

Reflections for the Weeks of Creationtide 2022: 1 September to 4 October

Listening to the Voice of Creation

These reflections and comments have been written by Christine Jack, Christ Church, Harrogate, for all to use.

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Introduction

In the beginning God spoke the world into being and shaped the elements around into the seven days of creation: Genesis 1. 1 – 3 providing the receptacle of... earth sky and sea and Genesis 1. 4-7 populating these with the creatures of the earth and sky and waters, led by humanity. The first couple are instructed to tend and care for the world and to ensure its' future through care for the land, provision of food from the land and procreation as the population multiplies.

Today, increasing awareness of environmental crisis has led to widespread religious reflection on the human relationship with the earth and with its' encompassing protective atmosphere. Emerging from this reflection has come the study of eco-theology, a form of constructive theology that focuses on the interrelationships of religion and nature, particularly in the light of environmental concerns. Eco-theology explores the interaction between ecological values, such as sustainability, and the human nature, set in a God-centred framework of worship and work. How can we live on this planet in a sustainable way while preserving its biodiversity and maintaining healthy, just, and lively communities in contemporary society? Creationtide provides an opportunity to try and answer this question.

How can the biblical message can be understood in contemporary situation, as our world stumbles to the brink of ecological collapse, the 'tipping point' of irreversible climate change? What or who are the drivers? What are the effects, on humans, on animals, on the land?

We need to explore contemporary contexts of climate change and global warming, urban and rural landscapes, industrialised and developing worlds

As we read the Bible, we find that environmental and ecological concerns are very much central to its message in both testaments. However, our focus here is on the Church of England lectionary set for Creationtide 2022, as celebrated

on Sundays 4th September – 2nd October. Much scriptural literature and discussion has focused on the Genesis and Wisdom books of the Old Testament. If we look at the New Testament, an initial glance will first show that there is relatively little to draw from for a theology of the environment. All the emphasis appears to be on human salvation, seeking to stress spiritual rather than material dimensions of God's work.

The underlying concern of ecology however is not only of the earth, but of inter-relatedness and therefore study of creation must be taken in its' fullest context in relation to the entire creation community. Our *oikos*, the home, from where we get the word ecology, is much wider than we have expected. The relationships within this larger home are to be explored to deal with the current crisis. This perspective will help us to see God's great plans for an inter-relatedness with creation that has Christo-cosmic dimensions.

From the beginning, Jesus' birth, and incarnation as a human (recorded in Luke and Matthew's opening chapters), there is an implicit identification with creation, as well as a proclamation of the wider scope of salvation. The scenes in the stable, with manger and animals, the gifts from local shepherds and from travelling visitors from afar give us the clues. Without detailing each point throughout his short life, the death on the cross and the cracking of the earth in response continue the connection, and we need to travel swiftly on to Paul's letters recording and reflecting on his life and its meaning.

The well-known passage in Paul's letter to the Colossians takes us further in its underlining of creation alongside Jesus' Christ's authority over the Church.

For by him all things were created, things in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible... all things were created by him and for him. He is before all things and in him all things hold together. (Col. 1.16-17)

The New Testament clearly states the centrality of Christ in relation to God's creation, alongside a proclamation of the wider scope of salvation. Christ became part of creation, networked into the human community, so that he could take part in God's total plans, directed towards future perfection of creation as well as community of people.

In Common Worship lectionary for Year C, the gospel readings come from the Gospel of Luke, and specifically from chapters 14 -17.

Luke's gospel re-tells the story for a growing inclusive church, for Gentiles and Jews, poor and rich, women and men. There is a sense of a new history unfolding – through the age of Israel, the age of Jesus, the age of church; it is an account of salvation history in the middle of world history.

Luke, in tracing the genealogical line back to Adam wants to show that a new humanity has begun which concerns the whole of humanity, Jesus as the Saviour of the world. Luke is usually considered the author of the Acts of the Apostles, in which the Holy Spirit takes the story from its Jewish context into the wider world. Luke understands the enabling power of the Spirit to be the basis of the Christian community. He focuses on inclusion of the marginalised by gender, race, or disability, on the poor, the oppressed, those without social status in their society.

The 5 weeks of Creationside 2022 focus on Jesus's journey to Jerusalem, and on the parables of chapters Luke 14-17:

- a) The parable of Costly Discipleship,
- b) Parable of the Lost Sheep, parable of the Lost Coin,
- c) Parable of the Unjust Steward (14:7–16:13);
- d) The story of Dives and Lazarus, the rich man and the poor man at the gate (16.19 – 31) and lastly
- e) On the necessity of faith in the parable of the Mustard Seed.

