



Sermon preached by Revd Nigel Uden on 15<sup>th</sup> September 2024

Readings: *Isaiah 50.4-9; James 3.1-12; Mark 8.27-38*

Trinity XV1

People of goodwill have always included those who aspire to what the United Nations calls ‘peace and prosperity for people and the planet, now and into the future’.<sup>1</sup>

In this season of Creationtide, with Christians in many places, we are giving ‘thanks for God’s gift of creation’, and renewing our ‘commitment to care for our planet home’.<sup>2</sup> As Colin Thompson has it, ‘to tread more gently on this earth, and love what [God] has made.’<sup>3</sup>



There are countless ways to pursue that laudable intention, and in 2015, the United Nations adopted one that it calls the Sustainable Development Goals, wanting to accomplish them by 2030. You can see a graphic of them here. These seventeen goals have a fundamental aim of human flourishing. As the United Nations says, ‘they recognize that ending poverty and other deprivations must go hand-in-hand with strategies that improve health and education, reduce inequality, and spur economic growth – all while tackling climate change and working to preserve our oceans and forests.’<sup>4</sup>

It is clear that any quest for a better world – for preserving the world in all its bounty and beauty - is urgent. The UN *Summit of the Future* is happening next week in New York City because that urgency is pressing. In remarks anticipating the summit, last week the UN Secretary-General, António Guterres, observed that ‘the challenges we face are moving faster than our ability to solve them’. Chief amongst those challenges, he highlights ferocious conflict, deep geopolitical division, inequality and injustice that are corroding trust, and poverty and hunger at crisis levels.

Mindful of AI’s positive potential, he nonetheless alludes to the risks of Artificial Intelligence being developed in an ethical and legal vacuum.<sup>5</sup>

And as if a backdrop to all of this, Guterres emphasises how, despite good words, ‘the climate crisis is still accelerating’. Maybe, if we were in Central or Eastern Europe this morning and affected by Storm Boris, some of us losing members of our families, you might share the view of the Romanian President Klaus Iohannis, that it’s ‘the effects of climate change, which are increasingly present on the European continent, with dramatic consequences’.<sup>6</sup>

<sup>1</sup> United Nations’ website, available at <https://sdgs.un.org/goals>; accessed 14<sup>th</sup> September 2024

<sup>2</sup> Church of England website, available at <https://www.churchofengland.org/about/environment-and-climate-change/season-creation>; accessed 24th July 2024

<sup>3</sup> Colin Peter Thompson 1945-, from the hymn *Creation’s glory shines*, (4.7f). The hymn was one of the winning entries in the 2024 Pratt Green Trust hymn writing competition. Available at <https://prattgreentrust.org.uk/hymn-competition-results>; accessed 15<sup>th</sup> September 2024

<sup>4</sup> UN website: <https://sdgs.un.org/goals>;

<sup>5</sup> UN Secretary-General’s remarks to the Global Call on the Summit of the Future, 12<sup>th</sup> September 2024.

Available at <https://www.un.org/sg/en/content/sg/statement/2024-09-12/secretary-generals-remarks-the-global-call-the-summit-of-the-future-delivered> Accessed 14th September 2024

<sup>6</sup> ‘Catastrophe’ as Central Europe deals with deadly floods - BBC News website, 15<sup>th</sup> September 2024. Available at <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/articles/c0jwp3ppp6xo>; accessed 15<sup>th</sup> September 2024

That is why the Sustainable Development Goals matter. They may not be perfect – indeed, there may be too many of them to enable taut and sharply focussed attention, such that the achievement of them by 2030 is unlikely. Indeed, by this year, only seventeen per cent of SDGs targets are on track to be achieved. As the United Nations' own progress report says, 'signs of a determined, sustained global comeback have yet to emerge.'<sup>7</sup> Nevertheless, despite slow progress, given due attention, might the Sustainable Development Goals inspire a broadly-based dedication to God's creation in its fullest sense?

We might ask, what all of this doing at the beginning of a sermon?

Well, apart from anything else, the Secretary-General is quite clear that although 'the United Nations is in a unique position to act as a platform and a convening space for key stakeholders,' it is vital for all sectors of society to contribute and collaborate in pursuing 'a safer, more sustainable and more equitable world'. And those stakeholders include people of faith. His call is not just to governments and financial institutions, to academia and civil society, but to the Church, and to other faith communities as well. After all, by observing Creationtide, we are responding to the invitation to renew our commitment to caring for this planet, our home.

And there is good Biblical precedent for this.

In the Old Testament reading we were listening to one of the four Servant Songs that are central to the second phase of the book Isaiah.<sup>8</sup> Essentially, the songs express the prophet's sense of how God will work amongst the people for the healing of the nations. We are given this image of the holding together of earth and heaven. God will use a servant. The word Messiah might come to mind. Debate has ensued endlessly as to whether the 'servant' is an individual, or all God's people. And in the Christian era, whether the servant - most notably the 'suffering servant' of the fourth song - is Jesus.

Now, I am going to ask you to accept that it's an authentic debate, but that, whoever the servant songs were actually meant to reflect, they speak eloquently to us about how the Church is to use its prophetic tongue in today's ecologically fragile world. You see, I don't think that the healing work God has in mind is solely for humanity. Would we want to be part of a plan that only redeems *part* of creation? Creationtide celebrates how God has made everything that is, and all the other tides – Christmastide, Passiontide, and their crown, Eastertide – reveal how 'Love's redeeming work is done'<sup>9</sup> in the living and dying and rising of Jesus Christ ... for everything that is.

