

Fourteenth Sunday after Pentecost

Fourteenth Sunday after Pentecost – 15 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 4:11-12, 22-28](#)

The future looks bleak for the people.

God's people have sinned against God and judgement is coming! Jeremiah has, in previous chapters, called on the people to repent but without success. The passage uses language which echoes Genesis Chapter 1, but here it speaks of reversing creation. We read in Genesis: 'In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth. Now the earth was formless and empty, darkness was over the surface of the deep, and the Spirit of God was hovering over the waters. And God said, "Let there be light," and there was light.' Contrast these words with this passage by Jeremiah: 'I looked on the earth, and lo, it was waste and void; and to the heavens, and they had no light.' The first act of God in creation is to be undone – light will disappear. Nor will there be birds of the air and the land will be turned to a desert. Creation destroyed.

The disaster is punishment for sin but yet there remains a faint hope. God refers to the people as 'my people' and at v.27, 'yet I will not make a full end.'

Today the greed of humankind is pushing the world closer and closer to the end of creation. Humankind is demonstrating that it is not a good steward of the gifts God has bestowed upon us.

Questions to consider:

Who do you blame for the increasingly grave issue of global warming?

How seriously do you consider the part you play in bringing about climate change?

Psalm 14

In discussing this passage commentators make reference to David's relationship with Nabal (1 Sam:25). Nabal was a man who refused to offer David and his men provisions despite the fact they were protecting his property. The name 'Nabal' means 'fool' and is the word used to describe God's people in Psalm 14. However, the word 'fool' does not refer to a person's intellectual ability, it refers instead to their (lack of) moral standards.

The Bible makes it clear that the fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom, but in this psalm the root of foolishness is the rejection of God. 'The fool has said in his heart, "There is no God."' Given the language, the passage is telling us that rejection of God means rejection of moral standards.

In the context of the challenges we face over global warning it is so easy to blame oil companies. We tend to view them as money-grabbing international institutions bereft of all morals. They are the 'fools'.

However it might be worthwhile to pause and consider that these companies are made up of people. People who for the most part are looking to provide for their families. People who are extremely conscious of the need to develop alternative forms of energy. People who are employed to provide the energy demanded by.....?

We are all called to be stewards of God's creation. We, who are fortunate enough to live in the West, tend to be a little foolish in our management of it to the detriment of our brothers and sisters elsewhere in the world. Perhaps, just perhaps, instead of blaming the multinational oil companies for the situation we find ourselves in we should be asking ourselves questions such as:

- Is it foolish to take the car when I could walk?
- Is it foolish to take the car when a bus is available?

- Is it foolish to heat our homes excessively or leave lights on in empty rooms?
- Is it foolish to run a heavier 'SUV' type car, when a smaller hatchback has as much room inside but uses less fuel?
- How foolish is it to blame oil companies when we create the demand for more and more energy?

Exodus 32:7-14 (Alternative reading)

This passage begins by making it perfectly clear that the people have broken the first commandment, 'You shall have no other gods...' Consequently, God's wrath is centred on the people, who are to be punished severely. In verse 1 the people are no longer described as God's people. In words reminiscent of a fight between a couple over the behaviour of one of their children, the words change from "Look what your son has done now" (which implies some responsibility lies with the other parent), to, "Your people whom you brought up out of the land of Egypt." The people are Moses' responsibility.

Moses pleads with God and consequently God's mind is changed. Interestingly, this is not because the people change their ways, God's mind is changed because of Moses' petitions. As Brian C Jones writes: 'The passionate, persuadable God portrayed in this passage is in accord with "the Crucified God" (Moltmann) of the New Testament. Humans cause God grief and suffering, but God does not withdraw or give up. In costly love, God embraces humanity, though pierced in the act. God suffers none to be lost, but pursues each wandering lamb, frantically searches for each lost coin. And when the lost turn back, God's heart is glad.'

There is a great deal of teaching centred on the first commandment. We are taught to consider who or what our other gods might be. Youth groups might be asked how much members 'worship' the latest high flying band or artist. I have heard adults being asked to consider the place of money, or even the golf club in their hierarchy of requirements or needs. Are such things the gods they worship?

Today, perhaps it is wise to question whether our demand for energy reveals our love affair with another 'god'. Of course we need energy, the whole world needs energy. However the entire world, ourselves included, requires clean energy. If humankind does not make the shift, God's creation will change and many, many species will cease to exist.

There is hope. It would appear that the worship of money and the worship of energy can be used together to bring about change. In Norway almost 50% of new cars sold are now electric. This sea change in car use was brought about by financial incentives introduced by the Government (despite it being the largest shareholder in Norway's oil industry).

We may not be able to break our thirst for energy on our own, but our true God is not going to abandon us. Moses petitioned God for a change of mind over punishing the people. We can petition God through our prayers to bring about change either on a personal or national level through high level policy.

Psalm 51:1-11 (Alternative reading)

This reading stands well apart from the others set out for the day. Here is a heartfelt plea for forgiveness. In contrast to the other readings, none of which offer a sniff of repentance for the behaviour of God's people, here is a man you can imagine being on his knees, racked with guilt over his behaviour.

