: the steps of the growing process are all interrelated. What you plant is directly related to what you harvest; what you use to feed your crops and how long you let your land rest influence what you're able to grow. So too, the decisions made in board rooms and government buildings in the global north have tangible impacts on Creation worldwide.

The admonition against exploiting the poor for their poverty calls to mind the idea of an informal poverty tax where often people in poverty end up paying more for basic goods because they are poor. An example of this in Scotland would be pre-paid electricity meters which people use who are unable to set up direct debits, but which cost more to run. Is this not an example of exploiting the poor because they are

poor? In modern Scotland “it is expensive to be poor.” Strategies for frugal living – buying in bulk, paying bills annually or by direct debit, etc. – all rely on the means and available income to do so.

In addition to frugal household economics, this kind of exploitation could be viewed through an environmental lens. Christian Aid has worked with grassroots Indigenous groups in the Amazon basin, whose land rights had been threatened by land-grabbing. Wealthy corporations sought to buy up the legal rights to land that had been managed by Indigenous groups for generations, putting those groups at risk of displacement, and exposing the Amazon to deforestation.

Our reading ends with a warning about “crushing the needy” through legal processes. Surely using political clout and corporate profits to buy up ancestral lands – lands which have been managed and stewarded by the same people groups since before the modern legal system was codified – falls under such a warning.

The Biblical mandate to be generous, and particularly to look out for the poor, extends across the street and around the world. And it is interlinked with the climate crisis. To love our neighbour is to look after creation, because we all share the same Maker.

Proverbs 22: EcoCongregation Staff

This rather sparse presentation of ‘selected verses’ from Proverbs 22 will benefit from your having read what the lectionary has left out: a succession of fairly obvious and self-explanatory ‘apple pie’ proverbs, and some that wouldn’t go down well in our society: we have other means of discipline than beating children with a rod (verse 15).

An appreciation of the fact that this is a book designed to promote the cohesion and good living of an ancient society might lead us to think of what proverbs and maxims might guide our own folk, and in particular, those preparing for some role of leadership. Could you suggest some proverbs for today, or encourage a congregation to contribute some of their own devising?

Cause and effect, or the expected and hoped-for effect of choices and actions dominate this part of the Proverbs ‘collection of collections’ including, from verse 17 “The Words of the Wise”.

The opening verses do draw our attention to the complex power, for good or ill, of **reputation**. We recall the huge investments by so many commercial bodies in greenwashing - in the attempt to maintain their public image in the face of continuation of activities which harm the environment, and therefore the ‘common home’ of their customers.

And yet, in the verses we're given, the advice is that dodgy dealings, and unkindness will always catch up with those who choose them; perhaps in a serious or deadly way. Whereas it does us good to do good.

At best, perhaps, this extract reminds us of the folly of complacency and selfishness in the conduct of our lives, and that everything we rely on is part of a myriad of interwoven and dependent communities of Life on Earth.

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Psalm 125

VIDEO READING Psalm 125

[Location reading :Assisi](#)

[Location reading: more visual](#)

1 Those who trust in the Lord are like Mount Zion,
which cannot be moved, but stands fast for ever.

2 The hills stand about Jerusalem;
so does the Lord stand round about his people,
from this time forth for evermore.

3 The sceptre of the wicked shall not hold sway over the land allotted to the just,
so that the just shall not put their hands to evil.

4 Show your goodness, O Lord, to those who are good
and to those who are true of heart.

5 As for those who turn aside to crooked ways,
the Lord will lead them away with the evildoers; *
but peace be upon Israel.

EcoCongregation Staff

A Psalm, very much from the partisan point of view of Ancient Israel, but applicable to everyone who loves their homeland, praying for peace and just living.

Praying that their own conduct may not detract from God's delight in the people and the land they are part of.

The observable stability of the natural - and sanctified - landscape (Mount Zion) works together with the steadfastness of God, especially to God's own people, to offer affirmation and reassurance. Looking to our own hills and mountains, do we find inspiration and encouragement? Does this sustain us, inspire us, or just keep us going?

When the appeal is to the immovability of mountains, perhaps it's quite there's no problem, though Jesus (and Paul: 1 Cor 13:2) poetically undermined that. And yet, if faith can move mountains, as we're seeing, so can injustice. Changes are happening to the state and health of nature well beyond what was previously thought possible, even in our lifetimes. God's unified Creation is of Heaven and Earth, of sky and soil. All parts are interwoven, interconnected, interdependent. As significant Christian leaders in various churches now affirm, the desecration of the balance of the climate is 'sinful'

As oppressed and marginalised peoples have discovered, sometimes a steadfast trust in the solidarity of God in times of trouble, and for Christians, the suffering of Emmanuel with God's creatures (including human creatures) will be at least as powerful.

