

## Twelfth Sunday after Pentecost

### Twelfth Sunday after Pentecost – 1 September 2019

The Church would like to thank writers from the Creation Time writing group, who are providing Weekly Worship material throughout September.

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## Introduction

Creation Time / Season of Creation is a worldwide celebration of prayer and action from 1 September to 4 October (the Feast of St Francis of Assisi). September's reflections on the lectionary passages are set against the background of the extreme urgency of the climate crisis and the challenges that confront every one of us: to change our own lives and to support and encourage others in the just transition to a world where all will be better able to weather the turmoil that undoubtedly lies ahead.

Our writers are drawn from a variety of church backgrounds and pastoral contexts, and all share, as Pope Francis has said, a 'Common Home', and have a contribution to make to the healing partnership of Christ with God's Creation. The God of the Bible's tendency –seen in these readings– to embrace those we might consider as our enemy, points towards a conciliatory approach, rather than entering into a blame-game, a denial of the crisis, or complacent acceptance of the principles, while at the same time making exceptions for ourselves.

The bottom line is love for your neighbour, as yourself.

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### **Jeremiah 2:4-13**

‘To pursue worthless things is to make yourselves worthless’, says God, clearly in a mood of desperation, or even disbelief at the peoples’ wanton stupidity: their squandering of natural abundance, the vacuum of leadership – including religious leadership – and the outright refusal of a reverential relationship with the land with which they are entrusted.

It might take a while before the foolishness of pouring scarce water into a cracked tank would become apparent. Maybe that is where the world (and its manager, the human race) is now, with much damage done, yet with some possibility of changing course before the rivers run altogether dry.

In the crowd-funded film ‘Age of Stupid’, a post-apocalyptic archivist of the future looks back at the climate disaster recorded and documented in detail.

*“We wouldn’t be the first life-form to wipe ourselves out. But what would be unique about us, is that we did it knowingly.*

*Why didn’t we save ourselves when we had the chance?*

*Is the answer because... we didn't think we were worth saving?"*

We have known for decades that this time will come. We have been made aware of the rapid extinction of beautiful and unique creatures. Thanks to the honest and disciplined work of climate scientists, we know (unless we fall victim to fake news) right now, that our lifestyle is unsustainable, and our dominant philosophy of 'permanent growth at all cost' carries the seeds of the destruction of the life that God called good.

Over and above the foolish stewardship of land and resources, yet closely allied to it, is the crisis of values, and of spirituality; a twisted and self-deceptive view of 'profit'. The whole Christian family now has an unprecedented opportunity and calling: to bring together mission, justice, stewardship, and study: to bring out of our 'treasure' the determinative priorities and values that are so different from those piloting Creation towards catastrophe. And above all, to take note of, and act on, and trust in, the worth we are given (each and all of us) in Christ. The worth and encouragement we may give to our neighbour, and our fellow creature, in partnership, rather than exploitation. May we cherish and be empowered by the knowledge of our enduring and transforming worth in the sight of God. Even if, until now, we have indeed pursued 'worthless things'.

### **[Psalm 81:1, 10-16](#)**

Verse 12, "So I gave them over to the stubbornness of their hearts, to follow their own devices," locates this emotional psalm in a widespread and intimate human experience. This may be in the joy and frustration of the parent of any infant at mealtime: "Open wide....", or in the rueful practicality of parenting a teenager, when the acknowledgment of independence begins to outweigh heavy-handed control.

As in the Jeremiah passage, the self-destructiveness of humanity is seemingly beyond the comprehension of the loving God who 'speaks' these words. Indeed, if these are the thoughts of God, then for once, the excuse that the 'ways of the Lord are beyond us' holds no water. This reasoning and these insights are far from obscure, either to the original writer, or to ourselves as we rise to the challenge of a just transition from a doomed fossil-fuelled economy to a hopeful and sustainable, compassionate and humble one. A throwaway society throws itself away. And more – it throws out the baby with the bathwater.

