

Sixteenth Sunday after Pentecost

Sixteenth Sunday after Pentecost – 29 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 32:1-3a, 6-15](#) – Taking prophetic action in times of crisis

Verses 1-2

This is the word that came to Jeremiah from the Lord in the tenth year of King Zedekiah of Judah, which was the eighteenth year of Nebuchadnezzar. At that time the army of the king of Babylon was besieging Jerusalem, and the prophet Jeremiah was confined in the court of the guard that was in the palace of the king of Judah, where King Zedekiah of Judah had confined him.

Comment

The context is the 2nd siege of Jerusalem in 588 BCE. The end was nigh for little Judah, now no longer a dominant power, and with the mighty Babylonian empire knocking hard at the door. Not easy to hang on to the promise given to their forefathers that this land would be theirs in perpetuity.

Questions to discuss or ponder

- Are there similarities to our situation today?
- What mighty powers are threatening our future?
- In what ways do you feel 'confined' in your words and actions as a concerned Christian in Scotland in 2019?

Verses 6-8

Jeremiah said, “The word of the Lord came to me: Hanamel son of your uncle Shallum is going to come to you and say, “Buy my field that is at Anathoth, for the right of redemption by purchase is yours.” Then my cousin Hanamel came to me in the court of the guard, in accordance with the word of the Lord, and said to me, “Buy my field that is at Anathoth in the land of Benjamin, for the right of possession and redemption is yours; buy it for yourself.” Then I knew that this was the word of the Lord.

Comment

Immediately prior to verse 6, Jeremiah has been prophesying doom: *“I am about to give this city into the hands of the king of Babylon, and he will capture it. If you fight against the Babylonians, you will not succeed.”* Then the word of the Lord comes to him, urging him to take practical action – action which makes little sense in the circumstances. Why buy a field when the land is about to be overrun by your enemies?

Questions to discuss or ponder

- Do you sometimes feel like a ‘prophet of doom’ as you speak about the climate emergency and other environmental disasters?
- What practical actions do you believe God is urging you to take?
- Can we have the kind of assurance that says, “Then I knew that this was the word of the Lord.”?

Verses 9-15

And I bought the field at Anathoth from my cousin Hanamel, and weighed out the money to him, seventeen shekels of silver. I signed the deed, sealed it, got witnesses, and weighed the money on scales. Then I took the sealed deed of purchase, containing the terms and conditions, and the open copy; and I gave the deed of purchase to Baruch son of Neriah son of Mahseiah, in the presence of my cousin Hanamel, in the presence of the witnesses who signed the deed of purchase, and in the presence of all the Judeans who were sitting in the court of the guard. In their presence I charged Baruch, saying, Thus says the Lord of hosts, the God of Israel: Take these deeds, both this sealed deed of purchase and this open deed, and put them in an earthenware jar, in order that they may last for a long time. For thus says the Lord of hosts, the God of Israel: Houses and fields and vineyards shall again be bought in this land.

Comment

Some of our actions as Christians are private (Matthew 6:6), and we respect this, but sometimes we are called to act openly and prophetically. Jeremiah followed all the

protocols of his time and society so that there was no doubt about the action he was taking. Heads would shake – what is the fool up to now?

In the light of our current climate emergency, some congregations, like Selkirk Parish Church, have boldly and openly withdrawn money from the Church of Scotland growth fund in protest at their continued policy, which allows investment in the very companies that are driving climate change by exploring for and extracting fossil fuels. This, despite the scientific consensus that tells us that we can no longer do so without causing irreparable harm to the world which was “made through Him and for Him” (Col 1:16).

Questions to discuss or ponder

“In the middle of the city’s impending destruction, Jeremiah makes an investment in the future” (from Frank Yamada, <https://www.workingpreacher.org>).

- In what ways can we invest in the future, despite our concerns?
- As a Christian in Scotland in 2019, what prophetic action are you, or your congregation, taking?
- Are you (and your church) putting resources (time, energy, money) into the future in faith that God wants this world to continue to be “very good” (Gen 1)?