The purpose of Luke's gospel is the building of the Kingdom, the parables are both kingdom-builders and lessons in living the life of the Kingdom of God. Luke's gospel ends as travellers on the Emmaus Road meet to share their story, as it travels from the particular to the universal. This is mission, the power of story lives on.

This vision offers an insight into God's all-embracing process of redemption, which includes creation, the fall, the incarnation, resurrection, and eschatological hope.

Week One: Sunday 4th September 2022

Costly Discipleship Luke 14. 25 -33

Hating family, giving up possessions, building a tower, preparing for war....are all signs of a costly discipleship, to quote Dietrich Bonhoeffer. These verses remind us to count the cost of a costly discipleship, or we'll be in trouble. We might find the phrase 'hating' too strong for our family relationships, but it is clear that often, and sometimes painfully, we must put non-family members first on our agenda.

This is all part of the challenge. How can we build an inclusive and just society, where everyone is welcome at the banquet, at the feast of the kingdom at the end of time? Jesus spells out the cost of discipleship for all – though perhaps the cost will seem higher for those with most economic and social connections. He is asking us to use our resources without expecting anything in return, yet not to give randomly but with careful planning; to try and be part of the kingdom without counting the cost would be foolish.

Jesus' teaching here offers the crowd the opportunity for informed consent – to know what they are getting into, should they choose to keep following. Conventional wisdom (e.g. Proverbs 24:3-6) sees the need to look ahead, to consider the resources needed to fulfil a plan, and to understand the consequences of commitments made. In the examples given, of domestic building projects or national conflicts, the potential consequences range from ridicule, through to financial ruin and military occupation.

All of these texts lead to reflection about choices we have. Whose words and ways do we listen to, and how? What priority do we give to actively choosing God's ways in our lives? What outcomes might we expect? Do we choose life in all its fullness, for all God's children?

With God's creation, there are many voices to listen to – firstly those living with the consequences of climate change and environmental destruction right now, the victims; the cries of the poor the suffering of the earth itself. We today must also listen to the scientists, economists, campaigners, theologians, and future generations. The costs of inaction are becoming clearer every day; inaction is the path of "business as usual" for many of us. What we need is to take the path of transformational love.

The blessings of listening to God's call to care are tangled up our own struggles and costs in our current way of life – economic crisis puts pressures on us all. Why should we seek God's ways? Why should those ways include caring for God's creation? Why should we make the huge changes to our lifestyles that are necessary for climate change to be slowed down?

To explore the motivation to follow Jesus, Luke 14 needs to be put in the wider context of Jesus' love and a reminder of the love that leads to taking up the cross.

We find answers in the generosity of God, who gives us an abundance of life in which we flourish and learn. We find more answers when we recognise people from all across the world as our sisters and brothers. We listen to their stories, as they tell us how their lives are affected by climate change and environmental destruction, as they bear witness to death and adversity because of issues around land and water.

Even if we can't always find such positive motivation, there should also be enough fear of the dire consequences for all the world, including our part of it, if we do nothing.

Week Two: Sunday 11th September 2022

Lost and Found Luke 15. 1-10

In this week's Sunday gospel reading, the Pharisees are grumbling about Jesus's association with tax collectors and sinners – those outside the circle of social acceptance. In response, Jesus replies with three parables, the parables of the lost sheep and the lost coin followed by the parable of the prodigal son, as three joyful homecoming feasts. Home coming, rejoicing and banqueting are signs of the Kingdom of God.

Two of the parables, the lost sheep and the lost coin, take place in different scenarios: one, in an outdoor setting and the other, within the home; in the rural landscape and in the domestic context. Our salvation is not limited to spiritual salvation only but has to do with the well-being of the wider human environment, both society and the urban and natural world. The focus is on those who have lost their way and includes stories of economic hardship as the loss of a valuable animal and the loss of a silver coin, part of a dowry inheritance.

It is worth commenting on our attitude to those 'outside' our immediate church or family circles. Part of a lack of enthusiasm within some churches to positively engage with ecological concerns arises from the fact that this call has come from 'outsiders'. Churches that decline to see and act concerning God's creation, especially those that want to exclude it from church agendas and activities, risk being like a coin that has rolled away into a dark place. Churches that celebrate God's world and seek to care for it through practical action are a cause for divine rejoicing, as they return to the fold of the good shepherd. Like the good shepherd, the Lord seeks out those who have strayed and calls them to change their ways and start caring for the earth again.