In this Psalm, God as the speaker values and privileges those with whom God does have a relationship, though the conditions of that association are that the people can still mess it up.

To quote from the 4-minute video, “Our Future”, that was published five years ago by the United Nations and narrated by Morgan Freeman: “We have never faced a crisis this big, but we have never had a better opportunity to solve it.” <https://youtu.be/8YQlaOldDU8>

Time has passed. Damage is done, and future generations as well as our own, will need, finally, to listen for God’s voice. Hope remains though, and God is still good, waiting for the opportunity our species might yet give God, and we can taste the wheat and honey.

Eco-Congregation Scotland does not require registered or member churches to launch into ‘fresh expressions’ (though that may well be where they are ultimately called), nor to try to be something they’re not. The ambitious call to **reinvent** the church is beyond our humble scope. Rather, we look to the church to **be** the church: to realise our God-given potential, and listen for the stern but honest voice that wishes us well, and wishes we would grow up and take notice.

### [Proverbs 25:6-7](#) (Alternative reading)

Proverbs emerged as a training manual for the ruling class of ancient Jerusalem, with the aspiration that young men given responsibility would be able to piggy-back the accumulated wisdom of those with more practical and spiritual experience of diplomacy and public affairs. It is full of useful practical hints like this, which were echoed in some of Jesus’ teaching.

Committed, though often powerless Christians in an age of climate crisis may need to be alert to how to speak truth to power, whether in a local community or nationally. The game’s a-foot, to transform our approach and awareness of what faces our planet in these crucial years, as potential tipping points appear on our horizon. Knowledge alone is not enough. The *virtues* of cunning and craftiness are vital to the equipment of those who need to convince others, but lack the formal authority to back it up.

For all its occasional cold practicality, Proverbs remains a spiritual text. The know-how practicality of Wisdom, with the imperative of justice, is seen to be built into the fabric of Creation. Wisdom herself is poetically permitted a character: sometimes like an alluring partner, sometimes a playful child.

The richness of what it is to be human, and to embrace wisdom, even in these verses of apparent deference to the status quo, are celebrated by us as, alert to the pitfalls of human society, we challenge injustice and subvert oppression.

## Hebrews 13:1-8, 15-16

This text begins and ends with two words that would have resonated differently with the original hearers, but for us, have possibly plunged into the mire of religious cliché. ‘Angels’ – not ethereal, other-worldly beings, but grounded in reality and ‘the now’ – beings who have something to teach you, to share with you – something you need to hear. The word for angels in this text is ‘aggelous’ or ‘messengers.’ When we show hospitality to strangers, part of that hospitality is an opening, not only of your home, but your heart and mind. We are called to be open to the message they bring.

How do we welcome the voices of our sisters and brothers, devastated daily by the effects of climate disruption? Disruption, not ‘warming’, which sounds nice and nebulous. Who wouldn’t want a little warmth? Increasing climate chaos is their lived experience, so when we offer humanitarian aid after the next disaster, when we give money to help the rebuilding effort yet again, will we also offer our change – serious, strong climate targets, buying less ‘stuff’, commitment to renewables and walking away from fossil fuels? If we truly entertain angels, we open our homes (including our planet home), our hearts and our ears to the urgent message they bring.

And we must be willing to sacrifice. ‘Thusia’ is the word for sacrifice, an offering to God, not aligning to your vision, but God’s. Thusia is a gift, not on your own terms, but on God’s terms and that explodes the boundaries! Being good and compassionate on God’s terms, not our own, surely calls for a wideness and generosity that challenges our narrow confines. When we open the door of our hearts and minds to messengers who call us to thusia, if we hear, we will act. If we ignore them, then we may make sacrifices distilled down within our self-imposed, community-imposed, life-style imposed confines, but we will not offer ‘thusia’ and the messenger has spoken in vain.

