



A time for celebration and care

Sermon notes

for the 5 weeks of Creation Time 2010



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Based on the principal Sunday service readings of the Common Lectionary

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These sermon notes are part of Churches Together in Britain and Ireland's programme of resources to encourage and assist churches to observe a Time for Creation between 1 September and 4 October each year, for the protection of God's creation and the promotion of sustainable lifestyles. This year's theme, *Creation Flourishing - A time for celebration and care*, links into the United Nations International Year of Biodiversity.

Week 1: 5 September
God's Sovereignty, Human Responsibility

Week 2: 12 September
The Community of All Creation

Week 3: 19 September
The Consequences of Greed and Injustice

Week 4: 26 September
The Love of Money and Its Consequences

Week 5: 4 October
St Francis's Day / Harvest Thanksgiving

Author's introductory note

These notes do not attempt to offer complete sermons in outline. What is presented here is a selection of suggested starting points, possible lines of exegesis, and a few random thoughts. These will need further illustration and application to the contexts in which they are used. I leave to each preacher the decision how to apply God's Word to each congregation and occasion, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit.

I hope that these notes may be of some help in relating the Christian message to what many have stated to be the most urgent issue facing our nation and our world.

Not all texts are equally applicable to the Church's ecological mission. I have focused on those which appear most relevant, with brief references to some of the others.

Week 1: God's Sovereignty, Human Responsibility

5th September - 14th Sunday after Trinity (Proper 18)



Jeremiah 18:1-11	
Continuous Jeremiah 18:1-11 Psalm 139:1-5, 12-18 [1-7]	Related Deuteronomy 30:15-end Psalm 1
Philemon 1-21 Luke 14:25-33	



 [Richard Outram](#)

The sovereignty of God is basic to the Bible's witness. God reigns in holy and unfailing love; the way we experience God's sovereign rule depends on our choices. The truth of God's sovereignty is balanced by our responsibility. God is like the potter; nations and peoples are like the clay (5). God's purposes don't always work out, because nations and communities sometimes resist God's plan. In that case – looking at the process from a human point of view – God may scrap that phase of the project and start again, never giving up. The process works both ways: if a people brings disaster on itself, but then changes direction and acts in wisdom and justice, the judgment will be averted; on the contrary, if they initially give God their allegiance, trust and obedience, but later turn away from God's path, they forfeit the good outcome that would have been theirs (compare Ezekiel 33:10-16).

How is this image relevant to ecological concerns? The Old Testament prophets saw the natural world as being responsive to human actions. Nature is involved in human life, for better or for worse. Examples from Jeremiah are in 12:10-13; 22:6-9; 31:12-14; see also Isaiah 24:4-7; Hosea 4:1-3. We are apt to see the roots of ecological abuse in economic, political and technological terms; but Michael Northcott has shown that there is a profound spiritual dimension: 'When read in the light of Jeremiah's theological reading of the imperial geopolitics of ancient Mesopotamia, global warming, like the exile of ancient Israel, represents both the threat of judgement and the promise of a better way of living on God's earth than the neoliberal vision of a global market empire.'¹ Humans and other creatures form a complex web of interrelationships and are bound together in receiving God's judgment and blessing. Looking at the passage under review in such a light, we can see that ecological sin brings judgment; faithfulness in dealing with God's world enables us to be instruments and recipients of God's blessings.

Several of the other readings emphasize the inescapability of choice. Deuteronomy 30:15-end forms the conclusion of a speech by Moses that is introduced in chapter 29, verse 1. It concerns the renewal of God's covenant with the Israelites. The scene is set in the land of Moab, on the very edge of the Promised Land. Like many other parts of the Bible it offers a stark alternative between good and evil, righteousness and sin, blessing and judgment. Only the false dualism that separates body from spirit, ecology from economy, could lead us to suppose that such basic spiritual choices have nothing to do with ecological crises. On an individual scale the same basic choice is laid out in simplified form in Psalm 1.

In Luke 14:25-33 Jesus does not lower the bar of discipleship in order to avoid 'putting people off'. On the contrary he meets enthusiasm with severe demands. The phrase about 'hating' one's dearest relatives and even life itself, is not of course an encouragement to neglect or rejection of family, or to self-hatred. It means that nothing is to take priority over our allegiance to Christ. Discipleship requires realism. In responding to the call to follow Jesus, we must consider carefully what it will mean. We have to 'count the cost' as truly as those who engaged in building construction or military campaigns.

