

Lent Study Course for Churches Together in Kings Heath 2018

'Our Common Home: Caring for God's Creation'

Notes for Group Leaders

This is a 5 week study outline for ecumenical Christian Lent Groups. We have chosen an important subject of common concern, and have included reference to some of the many resources produced by a wide range of Christian churches and charities. Each week there is a Bible passage, a prayer, some introductory notes, a poem and suggestions for action or abstinence i.e. things we might do or give up during Lent. As a leader it is important that you read all the material provided in advance to give you an overview of the whole course. You can then select what you think will be most useful. In the first meeting you can discuss with the group how long you want to give to reading, discussion and prayer each time. You may find you want to select some of the material provided, rather than using all of it. Please feel free to be flexible and pursue ideas as they come up.

It is also important to spend time in **the first session** introducing yourselves to each other. **Each week** you could share current concerns for prayer and also feedback on the previous week's actions. Sharing a cup of tea or coffee together is a natural way of building friendships across different traditions.

To prepare for **the final session** you might like to make some green paper leaves for people to write prayers or commitments on. Maybe these can be used in worship in the churches?

Introduction

During Lent Christians set aside time to reflect on their spiritual life, to concentrate on awareness of the presence of God and perhaps to make changes in their lifestyle. This may involve self-denial or possibly making a new commitment.

We believe that God has given us this planet earth, to provide a home for all God's people. We have a responsibility to treat it wisely, acting as caring stewards of God's creation. In today's world of extreme weather events, drought, flooding and the loss of species, it appears that we are abusing this responsibility. We are creating a world where some are relying too much on fossil fuels and many are vulnerable. Climate change is not an easy topic to think about, but we can find guidance from the scriptures.

We will use **the Lord's Prayer** as a framework and link it with key Bible passages about creation. You might like to pray this prayer at the beginning of each week's study session.

(Eco Congregations of England and Wales)

Week 1: *Our Father, who art in heaven...*

You are also at home in the air, the soil, the forests and the oceans.

Hallowed be your name...

By the care we take of creation.

Job 38 v 1 - 21

Week 2: *Your kingdom come...*

All that you see is good,

Your will be done on earth as it is in heaven...

Your will to till and care,

Give us this day our daily bread...

That all may have sufficient to live life in all its fullness. **Matthew 6 v 25-34**

Week 3: *Forgive us our trespasses...*

Our greed, our exploitation, our lack of concern

For other species and future generations

As we forgive those who trespass against us...

By reconciliation with justice and peace.

Luke 12 v 13 - 21

Week 4: *Lead us not into temptation...*

The temptation to equate 'dominion' with exploitation,

And deliver us from evil...

Genesis 1 v 26 - 31

The evil of destroying your gift of creation.

Matthew 4 v 1-11

Week 5: *For yours is the kingdom...*

Yours Lord, not ours,

The power and the glory...

In the cross and resurrection,

For ever and ever...

You were in the beginning and you are the end.

Amen.

Genesis 2 v 15-17

Revelation 22 v 1-5

Week 1: 'The Season of Creation' Job 38 v 1-21

The season of Lent is an opportunity to turn aside from ordinary routines in order to reflect on what is really significant in our faith and in our lives. What could be more significant than God's relationship with creation including humanity, so dramatically described in the passage from Job? It is a series of challenges – in modern terms it might read:

how is it that you can explore the solar system and yet cannot ensure all people have enough to eat?

how is it that you pollute and poison the earth when you can harness the sun, the wind and the waves to supply power?

how is it that you can claim to be able to understand the human genome and yet have to threaten each other with war and destruction?

What Christian leaders say

The central importance of caring for the earth has been borne out by recent statements by church leaders. In 1989, September 1st was declared as a World Day of Prayer for the Care of Creation. This has now been extended and adopted ecumenically. On September 1st 2017, Pope Francis and Patriarch Bartholomew (Ecumenical Patriarch of Constantinople) issued a joint statement saying they are both convinced that there's no solution to the on-going ecological crisis unless...

