


Creation in **CRISIS**

A time for prayer and action

COMMON LECTIONARY



Photo: William.n 

Sermon notes

for the 5 weeks of Creation Time 2009

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.

Our theme for 2009, *Creation in Crisis - a time for prayer and action*, will particularly help churches, groups and individuals to focus on issues relating to decisions that will need to be taken at the UN Climate Change Summit in Copenhagen in December 2009, described by some as the "last chance for the planet". In this context, Christians are called more than ever to demonstrate their commitment to care for creation by living simply and sustainably themselves, as well as by pressing politicians to take the measures necessary at national and international level.

If we seek first God's Kingdom – his rule and his values – then our current crises fall into perspective. Christian hope is more than blind optimism; it is undergirded by the hope we share as Christians, based ultimately in God's good plans for his creation, the cosmic scope of Christ's saving work, and the Spirit's renewing power at work within and through human beings.

Week 1: 6 September
Discrimination, Justice and Love

Anchor Text: James 2:1-17

Week 2: 13 September
The Challenge of Wisdom

Anchor Text: Proverbs 1:20-33

Week 3: 20 September
The Two Wisdoms

Anchor Text: James 3:13 – 4:3, 7-8a

Week 4: 27 September
16th Sunday after Trinity (Proper 21)
**Christian Commitment
and Ecological Responsibility**

Anchor Text: Mark 9:38-end

Week 5: 4 October
Christ, Creation and Humanity

Anchor Text: Hebrews 1:1-4; 2:5-12

Author's introductory note

These are not complete sermons in outline. What is presented here is a series of suggested starting points, possible lines of exegesis, and a few random thoughts. 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 of equal immediate relevance to the Church's ecological mission. For each week I have focused on one reading which I have called the 'anchor text'. Other passages are referred to more briefly.


Keith Innes

Week 1: Discrimination, Justice and Love

6th September - 13th Sunday after Trinity (Proper 18)

Anchor Text: James 2:1-17	
Track 1 (continuous) Proverbs 22:1-2, 8-9, 22-23 Psalm 125	Track 2 (related) Isaiah 35:4-7a Psalm 146
James 2:1-10 [11-13] 14-17 Mark 7:24-end	



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Creation Time invites us to offer thanks to the Creator and to consider the various issues of ecology, development and justice. These issues are inseparably intertwined.

Here James challenges Christians about discrimination on the grounds of status and wealth. This message would have been hard for the original hearers of the letter to accept. On the one hand the smooth running of life in New Testament times depended on benefactors who must be honoured. On the other hand were the Cynic philosophers who went to the opposite extreme: they made a point of living and presenting themselves in a disreputable manner.¹ So the two visitors to the assembly – one gold-fingered and shining, the other poor and dirty – would be easily pictured. (Most likely the Christian assembly is meant in verse 2, although the Greek word often means a synagogue).

To show honour to the rich and contempt to the poor is inconsistent with faith in the one called 'our glorious Lord Jesus Christ' (verse 1). Moreover God has shown a special care for the poor (5), while the rich and powerful could, and often did, use their influence to oppress Christians (6). The 'royal law' of love (8) demands equal respect and care for all, regardless of status, power or appearance.

The application of this instruction to our immediate circle is clear, even if demanding. To relate it to our neighbours in the global community is complicated. In those terms we in the British Isles are among the rich. To show even-handed respect, let alone love, raises issues of fair trade, economic policy and just distribution. Climate change bears most heavily on areas that have the least resources. Scientists expect increased droughts in dry areas and more floods in wet regions. Millions of people in low-lying areas are at risk from sea level rise, and have little opportunity to build defences.

Basic fairness dictates that we embrace necessary change ourselves, and that we lobby, give and pray in the interests of those who are most helpless and are also victims of our own profligate use of fossil fuels. The lesson is reinforced by our other readings. Proverbs 22 speaks of our basic equality before the Lord (verse 2); insists on justice and generosity (8-9); and warns of judgement against those who 'rob the poor because they are poor' (22-23). In Psalm 125 ultimate justice is assured by God's faithfulness, while Psalm 146 shows that justice and freedom for the oppressed are underwritten by the Creator (5-9).

