



COMMON LECTIONARY

Sermon notes

for Creation Time 2012

Based on the Revised Common Lectionary

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Author's Introduction

God's Creation and Sustainability

I have taken as my starting point the set lectionary readings in an attempt to be faithful to the scriptures. However, I have concentrated on the particular emphases found in them that could be helpful during Creation Time. I have traced a theme through the readings but they speak to us as individual texts or as narrative and do not require thematic constraints.

In particular, I seek to discover whether these ancient yet living texts speak to us in a time of ecological crisis and into our need to find a sustainable way of living on a crowded planet with finite resources.

It is reported that Karl Barth¹ maintained that you need to read the Bible in one hand and the newspaper in the other. I would suggest you should also be looking at creation at the same time.

¹ Karl Barth, Swiss Theologian, 1886-1968

These notes do not provide complete sermons in outline, but a rich selection of suggestions, starting points, and possible lines to follow.

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Photo of wind farm: [Chrishna](http://www.chrishna.com)

www.ctbi.org.uk/creationtime



Photo: Solar panels on Caloundra Uniting Church, Queensland, Australia

Week 1: 2 September **Sustainability God's Way:** **Following the maker's instructions**

Song of Solomon 2:8-13
Deuteronomy 4:1-2, 6-9
James 1:17-27
Mark 7:1-8, 14-15, 21-23

Week 2: 9 September **Sustainability and Recovery:** **Restoring the masterpiece**

Isaiah 35:4-7a
James 2:1-10, 14-17,
Mark 7:24-37
(Proverbs 22:1-2, 8-9, 22-23,
Psalm 125, Psalm 146)

Week 3: 16 September **Sustainability and Christ:** **Recognizing the Master**

Psalm 19
Mark 8:27-38
Isaiah 50:4-9a
(Proverbs 1:20-3, Psalm 116:1-9, Wisdom
of Solomon 7:26 - 8:1, James 3:1-12)

Week 4: 23 September **Sustainability and Culture :** **Asking the big questions**

Jeremiah 11:189-20,
James 3:13-4:3, 7-8a,
Mark 9:30-37,
(Proverbs 31:10-31, Psalm 1, Wisdom of
Solomon 1:16-2:1, 12-22)

Week 5: 30 September **Sustainability and Relationships:** **Relating to the master**

James 5:13-20
Numbers 11:4-6, 10-16, 24-29
Mark 9:38-50
(Esther 7:1-6, 9-10; 9:20-22, Psalm 124,
Psalm 19:7-14, James 5:13-20)



Sustainability God's Way: Following the maker's instructions

Week 1: 2nd September

Deuteronomy 4:1-2, 6-9 Mark 7:1-8, 14-15, 21-23 James 1:17-27 Song of Solomon 2:8-13



Photo: [David Muir](#) 

When faced with a flat packed piece of furniture to assemble I am always tempted to ignore the maker's instructions, thinking that I know how best to do it. The consequence of persisting with my way of doing this frequently results in a lopsided wardrobe and various screws left over that don't appear to fit anywhere.

As a human race this is often our way of operating; devising our own rules and ways rather than obeying God's commands. The consequences for human beings and the natural world have been devastating. Wendell Berry claims that "our destruction of nature is not just bad stewardship, or stupid economics, or a betrayal of family responsibility; it is the most horrid blasphemy."¹

Deuteronomy 4 is set at the edge of the Promised Land, with the people of God poised to enter. They are on the border both geographically and theologically. It is vital therefore that they get it right for the sake of themselves and coming generations (v9). The writer implores the people to follow the decrees and laws taught by God, not as a strait jacket but as means of ensuring human flourishing. These are guidelines for godly living that will allow the good life for the people of God through the generations and for the rest of the created order. Possession of this land flowing with milk and honey, that is a place of great natural and spiritual richness, is a wonderful opportunity to be celebrated. It is also a gift of God requiring stewardship. Therefore our responsibility is to 'be careful and watch yourselves so that you do not forget the things your eyes have seen or let them slip from your heart' (Deut 4:9). Central to this human flourishing is the need to remember continually that it is not theirs by right but the land is gift (v1). It is when we assume possession is by right rather than gift we enter into an exploitative relationship with the land.