‘Anoté’s Ark’ a film by Matthieu Rytz, chronicles the work of Anote Tong, former President of the island of Kiribati. Kiribati is a Pacific island nation, home to 100,000 people and 4,000 years of rich culture; yet it is slipping into the sea and will be gone forever due to the ravages of climate change. In an interview, President Tong commented that for the first time in history we know the damage climate change is doing and it is the last time in history we will be able to stop it. He went further to challenge the ‘developed’ countries whose consumption is driving climate change. His words are powerful! When you know what you are doing is harming someone else and you continue to do it, it is assault. Will we stop assaulting our sisters and brothers and our planet home? What sacrifice – thusia – is that challenge calling for? We should consider God’s terms, not ours.

## [Luke 14:1, 7-14](#)

Power and entitlement – how often the edges blur, balance goes off kilter and those in power, so blinkered by it, do not even see the others involved.

A local group was selling the idea of a homeless shelter to the owner of a large, profitable construction company. They were looking for board members who brought relevant skills to the table. With connections to the building industry, expertise in navigating the maze of planning applications and avoiding the pitfalls of falling foul of regulations, he had a lot to offer. But his first question when approached was “what’s in it for me?” The answer, coming from the local minister who was also on the board, was, “absolutely nothing – and that’s exactly why you should do it.”

And the thoughts go further than ‘there’s an opportunity to pay back some of your good fortune.’ It is a question about the assuming of power, the centralisation of influence, that, in order to thrive, takes agency from others. Today, we face the time-bound, justice-fuelled challenge of climate change and a ‘Just Transition’ to sustainable human development. The focus on climate change drives this concept forward, but it is deeply spiritual. Our current economic structures view the world as a consumer’s paradise – for those who can afford it. This extractive view gave birth to colonialism and consumerism, a dangerous twinning. Jesus, in our story, calls us to consider our space, to sit sensibly alongside others, not assuming we have the right to more than our share. Through this story, we are called to invite, not those already in on the deal, but those who have been excluded, those whose voices have been stifled, whose power grabbed. A just transition challenges a top-heavy economic model where a few hold control, while the many form the shaky platform on which they stand. In countries struggling to develop sustainably, a just transition does not so much give power as give back power we never should have had in the first place – power to cherish their environment, to build a strong and lasting infrastructure, to sit with equitable voice round the decision-making table.

It says at the end of the passage that we will ‘be repaid at the resurrection of the righteous’. Perhaps we will all contribute to the resurrection of our planet.

## Sermon ideas

Hospitality is the most primal of all human virtues. In each moment of life, we are guests: from the warm dark hospitality of the womb, to the welcome of the good Earth in our grave.

Why does care for the stranger seem to us a departure from natural inclination, when collaboration and mutual consideration arguably contribute to the survival of a species? Why do we need to be reminded?

The wisdom of hospitality goes deep. It's not just 'nice,' but vital to our place on earth, in partnership with all life. If you can't see the benefit of biodiversity, you're not looking, but please don't let it be reduced to an idea which is ornamental or quaint. Creation confronts us with beauty, yes, but also with pain and terror and mystery. Mystery that faithful people encounter with trust, with faith, with love. We may find fellow creatures lovely or repellent. But we need them. And perhaps – although only if we're doing what we're here for, to be stewards or partners in God's family business – they also need us.

It should be no surprise that Jesus locates holiness in hospitality. Our 'humanity' is developed and rooted in our care for the outsider, the elderly and the infirm. Selfishness and hatred of foreigners, by contrast, is toxic and self-defeating; a false friend to our species. The vision of Jeremiah rightly associates it with false and damaging gods and idols. Indeed, Jeremiah encounters the injured astonishment of God at the inhospitable nature of the people God thought God knew. God, the Creator, source of goodness and wisdom, is aghast at how 'Jacob's family' prefers to seek out those who have declared themselves enemies, and put energy into projects with no future: water tanks that simply leak. Extinction is knowingly chosen and manufactured; insecticides with which we are knowingly wiping out the pollinators – without whom we cannot grow the food we rely on, and systems of international law permit the manufacturers of such toxicity to take to court entire sovereign nations.