The issues of climate change, water crisis, deforestation, air pollution, food waste, loss of biodiversity, and many other sustainability problems are real challenges that cannot be solved by politics and technology alone. It depends on us. Luke, as Mark, does not envision so much of the restoration of the current temple or the creation of a new one. Instead, the work of God's Spirit can be fully embodied in the community of believers, who live out and call others to receive his word and embrace his ways.



Week Three: Sunday 18th September 2022

The Dishonest Manager or The Shrewd Steward Luke 16. 1-13

What would you like to call this parable? It's one of those passages that makes us and probably all congregations sit up and ask questions. Here at last is a parable set in the business world, although that of first-century Palestine.

Money is, however much we would like to think otherwise, very much central in our lives. Try going without for a while, and the point strikes home. This doesn't mean we have to worship it; few people serve only money and wealth for its own sake - usually what draws us on, is what it can buy or what it stands for in terms of status. What we call the economy, *oikos nomos*, the accountability of the household of God, is very much in the foreground of Jesus' teachings and all the parables in these two chapters have finance as a focus in some form or another.

So let's grasp the nettle. In our capitalist, neo-liberal society, economics is presented as objective and quantifiable, best left to distant experts and as a problem to be solved through new technologies and market efficiency. What happens if we begin to consider what economic values are important for human flourishing; how can we share resources that help us to join in with God's redemption of the economic landscape? How we can live on this planet in a sustainable way while preserving its biodiversity and maintaining healthy, just, and liveable communities under the influence of developing late capitalism.

In this parable, Jesus' injunction to 'make friends for yourselves by means of "mammon"', which the NRSV translation of the Bible renders as "dishonest wealth" (v. 9), is challenging to say the least. On top of that, his suggestion arises from a story where the central character is commended for "cooking the books"; in fact, he is described as having 'acted shrewdly' (v. 8). We might have to ask, to what extent is the manager bound to play within the system's rules? In what ways might we be hindered in following God's call by the system, the society in which we live? Alternatively, those rendered poor or needy by a capricious system may not have to respect all its rules. The answers to these questions could be part of the discussion.

Can we use mammon and the marketplace as a ladder in drawing closer to God's Kingdom? The Bible is clear in saying that the only way money does you any good is by giving it away to others who need it more. Jesus' command to the rich man to give everything away to be one of the most challenging yet compelling moments in the Gospel. We might struggle to reconcile modern capitalism with Jesus' views about money, but the money we own is powerful and we can use it to do good or to do harm. Individuals and communities can have a massive collective impact on the world economy as a force for good.

Jesus shows us the power of a relationship or circular economy; a relationship with God; a relationship with all God's people and with all of humanity. He especially includes those often excluded – the socially marginalised, the racially different, the disabled, the economically-disadvantaged. His goal is building the Kingdom of God, the Kingdom of heaven here and now.

Week Four: Sunday 25th September 2022

Wealth and Poverty Luke 16.19 -31

In the story of the 'Rich Man (Dives) and Lazarus', Jesus was speaking to the Pharisees who were ridiculing Jesus about what he said on idolizing wealth over the worship of God. This parable is about poverty and wealth, and focuses on the beggar at the gate of a rich man. The Rich Man seems unaware of the problems of the poor and homeless as he passes by every day, dressed sumptuously in fine clothes and enjoying his abundant daily feasts. Lazarus is pestered by dogs licking his sores as he waits, hungry for a few crumbs from the Rich Man's table. It could be a parable of today.

When death comes to both Lazarus and the Rich Man there is a great reversal of circumstances. Lazarus it seems does have some friends, the angels, who carry him to the loving and intimate company of Abraham, the model of Old Testament hospitality, the hospitality he never received from the rich man. The Rich Man is dismissed abruptly; dead and buried, he ends up in Hades.

Through the character of Abraham in the parable, Jesus emphasizes that what we do in this life has eternal implications. Lazarus says nothing. The Rich Man and his five brothers could have crossed the gulf between the rich and the poor if they had listened to and obeyed what Moses and the prophet said about care for the poor.

Those who will not be converted by words based on Scripture will not be convinced by miraculous signs 'even if someone rises from the dead'. If the Rich Man had recognised Lazarus as in need during his life and not been indifferent to him, there would not be a fixed gulf between them. The conclusion of the parable is a reminder that those who are attentive to the Scriptures and to the Word of God in Jesus, the One risen from the dead, will also be attentive to the poor.

(Note: Angels appear in this parable. It's worth noting that the 29th September falls this week, and this date is often marked as that of St. Michael and All Angels).

