

Season of Creation 2020: A Jubilee for the Earth

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Introduction

The Season of Creation runs from the 1st September until the 4th October each year. The global celebration began in 1989 in the Orthodox Church, with the Ecumenical Patriarch's recognition of a Day of Creation on 1st September, and is now spread throughout the global ecumenical community. Faith leaders invite us all to join the Season of Creation.

The theme for the Season of Creation 2020 is A Jubilee for the Earth. It is based biblically on the idea of Jubilee which we find in Leviticus, and is a time to listen to prophetic voices:

Then you shall have the trumpet sounded loud; on the tenth day of the seventh month – on the Day of Atonement – you shall have the trumpet sounded throughout all your land. Leviticus 25.9 NRSV

A prophetic voice for care of the earth was sounded more than 50 years ago, when the first signs of 'the groaning of creation' (Romans 8) were spotted by the eagle-eyed prophets of the day – groups such as Greenpeace and Friends of the Earth. Today, these organisations are still going strong and have been joined by other movements such as A Rocha, Zero Carbon Britain and Extinction Rebellion. Jonathan Porritt, with his early 'Save the Whale' campaigns, has been joined by naturalist David Attenborough and scientist Professor Brian Cox.

2020 marks 50 years since the first Earth Day when the environmental movement was born.

Our churches were a little slow in taking this up, as it meant that Christians needed to see their theology in a different way, and renew their understanding of the Doctrine of Creation. However, many biblical scholars, Christian economist, thinkers and writers were soon onto the task with people like Tim Cooper, Walter Brueggemann and others leading the way. In the 1990s, the Christian Ecology Link was born (now Green Christians) and we were on our way. Most Churches now have environmental policies as caring for God's earth becomes part of our recognised ministry.

Jubilee itself mean 'a ram's horn'. It was blown to mark the start of a time of universal redemption. The year of Jubilee involved release from indebtedness, when injustices of the past fifty years were to be restored. It was also a time for rest for the land.

And you shall consecrate the fiftieth year and you shall proclaim liberty throughout the land to all its inhabitants. It shall be a jubilee for you: you shall return, every one of you, to your property and every one of you to your family. Leviticus 25.10 NRSV

Human kind is easily ensnared in the culture of ownership and possessions; the desire for possessions can consume a person's waking hours and dominate their dreams. In the midst of this, we are called to stop, completely, for a short period of time. To pause for breath to take a break, to experience freedom from the demands of society. In the rhythm of days and years, passing time is given its measure, the earth is given a rest. The Jubilee call of justice and peace means leaving the land fallow and forgiving debts every seven years; the crops and fruit trees must be left unharvested and unpruned, so that there is food for the poor, the gleaners (Exodus 32.10 , Leviticus 25.1-7). A Jubilee year requires a letting go.

These sermon notes are based on the Revised Common Lectionary in an attempt to be faithful to the scriptures.

However, I have focused on the particular emphases found in them that could be helpful during Creation Time. In particular, we shall seek to discover whether these ancient yet living texts can 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.

The Christian focus on salvation and redemption now recognises our dependence on the earth for our survival, and our salvation takes place in the wider 'community of creation'. It is not only humans who will be redeemed through the sacrifice of Christ, but the whole creation will be renewed or re-created.

Week 1: 6th September

Sustainability and Community: The establishment of Israel and of the Church community

Exodus 12.1-14

Psalm 149 the faithful people

Romans 13.8-14

Matthew 18.15-20

The passages from Exodus focus on the Hebrew slaves leaving the land of Egypt and escaping into the freedom of the 'promised land', their establishment as the people of God, and the setting forth of the laws and ways of life which God gives them as Israel, a law-governed nation. Here we will focus on the themes of generosity, love, good governance and the restoration of a law-governed society.

In the weeks just before the Season of Creation, the lectionary readings reminded us that Jesus named Peter as the 'Rock,' on which Jesus will found his Church. The Church, ecclesia, is the establishment of the new Christian community, founded on earth. Here, the Triune God forms the church community's life in mission and in relationship to the world. We are to be a community of love in mutual relationality and genuine otherness, characterised by a theology of participation in the community of creation.

