

## **Fifteenth Sunday after Pentecost**

### **Fifteenth Sunday after Pentecost – 22 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 8:18-9:1](#)**

For several reasons, Jeremiah seems the most relevant prophet of the Old Testament to our ecological crisis.

Firstly, he unambiguously clarified that a disaster such as the extraordinary drought in Jeremiah 14 is not natural; rather it is an unnatural catastrophe. It is a direct consequence of Israel's moral failure and unrighteousness. Today we more and more frequently have to face weather-related catastrophes such as hurricanes, floods, or droughts. Do we recognise the roots of these in our unnatural lifestyle and environmental irresponsibility?

Secondly, he knew that there was no hope for escaping from the collapse – very much like our situation. He was a man under no illusion, though he suffered together with his community (Jeremiah 32).

And thirdly, he unveiled and condemned consumerism when he spoke against idolatry, in chapter 8. The people of Israel provoked God to anger with their images, with their foreign idols. Baal, the main idol worshipped in Israel, was a god of fertility, productiveness, and richness. Its image embodied all desire that we want to obtain in our society. Baal was the ruler and motor of the ancient notion of Gross Domestic Product (GDP). People thought

that the more they invested in a god of productiveness, the more they benefitted economically and financially. This is why the drought later had become a hard and relevant answer for the worship of Baal. They expected rain and agricultural prosperity, but they just gained fields of crops that died out.

However, the people in our text still had a positive and hopeful expectation of summer, harvest and agricultural prosperity. Jeremiah put his finger on the problem of prosperity when he cried: “The harvest is past, the summer is ended, and we are not saved” (v.20). Even if there was a good harvest with fruits, and even if the work had been done, the salvation had not been achieved yet. Simply it means that prosperity itself cannot save the people.

It is not just a lament over the coming disaster, but it reflects on the distorted and technical view of Israel on salvation. Jeremiah earlier raised the question of false gods with the same verb for saving (yasha – save): “But where are your gods that you made for yourself? Let them arise, if they can save you, in your time of trouble” (Jeremiah 2:28). We often think that one can be saved from the pursuit of profit through coining enough money. But it is never enough, and the vicious circle of consumerism demands more resources from the earth, more energy from the worker, and more time from the personal relationships.

True salvation is given, and only given by our Saviour Jesus, who provides balm as physician (v.22), and water of eternal life. If we accept His acceptance, then we are free from the idol of exploitation. And it is not just an individual and heavenly issue, but also corporate and earthly.

*“When I consider the state of the world, the total obscurity enshrouding our personal destiny, and my present imprisonment, our union—if it wasn’t frivolity, which it certainly wasn’t—can only be a token of God’s grace and goodness, which summon us to believe in him. We would have to be blind not to see that. When Jeremiah said, in his people’s hour of direst need, that “houses and fields [and vineyards] shall again be bought in this land,” it was a token of confidence in the future. That requires faith, and may God grant it to us daily. I don’t mean the faith that flees the world, but the faith that endures in the world and loves and remains true to that world in spite of all the hardships it brings us. Our marriage must be a ‘yes’ to God’s earth. It must strengthen our resolve to do and accomplish something on earth. I fear that Christians who venture to stand on earth on only one leg will stand in heaven on only one leg too.” (D Bonhoeffer, Letter on 12 Aug 1943).*

## **Psalm 79:1-9**

The Psalms are uncensored. This poetic record of desperate emotion perhaps recalls a brutal, humiliating and indiscriminate attack by the Chaldeans, which smashed the pride and joy of the Holy City. And Jesus' love for enemies is still centuries away.

We search in vain for some wholesome environmental message: the work of scavenging wildlife feeding on the dead only adds insult to injury, and the bitter and self-destructive desire for revenge smoulders alongside the despairing, painful cry to God. Foreigners and heathens are evil. Why does God not justly inflict this misery on them instead?

And yet the tone turns. The suspicion creeps in that catastrophe might have, in some way have been self-inflicted.

And at this point, the pride, the vengefulness, and the futile bargaining gives way, for a while, to a humble plea for help.