In Mark 7:24-end Jesus brings deliverance and healing to two sufferers in Gentile areas – outside the heartlands of orthodox Judaism. Although during his lifetime Jesus' primary mission was to Israel, the Gospels show clearly that the Good News is ultimately for all. The healings are a foretaste of the eschatological renewal of all things, spoken of in Isaiah 35. It may be no accident that the very rare Greek word in Mark 7:32 for one with a speech impediment is also found in the Greek version of Isaiah 35:6.

¹ P. Perkins, *First and Second Peter, James, and Jude* (Interpretation, John Knox Press, 1995)

Week 2: The Challenge of Wisdom

13th September - 14th Sunday after Trinity (Proper 19)

Anchor Text: Proverbs 1:20-33	
Track 1 (continuous) Proverbs 1:20-33 Psalm 19: 1-6 [7-end] (or Wisdom 7:26 – 8:1)	Track 2 (related) Isaiah 50:4-9a Psalm 116:1-8
James 3:1-12 Mark 8:27-end	



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Scientific knowledge and wise conduct are both equally important in facing complex ecological problems. Yet our culture places more emphasis on knowledge than on wisdom. Even an agreed definition of wisdom would be hard to find. One's idea of wisdom depends on one's aims and world view. E.F. Schumacher distinguishes between 'science for manipulation' and 'science for understanding', and he identifies the latter with wisdom.²

In Proverbs 1:20-21 wisdom is pictured as a woman appealing to the general population in the public square. In assisting congregations with their search for wisdom, the wisdom literature of the Old Testament (mainly Job, Proverbs and Ecclesiastes) offers us a rich resource. For those who use the Apocrypha, The Wisdom of Solomon and Ecclesiasticus should be added. Christians also need to understand some of the ways in which wisdom themes are developed in the New Testament.

Wisdom in the Bible starts with reverence for our Creator God (Job 28:28; Psalm 111:10; Proverbs 1:7; 3:5; 9:10; 15:33). Wisdom is essentially holistic and practical, leading to right conduct and skilful work (Proverbs 1:1-6). The proverbial wisdom of King Solomon included knowledge of the natural world (I Kings 4:32-33).

Aspects of wisdom include 'reproof' (Proverbs 1:23), and 'knowledge' (Proverbs 1:29). Among those who refuse to learn wisdom are the 'scoffers' (Proverbs 22:10) and the 'simple' (Proverbs 1:22) who are easily led and decline the way of wisdom (Proverbs 7).

In Proverbs 8:22-36 Wisdom is pictured as God's companion and 'master worker' (verse 30) in creation. At times the figure of wisdom appears as an aspect of God's very being.³ The way in which the message of Wisdom is expressed reminds us of the 'word of the Lord' proclaimed by the prophets (compare, for example, Isaiah 65:1-2, 12; Jeremiah 6:19). The attributes of Wisdom find fulfilment in the New Testament at the beginning of John's Gospel in the Word, who was with God, who was God, and through whom everything was created, yet who became incarnate in Jesus of Nazareth.

In Matthew's Gospel wisdom 'is vindicated by her deeds' (11:19; 'by all her children' in Luke 7:35). In I Corinthians 1:18-2:7 St Paul draws a sharp distinction between 'the wisdom of the world' and God's wisdom. The wisdom of God appears to be foolishness to the worldly wise because of their faulty orientation. Christ embodies in himself the Wisdom of God. True wisdom is God's gift (Ephesians 1:8-9; Colossians 1:9; James 1:5). True and false wisdom are sharply distinguished throughout the Bible (e.g. Ezekiel 28:2-7; James 3:15-18).

Relating godly wisdom in theory to environmental issues such as climate change, mass extinctions and resource depletion is not too difficult. Its application in practice demands taking up the cross, repenting of devotion to possessions, power and pleasure and following Jesus. He did not try to bypass the cross, and nor must we (Mark 8:31-38).

² *A Guide for the Perplexed* (Abacus, 1978).


³ E.J. Schnabel, 'Wisdom', *New Dictionary of Biblical Theology* (Inter-Varsity Press, 2000).