[Psalm 91:1-6, 14-16](#)

There is something incredibly comforting about Psalm 91. From its first verse it invites us to trust ourselves to God’s protection, who will shelter and protect us from all harm. Perhaps unusually for the Psalms the emphasis here is not on human enemies, but from natural or environmental dangers. In many ways we may see this image of God as less the judging God of much of the Old Testament and instead the loving, gentle, reassuring God that Jesus speaks of in the New Testament.

In many Catholic parishes a hymn based on this psalm is often used for funerals and memorials, a reminder for many of God’s certain presence at times of sorrow and anxiety. The extracts from the psalm used here remind us of that presence: “You will find refuge...I will protect...I am with him”.

During Creation Time and our reflections on the environment, it can often be tempting to focus on the dangers and fears of the climate challenge. A report by the IPPR think tank published this spring entitled “[This is a crisis](#)” reminds us of our need for urgent action, while campaigners and activists work hard to wake politicians and people up to the task facing us.

It is urgent. We cannot ignore it. We have to act now. Not just for future generations but for communities and countries already affected. Yet sometimes, in the face of the challenges ahead, it can feel like an overwhelming task that is beyond us.

This is where Psalm 91 comes in. It reminds us that in the midst of the crisis, we are not alone. God is with us in solidarity, binding us close and answering us when we call. As faithful Christians committed to environmental justice it does not give us the option to step back from action but reassures us that when we are deep in the midst, campaigning, challenging, and confronting the status quo, God is with us. We are not alone.

Amos 6:1a, 4-7 (Alternative reading)

I always find myself feeling quite ambivalent about the prophet Amos. Admiring and encouraging of his uncompromising challenge and unwillingness to accept injustice and hypocrisy, while at the same time quite terrified that his challenge is directed at me!

Our passage today, dating from approximately 700 years before the birth of Jesus, warns the people of the upcoming exile to Babylon. His warning however is particularly targeted at the idle rich, who have been the first to benefit from Israel's bounty. Amos declares that they should now be the first to go into exile. This is particularly deserved, he argues, not so much for the self-indulgence described here, but for the failure of the rich to notice or care what is happening to Israel and its people: the "Joseph" named in v6.

This failure is a breakdown of the covenant between God and Israel. A covenant that invites Israel into relationship with God, but requires them to act justly in their relationships with others.

As I read this today I find it speaking to me of our attitude in 21st century Scotland towards the environment and our global neighbours, who are increasingly affected by climate challenges, and the failure on our part to act justly in our relationships with all parts of God's creation.

I am aware that my lifestyle, and that of many like me, needs to change substantially to prevent the catastrophic predictions made by reports from global institutions yet I know I am often like those "at ease in Zion...secure on Mount Samaria". Unnoticing, or at least not responding to what is happening. My over-consumption, comfort and convenience means I should be impacted by climate challenges more, and before, the people of Bangladesh and the Marshall Islands, but I'm not. Amos challenges me on my lack of grief, my failure to notice and my slowness to act. He reminds me that God demands justice and particular

concern for “Joseph”, the poor and the powerless whose voices are ignored, and God demands that of me.

Psalm 146 (Alternative reading)

Hallelujah!

Joy belongs to our recognition of God as Creator. In the face of global or local threat, (which now are so often the same) our churches need to hold on to that blessing.

And the worshipful awe we feel at the marvels and the beauty we may encounter in the Created Order is not in any sense wrongly directed; for the whole Earth, and not just any religious box or building, is full of God’s Glory. But that’s not all. Inseparable from awe and wonder and everything that inspires faith and sustains our hope, is the overriding will of this creator God for justice. Nonetheless, in our day, the resilience and reliability even of Creation itself is undermined. Climate crisis is not at all a ‘*natural*’ and therefore fault-free phenomenon, no, we all have to take responsibility for the part we play in this unnatural reality.

It is thought that this vital link between Creator and justice goes right back to the first recognition of God as Creator. In our time, for us to separate, or to compartmentalise – for instance, climate justice – from a concern for poverty and inequality, must be recognised as illogical, wrong-headed and perhaps even blasphemous.