The Psalms remain uncensored. We can't pretend that the writers are perfect, always saying and doing "the Christian thing". But alongside the agony of the voice we hear in this ancient song, is a call to reflect with faithfulness on the futility and vulnerability of the things we have most relied on.

And the damage already done to the world and our fellow creatures by our 'past and present sins' would be cause enough for a new Psalm of horror. Plummeting numbers of mammals, reptiles, amphibians, birds and fish around the world are an urgent sign that nature needs life support. Our fellow creatures have been "brought very low". The 2018 ['Our Living Planet Report'](#) from WWF shows population sizes of wildlife decreased by 60% globally between 1970 and 2014.

Isn't it time we stopped and asked for God's help?

## **Amos 8:4-7 (Alternative Reading)**

How do we read this passage as relevant to our world today? Much of the current migration of peoples towards Europe is to do with the shortage of water, the changes in climate, the impossibility of making a living for a family. Are we the ones trampling the poor through the cost to the planet of our lifestyle? When we eat the fruits of the earth, and clothe ourselves in garments of wool or other fibres, are we respecting the makers or

selling them short economically? What if we changed places and walked in the sandals of the needy?

Amos comes to us from a time of plenty. Yet this prophet, a literate shepherd and tree-tender but not one of the professional prophet class, is the earliest to tell us many things that later prophets returned to. The urgency of Amos rings down the centuries: God is the God of the entire universe and created every person out of love, we are all equal in God's sight, and God is the only god there is. Everybody matters, as does the whole of God's creation. But the cries of the poor go unheard by their neighbours. Where wealth and power are spread unevenly so that many cannot thrive, it is the responsibility of the comfortable to challenge, to turn back to equality. We are part of the natural world, the cycle of what has been created with a place for each of us – and meddling with this is denying the poor. God requires justice of us, and does not forget the good or the evil that we do. We are called to repentance, to changing our ways; and to accepting God's forgiveness from the poor.

### **Psalm 113 (Alternative reading)**

There are some pretty grim readings in the Lectionary this Creation Time, but if you need a boost, pick Psalm 113. Get carried away with praise. This is what we are made for: joining the song and the party with sun, moon, heaven and earth. It gives us a whole day's joy; it spans the horizon of our human experience and invites humankind to find our place in the magnitude of the exultant praise offered by Creation. Totally integral to all this awe, wonder and praise is the subverting of human systems of injustice, equality and disadvantage by the determined action of the Creator God. Wherever you see this happening, God is at work there ... Join in!

I wonder if the noses of the princes of ancient Jerusalem were put out of joint by the prospect, even in this song, of the poor from the dust of the street being set on a level with them. Here is a great God who reaches down to get involved in the messes that people find themselves in. We've got a few today! All our power and politics are put in perspective by God, set 'above' it all. The scope of God's love is both global and micro-local. It takes a lot for that to sink in.

Like young St Augustine, who prayed that God might make him "pure, but not yet", we want to be "green/equal/just/sustainable/fossil-free, but not yet". The mood of this psalm takes away such inhibitions. The heavens/the sky and the earth are here conceived together as one creation. Our scientific understanding need not clash or conflict with this poetic vision.

And then the song ends with the joy in new life; in children. Come what may, the love and hope we invest in the generations that come after us are strong and rewarding motivators for our engagement in the urgency of the challenges of today.

By the grace of God, from the rising of the sun to its setting, life goes on. God has not given up on us.

## [1 Timothy 2:1-7](#)

The absence of punctuation in original New Testament manuscripts is always a challenge. The verse numbers added in the 16th century sometimes help. Perhaps this is a case in point.

We begin with the impossible task of praying 'for everyone'. When, however, in the next verse, the scope narrows to those in political leadership, this passage from Timothy becomes a red rag to activists, or because of continual disappointment and frustration, we slide into blanket disillusion with all those who exercise political leadership, which might lead us to disregard these verses entirely.

And yet there is more to say. The rule of law, applied with wisdom and compassion, protects the vulnerable, and applies pressure on all of us to promote sustainability and refrain from actions and habits which damage life.

