A Green Hermeneutic for a Green Homiletic:

Preaching Paul in Time of Ecological Threat.

Trevor Jamison

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ABSTRACT

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This planet is suffering from the impact of climate change, brought about by human activity. In response, the author of this thesis preached a series of four sermons in September 2018. All four featured Paul's Letter to the Philippians, read using a green hermeneutic. Gospel readings were also chosen from the Revised Common Lectionary. Readers' interests, rather than the intentions of the author, or exegesis based on the historical setting of the biblical text, was the primary driver of ecological interpretation in the sermons.

Using a preaching journal, maintained during this series, the thesis analyses the preparation process for writing the sermons. This takes account of the role of the preacher's life story and contemporary contextual factors in decision making. The texts of the sermons preached are examined, using responses from a three-person reflection panel. This identifies 'types' of possible responses to ecological preaching: 'wary listener', 'critical friend', and 'ready listener'.

Reflection upon this example of ecological preaching practice produces a number of findings. First, when read using a green hermeneutic, Paul can encourage helpful reaction and response to contemporary ecological threat. Second, preachers need to give suitable time to considering the wider ecological context before moving to consider the biblical texts. Third, giving due weight to readers' interests implies that listeners may also reinterpret a preacher's ecological interpretation. Fourth, the approach used for these sermons may be used for group discussion, particularly Contextual Bible Study.

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Abbreviations

EBP	Earth Bible Project
Greening Paul	Horrell, David G., Cherryl Hunt and Christopher Southgate. 2010. *Greening Paul: Rereading the Apostle in a Time of Ecological Crisis*. Waco, Texas: Baylor University Press.
HHS	Horrell, Hunt and Southgate
PCI	Presbyterian Church in Ireland
RCL	Revised Common Lectionary
URC	United Reformed Church

Chapter 1 Confronting Climate Change Through Ecological Preaching

The Challenge of Climate Change

This thesis concerns a modest response to one of the greatest challenges facing humankind today. That challenge is the threat posed to this planet and its inhabitants by climate change.[1] The response offered was four sermons, preached during September 2018 to the United Reformed Church congregation in North Shields, in the North East of England.[2] I have been the Minister of this congregation since June 2018. For five years prior to that I was the Environmental Chaplain for Eco Congregation Scotland.

In this thesis I explore how attention to the contemporary ecological crisis came to the fore in my preaching. I consider how the Holy Spirit might first work through the ecological context, then the biblical texts, and the congregational setting, in inspiring ecological preaching. This issue arose as I tested the extent to which the Apostle Paul can be a positive resource for preaching on contemporary environmental issues, particularly using his *Letter to the Philippians*. For that I drew upon insights from the University of Exeter collaborative research project on 'Uses of the Bible in Environmental Ethics.' I attempted to read Scripture from a 'green perspective'.[3] Also, I was influenced by Stephen Fowl[4], particularly his approach to interpreting biblical texts, leading me to preach with the aim of stimulating healthy conversation on ecological issues in a congregational setting.

Ecological preaching is required because the planet's climate is changing in significant ways and at an unprecedented rate. Changes are largely driven by industrial scale use of fossil fuels (coal, oil, and gas). The human capacity to change our own climate results in our era being described as one of 'anthropogenic' climate change.[5] Our burning of fossil fuels for heating, transport, and manufacture has significantly increased the levels of CO_2 in the

[1] For an overview of the relevant science see Houghton. 2015.
[2] Acknowledging the reality and significance of climate change necessarily involves considering its impact upon liturgical practice. Gschwandtner points out that liturgy is a highly significant place of learning in the Christian faith; one intended to affect how its participants lead their lives outside of the church setting. She also notes that 'in more heavily Scripture-oriented traditions, possibly the ways of applying Scripture environmentally might prove more useful than the liturgical retrieval.' Gschwandtner, 2019, 569. Writing from within a 'Scripture-oriented' Reformed tradition, , I am attempting to test out truth of this suggestion.
[3] Most particularly relying upon Horrell, Hunt and Southgate. 2010.(Hereafter *Greening Paul*.) Information on publications generated by the Exeter project can be found at http://humanities.exeter.ac.uk/theology/research/projects/uses/publications/ Accessed 20/04/2018
[4] Particularly Fowl 1998.
[5] IPCC. 2014.

earth's atmosphere, triggering changes in the climate leading to a rise in the planet's temperature.[6]

This rise in global temperature has alarming, adverse effects.[7] These include increased incidence of extreme weather events such as heatwaves, storms, floods and droughts. The damage caused, and the human and economic costs of such events, are growing, and will continue to grow. Agriculture is impacted. Higher Northern latitudes may benefit from increased temperatures, but this is more than outweighed by substantial decreases in crop yields in tropical regions. Substantial reduction in rainfall in southern Europe, the Mediterranean, and southern Africa will adversely impact water availability. Meanwhile, dieback of forests can be expected in northern latitudes. Rapid change to the climate of habitats leads to species loss. Increased CO_2 levels in the ocean leads to acidification, with severe impact on corals and other marine creatures, and as oceans warm and sea levels rise significant land loss is expected.

These changes will impact on human populations, displacing millions of people from their land, with accompanying social and political ramifications. The impact is greatest on those with least resources because the economic costs are high. These include direct costs caused by more frequent and intense disasters, plus the costs of adaptation undertaken to reduce associated damages. Since significant climate change has already taken place, ongoing and future adaptation costs are unavoidable. Financial costs also arise from mitigating actions undertaken to reduce the amount of climate change. Without radical action by the international community, substantial costs associated with mitigation, are also unavoidable.[8]

Simply put, climate change is the greatest challenge facing humankind today because it affects our environment – our living space. Therefore, potentially, all human life and activities are impacted by climate change, whether or not we acknowledge it. Viewing climate change as only an environmental issue underestimates the scale of the crisis. It is an

[6] The findings of the IPCC 2014 synthesis report are confirmed in the organisation's more recent report on the challenges facing the international community to keep the rise in global temperatures under 1.5° C. See IPCC. 2018.
[7] See Houghton. 2015, 133-214, summarised, 252-255.
[8] Houghton. 2015, 162-214.

economic issue, a political issue, and a social issue. To identify climate change solely with environmental issues even increases the probability that some will deny its very existence because of its perceived association with the environmental lobby.[9] Since climate change so affects this small planetary part of God's creation, it is clearly a significant and urgent theological issue, and so should be addressed in contemporary preaching.[10]

I began this chapter by writing about climate change, not about the discipline of theology because this thesis is an endeavour in practical theology.[11] It is grounded in the conviction that situations generate theological insight in themselves. Context is not simply the arena in which truths of systematic theology are applied, nor is preaching only an occasion when the outcomes of biblical studies are shared.[12] Instead, I hope that reflection upon my preached sermons may provide theological insights about climate change, ecology, Christian ministry, preaching and the Church.[13]

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[9] The history of how climate change came to be identified with environmental campaigning organisations is traced by George Marshall. The existing political profile and rhetoric of these groups on other issues 'tainted' the issue of climate change in the eyes of others, encouraging denial of its reality. Marshall, 2014, 127-134. One example of examining climate change in wider terms is Naomi's Klein's analysis of its impact upon the global economic system. She highlights not only the pervasive impact of climate change but also how opposition is generated when effective action is perceived to threaten the economic status quo. Klein, 2014.

[10] For a recent wide-ranging collection of theological responses to climate change see Koster and Conradie, 2019. These include emphasising the need for collaboration with disciplines outside of Christian theology; finding common moral ground for such collaboration; challenges in collaborating with different Christian traditions; understanding God's identity, character and work; implications for ecclesial practice (including liturgical ones); and reflections on further work which needs to be done with regard to issues such as race, gender, class, other animals, and geographical divides.

[11] Miller-McLemore suggests a four-fold definition of practical theology. First, it is an activity of believers, and preaching is clearly so. Second, it is a method of understanding or analysing theology. Researching preaching practice fits well here. Third, it is a curricular area in theological education, which seems less relevant to my project. Fourth, though, it also operates as an academic discipline. Research and writing of a doctoral thesis is clearly relevant. Miller-McLemore, 2014, 1-20.

[12] Concerning the relationship between systematic and applied theology, Graham, Walton and Ward (2005, 3), draw attention to significant challenges from the still influential model advocated by Schleiermacher, with its clear hierarchical distinction between systematic and applied theologies; the latter dependant on the former for discovery of truths, subsequently applied in pastoral situations. Here, note also cautions against presuming that preaching starts with the bible and pastoral practice begins with the situation. Quicke, 2005, 241.

[13] Caution and humility regarding such hopes is required, considering the context from which I write. Koster and Conradie argue that 'North Atlantic Christianity' may be as much a problem as it is a source of solutions. The North Atlantic economies have contributed the greatest amount of historic carbon emissions. Christianity was the dominant form of religion during the industrialisation which led to this rise in carbon emissions. Even if it did not legitimise it, Christianity's critique of industrialised capitalism's impact on the world's climate has been ineffective. Also, given the decline in its numbers and influence in an increasingly secularised global North, the prospect for future effective intervention there by the Church, and theologians associated with it, is not bright. Instead, they argue, the Global South, which is the most impacted by climate change, and where religion is more thriving, is where Christian theology might play a significant role. Koster and Conradie, 2019, 2-3. I accept the accuracy of their account, but do not see this as a reason to stop preaching, and reflecting theologically upon my preaching. Rather, I try to preach faithfully in challenging circumstances. I share what I have seen and experienced concerning climate change, proclaiming God, not 'North Atlantic Christianity', as the source of

So, the dangers and challenges posed by climate change are what first demand attention and response. Practical theology influences my approach to these ecological issues. I hope to demonstrate how awareness of climate change and a practical theological perspective affected my preaching practice and my choice of methods for examining and reflecting upon these sermons. Before considering research methods though, I need to acknowledge how my pre-existing faith perspective affected my response to climate change and my choice of research methods. So now I explore the interplay between my personal history and my faith commitments, my encounters with biblical scholarship, particularly as it relates to Paul, and environmental theology.

Reflexivity Concerning Preaching and My Own Story

My life story features experiences which propelled me towards preaching, and my inclination to research. It features a confluence of place, time and church, and the role of education. It begins with me as the product of working class, Protestant, Evangelical, Irish Presbyterian Church culture. Born at the end of the 1950s, I grew up in Belfast, Northern Ireland, where levels of religious observance were much higher than in the rest of the UK. From earliest childhood my involvement in Church was all-encompassing. The accepted theological position of the congregation was conservatively Evangelical, with the Bible read in a literal way. An emphasis upon individual sin and redemption was accompanied by a conservative attitude toward personal relationships. Socioeconomic issues, however, were regarded as largely irrelevant to Christian faith. Church social action was resisted as distracting from bringing others to faith, to avoid their eternal damnation.[14] This was a source of discontent for me. My experience of education through school and university was a major factor in this discontent.

hope. Koster and Conradie's argument encourages me, though, to commend engaging constructively with others outside the Church, so as to leverage the influence that we have for the common good. (I address this in Sermon 4.) Koster and Conradie structure their handbook with such collaboration in mind. Part I is devoted to working with others such as scientists, economists, engineers, politicians, and climate activists; Part II explores finding common moral ground in working with others; and Part III concerns working with (and against) different traditions within Christianity. Only then do they explore the Christian story of God's work and the Christian notion of God's identity and character. Ecclesial praxis, where ecological preaching might be located, is only then addressed.

[14] An instance of what Marais identifies as a problematic wider phenomenon within the Reformed tradition: 'prioritising the salvation of human beings above all else, including the creation of all living beings; this expressed in the concept of salvation from (old) earth and (physical) bodies.' She argues, though, that other Reformed traditions and practices offer resources in an era of climate threat. These include readiness to confront theological distortions, the use of the language of confession in times of crisis, and using the language and concept of covenant to understand God's relationship with all creatures. Marais, 2019, 293-295.

I am an educated man. From the age of five I was a precocious reader, enjoying school, and engaging enthusiastically with learning ever since. Within my working class community there was a significant division of opinion concerning education. Some regarded it as a necessary evil, to be endured, but escaped at the first opportunity. For others, my parents included, education represented respectability and a route to social and economic betterment. I embraced their view enthusiastically. In the Church I was to 'glorify God and enjoy him for ever.'[15] In the education setting I also believed that I was doing the right thing, but increasingly I questioned aspects of both of these narratives. The congregation's story about the world, could not be insulated from alternative narratives in surrounding society. My understanding of education as means to betterment was countered by arguments that learning offered other outcomes.

In September 1983 I changed places and churches. I moved to London for further study, joining the United Reformed Church (URC), a denomination with a theologically more liberal ethos than the Presbyterian Church in Ireland. My London congregation was smaller, but socially and theologically more diverse. Members were encouraged to explore the social implications of Christian faith. I found this congenial. My involvement in church life deepened, and the easier fit between congregational life and intellectual learning encouraged me to explore academic theology. This interest deepened as I trained to become a Minister in the United Reformed Church, being ordained in 1995.

Given that it was now easier for me to connect theological issues with social issues it is surprising how long it took for me to connect faith and theology with environmental issues. Theological concern about environmental issues has a long history in the twentieth century,[16] and deep appreciation of nature featured in early Reformed tradition.[17] Yet I am unaware of making such connections before 2006. As Minister for three URC congregations in Essex, I

[15] Westminster Shorter Catechism, Question 1. "What is man's chief end? Man's chief end is to glorify God and to enjoy him for ever".
[16] As demonstrated by Pihkala, 2017.
[17]See Lane, 2011, concerning beauty in nature as a theme for Reformed writers in the sixteenth, seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Conradie (2013) provides a considered assessment of Reformed contributors, including Calvin, Bavinck, Barth and Moltmann. More recently, Marais points to Calvin's interest in and love for astronomy, which emphasised the importance of experiencing God in the beauty of the universe, potentially de-centring humanity in our understanding of God's concerns and plans for creation. Marais, 2019.

supported members in one congregation who wanted the church to engage more deeply with environmental issues, but it was not a significant priority for me at that point.

Major change came in 2012 when I was invited to apply to become the Environmental Chaplain for Eco Congregation Scotland, an ecumenical Christian movement which encourages churches to make care for creation a significant, integral part of their life and witness.[18] For five years I carried out this role, which was intended to bring an explicit theological perspective to the work of the organisation. This involved speaking to groups, leading worship, and preaching at churches of different denominational traditions across Scotland. I was also responsible for producing support material for worship leaders, to be used during the ecumenically recognised, Creation Time, which takes place each September.[19]

This requirement to preach and support preachers encouraged me to explore ways in which to read the Bible from a green perspective. I became interested in whether Paul's writings could be read in ways that would be fruitful, ecologically speaking. Explaining that interest leads me to consider my long-standing relationship with the Apostle.

Saint Paul and Me[20]

It's difficult to remember when I first heard about Paul. My PCI involvement provides no clear memory of him. Whilst I was a member of a URC congregation in London (1983-1991) the bible study group read his letters, but Paul was perceived as an inferior resource compared Jesus's teaching, or the message of Israel's prophets. During my ministerial training (1991-1995), I was required to read Paul for myself rather than to read about or hear about him. I encountered the New Perspective on Paul (NPP), which was indeed 'new' in the 1990s. Whilst

[18] http://www.ecocongregationscotland.org/about-us/about/ for further information.
[19] https://www.ecocongregationscotland.org/creation-time/ for information about Creation Time in its ecumenical setting and examples of the support material offered in recent years.
[20] In this thesis I subsequently respect current academic conventions by referring to 'Paul' or on occasion 'the Apostle Paul'. I understand the concern not to unnecessarily privilege either the historical figure or the writings of the author or authors of the letters which bear his name. Some traditions within the Christian Church avoid attributing the title, "Saint" to Paul, or other figures, though I do not share these qualms. In my sermons Paul is often referred to as 'Saint Paul'. I regard the title as a reminder of Paul's prominent position in and contribution to the history of the Church. This is not to imply that I regard him as a perfect human being, or that I am prevented from disagreeing with what he (or those who may have written in his name) did or said.

welcoming it as an antidote to interpretations of scripture which seemed, at best, to marginalise Jews, at worst to demonise them, I also felt uneasy. Were we re-writing Paul for our own purposes, to atone for Christian treatment of Jews, with its terrible climax in the twentieth century Holocaust? This concern about reading Paul for one's own purposes would recur in interpreting him in relation to environmental issues.

Paul was a recurring figure after ordination. As a Minister of two URC congregations in Liverpool (1995-2000), I preached on Paul and had his letters as the subject of Bible study series. In a subsequent ministry (2001-2006), working in a training role with congregations in the North of England, Paul remained in the background in my preaching and educational work. As the Minister of three URC congregations in Essex (2006-2013), I preached from Paul's letters, but found that the great majority of my sermons continued to be based on Gospel readings. In 2007, in a three-month sabbatical, I addressed this situation, preaching a sermon series on *Romans* in a church in Indianapolis. Re-reading those sermons, one stands out, not only for its treatment of Paul, but also because it hints at how I would approach preaching on ecological issues more than a decade later.

This sermon, on Romans 13:1-7,[21] addressed Paul's exhortation to 'be subject to the governing authorities'.[22] I am struck by five aspects of the sermon. First, my reading of Paul was guided by a pre-existing theological perspective: response to governing authority should be read in the light of response to divine authority.[23] Second, interpretation is not limited to Paul's original intentions.[24] Third, I extended Paul's thought from one area of life to others.[25] Fourth, I commended reading a Bible passage from the perspective of other parts of Scripture.[26] Fifth, I also appealed to contemporary and historical sources.[27]

[21] Jamison. 2008. For the text of the sermon, see Appendix E.
[22] 13:1
[23] 'How does an authority … wield authority? Does this reflect the just and loving nature of the God who bestowed the gift of authority?' Jamison. 2008, 82.
[24] The sermon concludes, 'So we respond positively to Paul's call for submission to authorities … but not without some thought and perhaps not on every occasion.' Jamison. 2008, 83.
[25] 'How we believe we should respond to the political authorities also provides us with guidelines as to how we respond to authority, as we encounter it in everyday life – parents, teachers, managers; and yes, the authority residing in religious leaders, such as ministers, and even including the preacher.' Jamison. 2008, 82.
[26] 'We don't just consider seven verses from one book in isolation from the sixty-six in the Bible when making our decisions.' Jamison. 2008, 82.
[27] 'We look around us not only to the scriptures but also to those authorities that are our fellow Christians, both in the present and the past.' Jamison. 2008, 83.

This experience of preaching and reading *Romans* had lasting, significant impact upon my thought and practice. This came to the fore when, as Environmental Chaplain for Eco-Congregation Scotland, tasked with thinking, writing, preaching and speaking on appropriate Christian responses to contemporary ecological issues. I wondered if my interest in Paul might make a distinctive contribution to preaching in this role.

Approach and Methods

Coming from a faith perspective, and researching in practical theology, I prioritise theology in its relationship with other disciplines. This influences my choice of methods and their application in reflecting upon the sermons I preached. Here, Swinton and Mowat offer a helpful analysis of the place of qualitative research in the pursuit of practical theology, presenting four possible relationships between theology and other disciplines: indissoluble differentiation, inseparable unity, indestructible order, and logical priority.[28]

With 'indissoluble differentiation', theology and other disciplines have specific roles and forms of knowledge that should not be confused. This offers clarity, but isolates theology, depriving it of the insights offered by other disciplines, and of shared language with which to communicate with wider society. Alternatively, in a relationship of 'inseparable unity' all methods coincide in a world without separation and division. Other disciplines offer additional knowledge on an equal footing, enhancing theological understanding. This echoes with my personal history where discoveries from outside a closed theological system affected me intellectually, theologically, and psychologically.

Since I accept insights from other disciplines, how does theology take priority in the relationship? Again following Swinton and Mowat, in an 'indestructible order', theology takes logical precedence over social sciences because it deals with ultimate matters for which the latter does not have capacity. A different way of understanding such relationships, though, speaks of 'logical priority'. Here, theology does not acquire its ultimate significance from qualitative social research because it does not require it for self-understanding, but 'within

[28] Swinton and Mowat, 2006, 83-90.

the process of practical theological research, qualitative data does acquire its significance from theology.'[29] I work on the basis that theology has logical priority, but remain suspicious of attempts to equate ordering with status. Even if theology is logically prior in my research it can still be the subject of criticism, reflection and challenge.[30] Working with this prior theological perspective, I proceed with cautious openness to insights and contributions from other disciplines.

In this thesis the insights offered by other disciplines come through using qualitative research methods.[31] There is great variety in the field of qualitative research. One overview identifies no less than fourteen distinct traditions and approaches in undertaking qualitative research.[32] In this thesis I make substantial use of hermeneutics, understood as exploring the conditions under which a text is produced in order to interpret its meanings.[33] In hermeneutics, a 'text' may include any human product or act, so both biblical texts and acts relating to their interpretation, such as preaching, fall within its scope.[34] I can tap into a rich theological vein of hermeneutical work.[35] Indeed, Jeanrond, even argues that Christian theology itself is best understood as a hermeneutical exercise, dealing with a tradition that has texts.[36]

Hermeneutics expands my options in approaching, using and responding to biblical texts when preaching on environmental issues. It focuses on the text's final form, as do preachers with the biblical texts. Also, a hermeneutical perspective acknowledges that interpreters (including, preachers) do not stand completely above or apart from textual interpretation.[37]

[29] Swinton and Mowat, 2006, 87.
[30] As argued by Swinton and Mowat, 2006, 89-90.
[31] A thesis focused upon responses of congregational members to sermons might use quantitative methods. My research, however, focuses more upon how theology and context interact with Scripture in the preparation and delivery of sermons. In-depth investigation of congregational response is beyond the scope and scale of this doctoral thesis.
[32] 1. Ethnography, 2. Phenomenology/ethnomethodology, 3. Conversation analysis, 4. Discourse analysis, 5. Protocol analysis, 6. Interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA), 7. Symbolic interactionism, 8. Grounded theory, 9. Ethogenics, 10. Hermeneutics, 11. Narrative analysis, 12. Constructionism, 13. Critical theory, and 14. Participatory action research / user-led research. Ormston et al, 2014,18.
[33] Ormston et al, 2014, 18.
[34] Jeanrond, for example, includes liturgy as well as the examination of biblical texts, in his consideration of hermeneutics. Jeanrond, 1994, 1.
[35] In addition to Jeanrond, see also Thiselton regarding the use of hermeneutics for developing Christian doctrine, including for the doctrine of creation. Thiselton, 2007
[36] Jeanrond, 1994, 9.
[37] Bartholomew, 2005, 137.

Hermeneutics has been applied helpfully to theological understandings of cosmology in doctrines of creation. David Tracy's understanding of 'world', for example, emphasises the theme of cosmology for theology, challenging anthropocentric presuppositions in modern theology.[38] Thiselton applies hermeneutics to the doctrine of creation, not changing the doctrine's content, but looking anew at the circumstances which lead to its rise.[39] His conclusion, that 'creation is not so much about the beginning of things as it is about their meaning' supports my intention to preach ecologically.[40] Hermeneutics, then, helps me in making explicit my understanding of the relationship between Scripture and its interpretation in a contemporary context. I need to decide, though if the ecological perspective I bring to preaching will be derived from within Scripture, or whether other sources can be used.[41]

As well as hermeneutics I will also make use of insights from ethnography, particularly auto-ethnography, and ethnomethodology. Ethnography seeks to understand the social world of people through immersion in their community, enabling detailed descriptions of culture and beliefs.[42] Examining my own work involves autoethnography, using personal experience to investigate issues or concerns that have wider social or religious significance.[43] Autoethnography takes different forms.[44] This includes performance autoethnography, which understands the social world as a performed one in which people act out their lives. It is frequently associated with strong political commitment, including an important role for personal testimony.[45] This fits well with understanding the Christian Church, faith (and God) as performative, as do Fodor and Haeurwas.[46] For them Christian faith is performance from start to finish because it involves worship of one who is 'pure act, an eternally performing God.'[47] They understand ethical actions as improvisations based upon prior models and exemplifications and I see this as akin to the process which brings a sermon into being.[48] They

[38] Bartholomew, 2005, 139.
[39] Thiselton, 2007, 5.
[40] Thiselton, 2007, 49.
[41] Contributors to the Earth Bible Project (Habel, 2000) derive the principles which underpin their hermeneutical perspective from outside the Bible, and the Church context. This contrasts with the approach of the University of Exeter research project on Uses of the Bible in Environmental Ethics. See Horrell, 2010 and *Greening Paul*.
[42] Ormston et al, 2014, 18.
[43] See Walton, 2014, xx-xxi, for a definition of autoethnography and its location within different methods of theological reflection.
[44] Walton, 2014, 4-9.
[45] Walton, 2014, 8. Also, Denzin (2003, 258) describes a thoroughgoing politically engaged autoethnography, offering 'tools for countering reactionary political discourse.'
[46] Fodor and Haeurwas, 2004.
[47] Fodor and Haeurwas, 2004, 77.
[48] Fodor and Haeurwas, 2004, 80.

challenge Christians to attune themselves to God's performance through liturgy (which includes preaching): 'a kind of performance before the performance, a preparation beforehand for whatever witness the church might be called upon to give.'[49]

Performance links with ethnomethodology where 'social facts' are understood to be external to and constraining individuals. They are treated as 'accomplishments' produced in and through members' practical activities: 'most qualitative researchers … want to know the world *as participants* see it, [but] ethnomethodologists prefer to study how, by the use of which procedures and methods, *any particular 'world' is produced and perceived.*'[50] Ethnomethodology prizes artful accounting for ideas and actions after the fact.[51]

Aspects of ethnomethodology potentially helpful to my research include emphasis upon the importance of context, and requirement for immersion in the actions being studied. All actions and objects are 'indexical' i.e. context dependant. Practical meaning comes through context, with weight given to local meaning, though perhaps acknowledging the role of cultural and societal systems in influencing individuals and their worlds.[52] My account of interpretative decision-making use of such methods[53] could be termed, accurately though inelegantly, as "autoethnomethodology". Alternatively, since I am investigating my own decision-making whilst using hermeneutics, perhaps "autohermeneutics" might be a better term.[54]

So, I will employ a hermeneutical stance in reading biblical texts, to generate fruitful interpretations for ecological preaching. Insights from autoethnomethodology or autohermeneutics help me to reflect upon the preparation and preaching of the sermons themselves. Next, though, in chapter two, I consider significant resources which were

[49] Fodor and Haeurwas, 2004, 98.
[50] Ten Have, 2004, 151. (Author emphasis.) Silverman shares this interest in what people do rather than how they see or feel about events. Silverman, 2000.
[51] Gubrium and Holstein, 2000, 491.
[52] Gubrium and Holstein, 2000, 491-495.
[53]Ten Have advocates deep familiarity with the world being studied, combined with distancing oneself from its apparent ordinariness. Ten Have, 2004, 152, 153.
[54] The term, 'autohermeneutics', is used by Tim Gorichanaz, drawing upon autoethnography, self-study, and systematic self-observation to study how he receives and processes information in the experience of being a long-distance runner. Gorichanaz, 2016.

available to aid me in choosing the biblical texts for the sermons, to read them ecologically, and effectively commend my interpretation of them to sermon listeners.

