

Seventeenth Sunday after Pentecost

Seventeenth Sunday after Pentecost – 16 September 2018

The Mission and Discipleship Council would like to thank members of the ecumenical Creation Time 2018 Writing Group, for their thoughts on the seventeenth Sunday after Pentecost.

Creation Time 2018 – Week 3: Passing our planet on: passing on the gift of wisdom.

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Introduction

Worship material for Creation Time 2018 comes from an ecumenical writing group, with contributors from the Church of Scotland, the Roman Catholic Church, the Salvation Army, the Scottish Episcopal Church and the United Reformed Church.

It follows the theme “Passing our Planet on: God’s gift to us”, linking to Scotland’s Year of Young People, also highlighted in our Annual Gathering in April. It reflects on our planet passing on from one generation to the next, and the gifts given us by God to support and guide us in our care for creation.

Readings from the Gospel of Mark are emphasised, which appear in the Revised Common Lectionary in September.

About Creation Time

Creation Time started in the Orthodox Church in 1989 and has been supported by a growing number of churches across Europe since then. The European Christian Environmental Network has urged churches to adopt a Time for Creation, stretching from 1 September to the feast of St Francis on 4 October. This was endorsed at the European Ecumenical Assembly in Sibiu, Romania in 2007, when it was agreed that Creation Time “be dedicated to prayer for the protection of Creation and the promotion of sustainable lifestyles that reverse our contribution to climate change”.

This year Christian leaders signed a joint statement of support for the Season of Creation. This represents the first joint statement of support for the season reaching across denominations

http://www.ceceurope.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/06/Season_of_Creation_2018.pdf

Members of the Creation Time 2018 Writing Group:

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Miriam McHardy is a member of the Roman Catholic Church and has worked for many years in the area of faith, justice and the environment. As part of a relatively new eco-congregation she is interested in exploring how our faith can support care for our planet.

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Proverbs 1:20-33

This section in the Wisdom of Proverbs does not deal in practicalities about what one should do. The presumption is that the reader will be aware of the ways of righteousness, through knowledge of the Torah. We can hardly ignore Lady Wisdom if she is present in the squares, at street corners and the gates to the city (vv. 20-21). What she is offering is an exhortation to follow good advice. The focus of our lives should be about learning skills and understanding, and applying this knowledge intelligently.

This is the first time in Scripture that wisdom is personified as a woman, one who permeates creation, carries divine authority and whose motivation is to encourage everyone to live a good life. She warns of consequences for those who stray from her righteous path. One cannot live foolishly forever without reaping disaster. When inevitable disaster comes, it is too late to backtrack.

We should not ignore her prophetic voice. The existential threat of climate change, for example, is real, backed by extensive science. Pleading ignorance is no defence: Wisdom's voice carries like a market trader! So if we ignore her voice, amid the hustle and bustle of life, or shrug our shoulders with indifference, then we will reap the consequences. We are betraying our lack of judgement, shown to be easily led astray by fake news.

We may feel uncomfortable that Wisdom will laugh derisively, because "they hated knowledge and did not choose the fear of the Lord" (v.29). Fear in this context means respect, awe and submission. Those who fail to hear the protective voice of God and have faith in God's wisdom will have only themselves to blame.

Psalm 19

John Calvin was fond of referring to creation as ‘the theatre of God’s glory’ and composers have been inspired to set this psalm to music. It falls into three ‘acts’. The first (vv.1-6) is a dramatic monologue, poetically exploring the ‘Ruach Elohim’s’ creative work. The second (vv.7-10) is about the Torah providing the set design that underpins the whole production. Each line ends in an affirmative note – perfect, sure, right, clear, pure and true. The end section (vv.11-13) is a prayer that the audience will engage in with the psalm’s message, which is an essential guide to ethical and moral conduct.

Nature has a transcendent quality, an awesome act of creation by the Lord, bound in love by the Creator for the created, like a bridegroom on his wedding day (v.5). There is more than one source of the law, apart from Mosaic law, and that is the revelation of God in the created order, and in the wisdom and experience of humankind derived from everyday living. Such knowledge “revives the soul [...] makes wise [...] rejoices the heart [...] enlightens the eyes [...] is enduring and righteous” (vv.7-9). All these decrees, precepts, commandments and ordinances of scripture are “sweeter also than honey, and drippings of the honeycomb” providing life, wisdom and joy, more precious even than gold (v.10).

Human frailty (v.12) and the need for protection from “the insolent” (v.13), who would like to dominate with their secular worldview, bring to the fore the necessity of prayer. Our cosmic God is not an enforcer but one who rules with justice and mercy, providing wise instruction, and a forgiving ‘redeemer’ (v.14).

