

Season of Creation 4 - Call to a new way of life

24 September 2023

PRE-SERVICE CONTEMPLATION

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INTRODUCING TODAY'S THEME

The theme for Season of creation this year is *Let justice and peace flow.*

When we think about creation and caring for creation,
what could justice and peace look like for us?

Invite people to share their thoughts ...

Our readings today suggest that where we often get stuck in a rut
or aren't certain which way to go,
God is often a step ahead of us,
showing us a new way forward that we haven't thought of
or imagined before.

Let's listen to the hope and good news in our readings.

BIBLE READINGS

Your word, O Lord, is a lamp to our feet
and a light to our path

[Isaiah 43:16-21](#)

This is what the Lord says -

he who made a way through the sea,
a path through the mighty waters,
who drew out the chariots and horses,
the army and reinforcements together,
and they lay there, never to rise again,
extinguished, snuffed out like a wick:

'Forget the former things;

do not dwell on the past.

See, I am doing a new thing!

Now it springs up; do you not perceive it?

I am making a way in the wilderness
and streams in the wasteland.
The wild animals honour me,
the jackals and the owls,
because I provide water in the wilderness
and streams in the wasteland,
to give drink to my people, my chosen,
the people I formed for myself
that they may proclaim my praise.

[Matthew 20:1-16](#)

The kingdom of heaven is like a landowner who went out early in the morning to hire workers for his vineyard. He agreed to pay them a denarius for the day and sent them into his vineyard.

About nine in the morning he went out and saw others standing in the marketplace doing nothing. He told them, "You also go and work in my vineyard, and I will pay you whatever is right." So they went.

He went out again about noon and about three in the afternoon and did the same thing. About five in the afternoon he went out and found still others standing around. He asked them, "Why have you been standing here all day long doing nothing?"

"Because no one has hired us," they answered.

'He said to them, "You also go and work in my vineyard."

'When evening came, the owner of the vineyard said to his foreman, "Call the workers and pay them their wages, beginning with the last ones hired and going on to the first."

The workers who were hired about five in the afternoon came and each received a denarius. So when those came who were hired first, they expected to receive more. But each one of them also received a denarius. When they received it, they began to grumble against the landowner. "These who were hired last worked only one hour," they said, "and you have made them equal to us who have borne the burden of the work and the heat of the day."

But he answered one of them, "I am not being unfair to you, friend. Didn't you

agree to work for a denarius? Take your pay and go. I want to give the one who was hired last the same as I gave you. Don't I have the right to do what I want with my own money? Or are you envious because I am generous?"

So the last will be first, and the first will be last.

Lord, may your word live in us
and bear much fruit to your glory.

MESSAGE

The two readings this morning each offer a vision for a way to live based on God's justice and God's love. We'll consider each of them before diving once more into the world of creation and the struggle to find a way of justice and peace.

The story in Matthew's Gospel is a parable about the kingdom of God.

A landowner – who probably represents God in the parable – hires workers throughout the day and then pays them their wages, with a denarius being the typical wage for a day labourer.

The workers hired late in the day are paid the same – a denarius – as the workers who were hired first, who grumble that they deserve more

pay because they've worked more hours. But the landowner defends his actions saying that each of the workers – from the first to the last – agreed to be paid a denarius, which is what they received. If the landowner – God – is seemingly more generous to the ones hired last, what is that to the other workers?

A couple of points to note ...

- **In God's kingdom everyone is valued** everyone is welcome and everyone has a role or a contribution to make, from the least to the most highly regarded. In the mixed Jewish–Gentile community of Matthew, the last workers hired may well be the Gentiles, while Jews may be the first workers hired. But everyone has a place in God's kingdom and everyone is valued.
- **The scandal of the parable is God's character of grace.** It is God's choice to treat everyone generously – even those who don't deserve it – while we are more likely to think that some people are more worthy of God's favour than others.



Keep these two points in mind when we come back to look at creation.

The second reading from Isaiah addresses the concerns of the exiles living in Babylon, who feel that God has abandoned them, no longer loves them and is not powerful enough to free them from exile.

In the opening verses of the chapter, the prophet assures the people that God has not abandoned them, but rather loves them and will be with them through every challenge and struggle. God will indeed redeem and rescue them from slavery.