Is it too much to ask that when we come to vote, we see it as a prayer? And that we give every prayerful and active encouragement to those in authority to make the difficult and unpopular decisions we might not otherwise embrace? Especially on measures to aid in adaptation and the mitigation of climate crisis?

This extract from the United Reformed Church foundational documents can be taken as a commentary on these verses:

We believe that  
Christ gives His Church a government  
distinct from the government of the state.  
In things that affect obedience to God  
the Church is not subordinate to the state,  
but must serve the Lord Jesus Christ,  
its only Ruler and Head.

Civil authorities are called  
to serve God's will of justice and peace  
for all humankind,  
and to respect the rights of conscience and belief  
while we ourselves  
are servants in the world  
as citizens  
of God's eternal kingdom.

### [Luke 16:1-13](#) – The steward of dishonest wealth

If I had to choose just one parable for Creation Time, this would be it.

Is this the sort of stewardship we are actually called to: lovable rogues, rather than grim rule-keepers who collaborate with oppression and environmental disaster?

This story is a gift for our day: both with Jesus' characteristic admonition to 'Children of Light' to reclaim craftiness as a Gospel virtue, and the description of the wealth that the steward/manager has charge of as 'unjust wealth', set in perspective as a negotiable means to the end of fellowship and hospitality. Wealth is not neutral.

In visiting many churches as Eco chaplain, I have had to attend to a frail vision of Christian character as *Children of the Light*, who never dare rock the boat.

Jesus sent His apostles out like sheep among wolves, needing to keep their wits about them. To be as **harmless** as pigeons/doves, but also as crafty as snakes.

Most church folk have '*done the dove*'. It's time to '*be more snake*', as Jesus, in the postscript, makes pretty clear.

It is well established that fossil fuel companies in the past have heavily funded the denial of climate change and its devastating effects. Faithfulness to "wealth-of-dubious-justice" gives rise to wilful deception, taking advantage of ignorance and gullibility.

In the Niger Delta in Nigeria, for instance, the people of the land have derived no benefit, but much hardship from the exploitation of mineral wealth.

Please do not assume that the wealthy – and actually unjust – master in this parable is God. After all, the closest we have got to meeting God face to face is in a poor, and possibly redundant carpenter.

No, this master is a ‘wolf’, a predator. He’s not bothered whether the reports are true: the mere accusation is enough for him to yell, ‘You’re fired!’ (Although clearly there’s a custom of ‘working your notice’ taken for granted in the story, through which the steward triumphs.) Sometimes it seems that wealth is the only value we are permitted to espouse. The paradigm of indefinite growth at all costs has led us to this cliff-edge, with more frequent disastrous extremes of weather hitting many parts of the planet. The steward is not in trouble because he himself is unjust: injustice lies in the control of wealth that clearly oppresses all those debtors. It may be that he has decided he may as well be ‘hung for a sheep as a lamb’, and so it may be only in his exit strategy that he lives up to the accusations of a form of ‘dishonesty’.

What does Jesus mean when he talks about ‘faithfulness with dishonest wealth?’ If the right master to serve, exclusively, is God, then the crafty generosity, which liberates from hardship, is faithfulness to the God who values God’s people, creatures and planet.

### **Sermon ideas** – Luke 16:1-13

- This parable is unique to Luke’s gospel, like others that turn our usual expectations on their head (the Good Samaritan, the Prodigal Son, the rich man and Lazarus). They all emphasise the significance of human relationships, and the ‘God’ figure displays emotions accordingly. What do these stories tell us?
- Is the Master of the house God? Are we expected to consider God in human terms like the other characters? What is God’s relationship to honesty and dishonesty? What is the moral position of the people who had their debts reduced? What was the steward commended for?
- Money and material goods form the subject of the greatest number of parables. What is the purpose of wealth and how are we meant to deal with it? Does the way in which God is depicted as turning over expected opinion (like overturning the tables of the money-changers) give us guidance for personal values or for public action?
- In a world with finite resources and ever-increasing inequality, how do we restore a more equitable world order?

- The early Christians who first heard these parables were part of a world order where some were wealthy, some were managers, and many were slaves; women were subordinate and life choices were limited. How did they react and in what ways are we similarly in a position of slavery to an international consumerist order – and how do we break out? How do we emphasise that the economy (our housekeeping) is there to underpin but not to lead us?