The year of Jubilee, according to biblical regulations, had a special impact on the ownership and management of the land. These bible passages focus on landowners and tenants, and their relationship and management of the land as God's 'vineyard', and how to deal with problems when neglectful practice results in 'ecocide' or environmental degradation rather than fruitfulness.

We all have the responsibility for the pastoral care that requires us to deal with one another's sinfulness, especially when this threatens our cohesion as disciples of Jesus and as the community of the church, whether local, national or even global. Jesus tells his disciples how this painful but healing process of forgiveness is to be conducted. The authority of 'binding and loosing' that had been given to Peter to exercise in a particular way is here extended to the whole church because it is not only the leaders who must accept responsibility for reconciliation within the community.

The first approach in reconciliation is to be one-to-one between offended and offender. This should be done with no intention of judgemental confrontation, following the Torah tradition (Lev. 19.17-18) about reproving someone with love and loving one's neighbour as oneself. The 'legal' proceedings continue and the decisions are also entrusted to the local assembly. They are to be accountable and responsible because of the abiding presence of the risen Jesus in the community. If the community cannot bring the offender to repentance, this person is to be them 'as a Gentile and a tax collector'. This is not as harsh as it might at first sound be. In the gospel context, it is a reminder that it was Gentiles and tax collectors, people on the religious and social margins, whom Jesus befriended, never giving up on his efforts with them, like the lost sheep. The wideness of God's mercy gives offenders a second chance.

If we look carefully, we can see how this might affect us in the Season of Creation. It is the developing countries who forgive the developed countries for their part in causing the pollution which has resulted in climate change and global warming. The development of industrialisation and technology in the West has played a huge part, if not actually caused environmental crisis, and has been motivated by market-driven capitalism and consumer greed. Developing countries themselves now want to industrialise and become in turn modern nations of the 21st century. What to do?

Increasing awareness of environmental crisis has led to widespread religious reflection on the Christian relationship with the earth, with 'the land' in biblical terms.

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 take 21st century globalisation to heart, and recognise the increasing interdependence and interconnectedness of all life on earth in the light of God's will.

In his Letter to the Romans, Paul says that the only debt we should owe each other is 'the debt of mutual love'. We are all debtors to Christ because of the love God has shown us through his Son. Paul quotes the commandments that prohibit actions which might harm our neighbour, and emphasises the positive transforming power of love. Now the Spirit of Christ dwells within us (Romans 8) Christians have an inner law which commands love, even beyond the Christian community, to 'all nations'.

Week 2: September 13th

Sustainability and Forgiveness

Exodus 14.19-31

Psalm 114 or

Canticle: Exodus 15.1b-11, 20,21

Romans 14.1-12

Matthew 18.21-35

As the new church communities begin to establish the parameters of their lives and laws which govern them, Peter brings up the question of sin and forgiveness again. How often can we go on forgiving someone for their wrongdoings? Is there to be a limit on our tolerance of their behaviour? Jesus takes up the challenge with his usual generosity of spirit, and suggests 'Not seven times but I tell you, seventy times seven'.

This is followed with a parable in three parts: the dealing of the lord or king with his high ranking slave, the dealing of that slave with his fellow slave, and the second encounter with of the lord and the slave in the light of what happened between the two slaves. Jesus likens membership in the kingdom of heaven to the expectation that is at the heart of the parable; namely that forgiveness received from a loving compassionate God is the basis for forgiveness offered in return to others. There can be dire consequences if this expectation is not met.

So who, in our Creationtide story, needs forgiving, and who should forgive?

In week one we discovered that the developing countries must forgive the developed countries for their part in causing the pollution which has resulted in global warming. As we move on, however, we know that we cannot change the past, but the guilty must recognise their guilt and change the future.

Now that the discrepancy has been uncovered and recognised, can we continue to consume more and more? Can we continue to support a way of life measured almost solely in terms of material wealth and which ignores social and environmental issues?