This psalm is not naive. Though the oppressed look to liberation, it does not deny the fact of their oppression. Denial, and our current demon of ‘denialism’ is primarily the business of the oppressor, although the fake news that environmental action is a waste of time might sometimes seem convincing to those broken or ground down. Turkeys, who look only to those who seem to feed them, do vote for Christmas. That’s why the singer of this ancient song calls on their hearers to choose wisely those in whom they put their trust, and to whom they cede authority. In the psalm they are offered help to strengthen that choice.

Though the Psalms may have been an official national hymnbook of sorts, the singers of these songs have no qualms about setting the schemes and promises of political overlords in perspective. If nothing else, our common mortality frustrates the idolatrous claims of the wicked, the rich and the exploiters.

But we are, all of us, ‘children of the earth’, and we return to it: so abuse of the earth is a violation of our own being. Our lives end rightly, with a motherly embrace of the Good Earth. This we should not despise, nor hold in contempt. And if our trust is in God, and we

look to God for our source of authority and moral compass, then faith that does not express care for the marginalised and the most vulnerable of our fellow creatures is not worthy of the name. Praise to a Creator is undermined and nullified by selfishness and injustice. In this psalm you, the reader, are invited perhaps to choose sides and join the song of triumph and of justice, even beyond our own vision or lifetimes. A song that begins and ends with: “Hallelujah!”

[1 Timothy 6:6-9](#)

Recently I was in my parents’ attic, sorting through old possessions so that they are free to move house with a lighter load. In front of me were boxes full of a lifetime’s worth of memories: old school reports, well-loved toys, cinema postcards, letters from friends. Some of it my parents would take with them, some of it was still useful to me, either as resources for the future or as an enduring connection to my history, while most would go to the recycling.

Timothy’s pastor tells us that we bring nothing into the world and while we may amass many possessions on our earthly journey, “we can take nothing out of it” (v7). While we might be satisfied to take this on board as a spiritual lesson in detachment, the question remains: What do we leave behind?

As a society, we create a million bottles a minute, each of which takes 500 years to break down and, regardless of how much we personally recycle, we are on course for a future where there will be more plastics than fishes in the sea by 2050. The ‘ruin and destruction’ that Timothy’s pastor predicted for those who want to be rich (v9) are shared not just by those who allow themselves to be consumed by greed, but by the whole world.

“Keeping the commandment without spot or blame” (v14) is not an invitation to self-preservation while the world chokes and withers, buried beneath our discarded waste. When Christ Jesus made the good confession before Pontius Pilate that “My kingdom is not of this world” (v13; John 18:36), He didn’t disavow this creation and His followers’ responsibility for the earth. Rather He drew a line in the sand between the world order represented by Pilate – one of exploitation and force – and His own commonwealth of cooperation, justice and gentility. Here, we are not complacent in our contentedness, but released from the snares of greed and self-interest, and free to actively shun the destructive path, seek out roads paved with Good News for the whole earth, wrestling with all it means to be a Jesus-follower in a world marred by exploitation. In doing so, we seize the life-that-is-really-life (v11-12).

What steps could you take this week to actively lay a good foundation for the future (v19)?

What in your life could you simplify in order to find the contentment which blossoms in the wake of pursuing godliness (v6)?

How can you share the riches of strengths within you and the resources around you to live generously (v18) and affect change on a global and local level?

Whether they are small steps or large, let each be an act to ensure the enduring foundation we leave behind is not built on a million plastic bottles a minute, but an earth that is actively being restored. To paraphrase Charles Lamb, we might say that we are “contented with little, yet striving for a world worth so much more.”

Luke 16:19-31

This parable only occurs in Luke’s gospel. The writer was an educated Greek, by tradition a doctor, one of the ‘middle class’ of his society, but also as a Gentile outsider to the inner life of Judaism.