The benefits of mutual care cannot be assessed or limited to any single occasion. The God-given right of a species to exist cannot be reduced to marketable value. It is madness to 'marketise' the visit of a midwife or the work of a conservation ranger in units of care. Hospitality also belongs with humility: no one only gives – everyone also always receives, from the air we breathe, gifted by the work of the trees, to the water of life that we share as it becomes part of our bodies, then passes on: a gift from the dawn of the universe, from the eternal hospitality of God the Creator.

## Time with children

You could examine the theme of hospitality in partnership with fellow creatures:

- Make, examine, visit, design on paper, or build with a place of appropriate hospitality for insects: a bug hotel, or maybe a birdhouse, e.g. [www.rspb.org.uk/build-a-bug-hotel](http://www.rspb.org.uk/build-a-bug-hotel)  
Point out that insects are vital to our survival, and that these projects are not just selfless generosity, but a partnership with God and fellow creatures.
- Find an earthworm: see how it moves, but return it to the soil to do its work, helping the plants to grow.
- Think about planting some wild flowers on the premises, or go and say 'thank you' to them, if you have already taken this step.
- Read the Hebrews passage and think about people: visitors who have come to the church – perhaps there were some angels amongst them. Perhaps there were messengers among them.
- Who might the messengers be that we should listen to? Who's voice do we listen to in particular? Who's voice do we ignore or perhaps even attempt to silence? What message do you think is important for us to hear?
- What do churches, schools, and other places of hospitality do to make it easy for guests, visitors, and those in need to be part of our life together?
- What do we need to do to help people to be heard and to recognise important messages?
- If we have a party, how can we make sure that everyone is included? If we don't manage to do that, how does that make us feel?

Finish with a prayer:

God who makes and welcomes all living things  
Show us the joy of finding our place  
in the party of Your Creation:  
birds and bees and bugs and more.  
Help us to live thankfully:

giving and getting  
resting and working.  
And when we're together,  
safe as a church family,  
treating the visitors  
like angels –  
just in case.  
Amen

## Prayers

### **Prayer of Approach – Luke14:1, 7-14**

Living God, You invite us to the feast of life,  
where all are made welcome and all are satisfied with good things.  
We praise You for the abundance of the world You have created  
that can provide for all our needs if we use Your gifts wisely  
and are conscious not just of our own needs  
but the needs of others too.

We thank You for the gift of food,  
for the nourishment it brings to our bodies,  
for its crucial role in our health and wellbeing,  
for the delight of texture and taste and aroma.  
We thank You for the wide variety of foods we enjoy  
and the memories and connections different foods have with times and seasons.  
Help us not to take our food for granted,  
nor to waste what we have  
and to remember with thanksgiving all who work to produce and serve our food.

We thank You for the gift of company,  
of fellowship around the table;  
whether it be a great family feast  
or the breaking of bread together as a community of faith.  
Through the sharing of food  
may our relationships deepen  
and may our tables be places of laughter and community,  
of gratitude and thanksgiving for Your many gifts to us.

Living God You invite us to the feast of life,

where all are made welcome and all are satisfied with good things.  
As we take our place at Your kingdom banquet  
may our arms be open to welcome all who want to feast,  
may our hearts be open to receive Your nourishment,  
and may our trust be sufficient to need only our daily bread.  
Amen.