The real challenge for us is to live with our neighbours who own two or three cars, or fly across the world for weekend breaks, who still litter our streets, or keep the lights burning in every room of house, for example, and forgive. Forgiveness is a personal demand of discipleship of Jesus. Carping gets us nowhere. Only by persistently living our vision, with the love God asks of us, and at both a personal and governmental level, can we change things. If we challenge aggressively we will probably do more harm than good, though gentle reminders would surely not go amiss. We need to get alongside. If we start with a concern for the environment and draw people into that vision first, then issues of consumerism will grow from that. We do need to make the links between the natural world and our care of it, and our political economy in a modern society.

We can shop sustainably, use public transport and volunteer for our school or local council; we can encourage a greener attitude to our foods, the way we travel, and the energy we use to light and heat our homes, our school and council buildings.

As Paul says, we must welcome those who are weak in the faith. His remarks about vegetarianism need some comment. With a greater understanding of food content and food values, and the

inclusion of pulses, vegetarianism is no longer a sign of weakness. However, some Christian groups do take a literal interpretation of the Biblical prophecies of universal vegetarianism [Genesis 1:29–1:31, Isaiah 11:6–11:9, Isaiah 65:25] and encourage vegetarianism as preferred lifestyles or as a way of rejecting the commodity status of animals and the use of animal products for any purpose. In the 21st century it is ethical to eat less red meat. God however welcomes all: we live not for ourselves but for the Lord and must respect his creation and care for it.

Week 3: 20th September

Labourers in the Vineyard or 'The Generous Landowner'

Exodus 16.2-15

Psalms 105.1-6, 37-45

Philippians 1.21-30

Matthew 20.1-16

In the language of these biblical passages, metaphors run through and through; simile and analogy widen and broaden our understanding of the issues which Jesus wants to explore. The dominant metaphor here is the land as God's vineyard, and those who work it as the landowners, labourers, tenant farmers and slaves.

Theologically, according to Leviticus, the Jubilee existed because the land was the possession of Yahweh, and its current occupiers were merely aliens or tenants. The Israelites were servants of Yahweh. It is unlikely therefore, that Jesus is accepting for the purposes of the story, the social and economic powers of the landowner, in order to say something about God. Jesus' views on rich landowners is encapsulated in the parable of the rich young man – 'if you wish to be perfect, go, sell all your possessions and give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven. Come follow me'. However, not all can leave our houses and our families to follow Jesus.

Those who have to stay at home for the sake of their family, or indeed choose to do so, however, still have to work out how to live 'the Jesus way'.

The demand for fair wages comes years before the emergence of trade unions. We hear the grumbling of the workers, as they question the sense of fairness, of justice, in paying the last workers the same as the first. What is he saying about God here? Look at the last group of workers, the ones no one had employed. We might wonder why no one wants to employ them. Are they unkempt, disabled, blind, known to be lazy? Is God really employing the unemployable? Is the landowner standing for God, the workers for Israel, is there to be no favouritism at this work place? Do the disciples have to learn that bringing in the kingdom of heaven will not make them rich or powerful; that God does not make contracts or bargains, he makes covenants.

There are perhaps more questions than clear answers here.

This is a parable which has puzzled many. The vineyard itself also became something of a romantic image after the American discovery of the West, and the trials of the civil war. This was memorialised in the famous text by Julia Ward Howe of the first verse of Battle Hymn of the Republic; 'My eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the Lord, he is trampling out the vineyard where the grapes of wrath are stored'. The full verse reflects Isaiah 63, Apocalypse 19 and other passages feeding the 'winepress' tradition, and itself reflected in John Steinbeck's 1939 novel, *The Grapes of Wrath*. Working new territory was no easy matter.