The prologue indicates that this is aimed particularly at the priestly class, especially the Pharisees, originally popular preachers who proclaimed that everyone could enter the kingdom of God and who believed in life after death. It is also aimed at the Sadducees, who believed that death meant extinction. The rich man, often called Dives, meaning rich, is doing well, with feasting and fashion, until he dies. He is buried, we are told flatly. The poor man, the only person named in a parable, who suffers humiliation and hunger, finds on death that he is carried away by angels to life with Abraham, father of the chosen race, to be provided for in peace and plenty. Life for him is exalted. Meanwhile, the rich man finds that death is not the end: there is a reckoning. Abraham still regards him as a son when he calls out, but shows him that Lazarus is no longer at his command. Their roles are reversed and that the gulf is too great for Lazarus, whose name means ‘God has heard’, to act out of charity: he cannot comprehend the torment of the rich. The rich man asks for a warning for his brothers, but is told that this already exists in the scriptures.

Sermon ideas

Wealth, its right use, and the consequences of such choices, deeply permeate our key readings today.

Through God's guidance, Jeremiah is not deceived that investment is a purely financial matter, but rather a witness to the values we hold dear, and an expression of what we see as important.

We do indeed put our money where our mouth is, and where our treasure is, an onlooker might reasonably conclude, there will our heart be also.

If we're seeking first the Kingdom of God, all else serves that agenda.

The folk tale – not to be mistaken for systematic theology – that Jesus uses in His teaching emphasises implicit as well as explicit responsibility. From those to whom much is given, much is expected, whether or not they bother their heads with such an obligation.

The poor man is abandoned by humanity, with the humiliating comfort only of the dogs licking his sores. Thus the rich man, by his own inadvertent fault, somehow ends up in the hot and awful place – not Jewish Gehenna, but Greek Hades – even though he need never have broken any law, or indeed gone out of his way to make life hard for Lazarus. Indeed, he has not gone out of his way, or left his comfort zone at all. It wasn't that he chose to be evil, merely, that he never developed the habit of alert compassion. How bad is it? We realise that Lazarus is denied even the privilege of rummaging in his bins. Are the folk of our rich nations aware of what their lifestyle is already doing to our sisters and brothers 'on our doorstep' on this planet? Is this any excuse?

Jeremiah is one of the most difficult books to read or study in the whole Bible, and it becomes more difficult when we hear of the persecution Jeremiah endured. Jeremiah's subversively foolish purchase of land in a slump is a risk; a statement of hope in the redemptive faithfulness of God. It defies common sense and it expresses faithfulness. Faithfulness sometimes has to be its own reward, because there's nothing else on offer. Jeremiah doesn't take this lying down.

If faithful action leads to trouble, perhaps like the arrest of climate protesters, do we, like Jeremiah, need the freedom to let out our anger and frustration at God?

The heat of Hades concentrates the mind of the formerly rich man, but I wonder how many of your jaws drop that he still leaps to the idea of enlisting the formerly poor man in a subservient role. And although earthly inequality proves to be unsustainable, Dives still doesn't get it, and demands a special haunting, by the poor man, to change the mind of his family. As if the hierarchy of privilege will survive the grave. The story told by our loving Saviour ends with a very blunt message: that there is such a thing as 'too late' and that the

warnings are already in place in Scripture, and in the climate injustice before our very eyes today.

Time with children

On the Isle of Skye, at Duntulm, at low tide you can find footprints of dinosaurs. The footprints tell us a lot: what sort of creature made them, how large they were, how many toes, and so on.

Make some dinosaur footprint templates on card, and use chalk to create some tracks suggesting that the dinosaurs have made their way into the building today.

The sad story of the dinosaurs is not what many of the grown-ups learned when they were young. Dinosaurs were not slow, stupid and primitive, but they died out because they were not able to adapt fast enough, when the asteroid fell and changed the light and weather conditions in just a day or so. In our lifetime, things have begun to change alarmingly fast, but we have a bit more time than the dinosaurs, if we do take notice of the warnings God sends, through the honest work of climate scientists, and in preaching and prayer that takes account of the climate crisis.