Further exploration of Deuteronomy and the rest of the Torah gives hints and indications of how closely aligned to God's commandments are the concepts of creation care and sustainability, for example preservation of fruit trees in the times of war (Deut. 20:19-20).

Jesus takes this theme up in addressing the Pharisees in **Mark 7**. He urges them, who thought that they were faithfully following God stipulations, to look again at both the bigger picture and more closely at the heart of the matter. So caught up in seeming to do the right thing and ticking the religious boxes, they had lost sight of God's real purposes.

¹ Wendell Berry; *Sex, Economy, Freedom and Community* (New York: Pantheon 1992) p98



The observance of Corban (v11) was a sophisticated way of pretending to do one's duty to God whilst neglecting those who needed help. Jesus continues in the long line of Old Testament prophets and is unabashed in his condemnation, labelling those who do this 'hypocrites' (v6). 'You have let go of the

commands of God and are holding to the traditions of people' (v8). In these words Jesus holds up a mirror to our own hearts both individually and as a nation. Do we play religion or do we live in a way that makes the call of God on our lives to love God and love our neighbour our primary concern?

This call to love God and to love our neighbour has implications on how we steward the God given natural resources of the earth. Are they used to help the poorest and the neediest? The temptation is to cry 'Corban', and to carry on concentrating on our internal church life and church buildings whilst neglecting the marginalized. The effects of climate change and environmental degradation fall hardest on the poorest of the world. Creation care and working for sustainability is an integral part of the dual obedience of caring for the poor and looking after God's good earth. Sustainable energy is an example of this dual obedience; for example the United Nations aim to promote and provide clean stoves provides a key need for some of the most marginalized poor people on the planet whilst at the same time helps to preserve the natural habitat around them. This is an attempt to love God through helping sustain the resources of the natural world.

James 1:17-27. The epistle for the day is one of the starkest and most challenging passages of the New Testament. It is also in many ways one of the simplest and clearest. James is quite explicit that real religion is a matter not so much of orthodoxy but of orthopraxis, not just believing the right thing but doing the right thing as well. Looking after widows and orphans, in other words the poorest of this society and of any society, is not an optional extra for Christians. Simply saying 'stay warm, eat well' is not what Christians are called to do. Our calling is to be part of the solution and help provide warmth and stoves and food. That is how James would understand true religion.

"If in piety the church says, 'The earth is the Lord's and the fullness thereof' and in fact is no different in thought and action from the general community, who will be drawn to her word and worship to 'come and see' that her work or salvation has any meaning? Witness in saying is irony and bitterness if there be no witness in doing".²

How do you interpret **Song of Solomon** and learn lessons about sustainable energy from it? Well, you don't! Simply enjoy the glorious celebration of human love in all its richness. Then the challenge is if the love of God for you and me is yet more glorious, deep and real than this couple's, how then should we live in respect to him and other people?

² Joseph Sittler: *Evangelism and the Care of the Earth* in Preaching and the Witnessing Community (Philadelphia Fortress 1973) p104



Sustainability and Recovery

Restoring the masterpiece

Week 2 - 9th September

Mark 7:24-37
Isaiah 35:4-7a
James 2:1-10, 14-17



Photo: [Heal the Bay](#) 

Restorations of masterpieces are often painstaking and wonderful acts of love and dedication by highly skilled people with a passion for their work. Earlier this year at the Louvre the Leonardo da Vinci painting 'The Virgin and Child with St. Anne' was unveiled after a facelift. The original colours have been restored, so it is brighter, fresher, more vibrant and far nearer to the creator's original vision. The difference is so remarkable that it hardly seems to be the same painting.

Both the Gospel and the Old Testament readings are redolent with restoration themes. In **Mark 7** the Syro-Phonecian woman has the thing that was most precious restored to her. She knew exactly who could do that for her and went straight to Jesus. Leaving aside his enigmatic reply, the result was a wonderful and miraculous restoration of her daughter.