As this parable is found only in Matthew's Gospel, it seems to give relevance for his community into which the Gentiles were entering, with consequent tensions between them and the well-established Jewish -Christians with their well-established traditions. The Gentiles were to be accepted as equals. Today we, the Church of the developed world, must accept and encourage the Christians of the developing countries, realising that the future of the church may depend on them. The superiority of Western Christians was apparent in the missionary zeal of the mid-nineteenth century, and it has

taken many years for Western cultures, who certainly had plenty to give in terms of education and material goods, to accept that African and Asian cultures have much to offer too. This is story which is not for this discussion, but could be taken up another time.

Are there any other groups which we must learn to accept and welcome, such as the poor, the homeless, the sick and the disabled. What changes might we have to make to accommodate those who are different from our able-bodied congregations?

Sometimes only God's generous love can span the distance with forgiveness and love. Like the disgruntled labourers in the parable, we are often inclined to look at life from our own limited perspective, so that 'What's in it for me?' may be our uppermost concern, sometimes followed by envy if the newcomers get the pastor's attention. Paul's confidence in God, and his faith in the expansive generosity of God in Christ, witness to the truth that God's ways and dreams can surpass the limits of our human reason and understanding. 'The earth is the Lord's and all that is in it' says Psalm 24, and that includes the small patch of ground upon which our church is built, and the places in which we walk.

Week 4: September 27th

By what authority?

Exodus 17.1-7

Psalms 78.1-4,12-16

Philippians 2.1-13

Matthew 21.23-32

The metaphor of the vineyard continues this week, as Jesus wrestles with the chief priests and elders in an attempt to renew the life of the Jerusalem temple, and widen its influence in another parable of place and the 'workforce'. Jesus tells the story of the vineyard father and his two sons who are his potential labourers. The chief priests and scribes question his authority, rather than recognise their own shortcomings. But it also has significance for the wider Christian family. From our own experience, we know that we can respond to a request for assistance with the best of intentions – but then waver and never carry them out. Or after an initial refusal, we can have a change of heart, a twinge of conscience which causes us to change our minds and action.

The example of authority put forward in this passage is that of John the Baptist who left his synagogue community to preach along the banks of the Jordan. John was baptized in the river, as the Holy Spirit descended on him in the form of a dove. Many questioned his authority too. When I began lay ministry many years ago, neither licensed nor ordained but part of an active parish team, building baptismal and family groups, I felt uncomfortable and asked the Vicar this question "By what authority do I come?" almost unconsciously following the very questions asked biblically here. The answer which I received at the time was: "By the authority of your baptism". Ever since then, the ministry of John the Baptist seemed to take on a new light.

Today the call of the church is openly for all people as the global nature of environmental degradation is recognised. We have all heard of the second papal encyclical from Pope Francis, *Laudate Si*, with its emphasis on care for our common home. In it, Pope Francis spreads his message wider than the Christian world and laments environmental degradation and global warming, as he calls all people of the world to take "swift and unified global action".

The vineyard parables prefigure the Christian Eucharist, and the metaphor of Christ as the true vine, with his disciples as the branches (John 15.1): 'I am the true vine, and my Father is the vine grower'. In doing so, he claims for himself, as so often, a title that has belonged before to Israel itself, (Psalm 80.8-9,14-15). Augustine interpreted the Christian image into that of Christ in the wine press, where Jesus himself becomes the grapes in the press. The image from here is of Christ in the winepress c.1490.

This image of course has links with Christ's suffering and crucifixion. The vine that God planted is of course a vine that will be cut down (Isaiah 5.1-2,5-6). The image survived the Protestant Reformation, and despite some Catholic disapproval, persisted into the 18th century. Alongside Isaiah 27.2-5 and Matthew 21. 33-45 it was and still is understood as a metaphor for the church. We need to picture Jesus in the upper room on the night before he died, keeping Passover with his friends. Here he establishes the words of the Eucharist, with the cup of wine as the blood of the new covenant, and the promise of the kingdom. There are rich associations here that will lead us deeper into the mystery of Christ's death and resurrection, as we look forward to the gift of the future Kingdom of God (Mark 14.24-25).