Chapter 2 Resources for a Green Homiletic

In this chapter, reflecting the priorities set out in chapter one, I first address the challenge of achieving a theologically convincing green reading of biblical texts. This is for the purposes of preaching sermons which respond effectively to the significant ecological threat posed by climate change. Sermons using a green hermeneutic are shared in Christian faith community settings. So, second, although the initial impetus for ecological preaching comes from recognising the ecological threat posed by climate change, ecclesial contexts soon become significant, inescapable elements in the homiletical process. Traditional dynamics at congregational level, and in wider Church settings, must be negotiated in order to secure a healthy community reading of a green hermeneutic. Third, in terms of wider Church tradition, I will also discuss the mixed contribution of the Revised Common Lectionary; finding it to be a flawed resource for a green hermeneutic.

Seeking a Green Hermeneutic for a Green Homiletic

In proposing to use a hermeneutical lens for reading the Bible ecologically my most significant resource is the work of David Horrell and his colleagues at the University of Exeter research project on 'Uses of the Bible in Environmental Ethics'.[1] This project has resulted in a number of major publications on ecological readings of the Bible. For my purposes, the most significant of these is Horrell, Hunt and Southgate's *Greening Paul: Rereading the Apostle in a Time of Ecological Crisis*.[2] This offers an ecological reading of the Bible through a hermeneutical lens constructed using Romans 8:19-23 and Colossians 1:15-20. Whilst I value and utilise insights from *Greening Paul*, I intend to use an additional passage, Philippians 2:5-11, at the stage of shaping the green hermeneutical lens, not only to encourage ecological reflection, but also to strengthen the impetus to eco-ethical action.

In *Greening Paul* Horrell, Hunt and Southgate (HHS) begin with a highly useful classificatory survey of kinds of engagement with the Bible in eco-theological writings and also in writings opposed to any environmental agenda.[3] These are divided into categories of 'readings of

[1] For detailed information on this project see http://humanities.exeter.ac.uk/theology/research/projects/uses/ Accessed 20/02/2018
[2] Horrell et al. 2010. *Greening* Paul, hereafter, *Greening Paul*. For two other major publications from the project , Horrell 2010, and Horrell et al., 2010, *Ecological Hermeneutics*.
[3] *Greening Paul,* 11-32.

recovery' and 'readings of resistance'.[4] In their critical analysis, HHS find such approaches wanting. They advocate a more constructive and creative approach, self-consciously and openly reading Paul in the light of current contextual priorities, specifically the current ecological crisis.[5] They seek to maintain continuity with Paul, convinced that an appropriate Christian hermeneutic should be formed by as well as interpret Scripture.[6] They intend to draw out new meanings for our time through analogy with what Paul said, or by extending what he suggested concerning issues in his time, applying that within our contemporary ecological context. They declare that they are not pretending to uncover what the Apostle 'really' or originally thought.[7]

This leads HHS to an in-depth exploration of Romans 8:19-23 and Colossians 1:15-20, passages which they choose as the biblical components of their ecological lens. These are read within the context of Paul's understanding of a narrative of creation in relation to God.[8] In their analysis, these biblical passages offer up, respectively, images of the liberation of creation and of reconciliation with creation. The authors tend to find the motif of reconciliation more attractive than that of liberation for an ecological reading. Both readings acknowledge contemporary scientific claims, which appropriately limit plausible interpretations of biblical texts. From this combination they derive an ethic with corporate solidarity at its heart; what

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[4] They build here on Francis Watson's exploration of how Genesis 1-3 is treated in the Pauline writings. Watson suggests that readings of recovery work on the basis that the history of interpretation is flawed, and we need to get behind that to the true, good meaning of the text. In contrast, readings of resistance argue that the text itself is oppressive in its origin, and that there is no helpful truth to be discovered there. He believes both strategies need to be deployed for a healthy interpretation, though in this particular case he argues that resistance may be the better response to Paul's interpretations of Genesis 1-3. Watson, 1992.

[5] *Greening Paul*, 33-48. Here, they acknowledge their debt to the South African eco-theologian Ernst Conradie, particularly his concept of 'doctrinal keys', for ecological interpretations of biblical texts. See, for example, Conradie, 2009. For an indication of his recent thinking, see Conradie, 2017.

[6] 'It seems to us that a kind of acknowledged circularity is necessarily intrinsic to a fruitful hermeneutic: *hermeneutical lenses are at one and the same time products of the tradition and the means for its critical reading and configuration*.' *Greening Paul*, 43. (author emphasis) This marks the distinctive difference between their approach and that of the Earth Bible Project (EBP), where biblical texts are judged and interpreted on the basis of eco-justice principles, intentionally derived from sources outside of the Christian tradition. See Habel, 2000. I agree with HHS in doubting that those outside the Christian tradition will thus be encouraged to give value to biblical texts or that many within that tradition would wish to guide their interpretations by principles deliberately drawn from elsewhere. *Greening Paul*, 37-39. Currently, these two still stand out as the only relevant major projects exploring sophisticated hermeneutical approaches to interpreting the Bible in the light of climate change and ecological threat. See Rossing, 2019, 580.

[7] 'We adopt a self-consciously constructive and creative approach, recognising that we are reading Paul in the light of our own context and priorities, *making* new meaning from the texts, but seeking to do so in a way that is in demonstrable continuity with the Pauline material and is thus potentially persuasive as a form of Christian theology.' *Greening Paul*, 4. (author emphasis) Fowl, 1998, would agree that we make new meanings rather than discovering them as a quality inherent in the biblical texts.

[8] *Greening Paul*, 63-116.

they describe as 'other regard'. This ethic is then explored with reference to other Pauline texts (including Philippians 2:5-11).

Two elements of *Greening Paul* provide significant support for me in preaching on contemporary environmental issues and my use of Saint Paul's Letters. First, is their excellent critique of alternative, popular contemporary readings of the Bible in relation to ecological concerns. They provide this by identifying different forms of readings of recovery and resistance[9], showing why these are attractive to different groups. They also identify why each one of these readings, by itself, is not adequate to the task of providing a plausible ecological reading of the Bible. This includes a convincing critique of the option I would otherwise find most attractive, a reading of recovery, flowing from of a high view of scriptural authority, combined with commitment to ecological values, so interpreting selected texts in ways which make them seem to speak directly to ecological concerns.[10]

The second significant aspect of *Greening Paul* which benefits my project is the authors' construction of a green hermeneutical lens as a superior alternative to these rejected reading strategies.[11] In brief, the authors identify the cosmological narrative that they perceive underlies the writings of Paul[12] and other authors of biblical texts: 'A Christian theological cosmology [which] is always a narrative about the activity of a personal God relating to creation on an unfolding timeline.'[13] They then choose to read Romans 8:19-23 and Colossians 1:15-20 in the light of this cosmological narrative. Both readings, the authors demonstrate, follow a basic story in which creation is experiencing a significant problem but is provided with a divine solution. In Romans, the problem is bondage to decay, in which God subjects

[9] *Greening Paul,* 11-32.
[10] HHS identify several significant weaknesses in readings of recovery. Such readings, they argue, assume that the text has one true meaning that has not previously been unearthed in centuries of exegetical effort. This tends towards special pleading, suggesting that the biblical passage's authors' or characters' concerns were ecological when this is most unlikely in a first century setting. Those advocating readings of recovery are selective in choice of texts, ignoring those that seem unsympathetic to current ecological concerns. Finally, they fail to acknowledge their dependence on prior doctrinal constructions e.g. importing the term 'stewardship' into ecological interpretations of the creation narratives in Genesis, but presenting this as 'what the Bible teaches'. *Greening Paul*, 33-36.
[11] *Greening Paul*, 117-148.
[12] Paul the Apostle may not have written all of the New Testament letters which bear his name, including Colossians from which HHS draw one of their key texts. The relevant question here, though, is not a historical-critical one, about authorship, but a theological one, about scriptural authority. As canonical letters they all carry authority within the Church, and it is in this final form that they are preached. In that sense they are equally authoritative and for my purposes can be regarded as equally Pauline.
[13] *Greening Paul*, 52.

creation to futility, though with the intention of liberation. Such liberation will be shared by humankind and the rest of creation. In Colossians, the problem remains implicit in the text, but is revealed through the solution; God's reconciliation of all things and peace-making through Christ. The authors, giving greater emphasis to the reconciliation motif, combine it with insights from contemporary science[14] and then carry out a re-reading of the other Pauline material.[15]

Several aspects of HHS's green lens are positive for me as an ecological preacher. First, their work is contextual, explicitly offered as a response to planet-wide ecological threat.[16] Their use of the biblical cosmological narrative, which identifies a problem and then points to its solution, as the context within which to read passages such as those from Romans 8 and Colossians 1, is significant. This resonates strongly with the contemporary scientific narrative about our planet's climate, associated with human attitudes and actions, and the urgent need for a solution.[17]

Second, they bring clarity and transparency to the interpretative task by adopting a committed interpretative stance prior to approaching the texts, rather than suggesting, implicitly or explicitly, that exegesis precedes any theological beliefs held by the reader. This point also applies in the context of preaching, where, unavoidably, the exegesis of the text is always preceded and shaped by prior theological convictions.[18] As a matter of integrity, exegetes and preachers should be open with readers and hearers about the role of prior theological convictions in coming to the conclusions they share with others. Particularly, we are not claiming to uncover what Paul thought about first century environmental issues.

[14] The authors point out the benefits of a number of scientific insights. In climate change we are facing a problem we could not recognise or address but for science. Accepting that the evolutionary process is a reality, we need to reject any idea of Fall, so precluding readings which look to the restoration of a (non-existent) golden age. They also argue that scientific advances require our interpretation of texts to go beyond Paul's original meaning as he did not have access to the same scientific information. One possibility they moot here is of equating evolutionary process with subjection to futility, given that 98% of species have experienced extinction. *Greening Paul,* 132-137.

[15] *Greening Paul*, 149-187, exploring themes such as the goodness of God's creation, cosmic reconciliation, new creation, participation in Christ, and the eschaton.

[16] 'Environmental issues have come to the centre of our political and ethical debate. There are many issues that call for our concern, from pollution and waste disposal to deforestation and species loss. The *most prominent of all is undoubtedly global warming … [with] increasingly clear scientific evidence for anthropogenic global warming.' Greening Paul,* 1. (my emphasis)

[17] Marshall points out that acceptance or rejection of climate change has little to do with rational evaluation of scientific evidence. Instead people interpret it through the lens of values and worldview, held in the form of socially constructed narratives. Marshall 2016

[18] A point strongly made in Fowl, 1998.

Instead, we are exploring how Paul's thought about a number of issues can have contemporary resonance in a different situation.[19] From the perspective of a preacher, called upon, on a week-by-week basis, to address a wide selection of the diverse texts which comprise the Bible, this is significantly liberating. An explicitly theological perspective, such as the one the authors adopt, can, in principle, be applied to any biblical text with potentially fruitful results.[20]

Third, from my faith perspective, choosing biblical passages as integral and essential elements of the hermeneutical lens is welcome. I share the authors' conviction that such a lens must draw from within the Christian faith tradition itself, not only from sources outside the tradition which somehow are deemed to have some greater authority or claim to objectivity. Yet, contemporary British society is not dominated by Christian theological convictions, nor are church congregations insulated from the range of knowledge and the values of wider society.[21] Therefore, I support HHS's decision that contemporary scientific understandings are a necessary element in an appropriate hermeneutical lens. Yet, though I believe scientific insights must play a role here, this must be balanced by the knowledge that specific Christian convictions shape congregational understandings and responses to contemporary situations.[22] Preachers perceived to be guiding their reading of biblical texts by principles drawn from outside the Christian tradition are much less likely to get a sympathetic hearing from a Christian congregation.[23]

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[19] A number of biblical passages might be used in this way. These include the creation narratives in Genesis 1-2, the Noahic covenant in Genesis 9, some of the Psalms (including 19:1; 98; 136:5-9; and 148), wisdom literature such as Job 38-40, and appeals to Jesus' awareness of nature in his parables, as well as his commending of the 'birds of the air' and the 'lilies of the field' (Matthew 6:25-30). See Horrell, 2010, for consideration of the possible ecological implications and interpretation of these texts. Horrell includes Romans 8:19-23 and Colossians 1:15:20 in this list and they are explored in greater detail in *Greening Paul*, 63-116.

[20] This is not just the case with Pauline texts, as Horrell contends: 'What we need is not merely a careful reading of the biblical texts, but to articulate and develop an ecological hermeneutic, that is, a newly reoriented way of reading the Bible that is demanded by our current context and the issues that face us.' Horrell, 2010, 9.

[21] A point emphasised by Lisa Cahill, observing how relating biblical materials to ethics is so challenging because churches do not exist in isolation from their cultures, and that there is pluralism both in the biblical materials and among the churches. Cahill, 2002, 17.

[22] Marshall, citing recent research on effectively communicating with religious groups on climate issues, makes the point that there are faith statements that are neither overly theological in language or hierarchical in manner of instruction, but which build on science and on faith traditions, and work well across different faith groups. At the same time, he notes, there are some types of language which whilst they may be off-putting to some religious groups will motivate other groups to a greater extent than any widely shared statement. The language of 'creation care', for example, is much more effective with the Abrahamic faiths than with Buddhists or Hindus. Marshall, 2016.

[23] Therefore, both in principle and for practical reasons, whilst making ad hoc use of the insights of some of the Earth Bible Project's contributors, I do not adopt its overall approach. Nor am I attracted by suggestions that its eco-justice principles be widened still further in the name of social and religious inclusiveness, as argued by Nilsen, and Solevag, 2016. They effectively critique aspects of the Earth Bible Project, but their solution

Fourth, I applaud Horrell, Hunt and Southgate's decision to argue in favour of attributing a special role to humankind within creation, though in addition noting that for us 'creation' is effectively and for the foreseeable future limited to planet Earth.[24] Since Lynn White Jr.'s seminal article, over fifty years ago, on 'The Historical Roots of our Ecologic Crisis'[25], the Christian Church has been in the dock, charged with holding attitudes which are responsible for humankind's environmentally destructive behaviour. Continued and increasingly ecologically damaging actions in times and places where the influence of the Church has decreased, however, and the existence of such behaviour in other faith settings, suggest that its roots might be better located within the human condition. White's article generated much soul searching within churches and much criticism of them from without. Less attention was given to the fact that he not only identified religion as the problem but also suggested it might be a source for its solution.[26] HHS, acknowledge the existence of anthropocentrism in biblical texts and have suspicions about its ecological impact today. Still, they argue, humans, by virtue of the unique powers we hold, have a special place within creation, though this must not imply that the rest of creation is without worth.[27] Since solutions lie with humankind, activities, such as preaching, which encourage human response to the ecological crisis have merit, and implicitly they receive support from the authors of *Greening Paul*.

So, *Greening Paul* has considerable strengths. As well as identifying where other reading strategies fall short it offers an extremely helpful hermeneutical stance – a green lens – for

exacerbates rather than resolves its shortcomings. Significantly, although they acknowledge the existence of the Exeter Project of Horrell et al they do not engage with its approach in their article.

[24] Taking time to contemplate the findings of modern cosmology is useful in maintaining a sense of modesty about the status and role of humankind within the context of creation. Contemplating the 'cosmic space of stars and planetary systems, billions of galaxies, black holes and nebulae,' Douglas Ottati asks, 'does it make sense, then, to insist that we human beings who inhabit this small blue planet in an obscure corner of a galaxy, are the crown of creation? Does it make sense to maintain that human beings and their fate comprise God's chief end?' Ottati, 2005, and 2013, 171-210 particularly. In response, a preacher might be drawn to quote scripture: 'When I look at the heavens, the work of your fingers, the moon and the stars that you have established, what are human beings that you are mindful of them, mortals that you care for them?' (Psalm 8:3-4) The psalm, however, does go on to proclaim that we have been made only a little lower than God, are crowned with honour, and have dominion over the other creatures, both domesticated and wild. (8:5-8)

[25] White, 1967.

[26] This point is made in Taylor, Weiren and Zalehat in their survey of over seven hundred articles concerning Christian churches and ecological issues. They suggest that churches have not become significantly 'greener' since the publication of White's article. Limiting their survey to publications within the academic sphere, however, excludes a significant mass of material where such church activity, if it exists, is more likely to be reported. Taylor, Van Weiren and Zalehat. 2016.

[27] *Greening Paul*, 123-4. The same point was well put by a Scottish Episcopal Church priest in conversation with me: 'The question isn't whether or not we have dominion. We obviously do. The question is what are we going to do with it?'

reading biblical texts from an ecological perspective. This is contextually grounded, transparent in what it sets out to achieve, potentially fruitful in its application to a wide variety of biblical texts, helpfully acknowledges Christian tradition, and advocates an appropriate role for humankind within creation. All of this has significant potential for strengthening the practice of ecological preaching.

At the same time, there are aspects of *Greening Paul* which are less helpful for ecological preaching. The first of these is that the authors give little space to considering how to move from hermeneutical reflection to ethical action. The second is that although this is a work of theology which seeks to be grounded in the realities of the world (and to an extent succeeds in being so), it does not at any point locate this in a recognisable church or congregational setting.[28] So, for example, although the book concludes with an attempt to apply their ecological biblical hermeneutic to two contemporary ethical test cases, calls for Christian vegetarianism, and for action to reduce species extinction, both issues are approached in a tentative fashion.[29] In fact, considerable caution about moving from reading biblical texts to taking concrete ethical actions characterises *Greening Paul* throughout.[30]

In *Greening Paul* there are numerous occasions when the authors caution against the move from hermeneutical reflection to ethical action. In part, this reflects the context in which the book appeared. Published in 2010, on the basis of previous research, the book broke new ground by applying an ecological hermeneutic to reading biblical literature. Establishing a means of reading the texts was the priority for the authors. They hoped that by providing a wider framework ethical detail might then be filled in subsequently. Their concluding paragraph states, 'It is of fundamental importance to have established the broad shape of a Pauline ecological ethics … but we recognise that the move from this to decisions on specific measures and commitments remains tentative … and we look forward to further fruitful dialogue.'[31]

[28] So also, more recently, Barbara Rossing's essay, which purports to give an overview of current exegetical, hermeneutical and homiletical practice with regard to climate justice. Whilst the exegetical and hermeneutical elements are substantially addressed, homiletics receives only a single footnote, citing three relevant publications without further comment. Rossing, 2019, 581.
[29] *Greening Paul*, 202-210.
[30] One reviewer describes the authors' reticence about how readings of the Bible might influence contemporary problems as 'the question that plagues Horrell, Hunt and Southgate.' Clayville, 2012.
[31] *Greening Paul*, 220. Such dialogue is not reflected in subsequent literature. Perhaps they fell between two stools. The academic community has not shared their interest in creating a hermeneutical reading of biblical

Even so, repeating cautions throughout has a dispiriting effect on those hoping to discover resources for good practice. For example, according to the authors, Christian believers are caught up in this ecological narrative rather than being players in it.[32] Also, the authors argue, it is not obvious what reconciliation means between humans and the rest of creation, and between different elements of creation.[33] They argue that Paul's concentration on inter-ecclesial relations makes it clear that there is no clear way to read off a Pauline contribution to the debate around the non-human environment.[34]

Such caution is applied to their choice of the passages from Roman and Colossians as the biblical components of their hermeneutical green lens. First, readers are reminded that in both cases the texts are fundamentally theocentric (Romans 8) or Christocentric (Colossians 1). In Romans 8 it is God who subjects creation to futility and its liberation comes through divine, not human, action. In Colossians it is God who is the creator and reconciler, with an emphasis on spiritual and heavenly powers that is far from the twenty-first century, Western mindset. For HHS, 'this underscores the point that we cannot find ecotheology and ethics directly or explicitly even in these favourite bible texts'.[35] Second, the authors point to the anthropocentrism of the two texts, with the redeemed children of God as the focus of hope for God's creation in Romans, and the renewal of human beings in the image of God as the focus in Colossians. It follows, they argue, that claims about the human role in creation and the redemption of creation are to be treated very cautiously. Third, they point to the eschatological focus of the texts. Even if all of them are about transformation, not destruction of the earth, they argue it is still not easy to equate contemporary eco-action, such as recycling campaigns with eschatological transformation.[36]

HHS's arguments concerning the theocentricity, anthropocentrism and eschatological nature of these two passages may make excellent sense theoretically. Unfortunately, from my perspective as a preacher, they make much less sense practically! In the decade since the

texts to respond to present ecological concerns. On the other hand, church communities have not been engaged by the academic style and lack of connection with their contexts.

[32] *Greening Paul*, 131.
[33] *Greening Paul*, 157.
[34] *Greening Paul*, 195.
[35] *Greening Paul*, 125-126.
[36] *Greening Paul*, 121-126

publication of *Greening Paul* the need to respond to the threats posed by climate change has not diminished but has increased.[37] Better theological understanding of this crisis is welcome, but the need for theologically informed action has become more pressing. Eco-theology needs to build a closer relationship with action in the way that forms of liberation theology and feminist theology have attempted; eco-theological orthodoxy needs to be accompanied by eco-theological orthopraxy.[38]

Both the Romans and Colossians readings do contain elements of encouragement towards action as well reflection, as HHS acknowledge. Concerning their Fall-free reading of Romans, they remark that, 'the freedom of the glory of the children of God becomes the realization of the potential of human beings, liberated by their participation in Christ … it would be very curious if that process … had no ethical aspect … no implications for working out a pattern of behaviour consonant with a transformed relationship with that creation.'[39] Similarly, they point out that in the Colossians reading the image of a reconciliation which has been achieved in Christ, but which still remains to worked out, might give an indication of what the pattern of human behaviour should look like in the our current situation.[40] These are welcome hints about a direction to be taken, but they remain a frustratingly minor theme, part of the authors' continued caution concerning concrete ethical actions arising from eco-theological reflection.

My response is not to remove these readings from their hermeneutical lens, which would lose what was valuable, but to augment them by the addition of other Pauline passages from Philippians. This does not represent a change of principle from what HHS advocate. They are clear that using Romans 8:19-23 and Colossians 1:15-20 as the biblical elements in their lens is a matter of choice. Also, like them, I remain within the Christian tradition in my choice of

[37] See such awareness expressed in, for example, Francis, 2015; Bell and White, 2016; Koster and Conradie, 2019.
[38] Both feminist theology and liberation theology have made links with the need for a committed form of eco-theology. The former did so at an early stage in eco-theological reflection. The latter took longer to make this move, doing so in response to criticism. It is now recognised that areas of greatest ecological degradation are often those where people are materially poorest and so more open to exploitation. For a succinct overview of ecofeminism see Ruether, 2000. For an early example of ecofeminist writing, see McFague, 1993, developed further in McFague, 2000, and, most recently, in McFague, 2013, where she argues for a radical lifestyle, based on notions of kenosis. For an acknowledgment of shortcomings in liberation theology and a call to move forward on ecological concerns, see Boff, 1995.
[39] *Greening Paul*, 138.
[40] *Greening Paul*, 139.

additional guiding texts. They recognise that others legitimately might make different choices to them, though they have arguments in favour of their own.[41] Nor is the inclusion of a passage such as Philippians 2:5-11 at all out of step with the cosmological narrative that they identify lying behind Paul's thought in the Romans and Colossians passages. To the contrary, and as the authors themselves acknowledge, 'at the heart of the story of creation, from its origins through problem to resolution … is the story of Christ, who enters the world to redeem it, and is raised to glory as the firstborn of the new creation. Paul summarizes the story most famously and tellingly in the Philippian hymn.'[42]

HHS do not ignore Philippians 2:5-11. They make increasing use of it as they survey other Pauline literature through the lens of the liberation and reconciliation of creation, derived from Romans 8:19-23 and Colossians 1:15-20, making suggestions about Pauline ethics as seen through their eco-theological lens.[43] They envisage a response to the ecological crisis of costly self-giving involving an ethical kenosis.[44] In making the attempt to move from exegesis to application, they see this as 'best captured by a focus on christologically-grounded other-regard,'[45] where self-giving for the sake of others 'forms the central norm of Pauline ethics … [and] one of the most influential texts encapsulating this Christological pattern of self-giving for the sake of others is Philippians 2:5-11.'[46] Arguing that Christ's self-emptying serves as an ethical paradigm, motivating and legitimating putting the needs and good of others before self, the authors offer tantalising glimpses of a 'kenosis of aspiration'. This eschews clinging to status or failing to respect the status of others. They also commend practising 'kenosis of appetite' when human consumption threatens to overwhelm the world's resources. At this point, unusually, they indicate areas where such ethics might be applied: deforestation and land use, high-food-miles, excessive use of long-haul flights, and high carbon-intensive energy use in human dwellings.[47]

The authors' interest in concrete ethical actions plays no discernible part in choosing the Romans and Colossian texts as the biblical component of their lens. This tends to undercut

[41] *Greening Paul*, 180-186 for their brief discussion of some of the alternative readings and their underlying narratives.
[42] *Greening Paul*, 172.
[43] The subject of the final chapter in *Greening Paul*, 189-220.
[44] *Greening Paul*, 173.
[45] *Greening Paul*, 189.
[46] *Greening Paul*, 193-94.
[47] *Greening Paul*, 198.

their own desire for human action and eco-theological response. My suggestion is to bring passages from Philippians, such as 2:5-11, into the lens from the beginning, strengthening the tendency to read other passages with appropriate Christian ethical action in mind from the start. A brief comparison of these passages makes clearer three aspects of Philippians 2:5-11 which have positive impact when it is introduced at the outset of the hermeneutical process. First, it is a passage more explicitly grounded in the congregational setting. Second, it is clearer in its call for a response which demands action from believers. Third, it more clearly links the life and actions of the incarnate Christ with appropriate 'lordship' or 'dominion' over creation. I now consider each of these points in turn.