The man in question is David and this psalm is his response to the challenge made by the prophet Nathan over his adulterous behaviour. The story of David and Bathsheba is a well-known one. While his armies are away fighting, David sees Bathsheba, the wife of one of his generals, bathing in a rooftop pool. He sends for her and commits adultery. He consequently arranges to have her husband placed in the position of greatest danger on the battlefield in order to have him killed.

Despite his deplorable actions he approaches God, knowing God possesses 'loving kindness' and 'great compassion.'

David is only too aware of his 'transgressions' but interestingly in v.4 he states, 'Against you only have I sinned'. This follows Old Testament teaching where sins against others are regarded as sins against God (Genesis 39:3, 2 Samuel 12:3).

At v.8 David once again asks God to cleanse him from his sin and goes on to ask God to 'Create in me a clean heart, O God, and renew a right spirit within me.'

This psalm teaches us a great deal about repentance. Hopefully we will not commit such a heinous crime as David but none of us are perfect. We fall short in our dealing with others and our unwillingness to cut down our energy use means others in the world are suffering. May we learn repentance from David and as willing to approach our forgiving God for cleansing and a change of heart.

1 Timothy 1:12-17

At the beginning of this letter from Paul, Timothy is reminded that Paul had asked him to stay at Ephesus to try to stop the teaching of 'strange doctrines' that could raise doubts rather than advance God's designs. Now Paul offers himself as an example of someone who once acted in ignorance before becoming a believer.

All humanity has perhaps been acting in ignorance since the beginning of the industrial revolution. Our use of fossil fuels, our development of plastics, our ability to produce consumer goods quickly and cheaply – these have all led to the very 'strange doctrine' of a throwaway society.

God gifted us the earth, but we are choking that precious gift to death. In our role as stewards of the planet, we have to admit that we are each contributing to the injury of our God-given home.

But as St Paul tells Timothy, Christ Jesus made him the 'greatest evidence' of His patience for those who turn their lives around. We know the speed of St Paul's own conversion from a sinner 'acting in ignorance' to a man of faith, working in the service of the Lord. In this time of climate crisis, our own service must be to put into action and with all speed the actions and policies that will put the brakes on climate chaos.

The text's emphasis is on the rewards offered to those who turn around damaging behaviour. It offers an opportunity to give examples of the positive actions we can all take to reverse environmental damage. Urban and rural areas have different opportunities to reuse and recycle. Setting up local 'swap' groups on social media contributes to both reuse and recycling. Urging people to sign petitions and use their vote to ensure the best carbon reduction policies also emphasises St Paul's main concept of the rewards for turning around damaging behaviour. We can turn around our own lack of care for the environment, and seek to influence global doctrines that perpetuate the damage.

Luke 15:1-10

In Luke's Gospel, the parable about the rejoicing over the finding of one lost sheep, one lost drachma, suggests how precious to the Lord is the damaged soul, the marginalised brother or sister.

We learn from the World Bank that climate change, which has already caused huge migration from areas affected by water scarcity, crop failure and rising sea levels, may cause as many as 143 million people to be displaced by 2050.

Those 'lost sheep' will come from just three of the world's 'hot spot' regions, but will account for 55% of the developing world's population. And Jesus' parable tells us that every single one of them will be precious in His eyes. However, like the Pharisees at the start of Luke's Gospel who complain about Jesus inviting in tax collectors and sinners to eat with Him, the wealthy countries don't want anything to do with the marginalised – the sheep strayed from its own pasture. The developed world may be responsible for the most greenhouse gas emissions, but when it comes to helping those most affected by the emissions, the rich countries send migrants away hungry.

Our faith shouldn't allow that to happen.

There are two ways of helping the sheep that are lost – no longer one lamb to be slung around a thankful shepherd's shoulder, but hundreds of millions fleeing from the wolf that is climate chaos.

We must welcome them in as our sisters and brothers, joyful that we still have something to share with those driven from their own pastures.

But we must also take immediate action to search out the best way to quickly reduce harmful emissions.

We must diligently search for, and act on, ways to halt the effects of climate change or it will engulf not only the world from which the migrants are fleeing, but all of us. The world our Father placed in our hands to care for and cherish will become a barren wasteland unless we become a voice for the voiceless, persuading our leaders to act justly, for the good of all humankind.

Sermon ideas – (Luke 15, Psalm 51)

The only point in churches going on about 'sin' - *that is, about the things that disrupt our partnership with God and the Earth* - is to be free of it, and to live better, for the good of Creation and the glory of God.

Becoming painfully aware of what, in individual or corporate life, could be better, is pointless if it disables us with guilt, despair or grief. The lost stay lost. Heaven remains glum and joyless.

This is why confession – confronting our intentional and knowing negligence and actively harmful behaviour – is no trivial matter. The large-scale matter of climate emergency and effects on a global scale concern our species as a whole, though those with the most power undeniably carry the most responsibility. All of us participate, though some unwillingly, to a greater or lesser extent, in the destruction of life.