'the response is concerted and collective, unless the responsibility is shared and accountable, unless we give priority to solidarity and service.'

They stress that care for the environment is inextricably linked with care for the poor,

'The impact of climate change affects, first and foremost, those who live in poverty in every part of the globe.'

Their call has been echoed by the Conference of European Churches, representing a fellowship of 114 churches from all countries of Europe. They have declared 1st September – 4th October the 'Season of Creation' for Christians worldwide.

Leaders of all faiths

In June 2015 leaders of all the major faith groups in the UK signed the Lambeth Declaration on Climate Change, which said:

'From the perspectives of our different faiths we see the earth as a beautiful gift. We are all called to care for the earth and have a responsibility to live creatively and sustainably in a world of finite resources...'

Worship /Reflection

1. Poem 'The Bright Field'

I have seen the sun break through
 To illuminate a small field
 For a while, and gone my way
 And forgotten it. But that was the pearl
 Of great price, the one field that had
 The treasure in it. I realize now
 That I must give all that I have
 To possess it. Life is not hurrying

On to a receding future, nor hankering after
 An imagined past. It is the turning
 Aside like Moses to the miracle
 Of the lit bush, to a brightness
 That seemed as transitory as your youth
 Once, but is the eternity that awaits you.

R. S. Thomas 1913 – 2000

2. Prayer

Silence

'Help us to find your Kingdom in the hidden and overlooked places

Help us to go out in joy recognising what is of true worth.

Help us to let go of what has held us

And reinvest with hope in another possible world. **Amen** (*Christian Aid*)

Points for discussion

1. What does it mean to act responsibly towards creation? Reflect on Job 38.
2. What do you think are the most serious threats to the future of planet earth?
3. What does your church do nationally or locally to give people a lead in caring about creation?

Suggestion for action or abstinence

1. Look for opportunities this week to reduce your energy consumption e.g. by turning the heating down a little or by using public transport instead of driving.
2. Look out for your own local 'bright field' e.g. in a local garden or park and really appreciate its beauty.

Week 2: 'God knows our needs' Matthew 6 v 25 - 34

This passage from Matthew's gospel is about God's provision for all people. It was written in very different times from our own, when fuel was largely wood and travel was by foot or on animals such as donkeys, with horses for the wealthy and powerful. How do the same principles apply now, when reckless use of the earth's resources by some people endangers the lives of us all, particularly the poor?

There is overwhelming scientific evidence that climate change is occurring and is caused by the excessive presence in the atmosphere of the so called greenhouse gases, particularly carbon dioxide, methane and nitrous oxide. The primary source of carbon dioxide is the burning of fossil fuels such as coal, oil and natural gas in industry, energy generation and transport. Methane and other gases are generated from agricultural practices as well as industry. Nitrous oxide comes mainly from fertilisers and livestock waste products. As economic development takes place around the world – and more people enjoy fullness of life – the output of these gases is growing rapidly, but it is the lifestyles of highly industrialised nations like our own that have contributed most.

We will continue to need to use electricity but generation from renewable sources such as water, sun, waves and wind is becoming increasingly economic and acceptable, not least in the less economically developed parts of the world.

The Revd Samitiana Jhonson writes from Madagascar: *'....the most obvious experience of climate change is how unusual it is to have so many cyclones. During the hot season we now have 3 or 4 cyclones each year. Not only is the number of cyclones increasing but so is their speed and strength.'*

At the same time, because the temperature is also rising, the south part of the island is becoming drier. The drought is critical and has led to famine. Last November, the Bishop of Toliara visited a parish to perform a christening, and a week later five of the children that had been christened had died due to a lack of food and drinking water.' (Faith in a Changing Climate USPG)

Worship /Reflection

1. Poem 'An Autumn midnight'

A shaded lamp and a waving blind,

And the beat of a clock from a distant floor:

On this scene enter – winged, horned and spined –

A longlegs, a moth, and a Dumbledore;
 While 'mid my page there idly stands
 A sleepy fly, that rubs its hands...