First, considering its grounding in the congregational setting, I note Paul's call to the Philippian believers to 'let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus.' (Phil. 2:5) Overwhelmingly, Pauline letters are addressed to groups – congregations - of Christians, primarily addressing issues that are pressing and pertinent to the life of the congregation and the author. They contain advice and admonition to practical action, undertaken on the basis of an explicit theological perspective.[48] Whilst deeply theological, they were not written in the form of systematic theologies.[49] Philippians 2:5-11 is much more clearly an appeal to persons in such a congregational setting, with an expectation of their response.[50] As the quotation of Philippians 2:5 indicates, the passage is intended as a direct call to Christians in Philippi. They are to live a life in their situation which emulates the life lived by Christ Jesus on earth. In comparison, in the Colossians 1 and Romans 8 passages explicit appeal to a congregation is either absent or muted by virtue of its being implicit. In Colossians 1 Christ is 'the head of the body, the church' (1:18), but "church" remains a general phenomenon, with

[48] 'It is impossible to escape their character as *letters*, communication from a *known* author to *specific* people in *particular* circumstance … which makes it, if not impossible, at least unwise to abstract what is said from the person and personality of the author.' Dunn, 1998, 11. (author emphasis) Dunn, though, is concerned that what Paul wrote then should be capable of application in the here and now; that 'ethics and relationships are the test bed on which dogmas are either destroyed or proven.' Dunn, 1998,9.

[49] Romans comes closest to being the exception to the rule here, but Paul states his purpose of writing to them as being in preparation for future missionary activity (15:24, 28), it contains substantial passages relating to the practice of congregational life (cc.12-15), and several references to his relationship with members of the congregation (16:1-16, 21-23). See Jewett, 2007, and, more recently, McKnight, 2019, who both argue for 'reading Romans backwards' i.e. that the congregational situation implied in the later chapters and Paul's missionary plans are the driving forces for the preceding theological reflection by Paul, not merely a pastoral afterthought.

[50] I am aware of the debate concerning the background of the 'Philippian hymn' in 2:5-11, with various scholars offering different solutions. (See Fee, 1995, 43-44 for a summary of those views, where he suggests that the diversity of proposals on offer indicates that this question will not be resolved.) Whether or not it was his own composition, Paul obviously agreed with its content as he included it in the letter (a point made by Wright, 2013, 680), and he applied it to the situation of the Philippian congregation. In any case, in preaching, it is this final form of the text that is addressed from the pulpit.

no sense of it taking the form of congregations.[51] In Romans 8:19-23 the wider stage of 'creation' is explicitly cited in every verse of the passage, and believers in general – 'the children of God' (8:19,21) – receive two mentions, but the congregational setting is at best only hinted at with the reference to 'we ourselves' in the final verse.

Second, the Philippians reading clearly calls members of a congregation to respond by taking action in their setting. The 'mind that was in Christ Jesus' they are to display led to actions on his part. Divine status was eschewed, and the form of a slave taken on. He chose to humble himself and to demonstrate obedience, even to the point of accepting death by a method deployed by the empire within which Philippi and its Christian congregation was located. The approach taken by Christ to life in the world is commended as the model for the members of this congregation. Choosing the approach to life taken by Jesus, Paul argues, will so form the Philippian Christians as to enable them to discern how then they should act in their different context. While everyday situations they faced would not be identical to those faced by Jesus, what counted was their initial orientation to life, consciously chosen in imitation of him. This should guide their responses to the challenges presented by their local context.

Living in the continuing Christian tradition, twenty-first century Christians are also called to have the mind of Christ as they face challenges in their setting. A first century congregation of individuals in a Roman colony located in Greece were not being called to replicate all of the actions that another individual, Jesus, took in his Palestinian setting. Neither are we called to attempt to replicate those Paul or Philippian Christians may have taken in their settings. Jesus, Paul and the Philippian congregation did not face an ecological crisis. We do not have to negotiate life within the Roman Empire.

So, we are not trying to identify ecological actions that were taken by Jesus or anyone else in the first century so that we can repeat them. Rather, Paul's advocacy of Christ's approach in

[51] This is not claim that contextual elements are absent either from the letter to Colossae or the one to Rome, but that indications of such context are almost entirely absent from the passages in Romans and Colossians chosen by HHS. Their understandable desire to choose passages which focus on the widest context - creation - result in the congregational context being put firmly into the background. Effective ecological preaching, however, needs resources which address the wider creational setting, but through, or in explicit relationship with, the congregational context.

Philippians 2:5-11 is a resource that is useable in different settings: seek to be Christ-like so as to make Christ-like decisions in your own setting. A reading of the whole letter to Philippi, particularly with 2:5-11 in mind, both challenges and resources twenty-first century Christian congregations in their context, one which is confronted by ecological threat.

The Colossians 1 and Romans 8 passages offer less help at this point of decision making about actions to be taken in response to ecological threat. In Colossians 1 the reference to Christ as the head of the church might be taken to imply an obligation to ethical action by members of congregations, as HHS note,[52] but the text contains no explicit call to do so. The Romans 8 passage, they remind us,[53] is thoroughly theocentric, God being the one who both subjects creation to futility and sets it free along with the children of God (8:20, 21). Humanity is portrayed as passive, awaiting its redemption (8:23). There is nothing here to act as an impetus to appropriate eco-ethical action.[54]

Third, Philippians 2:5-11 makes a connection between the attitudes and actions of Christ on earth and his resulting status with regard to creation. For Paul, it is because of Christ Jesus's choice of status and actions upon earth, described in vv. 6-8, that his lordship over creation is affirmed: 'Therefore God highly exalted him.' (2:9) As a result, Christ is given the 'name that is above very name … Lord' (2:9, 11) and this places him over creation – 'in heaven and on earth and under the earth' (2:10). It follows then that all human attitudes to status, and actions upon earth should seek to emulate Christ, and Paul seeks to apply this to the Philippian congregation's relationships with the wider polis in Philippi (2:12-15).[55] In contrast, in Colossians 1, references to Christ emphasise much more his role with regard to God's act of

[52] *Greening Paul*, 108, noting the increasing recognition among commentators on the letter that Christ's headship of his body, the church, must be seen in the context of recognition of his headship over creation.
[53] *Greening Paul*, 212-122.
[54] This is not to argue that Romans or Colossians as a whole are context-free. My point here is that when HHS abstract Romans 8:19-23 and Colossians 1:15-20 from those letters the passages can be read in isolation from their original setting. They retain their cosmic dimension, which makes them suitable candidates for use as a green lens for an ecological biblical hermeneutic. On the other hand, if read in isolation from their setting in the letters, they can lose their grounded, this-worldly quality. For example, in Romans the theocentric quality of 8:19-23 is not balanced by any reference within it to political realities (this letter is addressed to the centre of empire), or that Paul's projected visit, which the letter is written to support, is for future missionary activity. The lack of connection with a material, earthly context then reduces their potential to encourage action in the here and now. For the missionary purposes of Paul's visit, see Jewett 2007, 80-91. For an exploration of the setting in which the Romans letter would have been read and the implications for how it would have been heard and interpreted by the original hearers, see Oakes 2009.
[55] For the day-to-day pressures facing members of the Philippian congregation as a result of their attempt to live out a new lifestyle which was at odds with local expectations, see Oakes, 2001 and 2015.

creation in the beginning (1:15-17), not his role or status within creation subsequently, or in its current divine maintenance. This incarnational aspect of Christ's life and work receives précis-like mention only at the end of the passage with its reference to 'the blood of his cross.' (1:20) In Romans 8:19-23 mention of the life, career and cross of Christ are completely absent. With its focus upon the work of God, the passage says nothing explicit about appropriate human approaches to living in this world.[56]

Adding Philippians 2:5-11 to the green lens adds an extra dimension, encouraging interpretations that generate appropriate Christ-inspired congregational-based action on ecological concerns. The impact of such interpretations, however, will be significantly reduced in preaching if no account is taken of the role of congregational attitudes and practices with regard to hearing and reading the Bible as Scripture.[57] With such needs in mind I now turn to the work of Stephen Fowl.

A Community Conversation for a Green Hermeneutic

In the church context, with the task of preaching in mind, a green hermeneutic will be more effective if the preacher takes into account that biblical texts are read and heard, not only individually but communally, and as Scripture. Here, Stephen Fowl provides my second major resource for ecological preaching, particularly in his *Engaging Scripture: a Model for Theological Interpretation*.[58] Like HSS, Fowl approaches exegesis with an acknowledged pre-existing theological standpoint. Where Fowl differs, however, so offering help for my project, is in his decision to locate theology and exegesis firmly in the setting of Christian church congregations.[59]

[56] As I have already suggested (n.54 above), concerning the contextual settings in both Romans and Colossians, I am not suggesting Christ's incarnation and the details of the cross are absent from these letters but that they are either not prominent in, or are absent from, the passages HHS have chosen for their green lens. This reduces their significance for encouraging action as integral to Christian faith, an expectation I consider an essential element any reflection. Thus, Philippians 2:5-11 strengthens the green lens by encouraging action, which is required by the contemporary ecological situation.

[57] Craddock has been highly influential here, setting out the case for inductive preaching, which takes account of and responds to the changed contemporary cultural setting where authority has shifted from the preacher to the congregation. Previously preachers might proclaim, now they must persuade. See Craddock, 2011 for an updated statement of his original argument.

[58] Fowl,1998; Fowl and Jones, 1991.

[59] A perspective shared by Ballard (2014), who, writing on the use of scripture in practical theology, argues that to use the Bible responsibly there needs to be good contact between biblical scholarship and a community of faith. This is the approach I seek to follow in my preaching, both generally and in relation to ecological issues.

Locating hearing and reading scripture within the congregational setting, Fowl identities four considerations which aid my preaching. First, he offers a fruitful exploration of the concept of 'phronesis' or 'practical reasoning' whereby congregations in different times and settings are better enabled to respond appropriately to new situations and challenges.[60] Second, he explores how to respond positively to the disagreements which inevitably arise as different members of different church congregations attempt to interpret and act appropriately in different situations. This includes, third, the importance of bearing witness to the work of the Holy Spirit in the lives of others, legitimising their contributions to debate within church communities, encouraging acceptance of their insights. Finally, and also with implications for preachers, Fowl points out how the known character of the interpreter is highly influential upon decisions to accept or reject what they say concerning contemporary situations, seen in the light of his or her reading of scripture.

Fowl is helpful in pointing to the need to identify the Holy Spirit at work in engaging with the Bible in the faith community setting. For my project, however, his contribution would be strengthened by taking with greater seriousness the understanding that God may first inspire us, theologically and homiletically, through events that happen in the world itself, outside the walls of churches, and even outside the pages of the Bible. Specifically, through the Spirit, God is speaking to preachers in events taking place in the overarching ecological context. Then God speaks through interpretation of the biblical texts, and then in the words of preached to a congregation, and in that order. To clarify my assertion here involves exploring my understanding of the relationship between the Holy Spirit and the imagination; how the Spirit influences my understanding of the public sphere so as to inspire what I have to say concerning the public sphere when I preach. In this, Justin Ariel Bailey's recent exploration of the relationship between the Spirit and the imagination is very helpful.[61]

[60] This term, of course, is a significant one with the field of practical theology. See, for example, Miller-McLemore, 2014, 1, and Elaine Graham's seeking for 'phronesis' which support the ultimate end of practical theology as 'an interpretative discipline that enables faith communities to give a public, critical account of the truth claims that they enact in practice … to articulate and practice what they preach or believe and also to better articulate or preach what they practice.' Graham, 2000, 105.

[61] Bailey, 2018. For another recent exploration of the role of the Holy Spirit in the ecological context, see Bergmann, 2019, who argues that classical Christian faith in the Holy Spirit as giver of life demands resistance to the violation of life which is intrinsic to the forces driving anthropogenic climate change.

In the course of evaluating proposals concerning connecting Scripture and culture[62], Bailey provides a helpful scheme of three models of the relationship between imagination and the Holy Spirit. These models aim to show the relationship of imagination to revelation, the agency of the Spirit with relationship to the imagination, and the mode of the Spirit's engagement. The models are titled as constructive imagination, cooperative imagination, and responsive imagination. In the first, the initiative is with human imagination, which either replaces or is identified with revelation. In the cooperative model, imagination and Spirit are envisaged to be in cooperation, though theologians differ in their confidence in identifying the product of imagination as always being a matter of revelation. In the third model, imagination is understood as responsive to revelation. Bailey's analysis is presented in the chart set out below.[63]

Three Models of Imagination and the Holy Spirit

POESIS: Imagination as Lamp	Invention Reflection			MIMESIS: Imagination as Mirror
	Constructive Imagination: Initiative is with the imagination	*Cooperative Imagination*: Imagination and Spirit cooperate	*Responsive Imagination*: Initiative is with the Holy Spirit	
	Gordon Kaufman: Imagination replaces revelation	Paul Avis: Imagination is revelation	David Brown: Imagination may be revelation	Garrett Green: Imagination is responsive to revelation

FIGURE 1

I would locate myself towards the right-hand side of this chart, believing that the initiative lies with the Spirit, though with an element of caution in simply identifying the product of my human imagination as a response to divine revelation. Interestingly, as reported by Bailey, for Garrett Green, the Spirit inspires the interpretative community imagination, so that authority is found not in the text itself, 'but in the imaginative paradigm it produces (by the Spirit's power).'[64] This supports the pneumatological dimension of Fowl's argument,[65] which continues to influence my understanding of preaching as one significant element in healthy

[62] 'Culture' here can be interpreted widely. In Bailey's article it is being discussed in the context of public theology, which I would argue, includes responses to the impact of climate change.
[63] Bailey, 2018, 460.
[64] Bailey, 2018, 461.
[65] Fowl, 1998, 97-127.

practices of community interpretation. Another theologian, Kevin Vanhoozer (who is the main subject of Bailey's article) wishes also to see the Spirit as inspiring the text itself, at least in part because he 'is a champion for the possibility of hearing the voice of the author in the text.'[66] This, I find less helpful as an approach to discovering the Spirit at work in ecological preaching. Expecting authors of biblical texts to have commented upon and offer solutions to specific twenty-first century problems is not only doomed to failure but distracts from the contribution that reflection upon biblical texts can make in our situation.

Bailey contributes to my reflection upon my preaching not only by clarifying how the Spirit might be at work, but also in his discussion of where the Spirit is at work. He does so by highlighting the differences between the views of Vanhoozer and William Dryness.[67] The former looks only for vestiges of God's presence in the world outside the Church, the latter sees it as a site of the Spirit's active presence, one where, 'the Spirit of God is at work in the larger culture prompting and attracting people toward God.'[68] Both Vanhoozer and Dryness emphasise that humankind are actors within creation, members of the cast rather than sitting in the audience.[69] Given my longstanding desire to integrate religious beliefs with practical action in the world outside the congregation of believers, I enthusiastically endorse this shared view.

Bailey also points to the importance of locating the work of the Spirit in the world within an eschatological framework. Not only should God's general revelation (equally experienced by all both outside and within the Church) be taken with appropriate seriousness regarding past divine action, but the Spirit will also be guiding creation towards God's eschatological purposes for the future.[70] For me, this suggests that it is acceptable to begin with my own experience and observation of the impact of climate change within this part of creation, not simply as secular musing upon human experience, but expecting and experiencing God's Spirit to be saying something to me through that setting and situation. It also suggests that it is

[66] Bailey, 2018, 463.
[67] Bailey, 2018, 463-467.
[68] Bailey, 2018, 466.
[69] Bailey, 2018, 463.
[70] Bailey, 2018, 467-469.

appropriate to look to the actions of others outside the Church for examples of Spirit-led responses to God, a theme addressed in the final sermon of the series.[71]

The Revised Common Lectionary: a Flawed Resource for a Green Hermeneutic

One matter remains to be considered before moving to reflect upon the sermons I preached: using readings from the Revised Common Lectionary (RCL). I have previously noted several factors which influenced my choice of readings; the context of ecological challenge; the role of Paul's writings in the context of my personal history; and the resource offered HHS in fashioning a green hermeneutical lens through which to read the Pauline literature. I wanted to test this out using the Letter to the Philippians, particularly but not exclusively, Philippians 2:5-11.Why then take on the potential complication of choosing readings from the RCL?

The RCL is a three-year cycle of Bible readings for use in worship, published in 1992.[72] Its inspiration was the Roman Catholic Lectionary for the Mass of 1970[73]. The RCL is now used by many denominations across the world. Some denominations require or expect RCL readings to be the ones used in worship.[74] My own denomination, the United Reformed Church, commends it as a resource, but does not require its use. At St Columba's URC, North Shields, for over a decade the RCL has been the usual resource for choosing Bible readings for Sunday worship. This has created an expectation among many in the congregation that RCL readings will feature on Sundays. I decided not to change this practice for two reasons, one relating to the congregation and one relating to me. First, in encouraging the congregation to consider contemporary ecological issues, I wished to avoid making other changes which might distract

[71] Ser.4.5-15. It is important to keep in mind, however, human limitations as well as human achievement and potential in the ecological context. As Moltmann suggests, divine sabbath for enjoyment may be the high point of God's creative activity, not the creation of humankind. (Moltmann, 1985, 5-7, 276-296.). Also, as Colin Gunton helpfully points out, referencing Christoph Schwobel, human actions in the ecological context should not be equated with God's ongoing creative work. Rather ,what is needed in this regard is not a human ethics of creation, but an ethic of createdness which is informed by a theology of creation. Gunton, 1998, 228-229.

[72]Consultation on Common Texts. 1992.

[73] For a useful summary account of the development of the RCL see Leitzke. 2014. A fuller account is provided in Allen and Russell,1998. Reumann, writing before the appearance of the RCL, demonstrates that lectionaries have a long history within the Christian Church, arguably including the early congregations that produced the canonical Gospels, and perhaps also in Jewish synagogues of that time and before. Reumann. 1977.

[74] For example, note how proposals offered by Lisa Dahill to modify RCL texts in the light of ecological concerns are constrained by her Lutheran ecclesiological commitments. She can only offer her proposals as a 'thought experiment'. Though she is convinced that the plight of creation is central to the Christian life, ecological, concerns are trumped by denominational and ecumenical commitments. Dahill 2012.

from that message. Also, it was already my normal practice to use the RCL when choosing readings for the sermon.[75]

I use the RCL, aware of its limitations, but believing that the advantages in doing so outweigh the disadvantages.[76] It has wide coverage of the content of the Bible. Its use avoids over-frequent appearance of the preacher's favoured readings. Set readings challenge preachers to wrestle with new or uncongenial texts, so opening up fresh insights. Congregations of different traditions share the same readings and to abandon this would be an ecumenical loss.[77] Yet, departing from shared readings was integral to the compilation of the RCL itself i.e. it consciously varied from the Roman Catholic Lectionary for the Mass. Some denominations which expect their preachers to adhere to the RCL set readings have not themselves adhered to the version of the RCL produced by the Consultation on Common Texts. Both the Church of England and the Evangelical Lutheran Church of America are examples here. Since variation from a lectionary is written into the RCL project itself, and further variations of the RCL scheme exist at a denominational level this affects my attitude to the lectionary. I am more open to making imaginative choices in relation to the RCL readings set for specific Sundays.

There are also significant criticisms of the RCL, some relevant to my preaching project. Several of these relate to how texts are included in the lectionary, their relationship, and the omission of significant texts. Making choices with a green hermeneutic in mind, Willimon's warning that 'the lectionary is a hermeneutical device that, by its very form, exercises a powerful influence upon our preaching,' is highly pertinent.[78] The RCL is a human construction and so reflects the interests and the context of its compilers. The RCL, and

[75]The RCL is discussed in relationship to preaching here, but it was designed for wider purposes, even if in practice, there is a tendency to reduce it to this context. The Roman Catholic Lectionary for the Mass was intended to provide a more 'lavish' experience of hearing the Bible for worshipers, not only for worshipers to hear sermons. It and the RCL are intended to expose worshipers to a wide range of Scripture; to encourage preaching closely related to Scripture; to observe feasts, festivals and seasons; to raise questions about ethnic and cultural practices concerning the year; has doxological use, whereby the reading of Scripture forms part of the liturgical drama leading to the Eucharist; and witnesses to the historic continuity of the Church, including its ecumenical aspect. Allen 1998, 3, 13-23.

[76] A succinct evaluation of the strengths and weaknesses of the RCL is provided in Willimon, 2001. His findings are supported by Knights, who argues for modifying the choice of texts set by the lectionary. Knights, 2019. Leitzke concludes that no other lectionary seems to offer more, with newer alternatives sharing the values of the RCL against which they react. Leitzke, 2014.

[77] The ecumenical history and denominational variations of the RCL are set out in Allen and Russell, 1998.

[78] Willimon, 2001, 344.

lectionaries which preceded it, were compiled before ecological concerns became prominent in the life the Church, so it would be anachronistic to find such concerns reflected in the choice of readings or its overarching structure. Human concern about ecological issues, particularly climate change, has developed greatly since the RCL's publication in 1992, but it has remained unchanged in its structure and choice of readings.

This presents me with a number of options concerning use of the RCL. First, I could simply choose to accept the RCL readings set for the day, looking to HHS's suggestion that a green hermeneutic enables a fruitful ecological reading of many more biblical texts than might be expected. Yet some biblical texts, including some in the RCL will resist such interpretations. Here, to attempt an ecological reading might do damage to Scripture.

A second option, is to abandon the RCL, either using a lectionary compiled with ecological concerns in view[79], or simply choosing biblical readings that seem good to the preacher for that day. I am not convinced by this option. The *Season of Creation* lectionary, for example, is, in many ways, impressive. Yet its focus upon one topic, the complexity of the arguments used to make the case, and the radical changes required in church practice, make it unlikely to secure wide support. Abandoning any lectionary in favour of the preacher's choice, risks over-repetition of his or her concerns, possibly favouring problematic readings of recovery. The third option which I chose to use in my sermon series, is to attend to the set RCL readings, giving due weight to the contemporary ecological context, and also employing other biblical readings which help to open up valid green interpretations of the texts.

So, in 2018, I had already been confronted by the reality of a climate crisis brought about by human actions and activity. I was aware that my intention to respond to it by preaching was influenced by my faith history and previous life experience. I believed I possessed resources enabling me to read the situation and the biblical texts from an appropriate ecological perspective. Now the time had come to prepare and preach my sermons. In the two chapters

[79] For an example of an alternative set of lections for part of the liturgical year, see Habel, Rhoads and Santmire, 2011. The authors offer a sustained argument for the theology of liturgy and the biblical hermeneutic that underpin their choices. They also provide a set of sample sermons, preached using these readings.

that follow I offer a reflective narrative concerning my preparation for and delivery of those four sermons, including my response to Paul's Letter to the Philippians.

Chapter Three Reflecting on the Preparation Process in Ecological Preaching

During September 2018 I led five Sunday morning services at St Columba's United Reformed Church in North Shields. All of the services were on the theme of observing "Creation Time".[1] I preached sermons at four of the five services.[2] All of the sermons used the Gospel readings from Year B of the Revised Common Lectionary (RCL) appointed for that day.[3] To each of these I added a reading from Philippians. These also appear in the RCL, but not for these Sundays.[4] Philippians 2:5-11 provided the general theological perspective on responding to the contemporary ecological crisis. Additionally, it, along with the three other passages from the epistle, were also applied to specific issues within the ecological context: handling disagreement, understandings of 'dominion', the role of tradition, and the contribution of 'joy' to creation care activity. For each sermon, the corresponding passage provided an additional, temporary, Pauline lens, focusing further upon a specific situation, and inviting appropriate interpretations and responses from preacher and hearers. I decided to prepare and write each of the sermons in 'real time' i.e. during the week prior to each sermon being preached. I wanted to produce sermons which were prepared and preached in and for a congregational setting, not written for the purposes of a doctoral thesis. In this chapter I first provide an account of my normal practices in thinking and writing for sermons. Then, after briefly noting how the act of researching my preaching might affect normal practice, I provide reflective accounts of my experience in preparing each sermon.

My Normal Preparation Practices and Use of Additional Resources for the Purposes of Research

My normal sermon writing process is an eight-part one. First, I read the Bible passages which have been chosen for the sermon,[5] noting words and phrases for 'conversation' with bible

[1] Creation Time is a relatively recent phenomenon in the life of churches. In 1989 the Ecumenical Patriarch suggested that 1 September, the first day of the Orthodox Church's year, should be observed as a day of protection of the natural environment. In 1999 the European Christian Environmental Network (ECEN) widened this proposal, urging churches to adopt a Time for Creation stretching from 1 September to the feast of St Francis on 4 October. In 2007 the 3rd European Ecumenical Assembly recommended that the period 'be dedicated to prayer for the protection of Creation and the promotion of sustainable lifestyles that reverse our contribution to climate change'. http://www.ecocongregationscotland.org/materials/creation-time/ (Accessed 23/02/2019)

[2] The fifth service was in an all-age setting. It did not involve a sermon and so is not considered in this thesis.

[3] Consultation on Common Texts. 1992. Norwich: Canterbury Press. The readings were Mark 7:1-8,14-15,21-23; 7:24-37; 8:27-38; and 9:38-50.

[4] These were Phil. 1:21-30 – Proper 20 Year A; Philippians 2:1-13 – Proper 21 Year A; Philippians 3:4^{b}-14 – Lent 5 Year C; Philippians 4:1-9 – Proper 23 Year A.

[5] In principle, this is a statement of the obvious. In practice, I have listened to sermons where I suspect the preacher did not read the passage(s) on which they preached.

commentaries. Perhaps, I find them puzzling or troubling, but I try to remain open to having my understanding challenged and changed. This is what I am asking my hearers to do with regard to contemporary ecological issues.[6] Questioning something in the biblical text in a sermon may distress some hearers, increasing resistance to an ecological message. It is important, though, to allow for the possibility of disagreement with biblical authors, including Paul, which may arise when reading in a different context. Paul's communications to congregations were occasional and I am not seeking to retrieve the content of Paul's thought as such. I am more concerned with the effect of Paul's experience of God in his encounter with Jesus Christ, as shared with his congregations.[7] He is an authority to be respected, but not an ultimate authority to be obeyed.[8]

In the second stage, I reread each passage, making handwritten notes, including those things which struck me during first reading, and thoughts that come to mind from previous readings. This may include insights arising from academic study or my experience of church life. As a third stage, I start noting possibilities that come into my mind concerning the content of the sermon. Fourth, reflecting the influence of formal education, I turn to Bible commentaries, seeking to clarify exegetical questions, and consider interpretative suggestions that have potential for preaching. I welcome the insights of commentary authors, but also test their relevance for my preaching.[9] Fifth, I enter a time of reflection and planning for the sermon, reading and re-reading my accumulated resources. Contextual considerations, regarding the world and congregational settings now return to the fore. Questions about the structure of

[6] This point speaks to the importance of the perceived relationship between preacher and listeners. Using Aristotelian rhetorical categories, Allen suggests that listeners hear sermons primarily through one of three settings: ethos, relating to perception of the preacher's character; logos, concerning perception of the ideas of the sermon and how the preacher develops them; and pathos, focusing on perceptions of feelings stirred up by the sermon. Allen 2004 *Hearing the Sermon*, 2-3, 20-40. In terms of ethos, I wish not only for my hearers to perceive me as trustworthy, but to be so.