Likewise the second story of restoration in the Gospel reading is a beautiful and earthy account of Jesus praying and healing a deaf man. It is easy to see why the man, having had his hearing and speech restored by Jesus in a remarkable way, found it impossible to stay quiet about it. Despite strict instructions from Jesus, the master restorer, to tell no-one everybody around him soon knew about it.

This theme of restoration is seen again in **Isaiah 35** where it occurs on a bigger canvas than just the individual level. The promise of restoration includes the promise of human redemption and healing but it encompasses the whole of the natural world as an integral part of the masterpiece restored to its original colours. The pictures of blossoming of the desert, the springs in dry places, and the grass turning to reeds all speak poetically of a restored creation as part of God's redemption plan. This is no dualism where only human souls matter but a joyous celebration of the master restorer at work in the whole of his creation. We are invited to be a part of that redemption plan.

The passage from Isaiah is beautiful poetry and picks up the poetic and symbolic signs of God's redemption but there is a literal reality involved as well. As the people of God are restored this has an impact across the whole of the created order. Paul articulates this in Romans 8:19-21. We should expect to see evidence of God at work not only in the redemption and transformation of people and human systems but also in the transformation of the environment and natural systems.



“Through the Son, God creates, reconciles and redeems his creation. In the power of the Spirit, God is himself present in his creation- present in his reconciliation and his redemption of that creation.”³ We as co-creators and ambassadors are invited to be part of God’s work of the transformation of the whole world. What would that look like for you and your community?

In **James 2:1-10** James continues his straight talking in his letter. There is no place to hide, as he demands that Christians interweave their worship and their lives. James makes plain the need not to be swayed by the world’s views on how much status is given through material possessions but to have a bias to the poor.

In a time of environmental crisis the royal law, as James describes it, the call to love our neighbour, must surely have an environmental dimension. The fact that it is the poor that are disproportionately disadvantaged by climate change and environmental disasters means that if we are to seriously heed the words of James’ letter we need to work both for solutions to the environmental crisis and for amelioration of the effects of that crisis amongst the poor of this world. This will mean paying attention to our lifestyle, campaigning for more appropriate environmental policies at governmental levels and helping agencies that are working with victims of environmental degradation and climate chaos.

³ Jurgen Moltmann *God in Creation* SCM Press: London 1985, p15

Sustainability and Christ

Recognising the Master

Week 3 - 16th September

Mark 8:27-38
Isaiah 50:4-9a
Psalm 19



Photo: [paul \(dex\) bica](#)

Mark 8 is seen by most scholars as the lynch pin of Mark's Gospel. After spending time with him Jesus' disciples are questioned about whom people think that he is. Jesus quickly turns the question on to the disciples. It is a question requiring a personal response. Peter responds with the simple yet profound and earth shattering words, 'You are the Christ'. He recognizes Jesus for who he really is. He is the Messiah, the Chosen One. Once those words of recognition are uttered nothing is ever the same again. It is at that point that Jesus sets his face towards Jerusalem and he starts teaching about what the Christ is going to do and what he must endure (v31) to accomplish his work.

Those who recognized him for who he truly is are invited to walk alongside him and experience the same life and the same death. It is not easy teaching. To be told to take up a cross and follow must have appeared harsh and daunting. Two thousand years later it still does. Yet almost counter-intuitively Jesus reassures them that this is the way to life.

Those of us who have made the same confession of faith, who have called Jesus of Nazareth the Christ, who is the Lord, cannot expect things to remain the same. It will affect every area of our lives and will demand the whole of our lives to be lived in loving obedience. Going the way of the cross is never easy and yet it is the way of life. It is the paradox of living life through dying.

We often forget or tone down Christ's radical call on our lives. But if we truly recognized the master in all that we are and did then our world would be transformed. We would not hold on to our rights; we would not demand to keep what we have, recognizing that what we have does not bring us life. We can then be set free to live a radical lifestyle. For Christians in an age of ecological crisis how would that look? Surely it will entail a commitment to a simple lifestyle as we recognize the master and try to live in obedience to his call.