Week 5: October 4th Francis of Assisi

Stewardship and Care for our Common Home

Exodus 20.1-4, 7-9,12-20

Psalm 19

Philippians 3.4b-14

Matthew 21.33-46

This week's gospel is the third of a trilogy of vineyard parables and is again told in the presence of the chief priests and elders of the people.

Absentee landlords were well known to Galilean peasants. Sometimes they would rent the land to tenant farmers who worked the land and were recompensed by a certain (often meagre) percentage of the crop's return. At harvest time the owner's agents would be sent to collect his dues. The parable vineyard has been created by the landowner God who planted it, protected it, built a winepress in it to crush the grapes and a watchtower to guard it. As we follow from week to week, we continue to recognise the vineyard as Israel and the landowners who were sent to collect the fruit of the harvest as the prophets who were mistreated and abused. Finally, the landowner's son is sent with full authority of his Father, only to be killed by the tenant farmers.

However, the vineyard is not destroyed, only those who fail in their stewardship of God's precious possession are punished. The parable stresses the need to bear fruit, which means here productive, life-giving behaviour which results from the conversion to kingdom living. Bread is for strength, but wine is for gladness. Heard in Matthew's Gospel and our own post-resurrection communities, these words confirm that Jesus, the rejected stone, has become the cornerstone which holds together the walls of the building of living stone (Acts 4.11; 1 Peter 2.7).

This parable offers a warning to those who are unproductive and bear no fruit, especially at vintage time when the Son of Man comes to claim the harvest of our lives.

Paul's letter to the Philippians is addressed not to landowners or tenants, but to the poor, many of whom were slaves and therefore landless. Paul tells them not to worry but to turn to God in prayerful thanksgiving for what they have. Their confidence must be in God, rather than financial or social security. Today this meekness might not entirely be approved. Our current pandemic has pointed up the low wages of many of our key workers, now recognised as essential to our health and wellbeing.

This week also celebrates the life of St. Francis of Assisi, well known for his love of animals and the brotherhood and sisterhood of the natural elements of God's world, exemplified in his well-known Cantic of the Sun. In the afore mentioned papal encyclical *Laudate Si* from Pope Francis, the phrase 'integral ecology' is mentioned explicitly at least ten times. St. Francis of Assisi is held up as an 'example ... of an integral ecology lived joyfully and authentical' and as such is the patron saint 'of all who study and work in the area of ecology'. His care for all of creation was a turning point in the understanding of God's world.

Conclusion

Throughout these readings and parables which fall as the lectionary readings during the Season of Creation 2020, the natural and the cultivated land continue to be the arena for revelations about God.

Throughout Scripture, the drama unfolds in cultivated gardens, rocky mountains, broad rivers, parched wilderness and in the busy streets of small towns. The land is all we have to keep us alive, and we are utterly dependent on it. The land, says Usher, 'contains our identity and our promise for the future'.

Of the parables of Jesus, the one that gives most focus to the land is the parable of the Sower. Jesus uses clear motifs from rural Galilee throughout his ministry. He continues to draw in those on the social, financial and ethical borders of life, often the rejected of society. The God of the Israelites was also encountered in such borderlands. These readings which deal landowners, tenants, labourers unforgiving servants and generous masters focus on how the land, how this environment is managed.

It might be worth recalling the earlier 1981 encyclical of Pope John Paul 11, 'Laborem Exercens', on human work, as the parables in the vineyard deal with landownership, labourers, tenants, unforgiving servants and generous masters'. Laborem exercens begins with a scriptural argument that work is more than an activity or a commodity, but an essential part of human nature. It deplores situations which tend to degrade the dignity of work, such as unemployment, under-employment of highly skilled workers; inadequate wages to support life; inadequate job security; and forced labour. This is saying something to the context of the vineyard parables and the context of our working lives today, both rural and urban, and is worth further reflection and revival.

The question remains '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 the market economy and the developing late capitalism in the work-a-day world of the 21st century?' Some clues as to the way forward can be found in the lectionary readings for the Season of Creation 2020.