In applying these principles to creation care, we have to recognize that we are limited to some extent by the failures of government and the structures of society. But we still have to make decisions about our lifestyle, consumption, political allegiance, holiday habits and so on. Conscious of our imperfections, we are still called to progress along the way with Jesus, identifying ourselves with his way of self-giving and never content with our half-measures.

¹ Michael S. Northcott, *A Moral Climate; The Ethics of Global Warming* (London: Darton, Longman and Todd/Christian Aid, 2007) 15.



Week 2: The Community of All Creation

12th September - 15th Sunday after Trinity (Proper 19)

Jeremiah 4:11-12, 22-28	
Continuous Jeremiah 4:11-12, 22-28 Psalm 14	Related Exodus 32:7-14 Psalm 51:1-11
1 Timothy 1:12-17 Luke 15:1-10	



 [Martin Heigan](#)

God's judgment is pictured as a destructive wind against those who are wilfully ignorant of God's way, and whose natural skills are directed only towards evil outcomes (11-12, 22). The prophet paints a terrifying picture of the undoing of creation. God reverses the creative work pictured at the beginning of Genesis. The earth becomes again 'waste and void' (23). Light is withheld; the mountains quake; people and birds have disappeared; the works of civilization, both agricultural and urban, have vanished (23-26). Verse 27 offers a glimmer of hope that, after all, the judgment is not total. But the final vision is of complete darkness (28).

Interpreting this vision of judgment Kathleen M. O'Connor comments: 'Theologically, politically, socially, the Babylonian invasion of Judah and Jerusalem meant the end of the world and the cessation of the created order for the community.' She goes on to write: 'In this mythical conception, earth, animals, and cities form an organic, interdependent whole, and their destruction by YHWH's angry decree is the result of human evil'.² In the biblical view the earth and all that fills it comprise a community. One of the basic errors of our culture is to separate humanity from the rest of creation. The very term 'the environment' suggests that we are a separate entity, while everything else is 'out there'.

In the Genesis account of creation, humans and other creatures are formed together (Genesis 1:24-31). In the present passage all are judged together. Humans, endowed with a special calling and special privileges, have a pivotal role in the development and well-being of creation. When we fail, all creation suffers. Correspondingly, the redemption of creation awaits the full redemption of human beings (Romans 8:18-23). The implied imperative is twofold: to work 'with the grain' of God's redeeming purposes in helping to save species he has created; and to turn from the arrogance and idolatry that incurs his judgment.

The root meaning of idolatry as the worship of God in the image of a natural creature, rather than in God's true nature as Almighty, Loving Creator is portrayed in [Exodus 32:7-14](#). [Psalm 14](#) shows the breadth and depth of human corruption. Both the New Testament passages express the wonder of God's redeeming love. [Luke 15:1-10](#) concerns the salvation of people. But its argument depends on the supreme value of lost things. Without that assumption the parables would lose their force. By contrast, many people tend to think that the disappearance of natural species is a matter of relatively small importance. In planning matters, economy often takes precedence over ecology. Partly as a result of such a mindset, we are living through the sixth great extinction in the history of the Earth – and the first to be caused by humans. The current rate of extinction is said to be 100 or even 1,000 times above the natural level.³ A true sense of the value of God's creation will cause us to repent of such callous disregard.



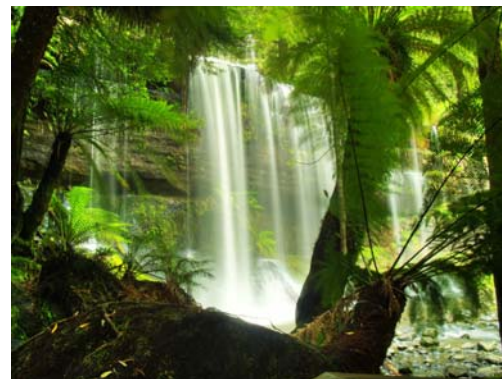
² Kathleen M. O'Connor, 'Jeremiah', *The Oxford Bible Commentary* (Oxford University Press, 2001), 494.

³ David Chandler, 'Over the Edge?', *A Rocha* 32, Spring 2010, pp. 12-13. This article refers to Johan Rockström et al., 'A Safe Operating Space for Humanity', *Nature* 461:24 September 2009, pp. 472-475. See also Sean McDonagh SSC, *The Death of Life: The Horror of Extinction* (Dublin: The Columba Press, 2004), 9-11.