There is a universal quality to this psalm, not only embracing many of the psalter’s themes emphasising maintenance of the law, and praise of the Lord’s sovereignty. It also assures us that, even when our lives are shot through with ignorance and ambiguity, the Lord will hear our plea when we cry out, “Clear me from hidden faults” (v.12). C.S. Lewis thought this psalm “the greatest poem in the Psalter” and cautioned that in obeying God’s Law we must also value the “sweet reasonableness” of Christian ethics (*Reflections on the Psalms*, 1961, pp.56-7).

Perhaps a word of caution needs to be made about this psalm however, to balance its transcendent character. We also need to bring creation down to earth. As Sally McFague says, “What if we saw the earth as part of the body of God, not as separate from God (who dwells elsewhere) but as the visible reality of the invisible God?” –*The Body of God: An Ecological Theology*, 1993, p102.

James 3:1-12

James' opening remarks are about passing on knowledge. As preachers and teachers of scripture, we have a particular responsibility to do this, he argues, and he does not exclude himself. We may present ourselves as people of authority on one hand, but misuse what we have learnt by making false claims. In this way we become responsible for the errors that our congregations assimilate and pass on (vv.1-2).

James raises fundamental questions about the experience of life, the connection between wisdom and accountability, awareness of the perilous journey of life and the source of some of our transgressions. The use of 'we' (vv.1, 3) indicates our collective responsibility to make good use of the gifts of faithful wisdom and the need to face our failings with honesty. We might reflect on this especially when considering our responsibility as examples to younger generations and our desire to pass God's faithful wisdom on.

Creation is the first 'Book of the Word' and, as humankind, has been given a particular role in that word, being made in the image of God. Our rationality and right relationship, the real meaning of 'dominion' (Genesis 1:26-28), should ground our biblical environmental ethic. The consequences of not doing so are raised using hellfire imagery (v.6). How ironic James says, that we can try to tame the wild animals, but can't tame our own tongues (vv.7-8).

Faithful wisdom requires us to confront the frailty of our human behaviour and call forth the richness of human knowledge. Provided we are careful in our exposition, we avoid the dichotomy that "From the same mouth come blessing and cursing" (v.10).

Mark 8:27-38

Jesus and his disciples are 'on the way' in an area that they would have regarded as sacred because of its proximity to the source of the River Jordan and also Mount Harmon. In this episode they are in the district around Caesarea Philippi, where Herod the Great had built a temple and renamed the town after the emperor. There the Greeks had worshipped the god Pan, a god of nature. Jesus is the embodiment of word/wisdom.

Jesus' questions directly the disciples. First, "who do people say that I am?" And then, "who do you say that I am?" (v.27), a question that Mark is addressing to the reader of his Gospel. The disciples reply that they associate Jesus with previous prophets. Jesus

reiterates that a prophetic ministry, speaking truth to power, carries with it the perils of suffering and death.

Peter does not fully understand this. He would rather focus on the messianic aspects of Jesus's leadership, in the sense of the restoration of a Jewish king. Jesus instead is emphasising that He, the Son of Man or "the human one" (see Daniel 7:13), must undergo suffering and death. No wonder Jesus rebukes him, "Get behind me, Satan! For you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things"(v.33). Peter has made the category error of offering the same temptation that Satan offered Jesus in the wilderness (Mark 1.13). Jesus is also emphasising here the political inevitability of a clash with the "elders, chief priests and scribes" (v.31).

Jesus calls together the crowd and reminds them what it means to be intentional in our Christian discipleship. The imperatives "let them deny themselves" and "let them take up their cross" (v.34) are what it means to follow Jesus. The crowd would have been familiar with the humiliation inflicted on slaves, violent criminals and insurgents, carrying their crosses to their place of execution. Moreover, what Jesus is seeking in His followers is something rather more than pious resignation in the face of the ways of the world, but spiritual activism.

Followers of Christ do not simply benefit from His work on the cross: they are to be drawn into His struggle with evil, willing to accept the way of love, the good news, even unto death (vv.36-38). We are offered the paradox that to deny one's life as a Christian, in order to save it, is to lose one's life as a follower of Jesus and the gospels. Capital punishment was the bottom line for the power of the state, thus instilling fear into the population, so by resisting in the face of this threat one diminishes this power. To recognise this is wisdom indeed.