Week Five: Sunday 2nd October 2022

Increase our Faith Luke 17. 5-10

Many of Jesus' parables come from the natural world, and the parable of the mustard seed is no exception. To hold a mustard seed in your hand reminds us of just how tiny it is. To plant, nurture it and see it grow is to remind us of all how plants grow from such tiny beginnings to much larger plants.

Jesus raises our awareness again with his metaphors and his attention to detail. Can we really grow our faith in such a way? Yes, with nurture and attention to detail.

The parable continues with references to slaves and their servitude, which probably doesn't connect with us very much today. However, the point of both parables is that in doing what comes naturally, we need to remember the smallest things and pay attention to detail. We should be taking note of what's growing around us, we should be caring for our earth and all around us. In our busy consumer, work-directed lifestyles, such detail is often brushed under the carpet.



Harvest Service

Provision is made here for a **Harvest Festival** usually takes place during these weeks of Creationtide. The lectionary suggest that harvest should be celebrated on any of these three Sundays. The gospel readings and collects can help to develop the theme.

Readings

Sunday 18 September - John 6. 25-35.

Sunday 25 September- John 6. 25-35.

Sunday 2 October - John 6. 25-35

Collects

Creator God
You made the goodness of the land
The riches of the sea
And the rhythm of the seasons.
We thank you for the harvest,
May we cherish and respect
This planet and its peoples,
Through Jesus Christ our Lord.

Or

Eternal God,
You crown the year with your goodness
And you give us the fruits of the earth in their season.
Grant that we may use them to your glory,
For the relief of those in need and for our own well-being.
Through Jesus Christ your Son, our Lord
Who is alive and reigns with you,
In the unity of the Holy Spirit,
One God, now and for ever.

Our farming communities are sometimes forgotten in the food chains of supply and demand and in the supermarkets of our consumer society. The Season of Creation and its link with the festival of harvest is a time to celebrate and give thanks to our farmers for all they do towards the provision of our food. The harvest loaf remains a central symbol at most harvest festivals – symbol of the bread of life, which nourishes us both physically and spiritually.

The theme of God's provision is set within a covenantal relationship. Biblical Scholars now say there were two traditions of open table fellowship – bread and wine, and bread and fishes. Bread and wine became the meal that today we call the Mass or the Eucharist or the Lord's Supper. The bread and wine is the tradition which lends itself more to ritual. The bread and fish tradition contributes more to issues of justice, community – this was real food which fed the poor (Luke 9. 10-17). Within a covenantal relationship then for Jesus to eat with people was his way to symbolically enact the restoration to the new creation paradise.

This year in celebrating a Royal Jubilee, we can also remember the ancient biblical Jubilee call (Exodus 32, Leviticus 25) of justice and peace for the land. This means leaving the land fallow and forgiving debts every seven years; the crops and fruit trees should be left unharvested and unpruned, setting aside food for the poor, the gleaner. The biblical Sabbath every seventh day is also an occasion of thanksgiving, a feast of contentment and 'enoughness'. In the rhythm of days and years, passing time is given its measure, the earth is given a rest. Sabbath requires a letting go, something

in our 24/7 world we find hard to do. Today, soil health is at the top of the agenda of many farmers and landowners. So should be the health of our farmers themselves.

Sunday 2 October can also be celebrated as a Dedication Festival, meaning a thanksgiving for the Church (John 2. 13-22): as a house of prayer and place of meeting for God's people. At harvest, all is 'gathered in' in the words of the favourite harvest hymn 'we plough the fields and scatter'— whatever its' short falls in recognising the harvesting methods of contemporary farmers. Not much ploughing is done today in our fragile and depleted topsoil. The idea of 'gathering in' extends to our parishes, gathering peoples and families in the local community, many of whom seldom enter a church building at any other time of the year (except perhaps Christmas).

Each week we pray 'Thy Kingdom Come'. We pray for bread, forgiveness, deliverance and anticipate the kingdom, where the bread we need is for all and should be shared with those who have none. We openly recognise the importance of ecological issues, alongside social justice and economic justice issues. We pray for the ecological crisis driven along by the pursuit of economic growth regardless of the cost to the environment. Changes must be made.

We know that we live in the in-between times, anticipating a kingdom which has not yet come. The Church on earth is a historical reality, it is exposed to the ambiguities of all human history and needs constant repentance and renewal in order to respond fully to its vocation.

There are real and hard challenges here for all Christian churches, and prayers to rebalance both our own lifestyles and the planet, would lift morale and encourage the congregation to engage in the world as Christ's light.