## Time with children

### *It's not fair!*

Does your school have a student council? If it does, or you'd like there to be one, what would you do if something like the following scenario happened?

Lots of pupils come to school by bike. Most of the time everything is fine, but there's one pupil who goes into the bike shed at break and takes a bike. They ride it round just outside the school grounds (which isn't allowed) and always put it back. It's really annoying, even though they always put it back when the bell rings.

What are you going to do?

Suggestions:

- Lock the bike shed and only let bike owners know the code
- Tell the teachers that they go out of bounds, so they get into trouble with them instead
- Tell them off because they're so annoying
- Ask them why they do it
- Buy them their own bike
- Something else?

Which option do you choose? Are you all agreed? Why would you do the one you chose? What was the most important thing in your discussion?

Could you write a prayer about your decision?

## Prayers

### **Prayer of Approach – Psalm 113**

People of God, let us praise our God.

Let us join our voices with those of every age and place  
to praise the name of the Lord.

### **Let all the peoples praise You God, let all the peoples praise You**

From north and south and east and west may voices ring with praise.  
From dense tropical forest to barren desert dunes,  
from temperate grasslands to windswept tundra.

### **Let all the peoples praise You God, let all the peoples praise You**

In industrial heartlands and rural smallholdings,  
in hi-tech computer labs and the artist's studio,  
In classroom and hospital,  
in night-shelter and trendy café.

### **Let all the peoples praise You God, let all the peoples praise You**

For there is no one like the Lord our God;  
powerful creating force, maker of heaven and earth  
and yet intimate carer for every part and person of creation.

There is no one like the Lord our God;  
who opts for the poor and brings to the centre those who are brushed aside.

There is no one like the Lord our God;  
who reaches out with tenderness and seeks our wellbeing,  
promising life in its very fullness to all.

### **Let all the peoples praise You God, let all the peoples praise You. Amen**

### **Prayer of Confession** – Luke 16:1-13

Gracious God,  
we confess before You and before each other in this community  
that we have too readily deluded ourselves that we can serve two masters;  
that we can serve both You  
and buy into the justification of wealth creation in our world.

We confess that we have been swept along by society's rhetoric  
that continual growth is the answer to our world's problems;

That we have valued the accumulation of our own possessions  
and personal finance over the needs of others and the abuse of the earth,  
our common home;

That we too often live according to our greed and not our need.

Gracious God,  
You offer us a different vision of Your new heaven and earth  
where resources are shared,  
where land is held in common,  
where all are welcome, regardless of ability to pay,  
and all receive according to their need.

Forgive us our collusion with the dominant messages of our world.

Bless us with commitment to make changes in our lives that seek the common good.

Bless us with courage to enact your vision of a new heaven and a new earth.

The Lord says, "See I am making all things new".

Through Him our sins are forgiven.

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.*

- CH4 530 – “One more step along the world”
- CH4 4 (Psalm 8) – “How excellent in all the earth”
- CH4 5 (Psalm 8) – “O Lord, our Lord, in all the earth”
- CH4 51 (Psalm 80) Lord of Hosts, you chose a vine”
- CH4 73 (Psalm 113) – “Bless the Lord, O saints and servants”
- CH4 240 – “God in his love for us lent us this planet”
- New words sung to the tune of CH4 644, “O Jesus I have promised.” (Wolvercote probably fits best) “Come saints and trouble-makers”

1. Come saints and trouble-makers:  
all passionate with good will;  
as signs emerge; take note now  
the Good News to distil:  
Good News for every creature  
that’s threatened in our day:  
Good News, as in the darkness  
we stumble on our way.
2. Come saints and trouble-makers:  
love with integrity  
the urgency of action  
in solidarity.  
Not what we earn will matter  
nor who deserves to live:  
when partnered with Creation  
to heal and to forgive.

3. Come friends of Jesus, fearful  
of news we daily read:  
who hide behind tradition,  
seek refuge in our creed:  
these very gifts are given  
by grace, to cheer and feed:  
to make of us Christ's creatures:  
the gift the Earth shall need!

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