Sermon ideas

Life isn't straightforward and this awareness inspired the compilers of the Wisdom Literature. Lady Wisdom shouts boldly in the busy street but gets no response from the simpletons and fools who hear her. Are we the fools, when we ignore the call to live lightly on this earth; when we think we are insulated from disaster and can survive the looming ecological crisis? What if this crisis caused by our consumerist lifestyle were to elide with an economic crisis, would we survive the perfect storm? Lady Wisdom would not be sympathetic.

The Bible helps us to understand how God's creative word is woven through all that is. Psalm 19 inspires us with awe of God's glory, and stirs wonder in our hearts but how many of us are sensitive to the interconnectedness of creation? How many of us fail to hear the cries of protest, from Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring* to the BBC's *Blue Planet 2*? What is it we don't understand and why are we in denial? Is it that we secretly want the honey and the gold? If we have become half-hearted and apathetic, are these the hidden faults that the psalmist cries out to be purged?

James calls on us to examine ourselves closely and determine who we truly are. James warns that our struggles to prevail in the world can lock us into the sinful structures of the world. If we are passionate about justice, not just for ourselves but for all, especially the weak and vulnerable, then we may have to endure hardship by facing up to the "scoffers" and "fools". How do we gain a perspective on the best strategy to follow? We need to become pilgrims of hope and speak truth from the heart.

It is one thing to shout, "Jesus is our Lord"; it is another to live a Christian faith of love. The outrageous love that Jesus calls us to embody is risky, courageous, life-changing. Peter was complacent about the path of discipleship. He could only focus on the eventual glory. The teaching of Jesus along the way about where this would lead was just too difficult to accept. Jesus developed His wisdom through listening to the poor and downtrodden, fisher folk and vineyard labourers and knew He needed to engage with them and champion their human rights. The rendering of community relationships would lead to conflict with the powerful.

The nourishment of the Lord's Supper is Wisdom's feast and the invitation of Jesus to follow Him, to feast in the kingdom of God. When we go out as disciples we may be faced with difficulties in our mission, but we are pilgrims on the way of hope, nourished in mind and body to be justice-centred. If we listen to Jesus carefully, He will touch the imagination of our hearts, so we can speak with truth, work in humility and find ways to pass on that gift of wisdom to future generations that they may better care for our world.

Time with children

Invite the children/ young people to act or read out this dramatisation from Mark 8:27-38 for the congregation.

Narrator: Jesus and his disciples are on the move in the villages around Caesarea Philippi. Jesus starts up a conversation.

Jesus: Who do people say that I am?

Disciple 1: Some say that You're John the Baptist.

Disciple 2: I've heard people say You're Elijah.

Disciple 3: No, some of them say You're one of the prophets.

Jesus: OK. I'll put the question differently. Who do *you* say that I am?

Peter: You're the Messiah.

Disciples: What?

Peter: He's the Christ! The Messiah.

Jesus: Ssssh! You mustn't say that!

Disciples: But Teacher, why not? Isn't it true?

Jesus: You know why! The elders, chief priests and scribes will get angry and have me tortured and killed. But I have a secret. After three days, I shall rise again.

Peter: Look Jesus. You mustn't say that. You are the Messiah, the Chosen One. The one who will be king of our people.

Jesus: Get thee behind me, Satan. That's fake news. You're just like everyone else. Always thinking about the race to the top.

Jesus: Look, gather round folks. If you are going to be one of my followers you'll have to learn that it's not going to be easy. God's way is different to human ways. You need to be wise so that you can understand what God believes is really important, and be brave, to be different and give up what the world thinks is important. Do you think you're ready for that?

Ideas for exploring the Gospel:

In the play we see that Peter seems wise because he recognises who Jesus really is, but Jesus had to pass on His wisdom to Peter, to help him understand what being the Messiah really meant.

Make a poster with the children and ask them to add pictures of the people in their lives who are wise, and have helped them recognise who Jesus really is, e.g. family, friends, members of the church or wider community.

Then give them cards with different ideas of how we can follow Jesus today, e.g. buy Fairtrade products, spend time with a lonely neighbour, recycle plastics, speak up when we see people treated unfairly. Encourage the children to talk about who can help them to understand how these actions help them to follow Jesus, and help others.

One thing we can do is care better for the world God made, but we're often not sure how to do that.

In groups think about who in our church or wider community can help us learn about looking after our world better, e.g., a church garden group, or a Men's Shed group? How might the children and leaders ask others to share their wisdom about the environment with them?

You might share it with the congregation another week.