Verse three is very significant. *"The sceptre of the wicked shall not hold sway over the land allotted to the just, **so that the just shall not put their hands to evil.**"*

We note that God's love affair with justice removes that temptation to choose the *'wrong things we have to do'*.

Those treasurers and others dealing with finances, who may previously have perceived their solemn and conscientious duty as to maximise investment earnings, even where that seemed in conflict with the moral aims of churches and other charities, can be freed from this burden, and their hard work valued accordingly all the more. Our money and resources **can** be used for good or ill, but " the just shall not put their hands to evil."

[The World Council of Churches](#) workers on childrens' rights and climate change, work ecumenically with others to raise awareness of the significance of whom we bank with: so that, for instance, money raised for aid programmes will not undermine its intent when the money is used for fossil fuel development which will lead to the threats faced by the poorest, who pollute least.

In verse 5, the singer reminds themselves and their hearers that wicked choices are ultimately self-destructive. If ever such sentiments seem futile, or 'wishful thinking', then it's time to be more aware that we inhabit just one world. It's our own home, not just somewhere far away air invulnerable, that is threatened, and this year, not just in the future. Can we learn to take a loving pride in our '**common** home' and live, pray and act accordingly?

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Isaiah 35:4-7a

VIDEO READING Psalm 125

[Location reading :Assisi](#)

[Location reading: more visual](#)

[Location reading with brief commentary. Scottish Highlands](#)

Say to those who are of a fearful heart,
'Be strong, do not fear!

Here is your God.
He will come with vengeance,
with terrible recompense.
He will come and save you.'

Then the eyes of the blind shall be opened,
and the ears of the deaf unstopped;

then the lame shall leap like a deer,
and the tongue of the speechless sing for joy.

For waters shall break forth in the wilderness,
and streams in the desert;

the burning sand shall become a pool,
and the thirsty ground springs of water;

Isaiah 35:4-7a EcoCongregation Staff

Vengeance - retributive justice -which is a notable theme in the Old Testament - is God's own prerogative, rather than one which falls to God's people.

Perhaps there's a sense of something like 'cause and effect'; that wickedness does lead to the downfall of the wicked, though in terms of the fragile systems of nature 'whatever the fault, the fate is shared'.

Is the downfall of the wicked at the expense of their innocent neighbours a step too far? Perhaps we have seen this clearly enough in recent wars.

For people - and perhaps in contradiction to many films and media - getting even isn't worth it. "Getting even" is not the point of global campaigns for '[Loss and Damage](#)', where the principle is that 'the polluter pays', but rather that responsibility should be acknowledged. 'Loss and Damage' is about justice and welfare, not punishment and pain.

The upside of 'leaving vengeance to God' is that the 'fearful faithful' should fully concentrate on health, justice, healing and joy, and not only for such humans as are socially and otherwise disadvantaged by impairments (we are mindful that blind, deaf and 'lame' people may have a strong identity which is not simply that of 'dis-ability'). The personality of the beloved land, too, looks to healing and refreshment.

In places where drought is commonplace, the explosive transformation when rains and water finally arrive is well-documented, but no less astounding. Plants creatures and even fish catch up for lost time. Perhaps the Psalmist was already learning from such phenomena; encouraging in their people an expectant resilience, which is something rather different from patience with resignation.

What is it that takes away our ability to respond both to fertile opportunity and to challenges? In the face of much alarming news, of wars and of accelerating damage to nature, what best helps *us* to "be strong and not be afraid"?

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Psalm 146

VIDEO READING Psalm 146

[Psalm 146 with a brief commentary. Scottish Highlands](#)

1 Hallelujah!

Praise the Lord, O my soul!

I will praise the Lord as long as I live;

I will sing praises to my God while I have my being.

2 Put not your trust in rulers, nor in any child of earth,
for there is no help in them.

3 When they breathe their last, they return to earth,
and in that day their thoughts perish.

4 Happy are they who have the God of Jacob for their help!
whose hope is in the Lord their God;

5 Who made heaven and earth, the seas, and all that is in them;
who keeps his promise for ever;

6 Who gives justice to those who are oppressed,
and food to those who hunger.

7 The Lord sets the prisoners free;
the Lord opens the eyes of the blind;
the Lord lifts up those who are bowed down;

8 The Lord loves the righteous;
the Lord cares for the stranger;
he sustains the orphan and widow,
but frustrates the way of the wicked.