Week 3: The Consequences of Greed and Injustice

19th September - 16th Sunday after Trinity (Proper 20)

Amos 8:4-7	
Continuous Jeremiah 8:18-9:1 Psalm 79:1-9	Related Amos 8:4-7 Psalm 113
1 Timothy 2:1-7 Luke 16:1-13	



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Here ruthless and dishonest traders are bringing ruin upon poor and defenceless people. Some commentators suggest that grain was being lent to the poor, creating debt slaves. At any rate produce and people were regarded alike as a source of income.⁴ These traders were impatient of spiritual constraints on their business (5a). They cheated by falsifying quantities and values (5b). In addition the goods were inferior to the point of uselessness (6). Whereas being remembered by God (7) is often a cause of encouragement, here it connotes judgment and warning.⁵

In our globalised economy, greedy and abusive trading practices dispossess both people and natural species. Destruction of tropical forests assaults both indigenous races and wildlife. Trade in ivory and 'bushmeat' threaten elephants and primates. Sometimes forests are destroyed by people who are themselves desperate for land in order to feed themselves and their families. In many cases demand from the rich nations drives the exploitation both of people and of the natural world. For instance our insatiable demand for cheap prawns can lead to the destruction of tropical mangroves; tuna fisheries threaten dolphins and albatrosses. Thus in our world oppression of the poor, such as is denounced by Amos in his time, is inseparable from the destruction of species and ecosystems. Rather than just feeling guilty, we can take practical and political actions towards fair and ecologically responsible trade.

Psalm 113:7 reminds us that God's Mission involves relieving the poor. 1 Timothy 2:1-7 reminds us that the Church's prayers should be global in their scope. Prayer for those who hold power is directed to 'a quiet and peaceable life in all godliness and dignity' for everyone (2). A healthy environment and a just society are both necessary for such a happy outcome.

The somewhat startling parable in Luke 16:1-8a (or differently interpreted, in 16:1-7 with comments by Jesus in verse 8 as well as verse 9) raises lots of questions of interpretation. But at least it teaches that the way we use wealth has eternal consequences (9).⁶ The sayings that are added in verses 10-13 are also rich in possibilities for application to ecological responsibility. Finally, perhaps the grief expressed in Jeremiah 8:18-9:1 should challenge us about the depth of our own sorrow for an abused creation. Some have even suggested that God's own grief is being expressed here.⁷

⁴ See Donald E. Gowan, 'The Book of Amos', *The New Interpreters' Bible* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1996) p 416; Francis I Andersen and David Noel Freedman, 'Amos', *Anchor Bible* (New York: Doubleday, 1989) pp 801, 804.

⁵ The meaning of 'the pride of Jacob' is obscure. See 6:8. It could be merely ironic, or else a title for God, or even refer to the Promised Land. See Gowan, p 417.

⁶ Fred B. Craddock, *Luke* (Louisville: John Knox Press, 1990) p 190.

⁷ Patrick D. Miller, 'The Book of Jeremiah', *The New Interpreters' Bible* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2001) p 648.

Week 4: The Love of Money and Its Consequences

26th September - 17th Sunday after Trinity (Proper 21)

Amos 6:1a, 4-7	
Continuous Jeremiah 32:1-3a, 6-15 Psalm 91:1-6, 14-end [91:11-end]	Related Amos 6:1a, 4-7 Psalm 146
1 Timothy 6:6-19 Luke 16:19-end	



 [Matthieu Aubry](#)

Amos 6:1a, 4-7 gives us a picture of unrestrained self-indulgence. Even the beds on which these people lie are made of the costliest materials. Their everyday diet consists of food that is beyond the means of ordinary people. Their luxury allows them to enjoy the best of music. Disdaining ordinary cups they drink from bowls, and they can afford the best of cosmetics.

Are they condemned for enjoying the good things of life? They are not. What incurs judgment on them is their failure to be grieved and sickened by the ruin coming upon their people (6). Because of this they will be in the forefront of those to be exiled, and their future decline will be all the greater by contrast with their former opulence (7).

Complacency is a special temptation for those who live in comfort. We may sink into a lethargy which says that all is well – while the majority of the world's human population, and vast numbers of wild creatures, struggle to survive. The starting point for the affluent must be to open our ears to God's voice and our eyes to the real world around us.

An alternative vantage point for a divine perspective on possessions is found in Jeremiah 32:1-3a, 6-15. Prospects were not bright for the prophet or for Jerusalem. The city was under siege, and Jeremiah was being held prisoner by King Zedekiah. Perhaps during a lull in the blockade, Jeremiah's cousin comes to him with a business proposition. He is given the opportunity to buy a piece of land in his home village. Israel's property laws (see Leviticus 25:25) were aimed at preventing extremes of wealth and poverty, and protecting family inheritance. Under these laws Jeremiah was asked to purchase a field from his uncle. In spite of the unpromising circumstances for himself and the city, he does so.