[7] Best argues that neither is it the preacher's role to think oneself into Paul's skin, so expressing what Paul would have said himself in our day. He sees this as distracting from finding the Christ that inspired Paul's writings. I disagree with Best here, believing that we cannot simply strip out Paul's presence from what Paul writes. Instead, Paul is the important conversation partner whose experiences and writings spark new thoughts about Christ, the world and my situation. Best, 1988, 105.

[8] This point is forcefully made by Campbell, who advocates an apocalyptic perspective on Paul i.e. Paul's gospel declaration rests on a revelation from God centred on Jesus. All truth claims must be judged in the light of that revelation, not upon the basis of other foundations of truth. Consequently, even Paul's writings are open to question in the light of the Christological account that he proclaims. Campbell, 2019, 40, 49.

[9] Here I follow P. T Forsyth, believing that academic study plays an important, but limited role in the sermon-writing process. It helps the preacher to discover an authentic Word from God within the biblical text. This Word, though, not intellectual or academic findings, is what the preacher attempts to share with the congregation. Forsyth,1949, 73-75.

the sermon become more prominent,[10] so, sixth, I produce a simple structure for the sermon in handwritten form.[11]

In the seventh part of my preparation process I move to the keyboard. Sermon writing proceeds, with frequent reference back to the handwritten material. The full text of the sermon[12] is usually between seventeen hundred and two thousand words long. In the eighth and final part of the process, on the day the sermon is preached, I re-read the text, making handwritten amendments. When preaching, I read the text, seeking to do so in a dynamic manner, with small variations from what is on the page.

For the purposes of this thesis, I took two additional measures. First, I maintained a Preaching Journal,[13] recording my experiences and thoughts about the writing process. I also noted comments from congregation members, made after the sermons. Second, although the weight of my research interest lies in how contextual factors and relevant resources informed my decision-making and the preaching, I also wished to have a measure of feedback. I assembled a three-person reflection panel. After each sermon was preached they received a copy of the sermon text and responded to accompanying questions.[14]

Noting the Possible Impact of Research Upon Practice

I intended to prepare and preach the sermons in 'real time' i.e. within one week, running from the Monday to the Sunday. My Preaching Journal (PJ) notes that my research might change the nature of the thing I was trying to study, for my preparations began a day early,

[10] As Allen demonstrates, in addition to the traditional three-point structure that I experienced as the norm in my childhood and youth, there are many others available to the preacher, with potential strengths and weaknesses according to the preaching situation. Allen, 1998.

[11] The forms of a biblical passage and the sermon may be linked. Paul wrote letters, so using a traditional three-point sermon structure risks extracting content from letters without due regard to context, so distorting Paul's message. Yet, 'the preacher's task … is not to replicate the text but to regenerate the impact of some portion of that text.' Long, 1989, 33. Although I agree that the form of a sermon may impact upon the message derived from a biblical text, I did not feel bound to replicate the letter format. Preaching in a form different to the biblical text also opens up new possibilities of meaning. It may regenerate the impact of the text for a new situation. Potentially, I become a 'co-author' (Theissen 1995, 30) of a new version of the biblical text, one which reflects the concerns of my context. Campbell argues (n.8 above) that the content of Paul's thought is open to question. I believe the same holds true for the form in which Paul presented it.

[12] My current practice is to write the full text of sermons I preach.

[13] See Appendix C

[14] See Appendix D for the questions asked of the panel members. Their responses are considered in chapter five of the thesis.

on the Sunday.[15] Monday and part of Tuesday was spent not on the sermon itself but 'working through the structure that underlies my context, practice and preaching.'[16] Despite being aware of the impact upon the preparation process, I continued, mentally reviewing my relationship with Paul until lunchtime on the Tuesday.[17] Doctoral research became the occasion for reflection upon ministry. Such periods of reflection are not unknown in my ministry, but noting this occurrence alerts me to research's potential impact upon normal practice, and thus upon what is discovered through that research.

Reflecting on Preparing Sermon 1

Reflecting on Sermon 1 led me to consider three issues. First, I identify influences upon choosing to address ecological issues in general, and then the choice of a specific aspect within that as a focus for my sermon. Second, I review the importance of my choice and way of reading of the biblical texts. Third I consider the role of biblical commentaries in my sermon preparation, understood as a 'conversation'. In preparing this sermon in response to the initial context of ecological challenge, my interest in Paul's writings, which originated in my personal history, was a background factor. The contribution of Horrell, Hunt and Southgate was an enabling one. Their contention, that a biblical ecological hermeneutic enables an appropriate reading of a wide variety of biblical texts gave me confidence to address biblical readings from an ecological perspective. This reassured me that in taking such an approach I was not misusing or abusing the Bible. Concerning choosing Bible passages, and what aspect of the ecological context might be considered, other factors became more prominent. These were the existence of ecclesial commitments with regard to the Revised Common Lectionary (RCL), prior personal experiences concerning one aspect of the ecological context, and the influence of the local context of the congregation for preaching. The first of these I address at greater length in the section of this reflection on choosing and reading the Bible passages. The role of prior personal experience and local context I consider now.

Prior personal experience was significant in choosing which aspect of the contemporary ecological context would appear in the sermon. In 2018 climate change denial was a

[15] PJ. PT1
[16] PJ.PT 2, 3
[17] PJ.PT 4, 5

significant part of the ecological debate.[18] As Environmental Chaplain for Eco Congregation Scotland (ECS) I had encountered worshippers ready to deny the existence of climate change. Others acknowledged its existence but denied or underplayed its significance. Thus, introducing the topic of climate change into congregational settings might lead to discussion, debate and disagreement. Now the RCL presented me with a Gospel reading featuring disagreement.

At this point, prior personal experience and local context influenced my decision making. I chose to introduce a topic about debate and denial in an ecological context by way of a specific issue: wind farms.[19] Memorably, in 2014, after a church service in Saint Andrews, I was berated by a church member for my support for wind farms, despite my not mentioning them. Now, in 2018, in North Shields, I was living a short distance from part of the Northumbrian coast where a recently constructed wind farm is clearly visible. Its construction generated local discussion and disagreement. So my sermon was both anchored in shared local experience, located within the wider issue of ecological concern.[20] I hoped this choice would enable both preacher and congregation to experience the Bible as a positive resource for community conversation about contentious issues.[21] Personal experience and local context then significantly interacted with the choice of readings for the sermon and influenced the

[18] Although usually understood in terms of public statements, climate change denial is not limited to those who refuse to believe that humanly induced climate change is happening. Anfinson. 2018, reveals the deeper level at which our denial operates. To do so, he highlights the story of two scientists who made radical lifestyle changes in response to discovering the reality of the threat posed to the human life and the planet by climate change. The great majority of people, me included, do not make such lifestyle changes despite our knowledge of the magnitude of the threat. Thus, Anfinson argues, through our inaction, and our continuing damaging lifestyle choices, we are, whatever we may say or believe, climate change deniers. Sallie McFague, relating such challenges to a church community setting, comments that, 'one of the most difficult problems we have encountered in responding to the economic and ecological crises facing us is the conundrum that while we know what we ought to do, we do not do it.' McFague, 2013, 34.

[19] PJ.S.1.2

[20] Graham, Walton and Ward, 200-229, provide an overview of the potential contribution of local theology, including referencing the highly influential work of Robert Schreiter (1985) in constructing local theologies. His approach is influential upon Tisdale, who applies it, along with insights from congregational studies to effective preaching in the local congregational setting. Tisdale, 1997, 38. She argues that exegeting' the local congregation carries equal importance to exegeting the Bible in the writing of sermons. Tisdale, 1997, 56-90. Whilst for me 'exegeting' the wider context of ecological crisis is the essential starting point for my preaching, exegeting the local setting is also needful.

[21] A concern addressed at length by Fowl, who sees interpretative disagreement, conducted well, as a sign of congregational health, if it arises within a shared commitment to the importance of Scripture for communal and individual faith development. Fowl, 1998, 62-96. McFague helpfully connects congregational community conversations and the topic of climate change. Faith communities, inspired by the example of lives of selected saints, she suggests, make a special contribution in relation to climate change, visibly refusing to collude with the notion that nothing can be done to deal with the problem. Notably, she considers using Philippians 2:5-11 as a green hermeneutical lens, describing such acts of refusal in terms of 'kenosis'. McFague, 2013, 76.

way in which I read them. This now leads me to explore my choosing and reading of these Bible passages.

Addressing climate change denial and the nature of the debate on ecological issues, most particularly regarding the building of wind farms, both affected and was influenced by my choice of the biblical texts. My use of the RCL meant that the specific Gospel passage for the day was treated as a given. This was not so for Philippians 1:21-30. Might choosing this Philippians passage provide a fresh perspective on the Gospel passage, so making a biblical contribution to wider contemporary ecological debate? The Gospel reading, Mark 7:1-8, 14-15, 21-23, features discussion between Jesus and Pharisees and some scribes about ritual washing prior to eating. This leads to pronouncements about defilement, which Jesus identifies as coming from the human heart, not from transgressing food regulations. In the Philippians reading Paul agonises about his choice between life and death, choosing life so that he might continue to support the recipients of his letter in their struggles, including against 'opponents'.[22]

Perceiving the Gospel passage as a story of disputes and noting the reference to opponents in the Epistle passage, I decided to preach a sermon that attempted to address questions of conflict relating to contemporary ecological concerns. I would introduce this by reference to the offshore wind farm, visible from the coast, less than two miles from the church where the sermon was preached. The sermon would note that the construction of the wind farm had generated significant opposition, some expressed in the letters pages of the local newspaper.[23] I intended to connect contemporary local disagreements with disagreements in the settings of Jesus and Paul, suggesting that the Bible readings might provide insights and resources for how to conduct ourselves in the current ecological and church context. One outcome of these decisions was that whilst the contribution of Horrell, Hunt and Southgate moved to the background in my thinking, the work of Stephen Fowl came more to the fore and remained there during the writing process. Fowl's commendation of healthy, community

[22] Philippians 1:28
[23] For example, Moffat, 2017, Muncaster, 2017.

readings of Scripture, which positively handle disagreement, influenced me as I looked at the direction the sermon might take.[24]

My Preaching Journal indicates that even before my reading got underway, the challenge of holding good discussion on a topic that is controversial was in my mind.[25] This led me to add the projected title for the sermon, "The Environment: What's the Problem" to the top of the page as I began reading through the two passages, making handwritten notes. My reading of the biblical text was being influenced by the ecological context in which the sermon was preached.

To some extent my knowledge of the biblical texts preceded and so influenced my response to the rise of concerns about climate change. The 'pastoral cycle', which is much used in practical theology, provides useful insights here.[26] It is important to recognise that this 'cycle' is a spiral, not a circle. The elements in this process do not each appear once only in linear order. Rather, once the cycle of seeing the context, reflecting upon it with the aid of resources, making a judgment, then acting, has been completed, it is then repeated. For example, I saw and experienced the context of ecological threat. This led me to reflect upon it, using a mixture of theological and other sources, including biblical texts, commentaries, and works of academic theology. This led me to choose a response – preaching – which I then put into action. This is only one loop in the spiral. It was preceded by other contextual experiences, including biblical and other reading, and a lifetime of experiences, within and

[24] Working from a conviction that meaning resides not in the text itself, but in its interactions with the concerns and convictions of its interpreters, Fowl (1998, 62-97) believes that differing interpretations within a community are sign of spiritual health. In such circumstances, shared conversations can take place, conducted in a setting of already developed and developing friendships, affording charitable trust to others. Convictions arising from such conversation should then be embodied in actions. Such growth in Christian lifestyle is understood in terms of a doctrine of theosis. Helpfully for my project, he also pursues these themes in his work on Paul's Letter to the Philippians. Fowl, 1998; 2002; 2005; 2012.

[25] PJ.S.1.1

[26] For a useful brief introduction to the pastoral cycle as an instance of reflection upon theology-in-action, see Graham, Walton and Ward, 2005, 188-191. For a more in-depth treatment, significantly emphasising how the pastoral cycle functions as a spiral, with the process of experience, exploration, reflection and response leading to a new situation in which the process needs to be repeated, see Green, 1990. Both Graham, Walton and Ward, and Green alert readers to the fact that the pastoral cycle originated with and is widely used as a tool within liberation theology. Whilst the setting for my reflection is ecological, this is not unrelated to the economic questions which inspire liberation theologians; those who are most economically deprived are often the ones most adversely affected by climate change. Boff,1995. Boff and Elizondo, 1995. Boff's phrase, 'cry of the earth, cry of the poor,' is echoed (though not referenced) in the Pope Francis's first encyclical, which is devoted to the theme of caring for humanity's common home, the earth. Francis, 2015, 49. For an Evangelical account which makes similar links between poverty and climate change, see Boorse, 2016.

outside Christian communities. Also, once a sermon has been preached, I now enter into subsequent loops in the spiral. I return to the ecological context, but now viewing it in the light of all of the significant elements of theological reflection and actions which formed the spiral preceding it. I am at the same point in a loop, but one that is now located in a different place in space and time.

That said, on this occasion I did enter the cycle/spiral at the point of experiencing the ecological context, not when I begin to read the Bible passages. For me, this is acceptable, even if some might wish to argue otherwise for the purposes of exegesis and preaching.[27] I note, however, to the iterative aspect of the ecological preaching process. This brings into question the bridge paradigm, so often used to describe the preacher's relationship with Scripture as part of the homiletical process.[28]

On this occasion, I chose to look at the Gospel passage first, then at the Epistle. At the time I wondered whether this sequence reflected a belief that Paul's contribution would bring subsequent 'added value'. Alternatively, did a Gospel passage somehow carry greater theological weight, thus taking precedence in my thinking and in the church setting? Conversely, had the Mark passage been rendered passive, fodder for reframing or reshaping in light of the content of the Epistle reading?[29] Aware of these wider questions, but not addressing them directly at this point, I read through both of the of the passages, making

[27] Essentially, some claim they begin with the Bible readings, from which they recover ecologically affirming meanings. These meanings, we are asked to believe, eluded generations of previous interpreters. It is much more likely that the readers brought unacknowledged ecological concerns to the text. In support of this point, I note that sermons, commentaries, and theological works which engage with ecological issues have almost always chronologically followed from societal concerns about the environment, not preceded them. Such 'readings of recovery' are effectively critiqued in *Greening Paul*, 33-36. A positive assessment of the role of the reader in biblical interpretation if provided by Fowl, 1998, 32-61.

[28] Instead of the oft-used image of the preacher as one who crosses a bridge into another world (the biblical story in its historical setting), returning across it to share with the congregation insights gained from the visit, I prefer the suggestion of Nancy Lammers Gross. She describes this as a process of 'swing'. The preacher swings back and forward between the biblical context and the contemporary context. They approach the bible passages with questions generated by their own context and concerns. The biblical passages and their context provide insights or perspectives which trigger thoughts concerning the content of the sermon. Importantly, though, the preacher is pulled back to the biblical passages to check if the proposed approach is appropriate. This dialogical process continues for some time. In teaching homiletics, Lammers Gross demands from her students not an 'exegesis report' concerning their sermon, but a 'hermeneutical journey report', a good description of what I am attempting in this thesis. Lammers Gross, 2002.

[29] PJ.S.1.3.

handwritten notes. My initial reading triggered reactions and thoughts, and in my Preaching Journal I asked what had led me to make the decisions to highlight these verses.[30]

My notes on the Mark passage include six highlighted items. Jesus's comment in Mark 7:6, referencing the prophet Isaiah, led me to note this as 'discussion from a shared setting/experience/context – with responses differing according to the perspectives of those involved – a shared conversation.' Mark 7:7, with Jesus's reference to 'teaching human precepts as doctrines' was noted by me as a comment which connected worship with doctrine. With regard to Mark 7:8: 'you abandon the commandment of God to uphold human tradition', I simply noted the words as worthy of further thought. Subsequently, I further noted that Morna Hooker described this as an accusation of subordinating Torah to human traditions.[31] Regarding Mark 7:21-23, I made three comments. First, I noted that Jesus's list of evil intentions at no point addressed environmental issues. Second, I then asked myself if there was 'evil' involved in environmental issues, particularly climate change. Third, I noted that there can be a relationship between human traditions, regulations, and 'evil' actions.

My notes on Philippians 1:21-30 highlighted responses to vv. 27 and 28. Concerning verse 27, I noted that Paul expects a response from others whether he is physically present with them or not, something that is the situation of both first century Philippian Christians and their twenty-first century counterparts. I also commented that 'standing firm in one spirit' and 'striving side by side with one mind for the faith of the gospel' was 'how we want the church on climate change.' Also, in my Preaching Journal, I questioned whether in reading Philippians here I was looking for comparison or contrasts between the Philippian context and my own. Instead, what was needed was to 'extend' Paul's approach into a new setting.[32] If Paul was seeking from Philippian Christians not simple imitation of his actions but 'non-identical repetition' appropriate to their circumstances[33], then such a response was appropriate for my own setting.

[30] PJ.S.1.4
[31] Hooker, 1991, 176.
[32] PJ.S.1.5
[33] See Fowl, 1998, 196, arguing that the imitation Paul seeks is 'not a wooden sort of identical repetition, but a 'non-identical repetition' based on analogy'. At this point Fowl, is writing concerning Philippians 3:17, but, among other examples, he also references 1:27-2:4, which includes the verses under discussion here.

Regarding verse 28, my attention was drawn to the existence of 'opponents' in Philippi, something that seemed potentially relevant to a situation of contested claims and differing views about the existence and nature of climate change. I made a note that although Paul speaks of the destruction of opponents this should not be an objective in contemporary conversation on ecological issues, either in the church context or elsewhere. At this point the identity of the 'opponents' in Philippians became an issue I wished to explore at greater depth. Were these other members of the congregation, part of the wider Christian movement, or non-Christian Philippian citizens opposed to this new religious group? Answering these questions might influence my approach in a sermon that engaged with issues of disagreement over ecological issues. Would I be preaching about how to handle such disputes within the congregations itself, across the wider Church, or between Church and society-at-large? The need to clarify this issue moved me on into the third element of my normal sermon preparation practice – engagement with commentaries on the biblical books.

Having read the Gospel passage first, I turned to my store of notes from commentaries on Mark. I had notes only from one commentary.[34] Normally, I would take this as the opportunity to consult another commentary in order to widen the conversation, but now I was under time pressure, with only two days in which to plan and write the sermon. Second, I felt comfortably familiar with the passage, perhaps its narrative format being easier to remember than the letter format that characterises Paul's writing. Third, perhaps evidencing that the Gospel passage was the junior partner in the dialogue with the Philippians reading, I preferred to spend time resolving my questions about the identity of the 'opponents' in Philippians 1:28. My already existing notes concerning Philippians 1:21-30, stretching back over twenty years, indicate a lengthy if intermittent conversation with commentators. For this sermon, my conversation began with Marshall's commentary,[35] which increased my focus on 1:27-29, in terms of unity, action, disagreement, and suffering with Christ.[36] I consulted other commentaries, hoping to identify the 'opponents' in Philippians.[37] This revealed considerable exegetical uncertainty, with commentators identifying them variously as non-

[34] Hooker, 1991. This situation noted in PJ.S.1.6
[35] Marshall, 1992.
[36] PJ.S.1.7
[37] Bockmuehl, 1998; Fee, 1995; Fowl, 2005; Oakes 2001; Oakes, 2015; Silva, 2005; Thurston, 2005.

Christian Philippian fellow citizens, or fellow members of the Christian movement, either within Philippi or from elsewhere, or as some combination of such groups.[38]

This confirmed me in my view that it was legitimate to preach both with regard to disagreement and the need for good discussion within Christian congregations, and also with regard to discussion between congregations and those who do not identify with the Christian Church. Commentators had not come to a collective mind on the identity of the 'opponents' Therefore, in my view, a preacher could legitimately use the Philippian situation to address disagreement on ecological issues, within the congregation, or between the congregation and wider society, or a combination of the two.[39] Clarifying this issue for myself through conversation with the commentators moved me to the point where I was now 'ready [to] think, outline, and write the sermon.'[40]

Reflecting on Preparing Sermon 2

Preparation for Sermon 2 was an occasion of writing in order to preach upon familiar texts. Here the Gospel reading was put into the background and a familiar Old Testament text was read through an ecological lens, with Philippians 2:5-11 as a significant component. The Gospel reading was familiar to me. I had preached a sermon on it three years previously, one I had experienced as powerful for myself, and which had received a strong, positive reaction from that congregation.[41] That sermon, preached during Creation Time 2015, addressed the plight of refugees trying to reach Europe, specifically the deaths at sea of Syrian children.

[38] Fee, 1995, 7, surveying the commentaries, notes no less than eighteen different constructions of the situation (he himself argues that it is opponents from outside the church who are referenced in 1:17-28). Similarly, Thurston, 2005, 69, whilst acknowledging the possibility of pressure from Roman authorities, does not believe there is enough evidence to differentiate between the groups mentioned in the epistle. Oakes, 2001 and 2015, based on a careful, plausible reconstruction of the historical setting of the Philippian congregation, argues strongly that the 'opponents' were fellow Philippian dwellers and citizens who subjected the congregation's members to economic pressures in response to their flouting of social norms about acknowledging the city's gods and other religious practices. Even where commentators such as Bockmuehl and Silva suggest the possibility of opponents who were from within the Christian movement, they acknowledge that external opponents may also have been present. Bockmuehl, 1998, 100-102; Silva, 2005, 82.

[39] Here, as elsewhere, the historical-critical approach aids the preacher by indicating what the text does not mean in the contemporary setting, rather than what it does mean. See Lammers Gross, 2002, 97-100.

[40] PJ.S.1.9

[41] Preached at Augustine United Church, Edinburgh, September 6th 2015.

Now, in Creation Time 2018, preaching to a different congregation, the Gospel reading itself would not feature so prominently.

Despite being contained within an obscurely located longer reading in the RCL, the Old Testament reading, Genesis 1:26-2:3 is widely known and referenced in the context of addressing ecological concerns. As Horrell points out, the passage has long been a focus for controversy and debate in discussions about Christian attitudes towards creation and treatment of the environment.[42] In part this stems from Lyn White's highly influential critique of Christian attitudes and actions towards the environment, which sparked much subsequent debate. It identified use of this passage as a significant element in authorising exploitative attitudes and actions with regard to the planet.[43] My own experience, working as Environmental Chaplain for Eco-Congregation Scotland, was that this passage was frequently referenced by those seeking to justify their current lifestyle choices, by those seeking to criticise the Church for ecological inaction, and by those struggling to read the passage in positive ecological way.

The epistle reading was also a very familiar to me. It gained greater prominence for me as I worked upon the Doctorate in Practical Theology, seeking an additional lens through which to read the Bible ecologically for the purposes of preaching. During my time as Environmental Chaplain for Eco Congregation Scotland I twice preached using this passage.[44] This combination of familiarity and my belief that I already had an idea for the direction of the sermon led me curtail my normal preparation practice.[45] Additionally, I felt no need to consult notes previously made from commentaries or to make new ones, with sense of

[42] Horrell 2010, 23.
[43] White, 1967.
[44] In one sermon I paired Philippians 2:5-13 with Acts 16:16-24, reading the story of Paul's silencing of a slave girl's power of divination as a threat to the slave based economic system. Paul, as a slave (Phil. 1:1) of the slave, Christ Jesus (Phil. 2:7), advocates a mindset that would as much undermine modern capitalism, which is as dependent upon fossil fuel production and use as was the first century economy upon the institution of slavery. In the other I paired Genesis 1:26-31 with Philippians 2:5-11. Here, imagined visitors to the congregation, personifying Horrell's description of different approaches to reading the Bible ecologically, responded to the idea that dominion/lordship be understood in terms of Jesus's practice of lordship as described in the Philippians passage.
[45] PJ.S.2.6

familiarity once again cited.[46] Already, I felt I knew what direction the sermon was liable to take.[47] I now commenced writing Sermon 2.

Reflecting on Preparing Sermon 3

Preparing Sermon 3 led me to ask how God is at work in the writing of a sermon, and provided an occasion in which I was encouraged to contemplate my own faith story. My preaching journal indicates a sense of urgency concerning preparation and writing of this sermon. I feared I might not be able to 'perfect' it prior to preaching it. Using academic commentaries was identified as a significant factor in this perfecting process. Also, my conviction that the Holy Spirit can speak through under-prepared sermons was comforting but acknowledged not to justify poor practice.[48] This leaves me with questions about what part God plays in the reception of sermons. Does God control the listeners' thoughts and responses even though the preacher does not?[49] If so, does it matter at all what I preach? And might the same be said, then, concerning choice of Bible passages ?

My own understanding lies between two extremes; one which effectively excludes God from a role in the listeners' interpretation process, the other envisaging human beings as empty receptacles into which God pours meaning. I preach on the basis that the listeners are in the same position as me. We live in a context which confronts us with situations we experience as significant. We are part of a living tradition, located in a church community, which reads and hears biblical texts, believing that they play a significant role in influencing our worldview and actions. This involves an iterative process of reading our context in the light of the biblical passages, and context in light of the biblical texts. Additionally and critically, though, we do this with a conviction that God will offer insight and discernment in this process; a work of the Holy Spirit.[50]

[46] PJ.S.2.7
[47] The relevant entry in my preaching journal (PJ.S.2.7) suggests this, noting that my sheet of handwritten notes of 'things to ponder/remember' contains a brief outline for the sermon to follow: verses 5-11 about the mindset of dominion over creation; verses 3-4 about questions of how to treat the other, in the light of questions of hierarchy in the Mark passage; verses 12^{b}-13 as a call to move from attitude to action (with a note to give examples).
[48] PJ.S.3.1
[49] For confirmation that the preacher, is not in control of the responses of listeners, see below, 92-94.
[50] The relevant section of the United Reformed Church's *Statement Concerning the Nature Faith and Order of the United Reformed Church* puts it well: 'The highest authority for what we believe and do is God's Word in the Bible, **alive for his people today through the help of the Spirit**.' (My emphasis)

Within the wider ecological context, the theme chosen for the sermon concerned being radically conservative concerning creation. The initial reason for this choice was my experience that among Christians who identify themselves as politically and/or theologically conservative, significant numbers distance themselves from involvement in creation care issues. Additionally, believing that a significant constituency in the Church is suspicious of creation care activity leads to unease among other church members who might otherwise commit to action. The enthusiasm with which creation care activity is embraced by those who identify themselves as political and/or theological liberals adds to the tension.[51] My intention in this sermon was to challenge the framing of creation care as an either/or issue for Christians, divided along a line between liberal and conservative. In fact, the sermon implicitly questions the adequacy of describing and understanding Christian faith in terms of theological liberalism or conservatism.