Week 3: The Two Wisdoms

20th September - 15th Sunday after Trinity (Proper 20)

Anchor Text: James 3:13 – 4:3, 7-8a	
Track 1 (continuous) Proverbs 31:10-end Psalm 1	Track 2 (related) Wisdom 1:16-21, 12-22 or Jeremiah 11:18-20 Psalm 54
James 3:13 – 4:3, 7-8a Mark 9:30-37	



Photo: Calum Davidson 

Those who claim to be wise are challenged about the roots and motivations of their conduct. Some so-called ‘wisdom’ stems from ‘envy and selfish ambition’ and results in ‘disorder and wickedness’. True wisdom comes from God and leads to peace. These two types of wisdom have very different results in the context of the present ecological crisis.

An overwhelming and growing weight of scientific evidence shows that ‘business as usual’ in releasing greenhouse gases into the atmosphere will result in catastrophic harm to the Earth. Some have even predicted that much of the planet would become uninhabitable for life as we know it, including human society. Climate change is not all. We may also be precipitating the sixth mass extinction of animal species in the history of the Earth. The previous extinctions revealed by geology occurred before we appeared on the scene; this one, if it happens, will be the only one brought about by our activity.

We know what personal, social and political changes are needed to avoid the worst. Much scientific knowledge to that end is available to us. Why then do we struggle so much to bring about the necessary transformations? Why does altering the direction of our global and national societies seem as difficult as changing the course of a giant oil tanker? Why do environmental imperatives so often take second place to the demands of conventional economics with their requirement of continually growing consumption?

James has much to teach us here. He insists that wisdom is never merely theoretical; it expresses itself in a lifestyle based on gentleness (James 3:13). It tends towards peace and expresses itself in mercy and goodness (17-18).

The alternative ‘wisdom’ is ‘earthly, unspiritual, devilish’ (15). It leads to ‘bitter envy and selfish ambition’ (14). The Greek word translated ‘selfish ambition’ is used by Aristotle for the ‘self-seeking pursuit of political office by unfair means.’⁴ According to F.J.A. Hort it is ‘the vice of a leader of a party created for his own pride; it is partly ambition and partly rivalry’.⁵ Mark 9:33-37 shows that even the Apostles were not immune from such a spirit.

If unchecked, human desires and ambitions lead to disorder, conflict and ultimately murder (James 4: 1-3). Such a statement may appear extreme, but it is borne out by history. Many perceptive observers foresee escalating conflict born of environmental damage, resource shortages and especially the consequences of climate change. The life-denying character of our present industrial and economic arrangements is plain to all who have eyes to see.

The call, ‘Draw near to God, and he will draw near to you’ (James 4:8) is one that the church must take to heart and issue in our societies. The present crisis demands that we set this challenge in the context of ecology. The environmental crisis has a spiritual dimension; the Christian faith has an ecological dimension.

⁴ Quoted by Perkins.


⁵ Quoted in R.V.G. Tasker, *The General Epistle of James* (Tyndale Press, 1956).

Week 4: Christian Commitment and Ecological Responsibility

27th September - 16th Sunday after Trinity (Proper 21)

Anchor Text: Mark 9:38-end	
Track 1 (continuous) Esther 7:1-6, 9-10; 9:20-22 Psalm 124	Track 2 (related) Numbers 11:4-6, 10-16, 24-29 Psalm 19:7-end
James 5:13-end Mark 9:38-end	



Photo: Stop Climate Chaos Coalition 

What is the relation between Christian discipleship and commitment to creation care? How does Christian ecological responsibility relate to environmental movements outside the Christian Church – are they quite separate? What's distinctive about *Christian* ecology? Is the Church just jumping on a bandwagon? Do we have a particular contribution to make to general or political environmental concern?

This Gospel reading carries no direct message about creation care, but it brings a crucial reminder of the true nature of discipleship. Taken as a whole, the passage shows that Christians should be distinctive but not exclusive. The touchstone of Christian activity is its relation to the name of Jesus (Mark 9: 38, 39, 41): is it engaged in with his authority, for his honour and in accordance with his word and character? On the one hand, no one whose work passes this test is to be impeded or hindered just for being different from us or not belonging to our own group; on the other, no work that rejects this name can be regarded as Christian (compare 1 Corinthians 12:1-11).

To cause new Christians to stumble in their spiritual journey with Christ brings the most extreme – indeed grotesque – condemnation (42). Hindrances to discipleship can come from within us as well as from others. Of course the instructions of verses 42-48 are not to be interpreted literally! But our lifestyles, habits and aims may often need 'pruning' to get rid of parts that do not honour Christ. Issues of ultimate judgement are involved.