More about Creationtide

Creationtide begins on 1st September, the beginning of the Church Year in the Eastern Orthodox Church. This day is now dedicated in both Eastern and Western hemispheres to prayer for the environment.

Creationtide officially concludes on 4th October, considered in most churches to be the feast of St. Francis of Assisi. Francis himself came from a wealthy background and renounced all he had, to live a simple life dedicated to the preservation of all God's creation. His love of animals and the brotherhood and sisterhood of the natural elements are exemplified in the Canticle of the Sun. St. Francis is held up as 'an example ... of an integral ecology lived joyfully and authentically' (*Laudate Si*, Pope Francis).

The season includes the day dedicated to St Hildegard of Bingen (17th September), prophetess of the Rhine and known for her understanding of 'veriditas'; the greening of life, and the rising of sap in all living things. Her monastery is set amongst the vineyards of the Rhine in central Germany, in the region of Geisenheim. Here we are reminded of the parables of the vineyard, and the true authority of the landowner and his son, who have given the responsibility for caring for the vines and vineyards to his stewards, who are punished for their neglect.

Listen to the voice of creation

The theme and focus for 2022 is to listen to the voice of creation.

Throughout Deuteronomy 3-5, the voice of the Lord is heard speaking from the clouds, like thunder, from the darkness of storms, from the crackling of fire. For the most part, the wrath of God is heard as a voice causing destruction. Today, the prevalence of unnatural fires are a sign of the devastating effects that climate change has on the most vulnerable of our planet. Creation cries out as forests crackle, animals flee, and people are forced to migrate due to the fires of injustice. However, the voice from the burning bush in Exodus 3.1-12, the fire that called to Moses as he tended the flock on Mt. Horeb did not consume or destroy the bush. This flame of the Spirit revealed God's presence. This holy fire affirmed that God heard the cries of all who suffered and promised to be with us as we followed in faith to our deliverance from injustice.

The psalms are filled with descriptions of the voice of the Lord speaking through desert and wilderness landscapes, through oaks and cedars, through storm and lightening – and even through the still small voice of calm heard by the prophet Elijah. Only in a few instances, does the natural world use its 'own' voice, such as in psalm 93 'The seas have lifted up, LORD, the seas have lifted up their voice; the seas have lifted up their pounding waves'.

Psalms 19 also contains the well-known verses:

*The heavens are telling the glory of God,
and the firmament proclaims his handiwork.*

²*Day to day pours forth speech,
and night to night declares knowledge.*

³*There is no speech, nor are there words;
their voice is not heard;*

⁴*yet their voice goes out through all the earth
and their words to the end of the world.*

In the New Testament, Jesus hears the voice of his Father at his baptism, as the clouds open and a voice comes from the sky. We hear the voice of Jesus himself as the good shepherd calling to his flock. We hear his voice calming the waters on Lake Galilee, the Lord of Creation stilling the storms of the seas and of our passions.

Today, our focus is on the groaning of creation heard in Romans 8; and the voices of those suffering from climate change – from drought and flood. It is our responsibility not only to hear, the cries of the victims, but to respond and to bring the voices from various communities to the public forum of our businesses and governments, and of our own lives.

Where to Find Other Creationtide Worship Resources

C of E suite of resources for *Listen to the Voice of Creation*: Creationtide Theme 2022
www.churchofengland.org/about/environment-and-climate-change/season-creation#na

C of E Season of Creation webinar series exploring environmental themes in theology and worship
www.churchofengland.org/about/environment-and-climate-change/season-creation#na

C of E Creationtide resources <https://creationtide.wordpress.com/>

Diocese of Leeds Environment Worship page www.leeds.anglican.org/environment/worship-teaching

Preaching for God's World - Weekly creation care themed sermon resources at <https://preachingforgodsworld.org/>

Greening the Lectionary – archived weekly sermon pointers www.greeningthelectionary.net/441901152

A Time for Creation booklet of Creation-themed liturgy www.churchofengland.org/prayer-and-worship/worship-texts-and-resources/time-creation

About the Author

Christine Jack has Master's degrees in Education and in Theology and Religious Studies, and a PG certificate in Christian Spirituality. Originally reader-trained, she has served in three parishes, and also overseas in the Church of Ceylon, the Christian Church in Sri Lanka. She has co-taught on the Reader training courses in the Diocese of Leeds, chairs the Diocesan Eco Worship Group and is a member of the Yorkshire Liturgists Group. Christine is currently based at Christ Church Harrogate, and runs the Diocesan Eco Book and Film Group.