Thus meet we five, in this still place,
 At this point in time, at this point in space,
 My guests besmear my new-penned line,
 Or bang at the lamp and fall supine.
 'God's humblest, they!'" I muse. Yet why?

They know Earth-secrets that know not I. *Thomas Hardy 1840- 1928*

Note: a Dumbledore is probably a cockchafer beetle

2. Prayer:

Silence

If you are asking questions such as: what is the purpose of my life in this world? Why am I here? What is the goal of all my work and my efforts, ***let's journey together***.

If you want to slow down and look at reality in a different way, promote best practice, stimulate creative solutions and encourage group and individual initiatives, ***let's journey together***.

Yes, we are called to live wisely, think deeply, love generously and sing as we go. ***Amen***.

Part of a 'Laudato Si' Litany: Susy Brouard/CAFOD

Points for discussion

1. When you pray 'Give us this day our daily bread', what are you thinking of?
2. There are strong Christian traditions of Lenten fasting in history and in different parts of the world. Are there important benefits of fasting which we have lost?
3. If Jesus is speaking about what matters most (Matt 6 v 25), what does this mean to you?
4. What do you know about the effects of climate change that are already happening ?

Suggestions for action or abstinence

1. Cattle produce methane, which is a greenhouse gas. Can you find out more about the effects of meat and milk production on the planet and consider altering your shopping and eating habits?

2. Can you 'fast' in some way and give the money saved to a good cause?

Week 3: Forgiveness and reconciliation Luke 12 v 13-21

This passage from St Luke's gospel is about greed and inequality. The rich man in the story is thinking only of himself and not about those who had worked on his land to produce the ample produce he possessed. He is accused of not being 'rich towards God.' Pope Francis in *Laudato Si'* quotes Patriarch Bartholomew as saying, '*inasmuch as we all generate small ecological damage*', we are called to acknowledge, '*our contribution, smaller or greater, to the disfigurement and destruction of creation.*' And, '*to commit a crime against the natural world is a sin against ourselves and a sin against God*' (7).

The rich man in the story had no time to repent but we do have time. How can we best 'become rich towards God' (Luke 12 v 21)? To quote Pope Francis again, writing in *Laudato Si'*, '*we need to take up an ancient lesson, found in different religious traditions and also in the Bible. It is the conviction that 'less is more'*' (222). What do you think this means?

He says '*to be serenely present to each reality, however small it may be, opens us to much greater horizons of understanding and personal fulfilment*'. He refers to the eucharist or holy communion, with its handling of bread and wine, as joining heaven and earth, embracing and penetrating all creation. (236)

Numbers in brackets indicate paragraphs of Laudato Si': Encyclical of Pope Francis 2013

Worship/Reflection

1. Poem 'Wealth and Poverty'

We have wounds

but they take away our medicine.

we are hungry

but they take away our bread.

and here we suffer

and there they are happy

and here we weep

and there they laugh

and we die

and there they are happy and laugh

and we are poor

and they are rich
 we without possessions
 they owners
 slaves
 lords

But we, we have more:

we have light
 we have water
 we have life.
 Life, water, light
 are everlasting.

They will not perish with the dollar.

We have God.

Humberto Lizardi 1947- 1973

A Methodist student leader who was assassinated in Chile

2. Prayer of confession

We confess our sins and the sins of our society, in the misuse of God's creation.

God our Mother, we are sorry for the times when we have lived at the expense of the earth.

Lord have mercy

We belong to a people who are well fed but ignore the cry of the hungry. We expect to travel quickly without counting the cost.

Christ have mercy

We store up goods for ourselves and our families as if there were no God and no tomorrow.

Lord have mercy

God hears our prayers and forgives our sins. ***Thanks be to God Amen***

Points for discussion

1. What do you think this reference to the bread and wine used in communion means?

2. Discuss ways in which our 'greed' can be reduced by consuming less and recycling more, while trying to avoid being holier than thou.
3. Some translations say 'Forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors.' How might this be a helpful way to think of our relationship with creation?