In the folk tale of the rich man and Lazarus, as Jesus told it, the rich man is worried that his family will need an additional warning to change their ways. Father Abraham says that the Bible should be enough, though the rich man is worried it may not be.

Think of ways in which the extinct dinosaurs might have a warning for us: perhaps dramatise this with puppets, shadow puppets, or posters which can be seen and taken note of by the whole congregation.

Prayers

Prayer of Approach – 1 Timothy 6:13

Creating Force,

who gives life to all things, we gather to worship You.

You are the eternal mystery that enables, enfolds and enlivens all things, including each one of us here today.

And so we come in thanksgiving
for the wonder of life in all of its facets.

For protons, neutrons and electrons – the most basic building blocks of life –
Three in One – in constant interplay with each other.

For the elements without which the earth would not survive –
for air and water and heat.

For the almost incomprehensible diversity of plants and animals
that inhabit every part of Your creation,
adapting through the wonders of evolution
to the environments in which they live.

For the uniqueness of each person,
made in Your image and likeness,
containing within them an aspect of Your being.

Being itself, the Source of the divine flow of life, the Creator –
the formless One, out of which all form comes;
You are beyond our comprehension,
Yet, held in Your love for us we praise You,
we thank You,
we worship You.
Amen

Prayer of confession. – 1 Timothy 6. 11, 17-19
Gracious God,

You have blessed us with many good gifts,
we are indeed rich in the things of this life.

Yet too often we refuse to acknowledge that You are the source of our wealth
and we seek security in the material things of our lives.

Too often we place in our hope in our own efforts, or in the efforts of others
and neglect to place our hope in You.

Too often we fail to do good,
we fail to be generous,
we fail to share with others and in so doing
we reject the treasure that provides a solid foundation for life.
We are truly sorry.

Forgive us our self-centredness and our lack of faith and trust.
Help us to turn once again to You and Your promise of abundant living.
May we strive for righteousness, God-likeness, faith, love, endurance and gentleness in our lives
and in our interactions with others and with the earth,
and may we believe Jesus' words of pardon and promise,
'Your sins are forgiven.
Whoever does the will of God is my brother and sister and mother'. 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 55 – (Psalm 91) “Safe in the shadow of the Lord”
 - CH4 102 – (Psalm 146) “Alleluia, praise the Lord, O my soul”
 - CH4 544 – “When I needed a neighbour” – additional, or alternative verses could be written by local churches to add context
 - CH4 –64 – “Sing, all Creation”
 - CH4 465 – “Be thou my vision”
 - Alternative words to CH4 362, “Heaven Shall Not Wait”, by John Bell (2018) (Verse 3 was written for the induction service of the Environmental Chaplain)
1. Heaven shall not wait
for the poor to lose their patience,
the scorned to smile,
the despised to find a friend:
Jesus is Lord;
he has championed the unwanted;
in him injustice
confronts its timely end.

2. Heaven shall not wait
for the dawn of great ideas,
thoughts of compassion
divorced from cries of pain:
Jesus is Lord;
he has married word and action;
his cross and company
make his purpose plain.

3. *Heaven shall not wait
till the earth becomes self-healing,
till air be clean,
and the sea give up its waste.
Jesus is Lord,
all the world is his creation
meant now to flourish and never be disgraced.

John Bell, Graham Maule, (verse 3: John L Bell 2018)

“In Christ our God took flesh”

(first used in New College Edinburgh, March 2019)

*The following tunes can be used – Carlisle, Franconia, St Ethelwald Plaisir d’amour
Metre -SM*

In Christ our God took flesh
as shared by *all* that live
The rainbow and the breath of life
to *people*, purpose give:

as shepherds, stewards, made
as partners in God’s care,
to own the task but not the world
and balance toil with prayer.

No ground, defence or plea;
extenuation, cause,
can justify that we deny
Earth’s pain at flouted laws.

To learn from **all** the trees;
be taught by Mother Earth;
Consider birds, and read the skies
requires, in Christ, new birth.

Though damage dire is done
and hope's in short supply,
still may the Church, and folk of faith
change course, with love comply!

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