The significance of this action is that it shows Jeremiah's faith in God's future plans. Although he had unflinchingly declared God's coming judgment, he also saw redemption beyond the disaster. Perhaps our situation is similar. A biblical worldview leads us to be pessimistic about the possibility of ecological flourishing as long as corporate and individual greed rule. But God also promises to renew the face of the earth. To live by faith in God's future means to live now for the redemption of species and their environment, trusting in God's saving power.

1 Timothy 6:6-19 warns of the danger of setting our hearts on wealth as a life goal. Instead we should aim at contentment (6-9). Yet our current economic system depends on insatiable demand and unbridled consumption to maintain growth. Such a philosophy, set within a world of limited resources, will bring in its wake poverty and destruction for human cultures and natural species. Rather than aiming for more and more, the wealthy are encouraged to use their riches creatively and generously, holding to a God-centred view of life (17-19).

Finally Luke 16:19-end conveys a similar warning. The rich man displays all the characteristics that 1 Timothy condemns: haughtiness, and the quest for life through luxury and selfish ease. In his lifetime he disregards the poor man at his gate. After death, with their situations reversed, he still seems to regard Lazarus as an inferior being who may be called upon to relieve his own agony (24, 27). The word of God should have been sufficient to guide him away from his selfish and callous mindset. If that is disregarded, nothing will avail.

Week 5: St Francis's Day / Harvest Thanksgiving

3rd October - 18th Sunday after Trinity (Proper 22)

<p>Continuous Lamentations 1:1-6, Lamentations 3:19-26 or Psalm 137 [137:1-6]</p>	<p>Related Habakkuk 1:1-4; 2:1-4 Psalm 37:1-9</p>
<p>2 Timothy 1:1-14 Luke 17:5-10</p>	



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These readings do not seem to lend themselves to an ecological application without forcing or a high degree of abstraction. Two other possibilities from the lectionary are offered below instead.

For St Francis's Day (4 October)

Galatians 6:14-end, Luke 12:22-34

Jesus in Luke 12:22-34 shows that an anxious mindset is unnecessary and unreasonable. The message behind his words about birds and wild flowers is that God has made this a basically friendly world. The ecosystem runs so that, on the whole, the needs of every creature are supplied. The challenge to us is twofold: firstly to live on the basis of trust in God's provision; secondly to reject actions and attitudes that interfere with God's providential care. One way in which God's fatherly provision is hindered is by human greed, carelessness and injustice. Another is by actions and policies that destroy natural species and their habitats. Both of these distortions of God's purpose come about when trade is unjust, polluting industries are allowed, and workers are unjustly exploited.

Francis of Assisi's great contribution to the theology and spirituality of ecological care was his vision of all people and all creation as a single family. He saw living creatures, natural elements and even death itself as his brothers and sisters. This vision should be seen in the context of his all-consuming devotion to Christ, epitomised in Galatians 6:14. 'Francis's relationship with nature had a *cruciform* character. He became the Christ-like servant of nature.'⁸

Harvest Thanksgiving

Deuteronomy 26:1-11; Psalm 100; Philippians 4:4-9 *or* Revelation 14:14-18; John 6:25-35

The offering of the firstfruits (Deuteronomy 26:1-11; see also Exodus 23:19; Deuteronomy 18:4) was a way of acknowledging that the land belonged to God and its produce was God's gift. The rehearsal of Israel's story gave a historical perspective to the gift. Jacob – the 'wandering', or perhaps 'perishing' or 'ready to perish' Aramean – had given rise to a people redeemed from slavery and gifted with a good and fruitful land. We also worship God as the giver of both physical and spiritual gifts; of the harvest of the land and the seas, and of the fruits of all our work for God. Such a thankful spirit is the best foundation for a life spent in the care of the earth and its inhabitants – human and nonhuman.

Philippians 4:4-9 leads us towards a life oriented towards God and dependent to God. A spirit of gentleness and peace should lead naturally to a life of care and sensitivity towards God's creation.

John 6:25-35 powerfully insists on the priority of a relationship of trust and dependence on God in Christ. Those who are regarded as 'Green Christians', who aim to live an ecologically responsible life, should remember that we serve a God who is both our redeemer from sin and also the Creator and Redeemer of all that God has made. Making common cause with others in working for God's creation, we must bear in mind that for Christians the Lord and Saviour of the universe is Jesus, and his is the glory that we should seek.

⁸ H. Paul Santmire, *The Travail of Nature: The Ambiguous Ecological Promise of Christian Theology* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1985) p. 111 (emphasis original). See also the whole section, pp. 106-119.