9 The Lord shall reign for ever,
your God, O Zion, throughout all generations.
Hallelujah!

Psalm 146: EcoCongregation Staff

Beginning *and* ending with Hallelujah! Wow!

An exuberant song of potentially subversively hopeful delight and praise: that it's from God, rather than from disposable and dispensable earthly rulers, who come and go, that all good things: justice, healing and the wider glories of Creation derive.

If you're suffering a time of political incompetence, have hope: it will pass! God's justice is the only durable heritage.

One wonders whether this lyrical enthusiasm for God actually risks underplaying the special and beneficial part which can be played by human responses.

God does call us to purposeful - righteous - living, in which God evidently delights.

But the point is clear: in terms of trustworthy goodness, between our leaders and God, there is no 'competition' at all! The 'divine right of kings', and spiritualities which counsel simple obedient acquiescence to political rule, would choke on this song of praise, with a welcome for all who are vulnerable and in need. Including the strangers, the foreigners, the refugees. There is not a leg to stand on for any form of government which neglects these holy interests. And equality, it's been clearly established, is in so many ways a **greener** choice than that of societies with abysmal differences between rich and poor. For *this* Psalmist - who notably doesn't seem to be setting God up as a totalitarian ruler - collaboration with God is the only wise choice. An offer that the wise accept. One wonders what the court of ancient Jerusalem made of such things sung aloud in their faces!

Do any of us, when we exercise power or authority over others, have the humility to celebrate our own limits?

Yet again, it's powerfully recognised here that God as Creator/Sustainer and God as the ground of Justice belong together. The calls of our committed young protesters for "Climate Justice - NOW!" are completely spiritual coherent in this context, where human identity does not mark a boundary of justice: it's

possible, as religious leaders including the Pope and the Ecumenical Patriarch of the Orthodox churches have clearly affirmed, to “sin” against creatures other than humans, because all such sin is ultimately against God, who “frustrates the way of the wicked”.

In our day and age: animal welfare in farming is therefore as valid a spiritual/practical consideration as carbon footprint: if you eat meat, are you aware of what sort of a life the animals concerned have led?

What gives you cause to begin and end the service/the day with a shout of ‘Hallelujah’? Or even some gentle equivalent!

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James 2:1-10, [11-13], 14-17

My brothers and sisters, do you with your acts of favouritism really believe in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ? For if a person with gold rings and in fine clothes comes into your assembly, and if a poor person in dirty clothes also comes in, and if you take notice of the one wearing the fine clothes and say, “Have a seat here, please,” while to the one who is poor you say, “Stand there,” or, “Sit at my feet,” have you not made distinctions among yourselves, and become judges with evil thoughts? Listen, my beloved brothers and sisters. Has not God chosen the poor in the world to be rich in faith and to be heirs of the kingdom that he has promised to those who love him? But you have dishonoured the poor. Is it not the rich who oppress you? Is it not they who drag you into court? Is it not they who blaspheme the excellent name that was invoked over you?

You do well if you really fulfil the royal law according to the scripture, “You shall love your neighbour as yourself.” But if you show partiality, you commit sin and are convicted by the law as transgressors. For whoever keeps the whole law but fails in one point has become accountable for all of it.[For the one who said, “You shall not commit adultery,” also said, “You shall not murder.” Now if you do not commit adultery but if you murder, you have become a transgressor of the law. So speak and so act as those who are to be judged by the law of liberty. For judgment will be without mercy to anyone who has shown no mercy; mercy triumphs over judgment.]

What good is it, my brothers and sisters, if you say you have faith but do not have works? Can faith save you? If a brother or sister is naked and lacks daily food, and one of you says to them, “Go in peace; keep warm and eat your fill,” and yet you do not supply their bodily needs, what is the good of that? So faith by itself, if it has no works, is dead.

James 2:1-10 (11-13) 14-17

Jo Chamberlain

Church of England National Environment Officer

“Faith,” says James, “if not accompanied by action, is dead.” Faith needs to live. It needs to change how we behave. What good is our faith otherwise?

What kind of action will accompany our faith? James suggests that faith should affect how we treat those in need. Not just by being nice, praying or offering a blessing. There needs to be real action to meet physical needs. That could be something immediate – a warm coat, a hot drink, a supermarket meal deal. But I notice for the first time that the example of need is someone who is without daily food. This isn’t just a one-off. A supermarket meal deal isn’t going to cut it. It’s more than putting your hand in your pocket, doling out a fiver and then forgetting all about it. This takes us into the territory of bigger actions, actions to address the causes of need, so that the person in need can have food every day.