### **The Joy in Enough confession**

*The richest 10% of the world's population are responsible for half of the carbon emissions. Anyone with an annual income of over £10,745 is in that richest 10%. Not every Christian in Britain is overconsuming. Some do not have enough. Taken as a whole however, the church in Britain is affluent. Richer countries such as Britain use more resources, produce more waste, and cause more climate disruption. And yet there is little evidence that consuming so much makes us happy and fulfilled.*

*The Joy in Enough confession is a call to the church in Britain to acknowledge our complicity in consumerism and climate change, and to use the season of Lent to talk about these topics as a community. It is a call to repent, and to seek contentment, justice and a life in balance with the natural world. It is a call to freedom from the endless want-creation of consumerism, and to find joy in enough.*

Our climate is changing, and we are changing it.  
We confess our carbon footprints, our refusal to consider the consequences of our actions, our slowness to react.  
We are sorry for all the times we knew the right thing to do, but chose convenience.

Your earth is exploited, and we are complicit in its exploitation.  
Species are lost, soil erodes, fish stocks decline, and resources dwindle.  
We confess that many of us have taken too much, and not considered the needs of future generations.

We have become consumers.  
We have turned a blind eye to greed.  
We confess our hunger for more, and our refusal to appreciate what we already have.  
We live in a time of unparalleled luxury, and we are sorry that we have not been more grateful.

The poor are left behind, even in this age of plenty.  
Human rights are pushed aside for profit.

Wealth accumulates for the rich while the poorest still do not have what they need.  
We confess our apathy to injustice, and our haste in judging others.

This is not who You made us to be.  
We have not been good caretakers of Your garden Earth.  
We have not loved our neighbours.  
Forgive us, creator God.

Forgive us. Renew us. Inspire us.  
And in Your strength, God, we declare:

Enough climate change:  
Help us to take responsibility.  
Give us the wisdom to live appropriately, the urgency to act, and the courage to make changes.  
Give us the voice to call for change from our leaders, and the perseverance to keep asking.

Enough consumerism:  
Give us what we need, God our provider.  
Then help us to find satisfaction and contentment.  
Help us to be grateful and generous.

Enough inequality:  
Nobody should be left behind.  
You care for the poor, and we want to follow Your example.  
Make Your church a living example of equity and inclusion,  
and a powerful advocate for justice and sharing.

We thank You for Your kindness and Your mercy.  
We look to Your promise of restoration, and we move forward.  
Give us the strength to speak and to act –  
not out of guilt or duty, for we are forgiven and we are loved.  
Instead, we speak and act out of joy:

Joy in the living hope of knowing You.

Joy in serving each other.

Joy in the beauty and diversity of creation, Your gift to us.

Joy in Your provision and Your care – joy in enough.

## Musical suggestions

You can listen to samples of these suggestions in the 'Weekly Worship' section of <https://music.churchofscotland.org.uk/>. This new online music resource will allow you to listen to and search the breadth of music available in the Church Hymnary 4th edition (CH4). You will find hidden gems and alternative arrangements to familiar songs that will inspire creativity and spark fresh curiosity about how we best use music in worship.

- CH4 153 – “Great is thy faithfulness” – God’s faithfulness and creation
- CH4 167 – “Guide me O thou great Jehovah, pilgrim through this barren land”
- CH4 198 – “Let us build a house”
- CH4 122 – “Let all the world in every corner sing”
- CH4 689 – “Just as the tide creeps over silver sand”
- CH4 171 – “Take up the song”
- “Hymn for a green church” – by Anna Briggs. Found in ‘A Heart for Creation’ by Chris Polhill – available from Wild Goose Publications.
- “Come to the Party” – A new hymn, sung to the tune of *Blessed Assurance* (CH4 561)

1. Come to the party: all have a place  
ev’ry bright species, the whole human race  
God as the host for Jesus invites  
though much is broken, still God delights

Now is the challenge: will you attend  
Prophets and scientists: all whom God sends  
Stories and readings, parables keen  
Life in abundance? Not guaranteed?

2. Jesus told stories, from daily life  
learning from trees, birds, from need and from strife  
powerful his pictures, lovely his words:  
prizing you even more than the birds.  
If you're a 'work in progress', rejoice:  
Walking the Way begins with a choice.  
warnings abound, what more do you need?  
air that we breathe starts from a green seed!

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