Prayers

Prayer of Approach to God

We hear You calling us, Lord
over the busy clamour of the day;
Give us grace to pause and be still;
still our minds pre-occupied with self-esteem;
still our gaze to see, with Your joy, the wonder of Your creation.
Guide our seeing and our hearing,
our words and our actions,
to the quiet place of Your presence.
Stir in our hearts a new passion,
a passion for justice and peace,
grounded in Your wisdom,
a wisdom that we can faithfully pass on to others.

Amen

Thanksgiving

Blessed are You, Lord God,
You are the breath of life sustaining us each day;
You are with us in our journeying and in our resting;
our companion and teacher along the way.
You, Lord, are our hope and our strength;
Your grace permeates everything and everywhere;
the sound of Your handiwork resounds in all things;
Your mystery's breadth and depth exhausts our understanding.
In Your presence we taste the bread of life;
the living water that quenches our thirst;
that sustains us and fills our hearts with grateful thanks.

Blessed be God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit

Blessed be God for ever.

Amen

Confession

Forgive us when we turn away from You;
when we are distracted by our worldly cares;
when we are wrapped up in ourselves,
when we fail to pass on the good news.
Forgive us when we fail to hear Your words,
when we are distracted by our own voice;
when we are unthinking about the things we do
And are unmoved by the cries of the suffering.
Forgive us that we have not the eyes to see
the wonder and awe of Your creation;
and the radiance of Your everlasting light,
because we are gazing inwardly,
Selfishly looking after number one.

And so we pray,

**Let the words of my mouth,
and the love stored in my heart,
stir me into action to care for the world and its creatures,
to bring peace to the world and its peoples.**

Amen

Prayers of intercession

Peter confessed You as Messiah, but lacked understanding of who You truly were.

Give us wisdom to proclaim Your redeeming love;

to teach others to advance Your kingdom, regardless of the cost.

May Your Church be filled with songs of praise for the glory of the work of Your hands, our hearts open to Your love, and our ears to the wisdom of Your word.

Faithful Teacher,

Help us to understand what we believe.

We pray for all who influence our lives; those in places of government, in broadcasting and publishing, in politics and civic life that they may be blessed with Your wisdom in all that they do.

Guide all who preach and teach in Your name whatever is true, noble, pure and lovely, that they may help us to see Your plan to make all things new.

Faithful Teacher,

Help us to understand what we believe.

We give thanks for those who have accompanied us in our faith journey, who have supported us when we lacked confidence, and gladdened our hearts with Your wisdom and understanding.

We pray for all who are fearful and anxious,

who doubt Your love and find themselves in a dark place;

who struggle with illness, in mind, body or spirit.

When we struggle with words, take the intention of our hearts in our promise to pray.

Faithful Teacher,

Help us to understand what we believe.

We give thanks for those who have given their lives in the confession of their faith and rest with You in glory.

Give us grace to confess our faith in Christ crucified

and give us strength to overcome our fears when we offer ourselves

to be faithful servants of Your Son, Jesus Christ, our Lord.

Amen

Musical suggestions

Hymns for this week:

- CH4 342 –“Come and gather round
- CH4 132 –“Father, Lord of all creation
- “Immortal, invisible God only wise” – See <https://hymnary.org/> for sources
- CH4 644 –“Oh Jesus, I have promised
- CH4 246 –“O Lord of every shining constellation
- CH4 127 –“O worship the King all glorious above
- CH4 378 –“Praise to the Holiest in the height
- CH4 502 –“Take my life, and let it be
- CH4 402 –“Take up thy cross, the Saviour said
- “The heavens declare thy glory, Lord” – See <https://hymnary.org/> for sources

Passing our planet on: God’s gift to us:

- CH4 137 – “All things bright and beautiful”
- CH4 724 – “A Touching Place”
- CH4 231 – “For the fruits of his creation”
- CH4 623 – “Gather us in”
- CH4 153 – “Great is thy faithfulness”
- CH5 525 – “Let there be love shared among us”

- The Song Book of the Salvation Army 605– “Lord of Heaven and earth and sea”
- CH4 212 – “Morning has broken”
- CH4 644 – “Oh Jesus, I have promised”
- CH4 530 – “One more step along the world I go”

Resources for World Day of Prayer for Care of Creation – 1/9/2018

In 2015 Pope Francis established September 1st as the World Day of Prayer for the Care of Creation, encouraging the Catholic community around the world to pray for our common home. Now, for its fourth year, the aid agency, CAFOD, provides resources to support this day at:

<https://cafod.org.uk/News/Campaigning-news/World-Day-of-Prayer>

The Columban Missionaries also offer a range of resources at:

<http://www.columbans.co.uk/justice-peace-jpic-2/creation-time/>

Links to other websites were correct at the time of publication.

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Scottish Charity Number: SC011353

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