In the last few years, churches have been quite good at trying to meet the needs of the hungry, not just as a one-off, but in a more systematic way, often through food banks. And food banks rarely just provide food, they also signpost to others who can provide debt advice, benefits advice, housing advice, etc. And more recently, the organisations behind food banks have looked further up the chain of what causes hunger and have started lobbying for change. One example is the [Essentials Guarantee](#) to ensure that Universal Credit covers life’s essentials.

I am reminded of this quote from Desmond Tutu:

“There comes a point where we need to stop just pulling people out of the river.

We need to go upstream and find out why they’re falling in.”

Christians in Britain, however, don’t just have a brother or a sister without clothes or daily food in this country. We have siblings all over the world in similar need. How does our living, active faith do something about their physical needs? This is more complicated. Maybe a gift to an organisation which is meeting those needs on the ground? But how about going upstream to find out why they’re falling in? For many of our global siblings, the reason they are falling in is climate change.

What good is our faith if we do nothing about climate change? It is tantamount to saying: ‘Go in peace’ and doing nothing more. Verse 8 reminds us of the command to love our neighbours. Love is demonstrated when we respond to human need. It’s time to join the dots and see that the result of love and active faith must include doing everything we can to cut carbon emissions and help people to adapt to the havoc wreaked by climate change – at a personal level, in our churches and communities, in businesses and by our governments. Our faith is alive, it changes our behaviour, and tackling climate change is an expression of love.

EcoCongregation Staff

Please don't let this passage be read in a boring monotone. Or if it is, give a health warning. This writing is meant to shift hearers out of any form of complacency or apathy, and encourage those who are already moving beyond such things. Find a reader who will pull out all the stops of passion and expression.

But remember, it's intended *in love* to those the writer *loves* and cares for; to their 'brothers and sisters'. Both in warning to those who may be choosing harm for their own world, and to those very same brothers and sisters who can, by response to God's grace, contribute to healing. That term of address is not an incidental nicety.

And like every lovingly courageous preacher, 'James' is prepared to risk offence. To embody the conscience which goads us into that action which, though costly, will reward our souls.

The writer several times evokes a courtroom drama, in which the worst pit will be one we have dug for ourselves. The *hope* inherent in the writer's tone, is that although it's likely that some level of partiality or 'favouritism' will be present in a worshiping community, there will be few completely lacking in mercy.

He's writing it this way because there's hope you'll take notice. A 'soft gospel' is not only boring, but ultimately an insult, and an expression of despair, because it has given up on shifting us. If you're in the congregation, remember to cheer on those who stick their necks out for your spiritual well-being!

Nor is this a Scripture which it's hard to apply in a global context:

When we privilege the rights and opinions of the rich and powerful rulers, and corporations, rather than honouring and paying heed to the experience of - in our day - those in the Pacific, in Africa, and polar regions hit first and hardest, then we become, as James put it "judges with evil thoughts" digging our own grave.

At home, when folk are 'poor and cold' it's not, as some from a privileged side protest, due to environmental measures, but rather due to their neglect. Above all, avoid the temptation to blame the poor for having children.

In the crisis of nature and climate, the observations of the prophets that there is a causal link between injustice and harm to Creation is observable reality, well-documented but the IPCC and aid agencies.

So: 'Call yourself a Christian?' - You certainly can, and should, if you live a life which cares for those in need.

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Mark 7:24-37

VIDEO READING Mark 7

[\[Location video - Downloadable\]](#)

[Video reading \[to verse 30 only\]](#) **As told by Jo Clifford**

Jesus set out and went away to the region of Tyre. He entered a house and did not want anyone to know he was there. Yet he could not escape notice, but a woman whose little daughter had an unclean spirit immediately heard about him, and she came and bowed down at his feet. Now the woman was a Gentile, of Syrophenician origin. She begged him to cast the demon out of her daughter. He said to her, "Let the children be fed first, for it is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs." But she answered him, "Sir, even the dogs under the table eat the children's crumbs." Then he said to her, "For saying that, you may go—the demon has left your daughter." So she went home, found the child lying on the bed, and the demon gone.