Isaiah 50 also speaks of the cost of discipleship. There is no cheap grace, to use Bonhoeffer's phrase⁴, in the life of a disciple. The servant, though attacked and abused, knows the sustaining and help of the sovereign God. Being a disciple in an age of ecological crisis will not be easy and many will mock and abuse our attempts to live in a way that blesses both God and his creation but we can be confident of his help and his sustaining word as we try to live, by his grace, in a simple but radical way. For many who are discouraged as they try to do the right thing and live responsibly this assurance of God's grace and sustaining power is vital.

⁴ Dietrich Bonhoeffer *The Cost of Discipleship*, 1937



Psalm 19 is a celebration of what theologians have historically called ‘the two books of God’. That is the written word of God and the way God speaks through the natural order. The core of the psalm is a paean of praise to the Torah describing it as sweeter than honey and more precious than gold (v10). It is here we discover the character of God and come to discern his ways.

Why then does the psalm start with the phrase ‘the heavens are telling the glory of God; and the firmament proclaims his handiwork.’ (v1)? The psalmist is simply spell bound by the beauty and wonder of creation. In the created order the psalm recognizes God as the chief agent. If we want to know who God is and discern his ways it is to these two books that the Christian tradition has gone, time and time again. Both take time to study and to understand but both pay rich dividends for that investment.

How often do we stand and stare in awe and wonder. The glories are taken for granted as we ‘just get on’ with our daily lives and miss the beauty around us. Yet this is the ‘second book of God’; as we study it knowing God as the chief agent we will discover more of the creator. If we are convinced that we should handle the law of the Lord, the Bible, with great care, how should we handle the second book, which inspires the psalmist so?

Sustainability and Culture

Asking the big questions

Week 4 – 23rd September

Mark 9:30-37
James 3:13-4:3, 7-8a
Jeremiah 11:18-20



Photo: [SolarEnima](#)

Mark 9:30-37 -

Who is the greatest?

The question asked by the disciples was not an original one. It is one of the perennial questions asked by human cultures throughout the ages. The cultural form of the question changes but the heart of the question remains the same. Possibly the most common form of the question in our culture is “who earns the most?” or “who has the most possessions?” The assumption is that the answer to this question will reveal our self worth.

You can tell from the embarrassed response of the disciples that they had been around Jesus long enough to know that this was not a good question. They were right! Jesus exposed their cultural assumptions by inverting their expectations, picking out a child who in that culture was a non-person, and holding them up as the greatest. Jesus was preaching and living an upside down kingdom.

So what would Jesus’ response be to the question posed in today’s terms? Would the upside down response to the question “who is the greatest?” be that the greatest is the one who has nothing, who though they had much lived simply and gave generously, who did not answer the question of worth with ‘what’ but ‘who’? Is the greatest the one who saw riches as something not to be found in a safety deposit box or in a garage but in relationships and the difference made in other people’s lives?

How would the greatest face the questions of sustainability?

James 3:13-4:3, 7-8a

Living the good life

This is a phrase that for many is synonymous with large villas, fast cars and long cruises. For others a sit-com involving Richard Briers and Felicity Kendall trying to live sustainably with their pigs and chickens in their suburban garden springs to mind. Here are two very different ways of living a good life.

What is the good life James is thinking about in the third chapter of his letter? It is a good life that springs from wisdom. There are two very different kinds of wisdom contrasted in this passage. What is striking is that both types of wisdom are not primarily concerned with thinking but with acting. It is not wise words but a good life that characterized James’ thinking on wisdom.



James goes on to elaborate on these contrasting life styles. At the root of one is bitter envy and selfish ambition (vv14-16). This drive for more than the next person, to be seen as better than the next person at whatever cost, destroys harmony and produces quarrels and fights on personal, family, community, national and global scales.

Jeremiah 11:18-20 is a graphic description of the results of living from bitter envy and selfish ambition. It affects both people and the planet when our primary concern is our pleasure and our instant gratification. When a whole nation lives like this the effects can be catastrophic. The good life, says James, is when we are really wise and our actions flow from pure motives and a desire for peace. Peacemakers who sow in peace raise a harvest of righteousness (James 3:18).