From the above it is apparent that, once again, the initial concern in approaching the preaching event was the ecological context. My Preaching Journal indicates that I was reading the Bible passages from an ecological perspective, on this occasion identifying tradition as participation in a shared journey, rather than standing, unmoving, committed to an agreed, public stance.[52] Also, although ecological concern was driving my engagement with the biblical texts my reading was also informed by and impacted upon my personal faith story.

This was particularly the case with my response to Paul's statement, 'More than that, I regard everything as loss because of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord.'[53] I pondered how different life would be for me if I had never known (about) Jesus Christ,

[51] A near parallel in the secular setting, is helpfully described by Marshall who laments the close identification of the climate change issue with environmental activists who appropriated it as their cause. They framed the issue in language they found congenial, reflecting their associated political outlook. As a result, those not sharing their general political outlook identified climate change as an area where they expected to be on the other side of the debate: 'those who have historically distrusted environmentalism came to distrust climate change, and those who distrusted climate change came to distrust environmentalism all the more.' Marshall 2014, 128.
[52] PJ.S.3.3 where I reflect that my 'conscious choice of ecological perspective … set the terms' for my interpretation of the text; in this case noting that the discussion between Jesus and the disciples takes place in the context of a journey (towards Jerusalem); tradition as dynamic rather than static. Paul, of course, had his radical, 'conversion' encounter with Christ in the context of a journey (to Damascus) (Acts 9:1-9), and his subsequent ministry and theological reflection was carried out in the context of extensive travel.
[53] Philippians 3:8 For notes made on my reaction to this verse at the time of reading it in preparation for the sermon, see PJ.S.3.7-9

leading me to feelings of disquiet and gratitude. I was disquieted because a 'me' who had never known Jesus Christ would be a radically different person. My present self would no longer exist. That this is not the case engendered deep feelings of gratitude towards the God, my parents and the Church who had formed me. They had contributed to my ongoing formation as a Christian and human being, providing a structure with boundaries which set limits to the direction my life journey might take.

This encouraged me to consider that one significant reason I have warmed to the Apostle Paul in my adult years is a sense of shared experience. Both of us grew up within a strong religious tradition. We both were impelled to change because of the interplay between such tradition and our encounter with Jesus. There are also differences. There is no time I can remember when I was unaware of Jesus, the centre of the tradition in which I grew up. In contrast, Paul grew up in a religious tradition in which the figure of Jesus did not feature. It was Paul's subsequent encounter with the risen Christ which led him to radically reassess his understanding of his religious tradition. For me, questioning came through exposure to new ideas about Jesus and about God, sometimes encountered in the academic setting, sometimes though insights arising from life experiences.[54] Paul's story reassured me that radical reassessment of religious views need not represent a loss of faith or religious heritage. Paul himself remained a Jew, albeit a theologically radicalised one, with a new understanding of 'Israel' that was controversial, and not accepted by the majority of his fellow Jews.[55]

So, although my choice of ecological perspective was already in place when I came to read the Gospel and Epistle passages, there had been a prior attitudinal shift, arising from my exposure to new ideas about Jesus, God, and ways of reading the Bible. I was open to modifying my theology in the light of experiences, as Paul had once radically modified many of his theological positions. I was open to examining my theology in the light of ecological questions, without fearing that this undermines the Christian faith tradition. This enabled and

[54] See above, 4-6

[55] 'Paul's conversion was a conversion for Paul the theologian. Not a conversion from one religion to another. He remained a Jew and an Israelite.' Dunn, 1998, 179. Dunn goes on to make the point that this 'conversion' involved rethinking theological positions. Wright agrees with Dunn here, making his case in characteristically exhaustive fashion. See Wright, 2013, 1408-1472.

encouraged me to cast a sermon in the form of a general challenge to rethink how we understand tradition, using the occasion of contemporary ecological challenge to do so.[56]

The significant roles played by my ecological perspective and faith journey are evidenced in my choice and reading the Bible passages. First, my ecological perspective shaped my reading of the Bible passages, as my handwritten comments on them confirm. At the time, I highlighted comments on verses which I felt to be significant. Regarding Mark 8:27 I noted the words, 'on the way', commenting 'tradition is dynamic'. I also noted the request of Jesus to know what different groups were saying about him, commenting that ecological Christians might respond that Jesus is Lord of both heaven and earth[57], or by being drawn to Jesus's self-description in 8:31 as 'Son of Man'.[58] I also noted that Jesus's use of the Son of Man title in 8:31 was in the context of his teaching that he would suffer as a result of the opposition of religious conservatives to something that was new and radical.

My handwritten notes on the Philippians passage further confirm the impact of 3:8, with my comments on this verse highlighted in my paperwork. At this point in the preparation process I was engaged with the image of faith as ongoing journey. Concerning 3:6, with its mention of Paul's 'righteousness under the law', in his prior practice of his Jewish traditions, I commented that rule and regulation needed to be dynamically interpreted, then reinterpreted in the light of experience. I also noted 3:12, with its athletic race imagery, as affirming struggle, journey and forward movement as elements in how God acts to make us God's own: religious tradition as forward-moving, not static.

Next, I consulted commentaries, continuing to understand this as a form of conversation. I pondered the appropriate place for the insights offered by these commentaries, both when writing the sermon and when preaching it. Many of the commentaries I use are written by those with a close relationship with the academy. Increasingly though, I was drawn to Fowl's

[56] The statement that tradition is the living faith of dead people whilst traditionalism is the dead faith of living ones has been important to me since I first encountered it in the 1980s. Jaroslav Pelikan in his 1983 Jefferson lectures. *[During the pandemic I have been unable to access a library to confirm this citation.]*

[57] A reference back here to Philippians 2:10, confirming my use of this passage as an ecological lens through which to read Paul as a way of responding to the contemporary ecological situation.

[58] Here, James Jones's suggestion that the Son of Man title could be rendered as 'Son of Earth', referencing Genesis 1, where God formed man (Heb. *adam*) of dust from the ground (Genesis 2:7), to which man (humankind) shall return (3:19). Jones, 2003, 14.

call to re-prioritise the needs of the Church in theological interpretation of Scripture, placing these to the centre, using academic insights on an ad hoc basis. [59] My use of commentaries, however, goes beyond ad hoc. Their use is an integral part of my normal approach to preparation, seeking new insights and ideas.[60] There is, however, an element of the ad hoc in my use of them in the context of this sermon series. I went to them with concerns arising from an identifiable context – ecological threat. My response to that was influenced by elements of my personal history and faith commitments. Believing that the interpretations made by listeners in response to my sermons would be impacted by the work of the Holy Spirit, I approached the commentaries looking for that same Spirit to be at work in my reactions to what they offered. Additionally, I hoped and expected that the Holy Spirit would be at work in the commentators as they thought and wrote.[61] With the additional input from commentaries I was now ready to commence writing Sermon 3.

Reflecting on Preparing Sermon 4

The story of Sermon 4 was one about how writing became a struggle when I tried to make the sermon about my interests and concerns rather than the qualities of hope and joy which characterised the Epistle passage upon which it was based. My Preaching Journal reveals I began my preparation for final sermon in the series in an optimistic mood. I attributed this to a sense of relief that the series was coming to an end, and it had a positive impact within the congregation. It had also generated significant material for my thesis, thus providing greater focus for writing it.[62] Additionally, I felt I was returning to my comfort zone in writing a sermon rather preparing an all-age service.[63] My sense of optimism continued through that

[59] Fowl 1998, 13.
[60] See above, 34-36.
[61] Fee helpfully addresses this issue, arguing that the Bible commentator's work should be rooted in a spirituality (which he identifies with the work of the Holy Spirit) which drives the writer in a doxological direction. Further, he argues that good exegesis extends beyond searching for the authorial intention of a biblical author. Rather the exegete seeks to uncover the biblical author's spirituality, which, Fee argues, 'for the believing scholar … means further that God's Word is very closely tied to the intentionality of the divinely inspired author.' Fee 2000, 7, 9. I am sympathetic to this insight, though cautious lest it leads to attempts to replicate Paul's words and actions as though his thoughts about a first century situation can simply be repeated as the solution to a twenty-first century crisis.
[62] PJ.S.4.1
[63] PJ.S.4.2 The comments in my Preaching Journal also show a reluctance to begin preparation for an all-age service, and the difficulties of effectively presenting Paul's potential contribution to ecological understanding and response in a slideshow format. PJ.SER.1.1,4,5

stage in my normal preparation process where I re-read of the biblical texts.[64] It did not survive my initial failures to write the sermon, which I characterised as, 'a frustrating day in terms of sermon writing.'[65]

This frustration is evidenced by two abandoned attempts to write the sermon, In both cases, I felt that an 'initially promising outline was going nowhere in practice'.[66] In general terms, both attempts were abandoned for two reasons. First, I felt I was prioritising my philosophical and theological interests ahead of the needs of the congregation.[67] Second, I believed that I was more attracted to presentational possibilities than I was to what I wanted to say theologically and ecologically.[68]

My first attempt to write the sermon was both begun and abandoned on 25th September 2019. It was intended to be the introduction to the sermon. I was attempting to convince the congregation that commitment to ecological action should not be based upon feelings of optimism or pessimism but upon hope. Optimism and pessimism were characterised as based upon human calculation of odds. This was contrasted with hope, which I argued was 'based upon what God intends, accomplished in ways I cannot anticipate, either in my optimistic or pessimistic phases.'[69]

A combination of factors led me to abandon this first attempt at the sermons. First, I realised that my approach was being driven by a theological argument which I found congenial. Jurgen Moltmann contends that human calculation of future possibilities will never be able to anticipate what God might do. Such calculation of odds depends on the experience of what has gone before. They do not encompass what new things are possible from God. Hope, Moltmann argues, seen in an eschatological perspective, does not depend upon promising circumstances, nor is it extinguished by unpromising circumstances, for these are understood as such only within the limitations of human experience of the past.[70] This argument was

[64] PJ.S.4.3
[65] PJ.S.4.5
[66] PJ.S.4.5.L2
[67] PJ.S.4.5.LL3-5
[68] PJ.S.4.LL6-8
[69] Appendix B.1.3, LL, 5-7.
[70] 'What is new announces itself in the judgment on what is old. It does not emerge from the old; it makes the old obsolete.' Moltmann. 1996*, 27.* For his earlier, ground-breaking work on this issue, see Moltmann. 1978.

congenial to me. I believe it has force, but its appearance here was premature, giving the opening paragraphs an abstract air which I felt would struggle to retain the attention of the listeners. Even if I gained and retained the listeners' attention I would have done so in a misguided fashion. My sermon was not supposed to be about optimism and pessimism, but about joy and fear as motivations for ecological action

My second attempt to write the sermon was also abandoned, though only after I had written twice as much as I had with the first attempt.[71] It was more than one third the length of the eventually final preached sermon. My decision to stop writing was taken reluctantly, but reflected significant unease with the direction in which the sermon was being taken. It engaged more successfully with the themes of fear and joy as motivations for ecological action, yet my hand-written comment reads, 'this felt too much like an academic argument/essay, trying to solve a problem, [rather] than preaching good news.'

I am intrigued by that comment because upon re-reading the seven paragraphs of this second attempt I am struck by how well they read rhetorically. I situated the sermon within the theme of Christian care for creation, referencing Creation Time.[72] Then I reminded the congregation of themes covered in the previous sermons in the series, and the theme to be followed on this occasion, so affirming the legitimacy of a sermon series micro-tradition by locating it within the wider Church tradition of observing Creation Time.[73] I introduced the theme of fear or joy as motivation for ecological action by way of cultural references familiar to most or all of the congregation.[74] I then connected the theme and cultural references to the Gospel passage, once again entering the biblical material via narrative. On this occasion I pointed to the fears that the disciples of Jesus had that their status might be threatened by others who were carrying out his work but without being part of their number.[75] Also, I introduced the Epistle passage, hinting at its contribution in displacing fear and worry as driving motivations for ecological action.[76] This spiral of connections continued, with an

[71] Appendix B.2
[72] Appendix B.1.1
[73] Appendix B.2.2
[74] Appendix B.2.3, 4 The musical, *The Sound of Music*, and the television comedy, *Dad's Army*.
[75] Appendix B2.5, 6
[76] Appendix B.2.6.LL5-6

invitation to the congregation to reflect upon our attitudes to secular groups which do the work that Christians would identify as 'creation care'.

Why abandon something that seemed so promising? In part, because the second attempt also prioritised presentational issues over theological and ecological concerns.[77] Also, re-reading this material, I am struck that it prioritises worry and fear over joy. This amount of written material represented more than one third of my sermon. My handwritten sermon outline shows that there was more to come. Next I intended to address how worry impacts upon human outlook on life, so leading to negative attitudes. My proposed antidote to this was going to be to adopt a perspective of joyful hope, with the sermon then concluding with a description of contemporary examples. Although there is no reference to this in material I wrote at the time, either in my Preaching Journal, or hand-written material, I now suspect that I abandoned this attempt at the sermon because it failed to give due weight to joy and hope as motivation for ecological action.

At least in part, then, the sermon that was preached should be judged on its success in keeping the proper balance between its presentational aspects, which work to engage and retain the attention of the congregation, and the content of the theological and ecological message that I believed the listeners needed to hear. Also, the failure of my second attempt identified the need for good news as a non-negotiable element in the sermon. Good news here is understood not as that which will make the listeners happy but as gospel; good news about God and God's dealings with creation, including its human element.

Having discarded my second attempt at writing the sermon I now proceeded to produce the outline which led to the sermon which I preached to the congregation. I produced a final draft which I printed, then making hand-written amendments to wording on the Sunday morning, prior to preaching the sermon.[78] I felt 'reasonably happy' with the sermon as written, wondering, however, whether the situation described within it truly described the congregation, or where I would like the congregation to be located with reference to creation care and co-operation with others.[79] In writing I addressed whether joy or fear motivated

[77] PJ.S.4.5
[78] PJ.S.4.7-8
[79] PJ.S.4.9

Christians to care for God's creation. Once again, the ecological context and my own experiences provided the initial reason for the chosen theme. My choice was rooted in experience of working as Environmental Chaplain with Eco Congregation Scotland, when it was approached by a multi-disciplinary group from Edinburgh University, wishing to research how religious faith might motivate environmental action. This was a substantial project, with the AHRC grant to the group being substantially larger than the annual income of the organisation whose activities they were investigating.[80]

I was involved in helping identify congregations to be approached by a researcher to undertake participant observation and interview members about their motivation for undertaking environmental action. Associated with this part of the larger research project, Elizabeth Bomberg and Alice Hague compared the rhetoric employed by faith based and secular voluntary sector environmental organisations.[81] In their article, which provided the word clouds I used in the service and referenced in my sermon,[82] the authors identified spiritual resources which equipped church members for environmental action. Importantly, both within the life of the congregations, and within wider networks, such as faith-based environmental organisations, these were linked to positive rather than negative vocabulary and attitudes. This reflected my own convictions and commitments at this time, as is evidenced by the authors quoting one of my sermons to this effect.[83] The sermon they quoted was preached in 2016. Two years later, my conviction that creation care activity had to emerge from within Christian faith (tradition) remained strong. Additionally, convinced that the Christian Gospel is good news, I continued to believe that actions which were rooted in a joyful response to the experience of God's creation have greater capacity to inspire action by Christian communities than an appeal to fear. I decided to explore this conviction with the congregation in this fourth sermon in the series.

In reflecting upon my preparation and writing of the four sermons a number of themes arise. In Sermon 1 there is the influence of context on the choices that I made. The wider ecological

[80] 'Caring for the Future Through Ancestral Time: Engaging the Cultural and Spiritual Presence of the Past to Promote a Sustainable Future.' Published output from the project can be accessed via https://www.research.ed.ac.uk/en/projects/caring-for-the-future-through-ancestral-time-engaging-the-cultura/publications/

[81] Bomberg and Hague. 2018.

[82] Bomberg and Hague. 2018, 589.

[83] 'A Scottish chaplain directed his audience to the Scriptures, quoting Paul's exhortation to Philippians to 'live our lives in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ' (Philippians 1:27)' Bomberg and Hague. 2018, 588.

context set the theme for the preaching series. The ecclesial context (preaching which followed a lectionary) influenced the specific ecological situations addressed by each sermon. Then my reading strategies influenced the direction of the sermons, both my using an ecological lens, and my interaction with commentaries, understood as a conversation. In Sermon 2 I experienced preaching upon familiar texts, but doing so from an avowedly ecological perspective. In Sermon 3 I encountered questions about how God is at work in the writing of an ecological sermon, particularly working through the preacher's own faith story. In the final sermon I encountered the tension when what the preacher might like to say is at odds with what they think is the message from the biblical writer. In the next chapter of my thesis I explore how these themes informed and affected the sermons that were preached.

Chapter 4 Reflecting on Preaching Four Ecological Sermons

Moving on from consideration of my writing process in the previous chapter now I reflect upon my experience in preaching four ecological sermons in 2018. As in the previous chapter, a number of significant issues are noted. First, the contemporary ecological context preceded other issues, both logically and chronologically, in the preaching process. Second, Bible readings, as given by a lectionary, or chosen by me as the preacher, subsequently influenced the choice of aspect or event within the wider ecological context that was addressed in the sermon. Third, the contributions of academic theologians were significant, but the level of significance varied both in prominence and type at different points in the preparation process. Fourth, a number of issues relating to my role as the preacher were uncovered. These included matters of integrity, the wielding of authority, and my relationship with Paul arising from my choice of him as a conversation partner. Fifth, that the sermon series functioned as a micro-tradition, within the wider tradition of the Church, 'tradition' here being understood in a forward looking, dynamic fashion.

Preaching Sermon 1[1]

This sermon was preached on 2nd September 2018, the first in the series for Creation Time. The Gospel reading was the one given for the day in the RCL – Year B *Proper 17*, Sunday between August 28 and September 3 inclusive.[2] The Epistle reading, Philippians 1:21-30, appears in the RCL, not for that Sunday but for Year A *Proper 20*, Sunday between September 18 and September 24 inclusive.[3]

The sermon was written the day before it was due to be delivered. I decided to start with a concrete situation, whilst also alerting the congregation to the wider societal debate about climate change. I would then reference the Markan story as an incident of disagreement within a tradition, and my proposed historical setting for the Philippians passage as an incident of disagreement with those outside of the tradition. Paul would then be presented as offering advice which is helpful for our congregation's contemporary setting: 'live your life in

[1] See Appendix A.1 for the text of this sermon.
[2] Consultation on Common texts, 1992, 52.
[3] Consultation on Common texts, 37.

a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ'[4] In other words, with regard to contemporary ecological concern, Christian faith is as much about responding with action as is about thinking about such things.[5]

The building of an offshore wind farm was the local situation with which I commenced the sermon.[6] I began with the shared experience of the congregation, living in a coastal area where this evidence of environmental change was visible for all to see.[7] Those who heard the sermon were asked to consider their own feelings, encouraging them to mentally participate in debate.[8] Next, building upon this, I acknowledged the existence of disagreement about ecological issues.[9] I tried to report this fairly and accurately, but pointing to inconsistencies in the attitudes and argument: if wind farms are disliked because they are a humanly constructed intrusion upon the beauty of the natural landscape, why do the same people so like the landmark St Mary's lighthouse as part of that scene?[10] I note that this is the first point in the sermon where I stated that I, the preacher, had a view on such issues.[11]

I then acknowledged that disagreements on environmental issues occur within the Church itself,[12] maintaining a safe distance from the life of the congregation by relating a story about worship in a congregation elsewhere; implicit reassurance that this did not directly involve anyone in the congregation now listening to this sermon. This story about discussion of ecological issues which took place within a church setting then led to my first reference to the day's Bible readings, drawing comparisons between an aspect of the North Shields

[4] Philippians 1:27
[5] S.1.11
[6] S.1.1
[7] I was influenced here by work done on effectively communicating about climate change which emphasises the importance of sharing stories of recognisable human beings. Marshall, 2012.
[8] Craddock, and New Homiletic is influential for me here, specifically his argument for inductive preaching; drawing the hearer into the sermon, often through the use of story, rather than relying upon proclamation of truths. Craddock, 1985, 2011. As Myers points out, Craddock is as concerned with the manner in which the Gospel is communicated as he is with its content. Myers, 2020, 19.
[9] PJ.S.1.3
[10] Fowl (1998, 90-91) emphasises the importance of recognising that disagreements must be seen to take place within a context of shared belief. For him, this involves maximising the reasonableness of the strongest arguments of others, perhaps even recasting them to make them stronger. I am sympathetic to this approach, trying to avoid misrepresenting the views of others, but given the limitations of space and time in the sermon format, greater priority needs to be given to the argument I wish to make, not those with whom I disagree. Fowl's approach might be followed more fully in a discussion group setting, or in informal conversation after a sermon.
[11] PJ.S.1.3.L10
[12] PJ.S.1.4.

congregation's local environmental setting and the discussion between Jesus and the Pharisees and scribes in Mark. I observed that material objects can be iconic, generating strong feelings and heated discussion because of what they are taken to represent.[13] I made specific reference to verses in the Gospel passage[14], pointing to the capacity of such disputes to make enemies. This opened up space to ask how disputes should be conducted in our setting.

Here in the sermon asked the congregation to consider how best to answer questions, not just about the material objects that had been mentioned – wind turbines and cups, pots and bronze kettles – but about wider issues that lie behind them, particularly contemporary environmental ones. This included my first mention of the Philippians passage, saying Paul 'can help by suggesting appropriate actions and attitudes when handling discussion, not only about wind turbines but the situation which led to their construction.'[15]

Again, I shared my own views, implying that there are accepted norms concerning the causes of contemporary climate change.[16] Here, the authority of the preacher surfaces. In most Western settings, it is expected that hearers do not interrupt the preacher.[17] By declaring an agreed view on climate change I was not so much seeking agreement at this point as conscripting the members of the congregation into listening to the sermon on that basis. In retrospect, I am mildly troubled by my statement, 'If there are some who have doubts about that widely accepted analysis I respect that.'[18] I do not respect the views of those who deny the existence of humanly caused climate change since these views run counter to the great weight of scientific opinion. I tend to view denial of climate change as an unwillingness to face reality, either because the changes necessary to prevent or adapt to it are daunting, or because self-interest is preferred to acting for the sake of others. I think I should have said that I respected their right to hold different views, but not in such a way as to suggest I

[13] S.1.5. For a helpful survey of everyday practices among the Jewish population of Palestine, including purifying the body and hands, see Magness, 2011, especially 16-31.
[14] S.1.6.
[15] S.1.7.L9-11
[16] S.1.8
[17] One exception is preaching in the African American tradition where comments from the congregation are both expected and encouraged during the course of the sermon. To say 'I'm preaching this sermon on the basis that we are agreed on the reality and causes and climate change' might result in an audible 'watch yourself, preacher' from the congregation.
[18] S..1.9.L1.

respect the content of such views. If I am preaching, in part at least, to encourage better discussion and good disagreement in Christian congregations in responding to Scripture, then my preaching should reflect the practice I commend.[19]

I now clarified the potential for and limits to Paul's contribution in this regard.[20] Paul said nothing to his Philippian readers and hearers about environmental issues and climate change. On the other hand, he was concerned for those under pressure because of disagreements with others. At this point, I chose to move my argument forward on the basis that the 'opponents' Paul referenced in Philippians 1:28 were external to the congregation.[21] I did so in order to help the listeners make a connection between the situation of Philippian Christians and their twenty-first century counterparts who are concerned to care for God's creation; the latter in dialogue or possibly disagreement with other groups and individuals in our society.

In withholding information about alternative views concerning the identity of Paul's 'opponents' in Philippians was I misusing Scripture or misrepresenting or misleading the congregation? Then and now I believe that my action was legitimate. This is for two reasons. First, the identification of the 'opponents' as an external group has strong support among commentators.[22] Even those commentators who favour or accept the possibility that the 'opponents' were a group within the Christian movement agree that there might also have been external opponents. Second, I took care to signal that this interpretation was one that I favoured; 'that suggests to me' indicates the limits of my claim.

Although there is distance, both chronologically and culturally, between the situation of the Philippians and our situation, Paul's call to Christians to make lifestyle choices, despite risking disagreement, is just as applicable to the here and now.[23] My approach is undergirded by the conviction, that in the context of preaching, Scripture is a resource through which the sermon's hearers can hear a 'word' from God. This 'word' is not to be equated with the words on the page of the Bible. Rather, it is the message which they take from the words on

[19] Regarding hearers evaluating a sermon through the lens of their perception of the character of the preacher, see the survey-based findings in Allen, 2004, 18-41 and Mulligan et al, 2005, 67-90.
[20] S.1.10.
[21] S.1.10.L6-7.
[22] See 44, n.38, above.
[23] S.1.11.

the page when these are brought together with the hearers' situation. It follows that the concerns of the interpreters are what generates the meaning; that texts do not contain universal meanings within themselves that are there to be uncovered and recovered.[24]

Having stated that it was valid for listeners to view their own situation in the light of what Paul had written to the Philippian Christians, I now addressed potential concerns that to do so by engaging with contemporary environmental issues was not a valid response.[25] My tactic was first to summarise reservations about Christian involvement in environmental issues, often expressed to me as: 'surely our main priority is to bring people to faith so that they may be assured of their final destiny.'[26] I declared this to be a failure to live Christian faith in the here and now, referencing Paul's call to 'live your life in a manner worthy of the gospel if Christ' (1:27); confronting a supposedly theologically conservative position with the words of a supposedly conservative authority figure.