Suggestions for action or abstinence

1. Look at the Lent appeal from Christian Aid/CAFOD/TearFund.
2. Look at your bank statement in the light of this story.
3. What does it mean to become an Eco-church? www.ecochurch.arocha.org.uk

Find out about churches nearby that have taken these challenges seriously and become Eco Churches. Are there difficulties in taking these concerns up in your own church? How may they be overcome?

e.g. Streetly Methodist Church www.streetlymethodistchurch.org.uk/eco-church.php,
Fernhill Heath Baptist Church (Worcs) fernhillheathbaptist.org.uk/greenpage.html.

Week 4: The evil we don't mean to commit Genesis 1 v 26-31

Matthew 4 v 1 - 11

When we read in Genesis 1 v 28 that humanity is given 'dominion' over all the other living things on the earth, it helps us to understand how this has led to many Christians thinking that exploitation of the earth's resources is acceptable to God. However more recent biblical scholars have looked again at this word 'dominion' and tell us that stewardship is a more accurate translation of the original meaning. This fits in much better with other biblical evidence and with the belief that God blessed all that God created. Whether we see Genesis as a literal or a poetic depiction of God's relationship with the world, it is consistent that it is a relationship of loving care, not destruction.

When Jesus was tempted by the Devil, three fundamentally important areas of life were challenged: food, security and power. Matthew's Jewish audience would probably have thought of the wanderings of the people of Israel in the wilderness led by Moses, and Matthew shows Jesus using the scriptures to defeat the tempter. We too can find important principles in the Bible to guide our actions, even in very different times. In Lent we may have been managing to give up something – practising abstinence – or have been doing something extra, either devotional or practical. As we can learn from Muslim friends who practise more stringent fasting during Ramadhan, the most important thing is remembering God in prayer and being more aware of God's ways than we usually are. This enables us to re-orientate our lives in line with God's priorities – one of which is surely the care of creation.

Worship/Reflection

1. Poem 'God's Grandeur'

The world is charged with the grandeur of God.

It will flame out, like shining from shook foil;

It gathers to a greatness, like the ooze of oil

Crushed. Why do men not now then reckon his rod?

Generations have trod, have trod, have trod;

All is seared with trade; bleared, smeared with toil;

And wears man's smudge and shares man's smell: the soil

Is bare now, nor can foot feel, being shod.

And for all this, nature is never spent;

There lives the dearest freshness deep down things;

And though the last lights off the black West went

Oh, morning, at the brown brink eastward springs –

Because the Holy Ghost over the bent

World broods with warm breast and ah! bright wings.

G. Manley Hopkins 1844- 1889

2. Prayer

Almighty God,

You created the heavens and the earth and all that is in them.

You created humankind in your own image and it was very good;

Grant us the courage to recognise our failure to maintain your creation.

By your grace help us to halt the degradation of our environment.

Through Jesus Christ our Lord,

Who came that all may have life in all its fulness. Amen *(The World is our Host 2015)*

Points for discussion

1. It has been announced recently that it is now cheaper to produce energy from offshore wind farms than from nuclear power stations. What is your own experience of the various forms of renewable energy generation?
2. Churches and other public bodies usually have to invest their financial assets in organisations that will maximise the return to those who depend on them, but do make exceptions such as arms companies. How is this changing with the growing awareness of the causes and effects of climate change?

See www.operationnoah.org, www.brightnow.org.uk

Suggestion for action or abstinence

1. We throw so much food and packaging away, but Rowan Williams has said *'There is no such thing as 'away''*. Try to reduce your use of plastic packaging in the coming weeks – even plastic milk and water bottles are made from fossil fuels. When you use plastic, make sure you recycle as much as possible. Could you keep a record and report back next week?
2. Manley Hopkins says: *'...nature is never spent'*. Look for signs of spring, maybe in the Kings Heath Village Square gardens, and try to share them with someone – maybe a child.