Then in the verses we read, the prophet uses imagery from the Exodus – God making a way through the sea – to remind the people of God’s great and unchanging power.



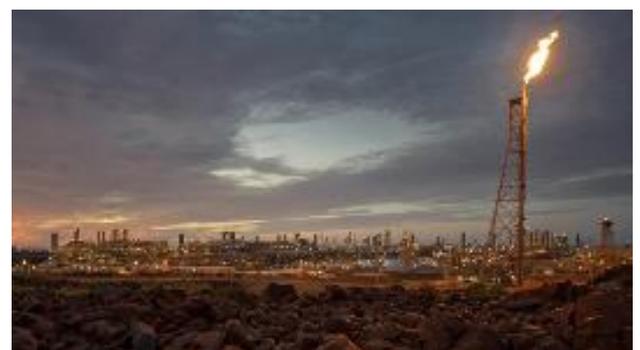
But now God is about to do something new – making a way through the wilderness for the people to return to Jerusalem. God will provide rivers in the desert for the people to drink.

The bottom line is that God is loving, God is faithful and God is always creative, making new ways where we can’t see a way forward.

When it comes to caring for creation in our time and place, it’s hard not to see injustice and greed most places we look.

Just this week there were reports from both the rich and poor end of the spectrum. On one hand, the world’s major oil and gas producers – including exporters of Australia’s gas – have made a profit of nearly **\$5 billion a day, every day, for the last 50 years.**

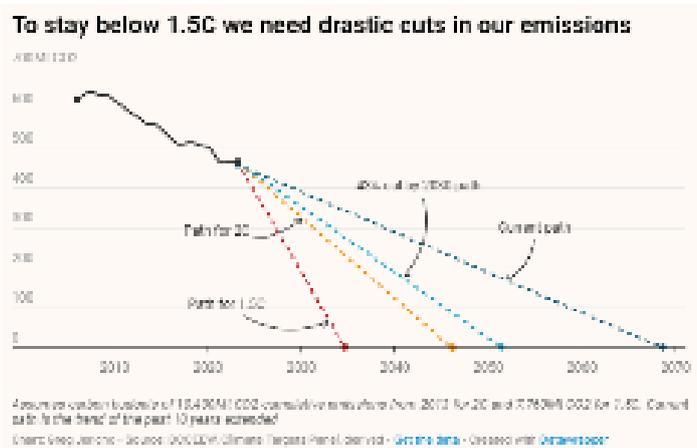
It’s a staggering amount of money!



As the report notes,

With that amount of money you can buy every politician, every system ... and I think this happened. It protects [producers] from political interference that may limit their activities.

Even our current Federal Government that says it is serious about investing in renewable energy and reducing Australia's carbon emissions, is still allowing new gas fields and new coal mines to go ahead. In a dubious honour, Australia still has the highest per person emissions from burning coal than every other nation on the planet. And when it comes to government assistance, not everyone is treated equally. In an ironic reversal of the parable, rich oil and gas companies in Australia receive some of the biggest handouts.



As a country Australia is not reaching net zero emissions nearly fast enough and every new gas project and coal mine makes the goal slower to reach. Just this week the Climate Council urged our political leaders to aim to reach net zero by 2035.

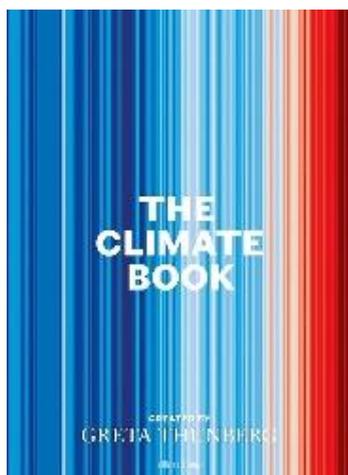
On the other side of the coin, there was a report this week on progress towards the UN's 2030 Sustainable Development Goals, which were published in 2015 alongside the Paris Climate Agreement to limit global warming to well below 2 degC. These goals have been largely ignored by the media and governments due to Covid and then the war in Ukraine, but remain a critical justice commitment for both the poor of the world and for the planet. Behind these 17 headings lie 170 specific goals.



At the halfway point of the 15 year project, only 15% of the goals and targets are on track to be met by 2030.