Having affirmed environmental lifestyle choices as a valid element in Christian discipleship, I then proposed a contrast between the situation of the Philippians, as historically reconstructed, and contemporary North Shields Christianity. The Philippians were out of step with the surrounding culture because of how they applied their faith in a social setting. In contrast, we were out of step with many of our secular neighbours because we failed to apply our faith to environmental issues.[27] Immediately, though, I accompanied implied criticism with expression of hope for positive change; that in this and succeeding sermons we would consider how we might improve that situation.[28] Even now, I suggested, we could apply our

[24] In coming to this view I have been greatly influenced by the analysis of approaches to interpretation provided by Fowl who writes in terms of determinate accounts, an anti-determinate stance, and underdetermined interpretation of Scripture. The first of these argues that meaning is a sort of property with which the text is imbued. Often identified with the intention of the author, it is the task of the interpreter to discover it. Once discovered, no further interpretative work is required. An anti-determinate stance, re-reads texts, seeking a place within it from which to resist the dominant interpretation of the time. Heavily dependent upon expert interpreters it is unlikely to be suitable for widespread use in church congregations. In any case, it shares with the determinate accounts the conviction that meaning is to be found within the text itself. Underdetermined interpretation, which Fowl favours, and which I find most useful and convincing in my work, argues that claims about textual meaning should be put into the background in favour of attention to interpretative aims, interests and practices. This is not to say that I have no interest in Paul's intentions as author, but rather that in preaching I am in a reciprocal relationship with Scripture. As Fowl puts it: 'Theological convictions, ecclesial practices and communal and social concerns should *shape and be shaped* by biblical interpretation.' Fowl, 1998, 60. (author emphasis)
[25] S.1.11-12.
[26] S.1.11.L8-9.
[27] S.1.14-15
[28].S.1.15.L6.

new understanding to one issue within the wider environmental setting; that cost and convenience trumps environmental commitments.[29]

I then provided examples of how this attitude works out in practice, intentionally moving towards an example from the congregation's own setting, with which all were acquainted; our use of single-use plastic cups for drinking tea and coffee after the morning service.[30] I offered alternatives to current practice, aware that what seemed to be a simple question about practices relating to drinking cups was connected with a number of sensitive issues about intra-congregational group dynamics and questions of collective self-image. I sought to reduce anxieties which might arise, either concerning our use of money in general terms, or its application to a potentially sensitive situation in the congregational setting.[31] I did so by acknowledging that talk about money is a sensitive topic in our culture, sometimes leading to disagreement and conflict, and that most of us try to avoid such things. Still, I argued, Paul's advice not to flee from (potential) conflict holds good for our situation, as it did for that of the original recipients of his letter.

As the sermon drew toward its close, I commended good disagreement as a feature of congregational life, even as we sought to address issues such as climate change, aware that what appear to be mundane material items and minor actions might represent or mask other more weighty matters.[32] Finally, I set out alternative approaches with regard to God's creation: positive change, irrelevance, or being a drag on change.[33] Once more, I shared my own preference, inviting the congregation to join with me in responding to Paul's call to a distinctive Christian lifestyle, and applying that to caring for God's creation today.

[29] S.1.15.L9.
[30] S.1.16.
[31] S.1.17.
[32] S.1.18.
[33] S.1.19.

Preaching Sermon 2[34]

This sermon was preached on 9th September 2018, the second in the series of four sermons for Creation Time. The Gospel reading was the one given for that day in the RCL– Year B *Proper 18,* Sunday between September 4 and September 10 inclusive.[35] The Old Testament reading, Genesis 1:26-2:3, does not appear in the RCL as such. It does so only as part of the longer reading, Genesis 1:1-2:4[a], on Trinity Sunday in Year A[36] and as part of the Easter Vigil in all three years of the RCL.[37] The Epistle reading, whilst not the one given for that Sunday, does appear in the RCL – Year A *Proper 21*, Sunday between September 25 and October 1 inclusive.[38] The shorter reading, Philippians 2:5-11 also appears in the RCL.[39]

Due to other ministerial workload I commenced preparation for this sermon only one day before it was due to be preached. Despite this there is no indication in my written material that this tight schedule was a cause of anxiety for me. In part at least this was due to my sense of familiarity with all three of the bible passages chosen for this sermon.

Being written and preached as part of a series, this second sermon commenced by looking back to Sermon 1, reminding the congregation of its theme of good disagreement and discussion on the contentious issue of climate change.[40] I then alerted the congregation to the question to be considered in this second week: 'are we human beings lords of creation. Do we have a God-given domination over the rest of creation?'[41] This referenced popular understandings within the Church of the human relationship with the rest of creation (and the wider societal understanding of the Church's perspective on ecological issues). It also

[34] See Appendix A.2 for the text of this sermon
[35] Consultation on Common Texts. 1992, 52.
[36] Consultation on Common Texts. 1992, 33.
[37] Consultation on Common Texts. 1992, 31, 47, 63. Moltmann (2010, 67) makes the valid point that this placing this text at Easter creates a helpful theological link: 'the raising of the dead and the annihilation of death are viewed – and rightly so – not only as surmounting the consequences of the Fall, but also as the consummation of creation-in-the-beginning.' Yet, given both the length of the lection, and its location here, upon an occasion when the majority of people in most congregations are unlikely to attend, the RCL effectively mutes the biblical reading which in the popular mind is most associated with ecological issues. Had the RCL been compiled in the more ecologically aware early 2000s rather than early 1970s surely this would not have been the case. This example strengthens the case for a revision of the RCL in the light of concerns which have arisen since its original composition.
[38] Consultation on Common Texts. 1992, 37.
[39] It is offered as an alternative reading for January 1 – Holy Name of Jesus, in Years A, B and C, and for Palm/Passion Sunday, again in all three liturgical years. Consultation on Common Texts. 1992, 26, 42, 58 and 30, 46, 62, respectively.
[40] S.2.1, 2
[41] S.2.2

engaged with the wider debate about anthropocentrism, which in turn leads to the notion that we live in the "Anthropocene" era; the first time when the course of the planet's climate is set by humankind.[42]

I connected popular understandings that the world exists for human use with readings of Genesis 1:26 which speak of humankind as being in the image of God and having dominion over other creatures.[43] I also hinted that what we say about the human relationship with the rest of creation should be reflected in our practice of the Lord's Supper, this sermon being preached as part of a communion service.[44] This hint is taken up in the sermon, making the point that the Lord's Supper, where participants remember Jesus, employs 'resources of planet earth' (bread and wine) in order to do so.[45] Up to this point I had refrained from identifying myself with arguments about 'dominion', instead reporting popular views and the position of 'some concerned environmentalists.'[46] Now, however, the preacher's view was revealed: urgent action is required in response to a real threat brought about by human actions. Such response involves building a better relationship with the rest of creation. We need a wider appeal to the Bible, not just to rely upon the Genesis reading.[47]

Having argued that better reading was required I invited listeners to recognise that we read both situations and Scripture from perspectives which reflect our cultural norms and contemporary concerns.[48] The point concerning cultural norms was illustrated by noting these at play in the conversation between Jesus and the woman in the Gospel passage. I note that here I was using the Gospel reading to support a point concerning reading Scripture in a time of ecological crisis. Contemporary context was driving my use of the Gospel, not Scripture

[42] Anthropogenic climate change was considered from a theological perspective by Northcott in the mid-1990s, and he has continued and developed this work since then. Northcott, 1996; 2014. Muers provides a theological treatment of the implications of anthropogenic climate change for other elements of creation and their relationship to humankind, including plant species and other animals. Given bleak future prospects, she suggests that lament, not theodicy, is the more appropriate starting point for theology. Muers, 2014, 102.
[43] S.2.3
[44] S.2.3.L8 For a firm statement connecting preaching and sacrament, arguing that 'Word and Sacrament are a seamless robe,' see Catholic Bishops Conference, 1998, 23. For a recent comment from within the Reformed tradition see Doug Gay's contention that when preaching at a communion service the preacher should have in mind to 'take them to the table.' Gay, 2018, 30-32. Among the Reformed such views are not new. John Calvin's preferred practice in his Genevan ministry was that 'the Supper could have been administered most becomingly … very often … it should begin with public prayers. After this a sermon should be given … and the Minister should repeat the words of institution at the Supper.' *Institutes,* IV.VIII, 43.
[45] S.2.6,L5
[46] S.2.3 and S.2.5
[47] S.2.6.L6-10
[48] S.2.7,8

driving my interpretation of my setting. Was I exploiting the Bible for my own purposes rather than being in some sense under the judgement of Scripture? I believe not, for on this occasion the Epistle reading, not the preacher, was in the driving seat. It was the Philippians passage (Paul) that informed my response to the ecological setting and influenced my interpretation of the Genesis and Mark readings. So, although using Jesus's conversation for illustrative purposes only,[49] and even hinting at the possibility of a reading of resistance with regard to the Genesis passage,[50] such readings were necessarily accompanied by the statement that they were being read in this way 'with the help of insights from the third of today's readings [Philippians 2:1-13]'.[51]

I had stated the need for urgent action concerning a pressing contemporary issue. I had alerted the congregation to the common interpretation of the Genesis passage which is increasingly problematic in a context of ecological degradation and climatic threat.[52] My next step was to inform the congregation what I, the preacher, believed was the necessary response in terms of biblical interpretation. This was to understand the term, 'dominion', through having a 'new mindset' which would change the way we regard and treat the rest of creation.[53] This new mindset was presented as a contribution from Paul, arising from his meditation upon the ministry of Jesus, as set out in Philippians 2:5.[54] Thus, the Philippians passage was brought into conversation with Genesis. I acknowledged that readings of the latter which identify untrammelled human power ('dominion') over nature as God-given, are plausible interpretations of what is in the text.[55] This plausible, but from an ecological perspective, wrong-headed interpretation of the relevant verses in Genesis, was then critiqued using the Philippians reading.[56]

[49] S.2.7
[50] In terms of human domination of the earth, 'I wouldn't even be surprised if that's how the writer of Genesis 1 saw things.' S.2.8.L3-4
[51] S.2.10.L8
[52] S.2.9, where I connect the 'literal mess' of pollution, the 'mess' that arises from large-scale fossil fuel extraction and use, and 'what it means for humans to have dominion on earth.'
[53] S.2.10
[54] S.2.11.1
[55] S.2.11.L5-10
[56] Here, I am undertaking a 'reading of resistance' of Genesis (*Greening Paul*, 11-32), though employing another biblical passage in order to do so.

I work from a conviction that 'all scripture is inspired by God and useful for teaching'[57] but on what basis is an Epistle authorised to influence or dictate the interpretation of the Old Testament reading? For me, the answer here is that the ecological context provides it. Here, I was following an approach grounded in practical theology, which builds theology from the contextual situation: 'Theological reflection on the practices of the Church as they interact with the practices of the world, with a view to ensuring and enabling faithful participation in God's redemptive practices in, to and for the world.'[58] Bringing the Genesis and Philippians passages into conversation may have echoes of canonical criticism. However, canonical criticism tends to seek agreement or support between or from different texts, whilst the conversation I presented opened up tensions between them.[59]

The interrogation of popular contemporary understandings of 'dominion', which depend on particular readings of Genesis, continued in the sermon. Christ's self-denial is contrasted with a mindset that equates dominion with exercising the power to dominate.[60] Human aspiration to god-like power in order to exploit the earth for our own enjoyment is challenged by an understanding of the nature of God derived from encounter with Jesus, who provides the correct model for practising human dominion.[61] Jesus-like divine lordship (dominion) was then explicitly identified as humble[62] and contrasted with the societal values that influenced the discussion between Jesus and the woman in Mark 7:24-37.[63]

[57] 2 Timothy 3:16
[58] Swinton and Mowat, 6.
[59] See Childs, 2008 for a proposal that the Pauline letters be read with Romans setting the interpretative tone for the rest, and the Pastoral Epistles representing their culmination in practice. This results in a socially conservative reading of the other epistles. Childs seems blind to the fact that imposing this interpretative structure is at odds with his conviction that, 'Scripture is not an inert text waiting to be rendered intelligible though the imaginative capacity of its readers … [but that] Scripture has its own voice.' Childs, 2008, 24. This contrasts with Fowl's argument that texts do not have their own voice but that meanings arise from discussion of sometimes conflicting interpretations. Fowl, 2008. Like Childs, Dunn, in his substantial treatment of Paul, also looks to Romans as the lens through which to read the Apostle's theology. For Dunn, however, this is a means to deepen understanding of Paul so as to enter into a dialogue with him on theological issues, including those contemporary to our time. It is not intended to form one of the two 'bookends', as in Childs's scheme, controlling interpretation of the rest of the Pauline literature. Dunn, 1998, 23-26. I am much more sympathetic to Dunn's approach, especially since preaching also involves a dialogical relationship between ancient scripture and the contemporary setting.
[60] S.2.11
[61] S.2.12-13
[62] S.2.14.L1
[63] S.2.14.L2-4

On this occasion the Pauline epistle was being brought to bear upon the Gospel reading. Once again, the ecological context was the driving consideration which authorised me to privilege the Epistle over the Gospel passage in interpretation for preaching. This included ignoring aspects of the Gospel passage which, on other occasions, might have provided a 'launch pad' for the content of the sermon .[64]

Having summarised Paul's understanding of Jesus's humble approach which looks to the interests of others,[65] my sermon moved to its climax: the congregation should adopt a mindset which leads to actions with a positive ecological outcome. I began by arguing that Paul 'invited'[66] the Philippian congregation to adopt a mindset that impacted upon attitudes and lifestyle, working out their own salvation with fear and trembling, regarding others as better than themselves, looking to the interests of others before their own interests. The next step was to 'wonder how Saint Paul would have applied these insights … in our setting.'[67] I was inviting listeners to consider non-identical repetition[68] and ethical extensionism.[69] The latter was introduced by asking the congregation to imagine how Paul might have applied his insights about Jesus to ecological challenges to God's planet. Specifically, how might the quality of relationships between human beings be extended to relationship with the 'non-

[64] Thus, in my Preaching Journal I noted that I was intrigued that Jesus 'entered a house' and that 'he did not want anyone to know that he was there.' (Mark 7:24) On this occasion I chose to 'pass', seeing this as an occasion when an ecological lens excludes an otherwise legitimate homiletical option. PJ.S2.4

[65] S.2.14.L5-9

[66] S.2.15.L1 Invitation is perhaps a soft description of Paul's appeal, though I am unconvinced by interpreters who see Paul's approach in Philippians as rhetorically manipulative; for example, Marchal, 2007. Preaching in a twenty-first century Western European church setting, however, invitation, not declaration or direction, is the most viable choice for preachers. Members of a congregation have control over their responses to the sermon, and the authority status of preachers is limited.

[67] S.2.16.1 Again my approach to the congregation is quite tentative, inviting them to 'wonder' with me about what Paul might have thought and done.

[68] Fowl reads the letter as Paul's call to the Philippians to deploy Christian practical reasoning that conforms to the story of Christ in 2:6-11 in order to meet the challenges that they face. Their imitation of Christ (and Paul), however, 'is not a wooden sort of identical repetition, but a "non-identical repetition" based on analogy.' Fowl, 1998, 196. This point is vital to my approach in interpreting and preaching Paul's letters. I am not seeking to discover Paul's original authorial intention and then share that with the congregation as though solving such a puzzle then presents us with the meaning of Paul for today. Instead, I am seeking to understand Paul's approach to dealing with the challenges facing the Philippian congregation, then apply that approach in the contemporary ecological setting.

[69] Ethical extensionism argues that moral standing can be given to things not normally understood to have such status. This a well-established approach in environmental ethics, as Clayville points out in her review of Horrell, Hunt and Southgate's proposals for 'greening Paul'. Clayville, 2012, 201. For me, Philippian Christians, using Paul's advice, could reason about their approach to congregational life in their political context. They were encouraged to do so by making analogies with Christ's practice in his incarnational setting, as described in 2:6-11. Contemporary Christians might then consider both Christ in his setting and the Philippian response to that, and its relevance to theirs. Driven by current environmental concerns, today's congregations are urged to apply the resulting insights to their own context.

human' part of creation.[70] Particularly, what did it mean if, imitating a Jesus-like approach to 'dominion', we regarded the other part of creation as 'better than ourselves', just as Paul had enjoined the Philippians to do in their dealing with other people. (2:3)[71] Then, human dominion over creation would require sacrifices, not acquisition, so looking very different to popular understandings.[72]

I concluded the sermon by arguing that where humans live with this mindset, the world would look a different place. On this reading of dominion, God's rest, God's enjoying of the flourishing of creation, is the high point of the Genesis passage, not God's creation of humankind which preceded the sabbath,[73] and followers of Jesus should join together in acknowledging his lordship (dominion) over creation.[74]

Preaching Sermon 3[75]

This sermon was preached on 16th September 2018. As with the two previous sermons, the Gospel reading was the one given for that day in the RCL – Year B *Proper 19,* Sunday between September 11 and September 17 inclusive.[76] The Epistle reading was not the one given for that Sunday, though it does appear in the RCL, both in Year A *Proper 22,* Sunday between October 2 and October 8 inclusive, and Year C *Lent 5*.[77]

Reflecting upon the sermon as preached, I note a number of significant elements. First, my faith story forms part of the discussion of tradition. Second, I realise that this sermon series, and so potentially any other sermon series, functions as a micro-tradition, both for the preacher and for listeners. Such micro-tradition enables preachers and listeners to better reason and make appropriate responses to specific situations. Third, such micro tradition

[70] S.2.16.L7-8
[71] S.2.16.L9
[72] S.2.17
[73] Following Moltmann's suggestion here, which challenges anthropocentric understandings and actions traditionally understood to be authorised by the Genesis text. Moltmann, 1985, 276-296.
[74] Referencing Philippians 2:11.
[75] See Appendix A.3 for the text of this sermon
[76] Consultation on Common Texts. 1992, 53.
[77] Consultation on Common Texts. 1992, 37, 61.

needs to interact with wider traditions; in this sermon the traditions of reading and discussing Scripture, and the contribution of Church tradition.

The sermon opens with story, something more akin to the Gospel genre than the Epistle. Referring to a response to one of my sermons in another church setting, it invites the listeners to consider an incident in my life story.[78] Normally, I am reticent about talking about myself in a sermon, believing that discovering God and God's will for us is the proper focus for sermons, not hearing about the preacher and their story or preferences. Also, if I am honest, I am concerned that sharing personal stories may my reveal my human flaws to the congregation. Yet I am also aware that the perceived character of the preacher is a significant element in congregational interpretation of sermons.[79] This encouraged me to share not only this incident from my recent history but also to speak briefly about my own experience and response to religious tradition.

Next, I invited the congregation to recognise that we had created our own micro-tradition through participating in a sermon series on ecological issues, and that this was part of wider Church tradition in observing Creation Time. The sermon's opening story referenced the potential for controversy in introducing a political issue into the religious setting. I pointed out that our micro-tradition (the previous two sermons) had already addressed political issues without damage to our faith, so we should be able to do so again in this sermon.[80] This enabled me to state the theme for the sermon of the day: 'asking if we are radicals or conservatives in the way we Christians engage with environmental issues.'[81]

Having posed this question, I now located it within the practice of tradition. First, we would examine the question with the aid of Scripture, both in terms of the disciples' response to Jesus, and how Paul advised disciples in Philippi to live their lives.[82] Second, discussion of ecological issues was further encouraged by the witness of contemporary wider Church

[78] S.3.1
[79] See Allen 2004. Reflecting upon my own listening to sermons, in Allen's terms, I am a 'logos' listener, primarily responding to the content and structure of the sermon. When preaching, however, I must try to accommodate the listening preferences of the whole congregation. Sharing something of my story helps build a sense of relationship with the listeners, particularly those who listen through an 'ethos' setting.
[80] S.3.2
[81] S.3.3.L1-2
[82] S.3.3

tradition,[83] and here I referenced Roman Catholic, Evangelical, and Reformed statements in support of the point.[84] The Eco Church movement in England was added to this list in order to connect the setting of the congregation to the perhaps nebulous concept of 'wider Church', by providing a concrete example for the congregation, so alerting hearers that such involvement was an acceptable option in their own setting.[85]

I then offered a summary of views held within the wider Church. These included worry about or opposition to the inclusion of ecological issues as an element of Christian discipleship.[86] I was seeking to acknowledge that this was a controversial conversation in the Church, perhaps including within the congregation to which I was preaching. For some in the wider Church it was about priorities, particularly time given to evangelism as opposed to something identified as a social witness. Others worried about maintaining proper boundaries between the sacred and the secular. For yet others it was about a perceived threat to the identity of the Church. I endeavoured to describe accurately the views of others, convinced that this is an essential element of healthy exploration of Scripture in the context of Christian community.[87] In the case of evangelism, I explicitly indicated my support for this practice.[88]

Ultimately, my intention was not to summarise the views of others but to state my own.[89] This was that whilst I was committed to Christian tradition (conservative), such tradition was centred on Jesus, so tending to disrupt static views of what constitutes tradition i.e. it was also radical. A dynamic, Jesus-focused practice of tradition allows for consideration of new concerns, including ecological challenge, in the light of this Christian good news / gospel.[90]

[83] Listeners heavily influenced by a Reformed or Evangelical background might question an appeal to Church tradition. This would be a response to popular but erroneous understandings of the Reformation slogan, 'sola Scriptura', which they take to reject extra-biblical tradition. Writing from an Evangelical perspective, Lane articulates a better understanding :'It does not mean we should use nothing but the Bible … [or] that we should learn Christian doctrine only from the Bible …it does not even mean that we should recognise no other authority than the Bible in our Christianity. Tradition and the church inevitably and properly function as authorities in some sense. But the Bible remains the decisive and *final* authority, the norm by which all teaching and tradition of the church is to be tested.' Lane, 1988, 633. Lammers Gross (2002) in referring back to bible passages, in order to exclude some potential sermon themes as unfruitful or inappropriate, represents an occasion of this doctrine's application in the homiletical setting.
[84] S.3.4.L2-8
[85] S.3.4.L8-10
[86] S.3.5
[87] Fowl, 1998, 161-177.
[88] S.3.5.L3-5
[89] 'You won't be surprised to hear that this is not the way I see things.' S.3.6.L1
[90] S.3.6

In pursuit of this, I invited listeners to acknowledge that our own congregation was part of an ongoing church tradition – Christian, Reformed, and (in this English context) Nonconformist. The latter hinted at potential to be radical, but the weight of the references here emphasised how the congregants were located within tradition rather than seeking to change it.[91] Additionally, I suggested that being part of a religious tradition today had parallels with the setting of both the Gospel and the Epistle readings. Jesus's disciples answer his question in terms of their scriptural traditions. Paul appeals to his Jewish religious background in support of the argument he is making to the Christians in Philippi.[92]

Having established the importance of religious tradition, for me, the preacher, for the congregation, and for the earliest followers of Jesus, Paul included, I now introduced a note of tension: adherence to tradition might provide comfort to believers living in an increasingly secularised society, but reliance upon past practice would not equip us to face new challenges. In fact, this might prevent us from responding to the real threat posed by climate change, especially if the claims concerning it were perceived to come from outside of the Christian tradition.[93] In order to challenge the notion that tradition is only backward looking, I introduced two notions, both insights from Stephen Fowl. First, he contends that readings with a 'relentless focus upon God' discourage us from misusing the biblical text to support sinful community practice and attitudes.[94] Second, since textual meanings are generated by the concerns of the readers, not by a quality inherent to the text themselves,[95] sustained disagreement over interpretation of Scripture will characterise Christian community life. Its absence would be evidence of spiritual ill health.[96]

Over against taking refuge in a static tradition as a reaction to perceived threats such as societal or ecological change, I offered an example from the Gospel reading of how focus upon Jesus might lead to views or actions that religious traditionalists would perceive as disruptive. Here, Jesus's response to views about him, which are framed by religious

[91] S.3.7
[92] S.3.8, 9
[93] S.3.10
[94] Fowl 1998, 78-81, commenting on Luke 11:34-36.
[95] Fowl 1998, 57-60.
[96] Fowl 1998, 87-91.

tradition, lead to conflict with Peter.[97] At this point, as in Sermon 2, I also used the Epistle to comment upon the Gospel reading, pointing out that Paul was prepared to re-read his experience of tradition through focusing upon Jesus: 'I regard everything as loss because of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord.'[98] Not only did I use the Epistle to comment upon the Gospel passage, I also used it in an appeal to the micro-tradition of this preaching series, referring back to the previous sermon, and to Philippians 2:6-11.The congregation were asked to embrace the model of Christ's lordship commended by Paul as the mindset they should adopt in our understanding and treatment of creation.[99] This would involve disruption and change, but only because of 'our relentless focus is upon Jesus Christ.'[100] I acknowledged this as potentially stressful for congregations, but also as a sign of hope, because it would be evidence of their practising a Christ-centred tradition.[101]

I now moved to critique forms of tradition which look only to the past in order to direct understanding in the present,[102] pointing out how inhospitable such an approach was to consideration of new ideas or experiences.[103] Paradoxically, my critique was being made on the basis of writings from the past, but this was necessary in order to point out that Jesus became the new factor in the life of a religious tradition, one within which some were temperamentally inclined to oppose or reject him. Disciples of Jesus, however, as a result of meeting or knowing him, were open to rethinking their tradition. This assertion opened the way for me to ask the listeners how they might respond to a new ecological situation in the light of knowing Jesus.[104]

This dynamic view of tradition was commended to the congregation with images of journey, drawn both from the Bible and from the contemporary local context.[105] The conversation in the Gospel took place whilst Jesus and his disciples were 'on the way.' (8:27)[106] Paul

[97] S.3.11
[98] S.3.12. For the impact of this verse upon me see above, 47.
[99] S.3.12.LL8-10
[100] S.3.13.L2 The reference to 'relentless focus' demonstrates the influence of Fowl upon me at this point.
[101] S.3.13.LL3-4
[102] S.3.14
[103] Here I was influenced by Barr concerning biblical interpretation: 'historical reading should move more towards an understanding of effects rather than an emphasis on origins.' Barr 1980, 46.
[104] S.3.14.LL7-9
[105] S.3.15
[106] A traditional image of leading the Christian life which I chose not to unpack for the congregation on this occasion.

appealed to his readers/listeners by reference to images of the athletic race, one that I connected with the annual Great North Run, which had taken place within the region in the previous week. I then presented the journey image to the congregation within a temporal framework i.e. within a tradition that points from the past towards the present and future.[107] Accepting this dynamic view of tradition, I argued, encouraged engagement with contemporary issues. Such issues were not in themselves Christian doctrine, but a dynamic faith tradition, focused on Jesus makes a significant contribution in deciding how we respond to them.[108]

At this point in the sermon it is notable how the influences of HHS and Fowl were at play. The influence of Horrell et al was evident in two places. First, in the reference to interpretation having to take into account the contemporary 'solid scientific consensus' on the reality of contemporary climate change;[109] second, the reference to Jesus here in my sermon not only as redeemer and reconciler, but as 'servant-like Lord'[110] echoed their contention that interpreting Paul in ecological terms calls for a chosen, explicitly acknowledged hermeneutical lens with components taken from within his writings. For them Romans 8 and Colossians 1 are the outstanding candidates, with a preference for the latter. In my sermon, at this point, I was attempting a similar exercise but choosing Philippians 2:5-11 for this purpose.[111]

The sermon now moved towards its conclusion. Listeners were brought back to the question posed earlier in the sermon, asking whether we saw ourselves as radical or conservatives in how we as Christians engage with contemporary ecological issues.[112] Once again, I, the preacher, stated my position.[113] I commended a conservative stance on adhering to tradition, but since this tradition focused on Jesus, it would always include radical responses to