Week 5: A vision of God's Realm Genesis 2 v 15 – 17, Revelation 22 v 1 – 5

Our two Bible passages, drawn from the beginning and end of the scriptures, both share a vision of a tree in a beautiful setting. The first, in Genesis, is an image of a world where good and evil are in the hands of God, and the second is of the water of life flowing through a city, with trees whose leaves are 'for the healing of the nations'. Beautiful images but both contain a challenge, echoed in the reversals of R. S. Thomas's poem, 'The Kingdom' (below). Lent is an opportunity to take a fresh look at our lives, to try to see with God's eyes, and to seek ways to be part of the healing that God wills for the people of the world.

In the Pacific islands, climate change is already forcing people to leave their land.

Assistant Bishop Apimeleki Qiliho from Polynesia, writes:

'Today the land to which I belong is in crisis. The source of my identity and belonging is threatened by the immense changes being brought about by climate change....During storms and high tides, sea water reaches the village green and damages roads, gardens and homes. Thick deposits of sand have damaged the marine ecosystems that we rely on for our livelihoods and daily sustenance.' (USPG 'Faith in a Changing Climate' info@uspg.org.uk)

So many of our errors are unintentional. When we started using fossil fuels of coal, oil and natural gas they were seen as a means of progress. Now scientists tell us they are one of the root causes of climate change so we have a responsibility to re-think in the light of our new

situation. We don't **intend** to be the cause of hurricanes and floods. We don't **wish** to force Pacific islanders to have to leave their homes because they are under water, but by our over use of fossil fuels we are part of the cause of these frequent disasters.

Other parts of the world have experienced severe hurricanes and flooding that will become more frequent as climate change progresses. What a contrast with the vision of the city of God! We must work to safeguard a future beyond our own, which belongs to our own children and grandchildren and to the world's future generations.

Worship/Reflection

1. Poem 'The Kingdom'

It's a long way off but inside it

There are quite different things going on:

Festivals at which the poor man

Is king and the consumptive is

Healed; mirrors in which the blind look

Back at themselves and love looks at them

Back; and industry is for mending

The bent bones and the minds fractured

By life. It's a long way off, but to get

There takes no time and admission

Is free, if you will purge yourself

Of desire, and present yourself with

Your need only and the simple offering

Of your faith, **green as a leaf.**

R.S. Thomas 1913 - 2000

2. Prayer

Silence

Christ has no body now on earth but yours.

Yours are the hands with which he can do his work.

Yours are the only feet with which he can go about the world.

Yours are the only eyes through which his compassion can shine forth upon a troubled world.

Christ has no body now on earth but yours.

St Teresa of Avila 1515 - 1582

Points for discussion

1. Look back at what you have thought and prayed about during this course. What do you want to remember and what would you like to find out more about ?
2. Find out more about local initiatives to address the issues raised by this Lent course, such as :
 - a) **Power for Good**, a Christian inspired local cooperative installing solar panels on places of worship including the New Life Baptist Church www.pfg.coop
 - b) **Footsteps: Faiths for a Low Carbon Future**, a multi-faith project inspired by the Paris climate change conference agreement in 2015, of faiths working together in Birmingham. www.footsteps.peacehub.org.uk
 - c) **Highbury Orchard Community**, a community orchard project in Highbury Park which welcomes volunteers on 1st and 3rd Sunday afternoons of each month, 1pm - dusk. www.peopleandland.org.uk

Concluding activity

As you look back on this Lent course, perhaps you could take a paper leaf and write a simple prayer, a new commitment or just something you want to think more about. Could the leaves be brought into worship in your church sometime over the Easter weekend, attached to a bare branch ?

More Poetry for Lent

Janet Morley 'The Heart's Time' SPCK 2011

This Study Guide was composed by a local ecumenical group of Christians:

Janet Nock, Margaret Healey Pollett, the Revd Alison Geary, Ruth Tetlow, Miriam Wilcher