Then he returned from the region of Tyre, and went by way of Sidon towards the Sea of Galilee, in the region of the Decapolis. They brought to him a deaf man who had an impediment in his speech; and they begged him to lay his hand on him. He took him aside in private, away from the crowd, and put his fingers into his ears, and he spat and touched his tongue. Then looking up to heaven, he sighed and said to him, "Ephphatha," that is, "Be opened." And immediately his ears were opened, his tongue was released, and he spoke plainly. Then Jesus ordered them to tell no one; but the more he ordered them, the more zealously they proclaimed it. They were astounded beyond measure, saying, "He has done everything well; he even makes the deaf to hear and the mute to speak."

Mark 7:24-37 Writer : Richard Murray

**Lay reader in the Scottish Episcopal Church,
Chair of EcoCongregation Scotland**

We know from history that relationships were strained between the Gentile Tyrians and the Jewish minority population living in this principal seaport; or in the Jewish villages that surrounded it, still deeply rooted in Jewish culture, who by economic pressure were forced to be the 'breadbasket' for the city elite. This may explain the morally offensive language exchanged between Jesus and the Greek woman, by race a Syrophenician, on the subject of 'dogs'; but whether the metaphor alludes to the stray scavenger kind or household pets, need not concern us here. It may have been a bit of banter, and there has been a lot of speculation. What we do know is that Jesus was staying at a house where he wanted no one to recognise him. Despite his best efforts, Jesus is confronted by a woman, who in Jewish eyes, was of a lesser pagan race and gender, and was part of the city's hated upper class. However, untrue to form, the woman has no concern about herself, only for her little daughter and in the encounter outsmarts Jesus in the argument that follows. The real moral issue here is that she is a mother who is suffering. She has a daughter possessed by a demon and one assumes has exhausted all the sources of help that her wealth can buy, so humbles herself at the feet of The Healer she has heard about. Evidently her faith in Jesus made her daughter whole, because Jesus learned a deeper truth about his ingrained prejudice and, moved by compassion, set his prejudice aside, and healed the child.

In the context of environmental justice, what is the deeper truth that we need to learn about our anthropocentric sense of privilege in relation to God's creation:

- Who or what ultimately qualifies as morally significant? Humankind made in the image of God or do all living things have moral status?
- How do you understand humankind's God-given 'dominion' over creation with the divine commission of Adam to 'till and keep'?
- If stray dogs have an intrinsic value independent of anyone, and puppies have an aesthetic value in being cute, and guide dogs have an instrumental value to blind people, how do you evaluate the moral worth of dogs? Should a distinction always be drawn, morally speaking, between what has a higher or lower worth to humankind?
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- What of other living things? What about invasive species and their effect on whole ecosystems?
- Should the healing of God's creation be left to science, or can theology and spirituality be deployed to heal our 'common home'?

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Sermon Suggestion: EcoCongregation Staff.

The notes above will be sufficient if you're negotiating the sensitive minefield of Mark 7 and the potentially offensive language it contains.

Otherwise it might be adventurous to combine Isaiah 35 and James 2.

It certainly takes courage to look with such stringent clarity at your own community as James insists: and that's why friendship is the best basis for truth-telling within such a community. Malice and judgementalism are the enemies of every effective audit.

Who, if anyone, might be trusted to be able to analyse your own local church and suggest, with love, rather than punitive vindictiveness, how they could live up to their potential?

James seems almost to envisage an investigation rather more far-reaching in its scope than the questionnaire congregations have filled in when registering for EcoCongregation Scotland. The scary aspect is, that this is a letter specifically for churches, not making general moral comments.

Again, perhaps the best approach is to start with encouragements, and with valuing the good things that are already part of your life; doing so in a way which isn't intimidated by secular values of success and money: what joy have you brought to a neighbour or a friend; have you taken part in the campaigns of SCIAF, Tear Fund or Christian Aid?

And who, or what are you prepared to see as a neighbour? With regard to your relationship with the Earth and fellow creatures, have you been able to summon the courage to move on from the 'stewardship' model of 'looking after property'?

Then, who and what are the voices which might previously have been denied a hearing?

Have you been able to move on from the fears which keep green things out of the regular Sunday prayers? To move on to a more listening, dynamic, interactive approach, which recognises the interests and rights of downtrodden and exploited peoples and other populations, from our doorstep, all the way across the world?

The reward waiting for those who dare? Friendship, solidarity, the sense of meaning that congregations do discover who engage in prayer and action for justice.

It might be helpful to leap ahead to James 5:13ff, where, as nearly the last word of the letter, it can be seen that this really is a letter of goodwill, striving to reassure churches and the disciples who make them up, that it's far better to take note of things and attend to them, than to dig in and deny.