[107] S.3.15.LL8-9, with Barr, 1980 clearly in my mind at this point.
[108] S.3.16.
[109] HHS's argument that interpretations of biblical creation accounts must take into account best contemporary scientific understanding was the major influence at this moment in my preaching. *Greening Paul*, 44.
[110] S.3.16.L9
[111] For the thinking behind my choice of Philippians 2:5-11, see above, 23-26.
[112] S.3.17, referencing S.3.4.
[113] S.3.17.LL2-4

contemporary questions.[114] Finally, ecological concern was named as an important setting in which to live out the implications of a tradition of Christian radical conservatism.[115]

Preaching Sermon 4[116]

This sermon was preached on 30th September 2018, the final sermon in a series of four. As with the previous sermons, the Gospel reading was the one given for that day in the RCL – Year B *Proper 21*, Sunday between September 25 and October 1 inclusive.[117] The Epistle reading was not the one given for that Sunday, though it does appear in the RCL, for Year A *Proper 23*. Additionally, Philippians 4:4-7 appears in the RCL for Year C *Advent 3*, and Philippians 4:4-9 for Year C *Thanksgiving Day*.[118]

This sermon sought to affirm that whilst caring for creation was God's work and will, the doing of this work is not the sole preserve of church congregations. Rather, willingness on the part of congregations to work with secular groups is needful in the context of the threats posed by climate change. The climate context might instil fear but, I was to argue, making joy, not fear, the basis for ongoing ecological action might be a distinctive contribution from Christian faith communities. This approach and contribution would be anchored in Paul's exhortation to the Philippian congregation to 'rejoice in the Lord always.' (Philippians 4:4)[119]

I began the sermon by confronting the existence of fear, first affirming it as a healthy response to a dangerous situation.[120] Immediately, though, I alerted the congregation to fear's limitations, specifically that it did not function well 'as [the] dominating basis upon which to live individual or community life.'[121] As with the previous two sermons I turned first to biblical narrative rather than the Epistle, referencing the occasion described in the Gospel passage, which I characterised as a crisis.[122] Jesus's disciples, I argued treated the situation

[114] S.3.18.LL1-2
[115] S.3.18.LL8-9
[116] See Appendix A.4 for the text of this sermon.
[117] Consultation on Common Texts. 1992, 53.
[118] Consultation on Common Texts. 1992, 37, 57, 71.
[119] S.4.20
[120] S.4.1 'With a great juggernaut heading your way, fear is not only natural but helpful.'
[121] S.4.2
[122] S.4.3 When this sermon was preached in 2018 discussions used the vocabulary of 'climate change'. Since mid-2019, the term, 'climate crisis' has become much common. Its use is advocated as a means to alert people to the scale and urgency of the problem. It is argued that 'climate change' is too passive a term to stimulate

as a crisis because they interpreted it through the lens of fear of loss of status. Instead, I suggested, they might have seen it as an occasion for celebration, so hinting to the congregation about the existence of an alternative to fear.[123] My hint was then presented in explicit terms: 'I want us to consider the roles fear and joy play in motivating us to care for God's creation.'[124] Referencing the situation described in the Gospel passage, I announced that we would explore the role joy played in motivating us to take action in caring for creation, particularly in our commitment to 'work with others who are environmentally committed, but not on the basis of Christian or religious faith.'[125] I reinforced this for the congregation by referencing local manifestations of well-known environmental organisations which make no claims concerning religious faith as a basis for their work.[126]

I continued by suggesting that fear of others, not unlike that exhibited by Jesus's disciples, prevented churches from working with other groups on a basis of equality, including in the area of environmental action.[127] Up to this point in the sermon 'fear' had been mentioned explicitly or inferred in every paragraph of the sermon. Now, accompanied by first references to Philippians, an alternative attitude was suggested; that we need not worry. This was attributed to faith in God, quoting Paul as inspiration for this point.[128] Worry, like fear, with which it is linked, was natural. This was true in relation to the world's climate. It was also true of the state of the twenty-first century Western Church, as experienced by the members of the congregation, leading to a temptation to form inward looking communities.[129]

At this point in the sermon I declared my rejection of this negative approach, arguing that openness to others would enable Christians groups and communities to flourish.[130] In fact, I argued, Christians who accepted Paul's call not to worry might be able to make a positive contribution to other groups which were emmeshed in negative views of the current

adequate response. Others doubt the newer term's efficacy in this regard, arguing that whilst it might elicit an initial response, it does little to encourage ongoing activity or commitment. Also, for those who perceive claims about 'climate change' to be scare mongering, talk about a 'climate crisis' reinforces them in their views.

[123] S.4.4
[124] S.4.5.L2
[125] S.4.5.LL5-6
[126] S.4.6
[127] S.4.7
[128] S.4.8 'The Lord is near. Do not worry about anything.' (4:5, 6)
[129] S.4.9
[130] S.4.10

ecological situation.[131] Living and working in response to 'narratives of fear and doom', I pointed out, leads many secular environmental activists to suffer high levels of despair and burnout.[132] Potentially, Christians can make a positive contribution here, as some secular commentators acknowledge.[133]

This Christian contribution included two beliefs and practices that church members might take for granted but which others might find valuable.[134] First, there was the commitment to a belief or values that transcend the current situation. This prevents ecological commitment, and its associated disappointments, from totally dominating one's life.[135] Second, in regular meetings for mutual support, shortcomings and failures can by acknowledged and laid aside; shared experiences and desires can form the basis of future actions.[136] At this point the Epistle reading was used to move from the general context of environmental action to the church setting, with the congregation told that, 'once again, it's helpful to listen to Saint Paul.'[137] Three suggestions from me for action in the church setting then followed.

First, a call to joy, not fear, as the basis of Christian life and action was proclaimed, reflecting the potential benefits of commitment to transcendent beliefs. This was done with explicit reference to the call to rejoicing in the Epistle passage: 'let's be energised by joy, not dominated by fear: 'Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice!' (4:4)'[138] Here, rejoicing was not simply a call to adopt a positive attitude in difficult circumstances. That can become just one more burden upon those who are struggling in the midst of difficulties. Instead of weighing down church members with demands to wishful thinking Paul issues a strong invitation to recognise a faith-reality; that God is near, even in difficult times, which is a cause for rejoicing.[139]

[131] S.4.11 I was referencing word clouds displayed earlier in the service, taken from the work of Bomberg and Hague. Bomberg and Hague 2018.
[132] S.4.12.LL3-5
[133] S.4.12.LL6-12
[134] S.4.13,14
[135] S.4.13 Although I did not say so explicitly in the sermon, the point intended is that the joy that comes from awareness of living in a world created by a loving God functions as a better resource for living than does fear.
[136] S.4.14
[137] S.4.15.L3
[138] S.4.16.L1-2
[139] Without explicitly referencing a named academic theologian, a practice that tends to weary congregants, the sermon here relies on the hearers' intuitively accepting what Moltmann argues explicitly: Christian hope does not rely upon the situation to date, but upon what God chooses to do next. Moltmann, 1996, 27.

Second, responding to the point made concerning the benefit to ecological activists of regular meeting, which allows space for admission of failures and practising mutual support, the preacher and congregation were invited to 'own up to our failings and shortcomings'.[140] This practice was commended with support from the Epistle passage, referencing Paul's attempts to resolve the disagreement within the Philippian congregation between Euodia and Syntyche.[141] It's with such conflict (hopefully) resolved that Paul immediately moves to his exhortation to rejoice. Just as rejoicing was more than wishful thinking, so attempts to resolve conflicts were not taken as evidence of perfection. I acknowledged that in church life imperfection is always with us.[142] The ability to disagree well, however, including when one was wrong, was commended as a valuable practice for the church as well as for others.[143]

The third suggestion for action in the church setting was to express hopes, desires and fears for ourselves and the world through prayer.[144] Once again, a direct quotation from Paul in the Epistle passage was used to support a suggestion from me, the preacher.[145] Such prayers, I argued, would, among other things, '[attune] our hearts and minds to the concerns and positive possibilities of living life fruitfully in this part of God's creation.'[146]

The sermon then concluded by reiterating my conviction that caring for creation is doing God's work and will; that this is true whether or not they are inspired by religious belief. Christians should work with others on what we see as creation care issues, offering distinctive practices which are rooted in joy, not fear.[147] With that, the sermon series also now concluded.

[140] S.4.17.L1
[141] Philippians 4:2-3
[142] S.4.18.L1
[143] Here, I was relying on Fowl's insights about the inevitability of disagreements in Christians communities which arise from differing readings of Scripture. The ability to conduct good community discussion when such differences are identified (not the existence of the different readings as such) is what matters. Fowl, 1998, pp.62-96. Fowl's approach might greatly benefit much discussion and debate around climate change. The narrative about climate change engenders different responses because people come to it with different experiences and interests. How they then conduct their discussion matters greatly.
[144] S.4.19
[145] Philippians 4:6, 7
[146] S.4.19.LL9-10
[147] S.4.20

From my experience of preparing and preaching these sermons, and reflecting upon them in this and the previous chapter, it would be possible to move straight to consideration of their value in demonstrating a green hermeneutic at work, expressed in a green homiletic. Before doing so, however, rather than depend solely on my understanding of my own role in preaching the sermons, and my perspective on the contextual circumstances that influenced my decision making, there is the opportunity to hear from other voices. The responses of the members of my reflection panel, provide a safety measure in assessing my research. From different perspectives they challenge me to reflect more deeply about the views I hold and issues I might otherwise pass over. Their voices, and my responses to what they had to say to me, form the basis of the next chapter of this thesis.

Chapter 5 Reflections and Responses to the Sermons After They Were Preached

In this chapter I consider the sermons after-the-event. There are two main sources for my reflections. The first one comes from my own reactions to the sermons as I have re-read them. These arise from and build upon the narrative I have shared in the previous chapters of the thesis, concerning myself (chapter one), the preparation for and delivery of the four-sermon series preached in the Creation Time series (chapters three and four), and my use of significant resources for that task (chapter two). The second significant source for this chapter is the responses provided by the three-person reflection panel. So I now consider the panel and its membership, then turn to the reflections that they help to inform.

The Reflection Panel

The members of this panel were Stuart Blythe (SB), a Baptist Minister, and the John Gladstone Associate Professor of Preaching and Worship at Acadia Divinity College, John Riches (JR), previously Professor of Divinity and Biblical Criticism at Glasgow University, and Sandie Stratford (SS), a retired teacher, living in Lincoln, England, who is both a church member and active campaigner on environmental issues. They were chosen to obtain feedback from a homiletics teacher, a biblical studies expert, and an ecological activist who has a strong church commitment.

There is a measure of diversity in the membership of the panel, though this is limited. Two are male, one female; two are of retirement age, one working age; two work or have worked within the higher education context, one as a primary school teacher. All are white and all are involved in the life of the Church. Had this thesis been focused solely on how people respond to ecological sermons then I would have brought together a panel more representative of the diversity one might find in a church congregation, particularly in terms of ethnicity and age range.[1] My research is focused upon a preacher's approach to ecological

[1] If seeking to more closely reflect the composition of the congregation which heard the sermons preached, the proportion of male to female would need to be reversed. Also, the congregation in North Shields contains significant numbers of people of working age. At the same time, it does reflect the wider situation in England and Wales where a much greater proportion of those who identify as Christian are in older ages groups (fifty and above) compared to other religions (especially Islam), and the population in general. Office of National Statistics, 2020.

issues, in terms of me as person (autoethnography)[2], and particularly the factors influencing decision making (auto-ethnomethodology)[3]. The panel, however, provides an additional element of feedback to the sermons, highlighting issues that may not have occurred to me, and encouraging me to deeper reflection upon issues I had already begun to address.[4]

I sought information from the panel members using a semi-structured approach. After each sermon had been preached, I sent a copy of the text to each, accompanied by a set of questions, inviting the panel members to respond, using their own words.[5] The same questions were asked regarding all four of the sermons. Panel members were asked questions concerning the focus of the sermon and clarity with which this was expressed, use of scripture and Christian tradition, development of theological understanding, and encouragement to new thinking and action. Finally, they were invited to share any other comments they wished to make as a result of reading the sermons. Comments from the reflection panel appear below as part of my exploration of issues that arise from reflection upon the sermons, but first I offer an overview of the reaction of each member of the panel to the sermons.

Overall, SB's responses reflected significant reservations about preaching an ecologically themed sermon series in the way that I had done. For him, if ecological (or other) issues were not present in the mind of the biblical author, or part of the content of the biblical passage, then attempts to derive such themes from them were misguided. From his perspective, my attempt to use a green hermeneutical lens to read Bible passages in order to generate ecological insights fitted into that category. So, although he responded positively in terms of whether the sermons clearly expressed my intended ecological focus, he was generally unconvinced by my use of scripture for that purpose. Where he responded most positively was when a Pauline passage was used as the lens through which to read an Old Testament

[2] See Denzin 2003 for an example of politically committed autoethnography, relevant in considering responses to climate change, a phenomenon with significant political dimensions.
[3] Ethnomethodology focuses upon what people do rather than how they feel about events (Silverman 2000). It is concerned with decisions and actions undertaken in a social world, and accounting for them after the fact (Gubrium and Holstein, 2000, 490-491); a good description of what is being attempted in this thesis.
[4] Using two qualitative methods, autoethnography and ethnomethodology, offers increased depth to my findings (triangulation of methods). Use of the reflection panel strengthens this through the additional insights from additional observers (triangulation through multiple analysis). For an account of different forms of triangulation and their potential contribution to evaluation, see Lewis et al, 2014.
[5] Appendix D *Questions for Reflection Panel*.

passage, one which is a widely accepted as applying to a creation setting. For SB, my choice to follow the set lectionary passages from Mark's Gospel was a puzzling. For him, it was unlikely to yield valid biblical insights for our ecological situation; and perhaps was even a misuse of the biblical material.

JR, in addition to his expertise in the interpretation of biblical texts, is concerned about the impact of climate change, and finding and taking appropriate actions in response. So he was interested and engaged with what was being attempted in the sermon series.[6] He did not underestimate the challenge involved in moving from biblical texts and their original contexts to preaching on the contemporary ecological context. That said, in comparison with SB, he viewed the interpretative approach I attempted as interesting rather than necessarily problematic. Thus JR was more generally positive in his comments on the sermons than was SB. This did not prevent him questioning some aspects of them, particularly, choosing to preach on the basis of two readings rather than one. He was concerned this would prevent me from using either to their full potential.

Among the three reflection panel members, SS was particularly open to hearing sermons that attempted to bring together Scripture and contemporary ecological questions. This attitude was rooted in her own life situation. She is both a committed Christian and an ecological activist. Often she finds that her spiritual insights are more welcomed, or tolerated, within environmental groups than her ecological questions and commitments are within a church setting. SS wished to know how the Bible might be a resource with regard to her ecological commitments. She was already convinced that, 'whilst not a 'rule book', the Bible contains wisdom to assist with 'living the life worthy'.'[7] In fact, she would further extend an interpretation offered by me in one sermon, in a way that opened up questions about the authority of both preacher and listeners. This is not to suggest that SS would hold back from making constructive critical comments. These, though, related to occasions where she felt I might have improved upon my application of the approach I took, not a rejection of my interpretative approach itself.

[6] 'I'm looking forward to … hearing and learning more how you see the urgency of the situation [and] …so you know a bit where I am coming from … I'll be touring for three weeks with farmers from Malawi who know first-hand what the effects of climate change are and have some very interesting ideas about how to combat them.' JR responding to Sermon 1.
[7] SS responding to Sermon 1.

The responses from the panel members should be understood in qualitative, not quantitative terms, i.e. they provide an indication of various types of response that might be made to my sermons.[8] The feedback obtained using this approach does not indicate how widely such views might be held within a 'typical' church congregation, nor does it encompass the full range of possible responses, from the most sceptical to the most accepting.[9] That said, each member of the panel represented a distinctive perspective. SB was the 'wary listener', suspicious of the project from the outset, being unconvinced by any sermon series which follows themes not derived directly from the original subject matter of the Bible passage.[10] JR was the 'critical friend', sympathetic to my aim of discovering a way into effective ecological preaching, and interested in how scripture might best be used and preached upon for this purpose.[11] SS was the 'ready listener', positively disposed to preaching that might resource her in making decisions about the place of environmental activism in her life, and in relation to her continuing church commitment.[12]

Taken together, the responses from the panel, lead me to highlight two areas for consideration. The first concerns my approach to choosing and using Bible readings in the sermons, not only in their relation to the contemporary ecological context, but also in their interaction with each other. This then leads me to consider the second area, which is the potential for and limits to how listeners choose to utilise what they hear from sermons.

[8] Within the literature on research methods, Denzin and Lincoln (2000) paint a stark picture of the differences between qualitative and quantitative approaches. This is strongly contested by Seale et al (2004) who believe that Denzin and Lincoln's preference for the qualitative alone wrongly privileges the inner life over the material. The focus of this thesis is upon why I responded to the various factors which encouraged me to preach as I did, and the types of response the sermons engendered among listeners. These matters do relate to the 'inner life' and so are best examined through qualitative methods. Also, investigating the types of responses, as opposed to a comparison of numbers of people who make different responses, is better done using a qualitative approach.

[9] 'Typical' here is a term to be used with caution. Whilst having factors in common all church congregations also display differences, arising from their settings, histories, and the interactions of key individuals within them.

[10] 'I am always suspicious of thematic or topical preaching that brings a question to a text that it was not really designed to address.' SB responding Sermon 1.

[11] 'I think the sermons raise issues [and] place them within contemporary Christian belief and practice.' JR responding to Sermon 4.

[12] 'Thank you for this opportunity to reflect on your sermons. I feel it has been timely – perhaps God's timing – in making me think about the next stage in my life and how I shall balance my sense of urgency about climate change with my desire to enjoy my retirement. It has also encouraged me to consider whether it is perhaps time to join the Quakers (whilst ideally keeping a link with my local church) in order to get the necessary support for activism.' SS responding to Sermon 4.

Choice and Reading the Bible Passages Used in the Sermon Series

I chose to focus upon Pauline writings as a potential resource for ecological preaching, particularly upon Philippians, and remain comfortable with this choice. That's not to assume, however, my decisions would be universally accepted by all those who heard the resulting sermons. Responses of suspicion or opposition are well represented by the member of my reflection panel who stated from the outset, 'I am always suspicious of thematic or topical preaching that brings a question to a text that it was not really designed to address.'[13] This not only challenges putting the ecological concerns first in the homiletical process. It also questions whether the vast majority of biblical texts can be read with any ecological implications in view at all.

As someone whose own faith story is inextricably bound up with encouragement to begin by reading the Bible and only then to derive themes from it, I acknowledge the force of this view. Yet I remain committed to the way in which I used scripture in this sermon series. Ultimately, however, my view is that any use of a biblical text, other than when it was read or heard by its original recipients in their setting, involves applying it in a situation that it was not written to address. Paul's letter to Philippian Christians, for example, was written to address particular aspects of their life, lived in a first century Roman colony in Macedonia.[14] Reading his letter for its relevance in any other setting (not just an ecological one) to some extent involves its application to situations that the biblical text 'was not really designed to address.' On the other hand, SB's response encourages me to ask what safeguards must be put in place when seeking to extend what Paul had to say in the first century Philippian context in a way appropriate to the contemporary ecological setting.

Within Christian tradition, in different historical periods, interpretations of the Bible which were widely regarded as valid, were not limited only to the literal sense of the text, or to its original setting or authorial intention. Both Augustine and Aquinas, to take as examples two prominent Christian theological voices in the Western tradition, argued for the validity of

[13] SB, responding to Sermon 1.

[14] Bible commentaries on Philippians usually provide an introduction to the historical setting. Variations between these accounts should alert readers to the frequently provisional nature of findings regarding the ancient world, including Philippi. Peter Oakes's careful, in-depth examination of the historical data, for example, not only builds a plausible picture of the city and church setting, but also corrects the anachronistic assumptions of some previous commentators about the Roman military background of its citizens, and the composition of the congregation itself. Oakes, 2001, 2015.

figurative and allegorical interpretations, in addition to a literal one.[15] Theological heirs of the Reformation tradition, which emphasised the literal sense of the text, have tended to view divergence from it with a measure of suspicion. In the twentieth century, the emergence of readings from a committed stance, such as feminist theology and liberation theology, encouraged a swing back in the direction of a wider range of interpretations, perhaps also encouraged by a general engagement with post-modern suspicion of a single overarching story concerning reality.

Looking at an instance of popular interpretation of the Old Testament within the contemporary Christian church, it is very doubtful that applying passages from the prophets to the story of Jesus, in the way so many congregations and preachers do during the Advent and Christmas period, reflects the situation the original prophetic message was intended to address.[16] Some would argue that this makes the point, as far the inadvisability of preachers diverging from the author's original intention and context is concerned. At the same time, however, why should a practice used by a Gospel author, or indeed of the Apostle Paul, be denied to a twenty-first century Christian preacher, as long as the preacher makes clear to the hearers the basis upon which she or he makes their interpretation? Applying biblical texts to situations which they were not written to address is a practice that occurs within the Bible itself, and it has recurred within the Christian tradition ever since. The Gospels, Pauline letters, and other New Testament books frequently reference or quote Old Testament books in order to make comment or claim about their later setting which was not the same as the one addressed by the earlier author.[17]

The question for preachers and sermon listeners is whether to accept that an ecological reading of biblical texts which were written without an ecological intention, is a legitimate occurrence of practices already present in the history of interpretation, and within preaching itself. Yet, for its survival and flourishing, preaching depends upon applying responses to

[15] Yarchin, 2004, 61-75, 93-96.
[16] When a voice is calling in the wilderness to prepare God's way in Isaiah 40, the prophet was not predicting the existence of John the Baptist, nor were they speaking about a situation of Roman military occupation centuries later. It is not surprising, though that Gospel writers might have discerned analogies between the two situations that led them to frame their interpretation in the way that they did.
[17] Sawyer, for example, provides a helpful, wide ranging examination of how one Old Testament book, Isaiah, has been referenced and interpreted in the Christian tradition, in different settings and for a wide variety of purposes. In it, he notes Paul's reference to the prophet no fewer than seventeen times in Romans and nine times in the Corinthians correspondence. Sawyer, 1996, 21-28.

biblical texts in different situations and settings. Of course, some contemporary situations and applications will seem more analogous than others when comparing them to (assumed) original settings, and authorial intentions. Also, there must be some limits to the interpretations that one can derive from a biblical text. A completely malleable text could be replaced with any other text. To quote SB once again, 'if the same sermon could have been preached from other passages have these passages served any specific function as Scripture, as somehow "authoritative" or even "informative" in this context?'[18] In fact, to push his point even further, if any interpretation of a biblical text is possible then not only could it be replaced with any other biblical text, it could be replaced by any text whatsoever, without this at all troubling the interpreter.[19]

My decision to be constrained by choices of readings made by others provided one safety measure against simply choosing texts to suit my own interests and purposes, ecological or otherwise. I chose to follow the RCL Gospel readings for the Sundays during the preaching of the sermon series, pairing them with my own choice of readings from Philippians. Here, though, the potential benefit of choosing to use these Gospel readings does need to be weighed against potential drawbacks relating to my research. On that question, my thesis supervisors wondered whether my choice would cause unnecessary complications in researching use of Paul's writings as a resource in preaching ecological sermons.

Despite their reservations I pressed ahead with my original decision, for in addition to their role in providing an appropriate constraint on my ecological interests, I had additional reasons for turning to the lectionary Gospel readings. First, I wished to preach sermons that reflected my current church setting, and following the RCL is normal practice at the congregation in North Shields. Second, I wanted to trial an approach to preaching that would be usable in the wider church setting, and many denominational traditions have an even higher expectation or requirement for lectionary-based preaching. Third, my previous experience in producing support material for worship leaders, whilst I was Environmental Chaplain for Eco

[18] SB, responding to Sermon 1.

[19] The history of interpretation demonstrates that some biblical texts present themselves to interpreters as being more amenable to the situation they are attempting to address. Martin Luther, for example, reading the Bible with the theme of justification and his contemporary church setting in mind, brought readings from Paul, particularly Galatians and Romans, to the fore. Other biblical books, notably James, he relegated to a minor role, or perhaps discarded. More recently, in the twentieth century, proponents of liberation theology brought books such as Exodus to the foreground, along with the Old Testament prophets, and looked to James, the Gospels, and the Book of Revelation, not the Pauline writings, for inspiration and support. Boff, 1987.

Congregation Scotland, suggested that this approach could prove fruitful. Finally, I wished to test the validity of the approach used by Horrell, Hunt and Southgate in using a green lens, taken from scripture, through which a wide range of scripture (not simply that which is understood to have been written with ecological intent) could yield ecological insights or messages.

My own reflection upon this decision, and its outcomes, is further informed and challenged by comments from members of the reflection panel. SS, the 'ready listener', reported no issues with my choice of the Gospel passages for these sermons. On one occasion she commented that the link to ecological concerns was 'somewhat more tenuous, I think', but this was in relation to my attempt to deliver this in one sermon, not about my decision to pursue this approach in general.[20] On another occasion she wrote favourably concerning the contribution of the Gospel passage in providing a clear understanding of the sort of issues that might lie behind a conflict, and of the importance of being of one mind.[21]

Both SB and JR, my 'suspicious listener' and 'critical friend', however, did raise concerns about my choice of readings, the former questioning the approach in general, the latter aspects of its application. SB's comment concerning one sermon, that he was 'not sure that Mark brought anything to the table other than that we define ourselves in relation to others,'[22] needs to be pondered seriously. His comment will, at least in part, reflect his concerns not simply about pairing of Gospel texts with passages from Paul as such, but about the use of either or both when reflecting upon ecological issues: 'I think you have taken on a very difficult task in trying to address a topic which can claim to be a valid Christian concern from a set of readings which do not address the issue and even implicitly require quite a bit of work to make the connection. I do not understand this as a strategy of choice.'[23]

I might be tempted to ignore SB's comments, dismissing them as arising from his opposition to thematic preaching which seeks to extend the application of biblical texts into situations

[20] SS, responding to Sermon 3.
[21] SS, responding to Sermon 1.
[22] SB, responding to Sermon 2.
[23] SB, responding to Sermon 3.

different from their original setting.[24] Yet this would be unwise as I am also strongly challenged by responses from JR. For example, concerning the first sermon, he says 'I think it was probably too ambitious to work with both the [Gospel and Epistle] texts.' He then cautions that although climate change themes could probably be derived from the texts used, this would involve substantial explanatory work for the benefit of the congregation. [25] And these comments come from a listener who 'enjoyed reading these sermons' and saw them as probably 'very well-tailored to the congregation you addressed'.[26] On another occasion he 'thought both the Mark and Philippians passages fitted quite easily into the general theme of the sermon,' but was 'not sure that they were really 'mined' to give any answer to the wider questions.'[27]

This might be taken to suggest that undertaking an ecological reading of one biblical text as the basis for preaching was challenging enough; to do so for two texts, reading each from a green perspective, then reading both in relationship to each other in order to generate a distinctive ecological message for a sermon, was attempting a step or more too far. The comments from SB and JR encourage me to acknowledge the complexity of the approach I adopted; theirs is indeed a plausible point of view.[28] As a result, in my future practice I might trial using one biblical text for each sermon when preaching a series, and compare the outcomes with those from the series that features in this thesis.[29] In grappling with world realities, however, whatever Occam might once have said, complexity is not necessarily a vice nor simplicity a virtue. So I believe it is worth exploring further the beneficial outcomes from the decision I made on this occasion.