Verse 49 may refer to Old Testament sacrifices to which salt was added. Salt symbolised the covenant relationship between the Lord and his people (Leviticus 2:13). The 'fire' may stand for the trials and hardships of true discipleship. The second of these two sayings about salt (50) challenges us about the distinctiveness demanded and brought by allegiance to the 'Name' of Jesus (compare Colossians 4:6).

How does all this relate to the Church's ecological mission? Are these 'spiritual' matters with little relevance to environmental responsibility? No. If God created the world through Christ, values it very highly, and sent his Son to redeem it (all propositions that are strongly emphasised in the Bible) then creation care is inseparable from Christian commitment. Damage to the natural world is sinful, because it causes harm to our fellow humans and because the Earth is created, loved and directed by our God.

But having established that our core loyalty is to Christ, we should also be willing to work in every possible way with the many other people who struggle for God's creation, including those who do not name Christ's name, secular groups and people of other faiths.


The other readings contain relevant thoughts. Delving into the many issues raised by the Book of Esther would take us much too far afield! But we should learn from Esther's courage and loyalty, and the diplomacy with which she set about influencing the dictatorial king. The story from Numbers shows how misguided strong cravings can be, and how they can harm us and disrupt God's plans for our welfare. Psalm 19:7-end reminds us that God's way is life-giving, and Psalm 124 that he is able to rescue us. James 5:13-20 underlines the central importance of prayer for physical, spiritual and ecological healing.

Week 5: Christ, Creation and Humanity

4th October - 17th Sunday after Trinity (Proper 22)

Anchor Text: Hebrews 1:1-4; 2:5-12	
Track 1 (continuous) Job 1:1; 2:1-10 Psalm 26	Track 2 (related) Genesis 2:18-24 Psalm 8
Hebrews 1:1-4; 2:5-12 Mark 10:2-16	



Photo: tany_kely 

Who is at the centre of our world? Often it is ourselves: the welfare of the planet is apt to come second to our material gain. Some give priority to the needs of humanity, especially the poor. That is admirable, except that our interests and those of other species and of the earth, the atmosphere and waters are intertwined. So should the Earth come first? That position leaves many questions of priorities and methods unanswered. According to our Christian faith God should be at the centre of our world view.

This text shows that Christ's incarnation and achievement are at the heart of God's work of salvation and of earth's story. In him the God of creation and redemption has lived among us. He must be at the centre of a Christian view of the created world. He is God the Son, a faithful reflection of God's radiance, the perfect expression of God's nature. Through him the universe was created (verse 2; see also John 1:3; Colossians 1:16; 1 Corinthians 8:6). He keeps it in existence (verse 3; see also Colossians 1:17). He is also its Heir: the destiny of all things is to be reconciled with God through him. By dealing through his Cross and Resurrection with all that is wrong with his world, he brings the Creation to its fulfilment.

The New Testament applies Psalm 8 to Christ (Hebrews 2:6-9; see also Matthew 21:16; 1 Corinthians 15:27; Ephesians 1:22). The psalm acknowledges that human beings have administrative responsibility on the Earth. Such responsibility is reflected also in Genesis 2:20, where the man gives names to the birds and the animals. Humanity is given insight to enable him to care. But this responsibility is subject to the majesty and glory of the Creator. It is to be exercised, therefore, humbly and for benefit of the whole earth community. Because of sin we have failed in our task. Only Christ is the perfect Servant King. Our destiny can only be fulfilled in loving obedience to him.

Psalm 26:1, 11; Job 2:3, 9 all speak of 'integrity', which means consistency and wholeness – to be 'all of a piece' by God's grace. Our culture fosters a fragmented life in which body and spirit, work and play, nature and faith tend to be split apart. Some of us have been damaged so that the fragmentation goes further and we are painfully divided selves. The purpose of God's grace is to lead us towards living whole lives on the Earth. Then we shall be able to stand on 'level ground' (Psalm 26:12) – a place of stability, safety and comfort. The institution of marriage (Genesis 2:21-24; Mark 10:7-9) is intended to be a part of this peaceful creation.

By receiving God's gifts with the simplicity of children (Mark 10:15) we can enjoy now a foretaste of God's future for Creation, and work towards the wholeness that is God's purpose.

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