Does this put us outside the scope of God's love and encouragement? The parables would suggest otherwise.

We should also be clear that 'sin' and 'crime' are different, though overlapping categories. The civil rights movement, and the well-meaning non-violent law-breaking by the radical environmental movements of today have no intention to cause harm. Rather they enter into these actions with loving intent, accepting the sanctions of the law as part of the cost of 'good news' for Creation.

We are aware too of toxic 'unwritten' codes of exclusion which, irrespective of law or religious teaching, can result in the 'loss' of the distinctive contribution of those with a different view, ability, race, class, or gender identity. Human and biological diversity.

Jesus' stories of redemption of the Lost call out the hypocrisy of these attitudes, and inspire hope for change; for a fresh start. Careful reading of the Gospels will reveal Jesus' habit of offering **forgiveness first**, before any 'penitential' action was undertaken. Thus the grovelling of Psalm 51 must be handled with extreme care. To wallow in guilt is a luxury, and ultimately an excuse. The devastation of our world is tragic, shocking, criminal and sinful, and humankind is, taken as a species, to blame. Healing, not vengeance and punishment, is the priority of the Good Shepherd, and the housewife, who, having found just the one lost coin, blows a fortune on a party to celebrate.

Time with children

The contribution of children, calling the adult world to account, has been moving and challenging this year, leading on from the 'school-strikes' led by Swedish schoolgirl Greta Thunberg.

You can watch a video of her speech on YouTube:

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=H6zw_dHUWjM

Within the bounds of possibility, and having checked with the leader of worship, consider, perhaps, some sort of 'Sunday-school strike': what real steps/changes might the children want to see in the church?

What has already been done, that they can be happy about?

Do they appreciate the cost and difficulty of change, and are they prepared to share it in some way.

Is there someone in their school, in society, or in the church, who has given them encouragement to speak out, or act, or make a change to help our partnership with creation?

Prayers

Prayer of Approach – Psalm 51:10

Have mercy upon us, O God, according to Your steadfast love.

We have gathered here to worship You,
to offer You our thanks and praise for the many blessings of Your love.

For the gifts of community through which we support one another, we praise You.

For the gifts of faith in which we are nurtured and which guide our daily living,
we praise You.

For the gifts of Your creation, which provides nourishment for our bodies and food for our
souls,
we praise You.

As we gather, create in each of us a clean heart O God,

Hearts which seek to worship You at every opportunity,

Hearts which seek to recognise You in every person,

Hearts which seek to follow You every day of life,

Hearts which put You at the centre of our being.

Create in us a clean heart, O God and put a new and right spirit within us.

Renew our spirits to work for justice, peace and the integrity of creation.

Renew our spirits to share our gifts and talents freely with others,

Renew our spirits to love and live abundantly,

Renew our spirits so that we may journey faithfully; 'walking the way, living the life of Jesus today'. (1)

Amen

[1] 'Walking the way, living the life of Jesus today' is the strapline of the United Reformed Church's focus on missional discipleship.

Prayer of confession – Luke 15:1-10

A shepherd went out looking for his sheep in the night and carried it home on his shoulders. A woman searched every nook and cranny of her house until she found the coin which had gone missing.

Gracious God,

we confess that there are times when we do not have the perseverance or determination of the shepherd or the woman.

There are times when we are tired and the search involves too much effort, too much disruption and we do not regard that which is lost sufficiently valuable to continue.

This Creation Time

we confess our complicity in all that our common home has lost and which we have not made sufficient effort to find or keep safe.

For species lost through disappearing habitats,
for biodiversity lost through deforestation and agri-business,
for precious resources lost through our single-use, throwaway culture,

for ozone lost through our continuing reliance on fossil fuels.

Forgive us
when we have given up searching for that which is lost.

Re-energise us
with the perseverance and determination that we need for the task.

Reassure us through the words of Jesus
'I tell you there is joy in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents.'

Thanks be to God.
Amen

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.

- Psalm 23 – e.g. CH4 14,15,16,17
- CH4 150 – “Sing to God with gladness”
- CH4 554 – “Rock of Ages”
- CH4 555 – “Amazing grace”
- CH4 55 – “There is a redeemer”
- CH4 565 – “How can I keep from singing”

New words to sing to the tune of “Colours of Day (Light up the Fire)”

When God says ‘no’, and yet God says ‘yes’;
And When God says ‘go’, but cares nonetheless;

When exiled, when travelling, we're forced to roam
Though homeless, in jeopardy, we look to home

Chorus

**For we are one nation from every land
We are the outcasts held in God's hand
We're found when we're lost, far more than we see
Though God is a mystery: Christ makes us free!**

Come the dark days, we fear to set out:
Old certainties fail, we're tested by doubt.
From out of the depths, our cry will be heard
Solidarity strengthens, breaks open your Word.

Families reject, and peoples exclude.
The seductions of prejudice feed every feud
When scripture's enlisted, twisted for hate
then fools like us hope, and discover God's great

Secrets and lies will all come to light
with nowhere to hide, then evil takes flight
God's foolishness trumps the world's common sense
Compassion the truth, and revenge the pretence

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