The UN statement read in part ...

Since 2015, millions of people have fallen into poverty, hunger and malnutrition are becoming more prevalent, humanitarian needs are rising, and the impacts of climate change are more pronounced. This has led to increased inequality exacerbated by weakened international solidarity and a shortfall of trust to jointly overcome these crises.



The Climate Book compiled by activist Greta Thunberg has many stories of struggling poor communities across the world. You may recognise the cover of the book from climate scarves. Both are based on the temperature stripes developed by Professor Ed Hawkins that provide a visual representation of how global temperature has risen over the last 100 years.

One story in the book comes from Chad in the Sahel region of Africa that lies just below the Sahara desert:

In this harsh environment, we have learned to live in harmony with nature. We cooperate with our ecosystems. ... Thirty years ago, when I was born, Lake Chad was enormous. Sixty years ago, when my mother was a child, the lake was a sea in the midst of a desert. But today it's a small drop of water in the heart of Africa. Ninety per cent of the water is gone. Our average temperature has risen ... we are now living with temperature rises greater than 1.5°C. Our average temperature could be 2°C higher by 2030 and 3–4°C higher by the middle of the century.



Most of the rain is already gone. The land is often dry and infertile. Our cows used to produce 4 litres of milk a day, now they barely produce 1 litre

because of the missing grass. And more and more often, rain, which has been our ally, is our enemy. Over the past five years, floods have repeatedly destroyed our lands, our houses, and the culture of my people. We live on the edge of climate wars.

We don't want to be victims of climate change. We will do our part. ...

Biodiversity is our best partner. Nature is our supermarket, our pharmacy, our hospital, our school. For too long, Indigenous peoples have been considered representatives of earth's history. But we don't belong to the past: we represent the future.

So as the rich make vast profits, the poorest of the world are struggling more and more. Where are justice and peace? Where are the signs of grace and God making rivers flow in the desert?

The Gospel reading today reminded us that everyone is valued and everyone has a contribution to make to God's kingdom.

The Isaiah reading reminded us that God loves us and wants to make rivers flow in the desert to provide for the needs of people. These will be rivers of justice according to the prophet Amos.

When it comes to thinking about the future with hope, I am encouraged by young activists like Greta Thunberg inspiring millions of young people to care about the environment, by Indigenous National Park rangers teaching us how to care for country using Indigenous wisdom, by the many scientists alerting us to changing patterns, by enthusiastic journalists like Ann Jones on the ABC excited by a whole natural world we have yet to discover, by the unsung engineers and farmers discovering better ways to care for land ... and for ordinary people like you and me doing our bit to make a difference.



A final example from another local river, this time the Yarra River, whose name is actually an ironic accident of history.

The Woiwurung word for the river is Birrarung meaning river of mists. But back in

1835 when the Surveyor General visited the site of the future Melbourne, two aboriginal men pointed to a spot close to the current location of Prince's Bridge and shouted Yarra Yarra. This was taken to be the name of the river, rather than being the Boonwuring word for a waterfall that the two men were pointing at. But the name 'Yarra' stuck and the rest, as they say, is history.



The waters of the Yarra and its many tributaries were a food source for Wurundjeri people and the confluence with Merri Creek was an important gathering and trading place for local Indigenous clans. The river used to run clear throughout its length but is now a muddy brown colour downstream of Healesville due to land clearing and ongoing erosion of its banks.

For many decades the river was treated as an industrial drain and a sewer, but during the last 20 years much of the pollution running into the river has been stopped so that it's now safe-ish to swim in the river at places like Warrandyte.

A new fish-ladder was constructed 10 years ago at Dights Falls in Abbotsford to allow native fish to once again migrate upstream.

Many trees, birds, reptiles, fish and platypus make their home along the Yarra. At its best the river is a haven for wildlife and a wonderful peaceful place for people to enjoy, whether walking, cycling, birdwatching or kayaking.

Like many rivers and like many other parts of the natural world, caring for the Yarra is a complex balancing act between human needs and the needs of the many other creatures that call it home. With careful intent and with willingness to see justice provided for all God's creatures, the Yarra can be a place of beauty and peace for everyone as well as a place of vulnerability and fragility.



Its future is in our hands.