So, I am offering the thought that the servant song that Tim read, from Isaiah 50, number 3, is an example to us of how we might contribute a voice from people of Christian faith into the world that so urgently needs to address creation's 21<sup>st</sup> century challenges. In it I have found four ways that God assists us to find our prophetic tongue.

In verse 4, Isaiah suggests that God gives the tongue for us to use it as a teacher. Our words are not to hector or bully, but to inform, to explore, to raise the questions that all good teachers open up. Creationtide is not about a naive sentimentality towards 'all things bright and beautiful'.<sup>10</sup> We will want to teach and enable intelligent exploration of this whole question of the environment. And we ought to ask questions about the Sustainability Development Goals, too. They are not perfect; ask any academic or politician who engages with them. They need interrogating and improving. But like Scripture, they are *worth* interrogating precisely because they're important. We are better with them as aspirations than with no aspiration at all. We can add the Church's thoughtful and theologically informed voice, both to explore and to advocate these seventeen goals.

Back to verse 4. The writer also intuits that a real prophet's words are not to exhaust, not to intimidate. The one who truly speaks a word from God is sensitive to the context of their hearers. They know the

---

<sup>7</sup> UN General Secretary's report, *Progress towards the Sustainable Development Goals* to the General Assembly Economic and Social Council, July 2024. Available at <https://unstats.un.org/sdgs/files/report/2024/SG-SDG-Progress-Report-2024-advanced-unedited-version.pdf>; accessed 15<sup>th</sup> September 2024

<sup>8</sup> 1) Isaiah 42.1-4; 2) Isaiah 49.1-6; 3) Isaiah 50.4-9; and 4) Isaiah 52.13-32.12

<sup>9</sup> Charles Wesley 1707-88, from the hymn, *Christ the Lord is risen today* RS 232.2.1 and 232.6.1

<sup>10</sup> Cecil Frances Alexander 1818-95, from the hymn, *All things bright and beautiful* (1848) CH4 137 Refrain.1

stresses of modern life. They bring a word that doesn't feed despair, but that 'sustains the weary'. You may recall the first servant song in Isaiah 42, where the authentic spokesperson for the Lord neither breaks the bruised reed nor quenches the dimly burning wick.<sup>11</sup> That's right; the proper prophet encourages, and inspires. Yes, they might prod and cajole, even admonish, but it is never to belittle or overwhelm. It is only ever to build up, to stir. How precious this point is, as we seek to identify a meaningful role for communities of faith in helping creation to honour its creator and to treasure itself. We will only be heard if we bring a winsome word that is worth listening to.

Then in verse 5 – and maybe this would be better preceding verse 4 – Isaiah senses God promising to open our ears so that we can hear what it is God wants us to learn, and then, not to turn our backs on it, but to be changed by it. And that matters. The message that we will have will not always be comfortable. It challenges; it demands changed thinking and priorities; it disrupts routines and ways of life. Indeed, just as on other political and ethical issues, people of faith disagree amongst themselves about things ecological. This Creationtide season seeks to open our ears, to help us ponder ever so carefully what the Spirit is saying to us in an era of climate emergency. We will only be heard if we bring a wise word that is worth listening to.

Verse 7 is helpful, too. Given Isaiah's earlier openness about how it is not a walk in the park to be prophetic – especially to a generation that seems to sit lightly to religious conviction – he now seeks to reassure with the promise of God's help. God, says Isaiah, will honour the one who speaks sincerely for God, so that they will not be disgraced. And going out on a prophetic limb, sometimes it is the confidence that God is with us, and for us, that alone will carry us through.

And such, too, is verse 9. As the Lord helps, so no-one else can condemn. How elegantly St Paul borrows this idea in Romans 8, 'if God be for us, who can be against us?'<sup>12</sup> When climate change deniers are at their most persuasive, or the heat of the debate at its most intense, or changed lifestyles too costly comfortably to advocate, it can indeed be tempting to dilute our commitment to the planet. But there is no planet B, and this season is urging our commitment to planet A. The One who made it is our helper.<sup>13</sup>

Might it be that these servant songs, with their longing for the healing of the nations, spur us on in this Creationtide to do what God wants done in this era. You see, for Jesus doing what God needed done was going to the cross. For us, it is highly improbable that taking up the cross is what God wants of us – though, if you are an Israeli hostage, a Gazan mother, or President Zelensky, maybe it feels something like crucifixion. For us, though, could it be that taking up a cross is doing our bit personally for the planet, and playing our part in enabling our nation to do so, too?

In closing, will you forgive me when I cannot help but notice how the Sustainability Development Goals are often known by that three-letter acronym, SDG? Now, some use that same acronym to mean *Soli Deo Gloria*, for the glory of God alone'. Bach and Beethoven were known to head their music that way. And it could just be that that is why, this Creationtide, people of faith need to regard the Sustainability Development Goals with utmost seriousness. Yes, they matter for the sake of our children and of our children's children; yes, they matter for the sake of every bit of flora and fauna that struggles to preserve itself; but also, let's pursue the ideas behind the SDGs SDG – *solī Deo gloria*, Amen.

N. P. Uden, 15<sup>th</sup> September 2024

---

<sup>11</sup> Isaiah 42.3a

<sup>12</sup> Romans 8.31b

<sup>13</sup> cf Psalm 121.2