What do these wise peacemakers look like in the 21st Century? I suggest that some of them will be the champions of sustainability who will harvest righteousness.

Examples of this can be found in many places such as the Yorkshire Methodist church who are offsetting their emissions by buying solar panels for a community in Africa or a church in Manchester that runs an energy saving scheme not for themselves but for their community.

Sustainability and Relationships

Relating to the Master

Week 5 - 30th September

James 5:13-20
Numbers 11:4-6, 10-16, 24-29
Mark 9:38-50



Photo: [United Nations Photo](#) 

James 5:13-20

Prayer is powerful. James is in no doubt. As we respond to the needs of others by prayer, God responds through grace. The simple but profound truth is spelt out by James in verse 13 'Are any among you suffering? They should pray'.

James goes on to reassure us that 'the prayer of the righteous is powerful and effective' (v16). He illustrates his point by giving the example of Elijah. Interestingly it is not a description of one of the human healings that Elijah did but of how he prayed over the land. The first prayer was for it not to rain and then the second was for the rain to come so that 'the earth yielded its harvest.' (v18). Unlike much of the western Church there is no dualism. The environmental and the personal are both proper subjects for prayer; there is no sacred –secular divide in the thinking of either the Old Testament prophets or for James in his writings.

Quite clearly our spiritual responses and actions are not restricted to a purely human arena but they have global and environmental implications. James is merely pointing to something that is an important thread throughout the Old Testament, from the story of the fall and its consequences not just for human beings, to the Noahic covenant with the promise between God and all living creatures in Genesis 8, through to statements such as the one found in 2 Chronicles 7:14, that confession of our sins and returning to God in prayer will bring a healing of the land.

Christians who are serious about spirituality and who consider prayer vital will take seriously the call to pray and work for God's kingdom to 'come on earth' and to yearn for the healing of the land. Likewise, those who strive on environmental projects and attempt to live sustainable life styles desperately need the power of God through prayer.

Numbers 11:4-6, 10-16

To make sense of this passage you really need to read the whole of the chapter rather than just the selected verses. However, the thrust of the episode is quite clear. Though God rescued the Israelites from slavery, overcame their oppressors and brought them into freedom with a promise of leading them to a land of their own, still they were not satisfied. Though God had provided miraculously for their material needs especially by sending a daily supply of manna bread they were not content and looked back to the foods of their captivity with fondness and longing. This staggering ingratitude caused discontent amongst the people, dissatisfaction with their circumstances and a rift in their relationship with the divine.



From the heady height of the 21st century it is easy to judge the Israelites and yet a simple examination of our lifestyle and attitudes suggest a similar spiritual malaise. A lack of contentment with God's wonderful provision, a forgetfulness of God's goodness, and a looking beyond what we have to what others have and we desire, wanting yet more is perhaps too accurate a description of the lifestyles of most Christians in this country. Do we look and behave like those Israelites?

The western disease of acquisitiveness lies at the heart of much of our discontent, a forgetfulness. Our desire for more rather than enough has meant that we have over fished our oceans, stripped natural habitats and over exploited the earth's resources to a crisis level. Still we have found not fulfillment and contentment but only greed, exploitation and inner discontent.

The victims of this race for more are the poorest of this world and the good earth that our creator has given us. No wonder God got angry! (v33)

Mark 9:38- 50. Jesus continues in Mark's Gospel to teach his disciples what it means to recognize him as the master and the Christ and to follow him on his journey to the cross. The difficulty of that journey is recognized but so also are our allies. The Lord employs a simple image to demonstrate this, 'whoever gives you a cup of water to drink because you bear the name of Christ will by no means lose the reward.' (v41)

This is in a sense a metaphorical drink of water. It indicates any help but it is not without literal application. Water, the most precious commodity on this planet, is not limitless and many places are increasingly experiencing drought and water stress. Whilst we, without a thought, turn a tap on or simply flush away this life giving resource, the reality is that over a billion people live without a clean water source and over 2.5 billion without adequate sanitation. Providing this in the name of Christ to some of those billion, many who are Christians, does not seem to be beyond what Jesus in this passage is requiring of people.