So, concerning the place of the Bible passages in my homiletical approach, although the ecological context came first, reading and responding to these texts was the necessary next step for me; the biblical texts were not an optional addition to the homiletical process. As I have written above, my normal preparation process for writing sermons involves reading the

[24] 'I am always suspicious of thematic or topical preaching that brings a question to the text that it was not really designed to address.' SB, responding to Sermon 1.
[25] JR, responding to Sermon 1.
[26] JR, responding to Sermon 4.
[27] JR, responding to Sermon 4.
[28] For example, on re-reading the text of Sermon 1, eight months after preaching it, I wrote, 'A complicated sermon, trying to bring together wind turbines, ritual washing in Mark, responses to conflict in Philippians, and apply it to single use plastic cups in church – ambitious!' Note made 25/05/2019.
[29] See the sermon with which I conclude chapter 6, below.

texts chosen, and returning to them again and again throughout the process of thinking and writing.[30] While the contemporary ecological context inspired the creation care theme for the sermon series as a whole, reading the Bible passages influenced or inspired my choice of which aspects of that wider context would be addressed and in what way. This was true for all four of the sermons preached.

In Sermon 1, a Gospel story featuring conflict, combined with Paul's reference to opponents in Philippi, steered me towards addressing conflicts which arise from contemporary ecological concerns and conversations.[31] In Sermon 2 the references to the lordship of Christ (Phil. 2:9, 11) sparked thought of popular interpretations of human lordship, or 'dominion' in Genesis 1:26. This led to a sermon on discerning the appropriate status and authority of humankind with and over the rest of creation.[32] In Sermon 3 the Gospel's portrayal of Jesus and his disciples 'on the way' (Mark 8:27) and Paul's self-portrait of faith development (3:4^{b}-14) in terms of journey towards a goal, encouraged me to explore how ecological concern is a legitimate part of Christian tradition, when tradition is understood as being a dynamic process.[33] For Sermon 4, Paul's exhortation to rejoice and not to worry (Philippians 4:4-6), when combined with the disciples' negative response to the witness of others (Mark 9:38-50), inspired preaching on the place of joy and fear in contemporary ecological activity, particularly drawing upon research on the vocabulary used by contemporary campaigning organisations.[34]

As well as having a significant role to play in choice of topic for each of the sermons, my interaction with the biblical texts, experienced as conversation, then influenced the content of each sermon. In my dialogue with the biblical texts I invite the authors of Bible

[30] See above, 34-36.
[31] See above, 56. Given my conviction concerning the role of the Holy Spirit in the ecological context, it would be more consistent to attribute this 'steering' role to the Spirit. That is to say, I believe or hope that the Spirit worked upon my imagination to make a connection between incidents of conflict in the Bible and contemporary conflicts over ecological issues in the present. Yet it was I, the individual, with my faith story, upon whom the Spirit was at work. So, there is space here for a distinctive imaginative contribution by the individual human being. I need, though, to avoid either claiming the Spirit's contribution as my own, or attempting to identify as divine revelation what is in fact the product of my imagination. As Fowl suggests (1998, 119) our attempts to identify the Spirit's presence are more credible when we discern it in the words and actions of others, not when we claim to find within ourselves. It follows that those who heard the sermons may be better placed to discern where the Spirit is at work in what I thought and said.
[32] PJ.S..2
[33] See above, 67.
[34] See above, 73.

commentaries into the conversation, Yet I seldom share the detail of this part of the conversation explicitly with listeners in my sermons. My experience is that much though I may be intrigued by these contributions, congregational members tend to find statements about what 'bible scholars' and 'experts' are 'telling us today' off-putting, or of little interest. So, whilst insights from scholarship inform the interpretations I offer in sermons, I seldom provide listeners with the scholarly backstory to reaching them. I find that this approach is seldom queried.[35] I am more likely, however, to point listeners to how I am using one passage of scripture to comment upon or interact with another one. Once again, though, here I listen to responses from members of my reflection panel which help me discern how effective this approach was in practice.

Responses from the reflection panel members did include some concerns about how effectively the Bible readings were used in my sermons. In general, the church-going ecological activist was very positive. For her, I 'drew out appropriate principles, in keeping with the gist of the text and perceived intention of the author … links with the gospel story were sensitively and intelligently made';[36] there were 'good links between the Gospel reading and the Philippians text';[37] and, 'the Bible was appropriately applied within its original meaning and intention.'[38] Such praise is unlikely to arise from a lack of discrimination since even this 'ready listener' was also prepared to draw attention to an occasion when she believed the sermon's link from the Bible to ecological concerns was 'somewhat more tenuous this time, I think.'[39] Both of the other reflection panel members, however, were more ready to question my use of the Bible passages in the sermons.

Unsurprisingly, given his suspicion of thematic preaching on topics not explicitly addressed within the biblical texts themselves, SB was frequently unimpressed by the way scripture was

[35] In the context of this sermon series, on only one occasion did a member of the reflection panel raise such an issue. JR, referring to the issue of the identity of the congregation's 'opponents' in Philippi, commented, 'I wonder a little … whether your emphasis on the challenges the Philippians were meeting outside their community quite gets the drift of Paul's letter … one might argue that there was at least as much concern with internal dissension.' JR, responding to Sermon 1. His comment is notable not for its content as such, but in its being made at all. I would be happy to respond to this and any such comments from listeners to a sermon. JR's comment, though, alerts me to the fact that listeners come late to the preacher's conversation with commentaries i.e. they get to hear its outcome, not its content, and so are relying upon the integrity of the preacher, both in preparation and preaching of sermons.
[36] SS, responding to Sermon 1.
[37] SS, responding to Sermon 3.
[38] SS, responding to Sermon 4.
[39] SS, responding to Sermon 3.

handled in these sermons. Concerning Sermon 1 he commented, 'the links between the text and the context were somewhat general … a rhetorical rather than a content connection … [so] I was not convinced by the text/context connections … [and] I think this is likely to be problematic throughout this series.'[40] Subsequent comments suggest that he did not change his mind on that final point: 'it has to be admitted that the [Philippians] text is being applied in a way that it was not necessarily meant to be';[41] and 'while this argument could be applied to creation care the case was not really made from Scripture that supporting creation care is the radical Jesus way … [and there was] no demonstration from Scripture that creation care was that particular way.'[42]

Comments from JR also raised some concerns, though these were not as critical as those from SB. Given that they came from someone more in sympathy with my aims and approach in this project, they carry weight in themselves, and also encourage me not to dismiss those from SB. JR, whilst he appreciated it was a challenge 'how in a few minutes … [to] make the bridge between text and contemporary context,' still suggested that, 'maybe a closer examination of the text … could have led to a closer examination of the ways people react to the need to simplify and change their lifestyles and indeed the way we do things in society.'[43] On another occasion, while accepting that the Mark and Philippians passages fitted easily into the sermon's theme (about a distinctive contribution towards motivations for ecological actions), he commented, 'I'm not sure that they were really 'mined' to give any answer to the wider questions.'[44]

JR went on to wonder whether ecological questions needed to be pursued elsewhere; that the sermon format alone is insufficient: 'the sermon raises issues … and opens the way for fuller discussion, which would probably best be conducted within a study group / action group context.'[45] This came in addition to an earlier response to the sermon's questioning of traditional views of human 'dominion' or 'lordship' over creation:, 'I think there is room (not

[40] SB, responding to Sermon 1.
[41] SB, responding to Sermon 2, though he does also comment that having the biblical texts in conversation with each other, in this case with the Philippians text commenting on Genesis 1 to make a case for contemporary creation care, might be appropriate in my congregational setting: 'fine if that is how this congregation gains its "knowledge" about how to live.'
[42] SB, responding to Sermon 3.
[43] JR, responding to Sermon 1.
[44] JR, responding to Sermon 4.
[45] JR, responding to Sermon 4. I address this in Chapter 6, 108-112, below.

necessarily in this sermon) for further reflection on the view of creation/nature shared by those who think they can simply pursue their own goals … without reference to the interests and 'voices' of other beings in the planet.'[46] Here, SS was in agreement, suggesting at one point that church home groups might be the venue for deeper reflection and a move to action, 'which might include involvement directly with one of the [environmental campaigning] organisations you listed [in the sermon]. Certainly, practical outworking of the theology needs careful attention.'[47]

In responding to these comments from the panel members about my use of the Bible in these sermons, and the limitations of the sermon format itself, two points occur to me. First, some of SB's reservations derive from our different views concerning any sermon series on a creation care theme (except perhaps where the biblical passages chosen explicitly address creation itself). Without our coming to a mind on validity of the enterprise in principle, attempts to reach agreement on how scripture might or might not be used for that purpose are unlikely.[48] I suspect that we would not come to one mind on this, though perhaps further conversation might reveal nuances in our positions that show us to be closer than is apparent on this occasion. If reaching agreement between two individuals concerning the approach to interpretation and the content of the sermons I preached was the object of the exercise, then the method I used to elicit responses from panel members is too limited. Instead, what was revealed was a specific type of response: 'wary listener'. Helpfully for my project, this functions as a 'perfect type' in sociological terms, one that it is useful to recognise and respond to so as to strengthen my own understanding and practice.

When, however, the 'critical friend' joins with the 'wary listener' in asking whether working with more than one reading results in lack of depth in interpreting the texts, I need to take

[46] JR, responding to Sermon 2.
[47] SS, responding to Sermon 4.
[48] As argued above in chapter 1, 1-4, above, I have justified the attempt at preaching a sermon series on creation care on the basis that the contemporary ecological crisis demands a response from humankind. As a preacher, I respond by offering sermons. These sermons bear testimony to what I discovered when I brought my concern for the contemporary ecological context into dialogue with certain Bible passages, so generating new interpretations. Hearers, including SB, may choose to accept or reject such testimony. As Anna Carter Florence puts it, in a sermon in the testimony tradition, 'the preacher tells what she has seen and heard *in the biblical text and in life*, and then confesses what she believes about it … there is no proof for testimony other than the engagement of a witness, and no proof for a sermon other than the engagement of the preacher. It is impossible to prove whether a sermon is true or false. One can only believe it or reject it.' Florence, 2007, xiii. (author emphasis)

yet greater notice and respond appropriately. JR's response encourages me to ask whether, given the same amount of preparation time, to choose two or more readings means that each receives less attention than if only one is chosen. Likewise, in the preaching of a sermon, space given to commenting upon second or third readings means that less about each can be offered to the congregation than would otherwise be given to a single reading. To choose only one reading is certainly a viable option.[49] It does offer greater opportunity for 'a closer examination of the text',[50] or to clearly 'demonstrate from Scripture'[51] a point a preacher wishes to make to the congregation. For me, however, such potential losses have to be balanced against the reward received through bringing the different Bible passages in conversation. This has potential to generate new insights into how we should respond to the challenges of the contemporary ecological situation. So the question to be addressed next is whether my practice generated plausible, helpful ecological readings out of such discussions between biblical texts.

In Sermon 2, this occurred when Genesis 1:26 was read through the lens of Philippians 2:5-11, which itself was being read from an ecological perspective. All the members of the reflection panel responded positively, JR especially so.[52] He described the use of Philippians 2 as 'thoughtful and appropriate … an interesting way of offering Christological critique/rereading of the notion of dominion in Genesis, one that might help in the necessary change of mindset which must precede action'. For him, the reading offered in the sermon was 'a creative development of various forms of kenotic Christology.' On this point even so wary a listener as SB agreed, if not in such effusive terms.[53] With SS, her positive response related less to the theological insight which so pleased JR, and to a lesser extent SB. Instead, for her, the value of this interpretation was found not only in its application to her views on ecological activism, but also through her reapplication of it to other areas of her life. [54]

[49] Though, in passing, I note here the argument made by Allan and Russell (1998) that all of the RCL readings should be read in the context of worship, no matter which one (or more) is preached upon. For them, this has catechetical and declarative implications. The congregation are instructed in the content of Scripture. Also, reading the biblical text, even without comment from a preacher, makes space for Scripture, presumably with the help of the Holy Spirit, to call forth a response from the listeners.
[50] JR, responding to Sermon 1.
[51] A phrase used by SB on more than one occasion.
[52] 'I really like this piece.' JR, responding to Sermon 2.
[53] 'The use of the lordship of Jesus Christ as expressed in the emptying incarnation is interesting and I think valid.' SB, responding to Sermon 2.
[54] I consider her comment in terms of its impact upon my understanding of the authority of the preacher, and the power of the congregation to use the sermon's message as they will, below, 92-96.

In the other sermons, additional helpful insights arose through the interplay between the biblical texts, when approached from an ecological perspective. In Sermon 1, the Gospel reading, concerning conflicts over ritual washing, when read with our ecological setting in mind, narrowed my focus to questions about how to deal with disagreements concerning the impact of human interventions upon the contemporary natural landscape.[55] The Philippians reading then contributed a further tightening of focus, by providing an example of working out disagreement in a congregational setting.[56] This included both handling disagreements within the congregation,[57] and in its relationship with individuals or groups outside the congregation.[58]

In Sermon 3, the Gospel reading, featuring Jesus and his disciples on the way, conversing about who people say he is, connected in my mind and memory to conversations with those who see concern about environmental issues as a low priority for, or even distraction from, Christian discipleship. With this as the initial focus for the sermon, the Philippians reading for that day contributed insights from Paul's call to a relentless focus upon Jesus Christ as the first priority which then sets the other priorities for our discipleship.[59] Additionally, the Philippians 2:5-11 reading, which had been used in the previous sermon, was deployed again to remind the congregation that this Christ was the Lord of creation who works in a servant-like way.[60]

[55] S.1.5-7.
[56] Paul's letters are, of course, letters to congregations. Although there are differences between the situations of first century and twenty-first century Christian congregations, and between different congregations in each era. Yet they all identify with seeking to follow in the way of Jesus Christ. Thus, Paul's letters are a resource, not only about how to respond intellectually as an individual to faith questions, but about how communities might act in response to the questions that face them in their specific setting, whatever that might be. In this sense, contra SB, interpreting Paul's letters from this perspective **is** to read them for what they were intended to address.
[57] S.1.12-13.
[58] S.14-15.
[59] S.3.12-13. Our understanding of who we believe Jesus is will affect our decisions about which of our attitudes and actions might be influenced and changed as a result of faith commitment. To be presented with every knee 'in heaven and on earth and under the earth' bending before Jesus Christ and every tongue confessing that he is Lord (Phil. 2:10, 11); to see him as the 'firstborn of all creation,' where, 'all things have been created through him and for him' (Col. 1:15, 16), is be challenged to apply what is believed about Jesus to living life in our interconnected planetary ecological setting. Here, I am following Stephen Fowl's advocacy of an unflinching focus upon God, experienced in responding to the person of Jesus. This functions as both inspiration and safeguard when acting in response to an interpretation of Scripture. Fowl, 1998, 78-81.
[60] S.3.12, 16.

In Sermon 4, it was Paul's exhortation to the Philippian congregation to be joyful[61] which triggered memory of a personal experience within the context of ecological activism. This was of research undertaken on the contrasting positive and negative vocabulary used by different environmental campaigning groups in their public pronouncements.[62] The Gospel reading played a more minor role here, providing in the sermon's opening paragraphs an illustrative story of followers of Jesus operating upon the basis of negative attitudes, not positive ones.[63] On this occasion there was less interplay between the Gospel and Epistle readings, and the inclusion and retention of the former owed more to ecclesial expectations than the value of its contribution to the theme of the sermon. Taken as a whole, the evidence from the four sermons suggests that the additional perspectives offered by applying the Philippians reading to the specific ecological topic for the day (the choice of which topic had been guided or inspired by Gospel reading) provided additional, valuable insights. This constituted a positive contribution from Paul's writings.

The Authority of the Preacher Challenged by the Listeners

My ecological preaching in this sermon series was based upon an interpretative approach in which the author's intentions are not allowed to exhaust the possible meanings of the biblical text. In this approach there is no need for the settings in which preaching takes place to be the same as those in the original text (always assuming that such information about the original setting is available to us in any case). I also wanted to unlock responses from the congregation which would help make the biblical texts and the text of the sermon come alive in their own setting.[64] It was challenging, though, to discover and accept that listeners to my sermons also might choose to reinterpret what I said, or to take what I have applied to an ecological setting and reapply it in another context. From the reflection panel, in her response to Sermon 2, SS provided a significant instance of this occurring.

[61] Phil. 4:4
[62] See above, 53-54.
[63] S.4.2-5.
[64] Here I was grappling with questions about the contextuality of all understanding. As Lawrence (2019, 125) comments, concerning interpreting the Bible in contemporary contexts, 'To be able to comprehend and interpret, one needs to begin with particular interests and questions. No one interprets from nowhere; furthermore texts do not have evident meaning without a reader. Texts do not in themselves speak, only interpreters do. Texts cannot live until someone responds and is stimulated by them in a particular place.'

I had called upon listeners to rethink the relationship between humankind and the rest of the planetary environment, and to do so based upon a style of lordship modelled on that of Jesus, as described by Paul in Philippians 2. In response SS first applied my suggestion to her personal wrestling with questions about vegetarianism and veganism, a topic which was not present in my mind or words. Still, debate about vegetarianism, including strong unease about agriculture's massive carbon footprint, a significant amount of which is generated by rearing animals for human consumption, is often discussed in relation to its impact upon the contemporary ecological setting.[65] At this point, though, her response to the sermon was still located within an ecological area of concern. In her next application of what she had heard, however, she stepped beyond that.

SS commented that my[66] sermon had led her to reflect further concerning notions of authority or "headship" of men over women, as she had encountered them in her membership of various churches. She reapplied my argument concerning appropriate human dominion or lordship within creation to this non-ecological situation: 'It reminds me of when people in my tradition refer to the headship of men over women … but if you 'love your wife as Christ loves the church' [Ephesians 5:25], you are hardly going to be lording it over her, bossing her about, making decisions on her behalf, or having the 'casting vote' in decision making. Rather you lay down your life, a very different and much more challenging approach.'[67] My authorial intention (to comment on the ecological situation through a sermon) was set aside, and its insight concerning the nature of lordship reapplied to a different context.[68] In fact, my interpretation of one Pauline text (Philippians 2:5-11) was repurposed to critique other

[65] For a relevant theological discussion, see, John Barclay's suggestion (2010) that Paul's advice that food should be eaten only with an attitude of thanksgiving to God, and concern for the impact that doing so has on others, requires Christians to abstain from certain foods in a time of climate crisis. Principally, Barclay has in mind the need to radically reduce or eliminate meat consumption. His suggestion inspired further discussion, with articles from David Grummett (2011) and Tim Gorringe (2011), followed by a response from Barclay (2011). Grummett welcomes Barclay's suggestion, offering support from the history of the Church tradition of fasting practices. Gorringe finds a call for Christian restraint with regard to food practices unexceptional, referencing the nineteenth century temperance movement as a relatively recent example. Drawing upon Genesis 1-2, however, he argues for continued meat consumption by humans, albeit constrained by ethical considerations concerning treatment of animals. I would characterise this discussion as a valid theological exploration of a potential response to a contemporary challenge. It uses Paul's thought and writing, albeit that Paul wrote with a different context and purpose in view, and no notion of climate change in his mind.

[66] At this point, taking into account the agency of the listener, I realise that using 'my' only indicates that this is the sermon that I preached, not that it is a sermon that I own.

[67] SS, commenting on Sermon 2.

[68] In the sermon I suggested that approaches to relationships in the social setting of the Gospel passage shed light upon some human attitudes towards use and treatment of the planet. SS now used the same approach, but reversed the direction of travel, moving from the ecological situation to a social setting.

persons' interpretations of yet another Pauline text (Ephesians 5:25) within a non-ecological (though still congregational) context.

SS's response to and use of my sermon gives me pause for thought, for now the 'boot is on the other foot'. As a sermon listener, she felt authorised to depart from the original intention of the text I wrote, just as I, for the purposes of preaching, had drawn new meanings from biblical texts that their author, Paul, never intended. So, as the one who is now on the receiving end of such a practice, am I still convinced of its legitimacy? In fact, my convictions here are unaffected by this use of my sermon. Through prior experience I already knew and accepted that once words have left the mouth of the preacher then control over their interpretation passes to the listener. In that this results in appropriate humility concerning the limits to my role and status, this is good. On occasion it may be somewhat galling, especially if I feel that something significant has been ignored by the listener, or even more so if I feel that their new interpretation is unhelpful in any circumstance.[69] I also wish to be to be open to the possibility that this is an incidence of the Holy Spirit taking the opportunity to work with a text, in order to work upon, or work with, individuals who listen to a sermon; doing so in ways that are appropriate for their situations and experiences at that time.[70]

Here I find myself arguing for the right or opportunity for preachers and others to respond to Bible passages using an approach which for me is inspired by a phrase from my Northern Irish background: "wouldn't it put you in mind of …" This phrase is used when a person finds that encountering one situation triggers a memory or feeling from a different context. That memory, and the thoughts or feelings it evokes, affirms the value of the original situation simply because it was capable of evoking them. Also, these feelings and memories have a capacity to bring extra value to consideration of the original situation because they cast an additional interpretative light upon it.[71] For example, my experience of recurring arguments

[69] For the avoidance of doubt, this was not one of those occasions. I share SS's reservations about notions of male headship as advocated and practised in some church (and other) settings.

[70] 'The wind blows where it chooses, and you hear the sound of it, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit.' (John 3:8) As a preacher, on many occasions, listeners have reported that what for me was a minor aspect of the sermon, or even an off the cuff remark within it, was highly significant for them. This includes times when I have been thanked me for saying words I did not utter, but which they 'heard' through their (possibly Spirit-inspired) interpretation of my words.

[71] To apply this to an occasion of the New Testament Church's use of Old Testament passages, when encountering the formula quotations in Matthew's Gospel (1:22-23; 2:15; 2:17-18;2:23; 4:14-16; 8:17; 12:17-21; 21:4-5; 27:9-10) I tend to read, 'this took place to fulfil,' as, 'it would put you in mind of.' That is to say, in pondering upon the person and significance of 'Jesus the Messiah, the Son of David, the son of Abraham' (1:1),

over the appropriate relationship between humankind and the planet in a time of climate change 'put me in mind' of discussions about human dominion over creation which arise out of the history of interpretation of Genesis 1:26. In turn, when reading Paul's advocacy of Christ-like lordship (dominion) in Philippians 2:5-11, I am put in mind of Genesis 1:26, and the arguments over it that I have encountered in my previous work as an Environmental Chaplain. Making use of these memories and textual interactions ('texts' here including the 'texts' of life experiences) enabled me to craft and shape the sermon. In it I invited hearers to reappraise and resist views of human dominion over the earth which have led to its harm.

This, however, is an open-ended process. It includes the possibility that there will be continuing intuitive leaps and applications, going beyond the ones that I have offered, and which others find fruitful in other situations. SS accepted what I had to say in the sermon about rethinking notions of human dominion on earth in the light of an interpretation made through the lens of Philippians 2:5-11. One outcome, though, was that this then put her in mind of conversations and experiences about the relationships between human beings in church settings. Now the Philippians 2:5-11 lens was turned from Genesis 1:26 in an ecological setting, and redeployed to challenge readings of Ephesians 5:25 and its use in debates about appropriate relationships between women and men. Some might consider this interpretative process to be anarchic, but I find it fruitful. Especially, this is so when preaching, and the discussion and debates it generates, take place within appropriate limits. Here, suggestions concerning healthy communal exploration of biblical texts, such as those advocated by Fowl, are helpful.[72]

As I move towards chapter six of the thesis, then, I do so, recognising that a preacher who brings new interpretations to a biblical text must attribute similar agency to their listeners, even if their interpretations extend into areas outside of the preacher's concerns. Also, I

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the Gospel writer, out of his experience of Jesus, associated him with biblical passages previously written for a different purpose, and invited his hearers and readers to ponder such connections. Of course, most of Matthew's readers and hearers have lived in yet other settings, and with other interests from those of the Gospel's author. They might make additional or different connections, interpretations, and applications, sparked by memories and associations arising from their own life experiences. The importance attributed here to the reactions generated by hearing a text, be it a biblical one or a sermon, also characterises the approach of contextual Bible study (CBS). I consider the potential for using this approach in group discussion of ecological issues in Chapter 6.

[72] In addition to relentless focus upon God, Fowl also advocates, awareness of one's own imperfections, consciously charitable response to the interpretations of the others in the faith community, and openness to the possibility of insights offered from outside of that community. Fowl, 1998, 62-96.

acknowledge that using more than one Bible reading for each sermon came with a cost in terms of delving deep into the biblical texts. On another occasion I might preach, choosing only one reading. I would still argue, however, that using more than one Bible reading for each sermon, as I did in this preaching series also offers advantages. The Gospel readings played a significant role in identifying specific issues to be addressed within the wider contemporary ecological context. Different Bible readings, when brought together in conversations, and read from an ecological perspective, sparked new interpretations. Significantly, this ecological perspective arose from initial awareness of the impact of global climate change. Pondering upon that drives me to try to deepen my understanding of the way in which the Holy Spirit works within the world, not just with the Church and its scriptures.

So, in the next chapter of the thesis, as I suggest what lessons might be drawn from my discoveries, the work of the Holy Spirit will be the first topic addressed - in the ecological context, the church setting, and in the work of the preacher. Then I will also evaluate my use of a green lens through which to read Scripture and its applicability for use by others for preaching. Also, I will explore how the approach I take on preaching on ecological issues might be used in a discussion group setting, and the advantages which might accrue from this different practice. I will also reflect upon how the approach I took in ecological preaching might be transferred to my preaching on other occasions. Finally, I will illustrate insights gained on my journey through this doctoral project by providing the text of one further sermon.

Chapter Six A Green Hermeneutic for A Green Homiletic

In this final chapter of the thesis, building upon the narrative shared in the previous chapters, I make three significant claims relating to preaching and Paul in an era of environmental crisis. First, that Paul is 'to be silent' while the preacher has attends carefully to what God is saying in and through the contemporary ecological context. Second, Paul should then be read using a green hermeneutic, one which stimulates and guides responses for today whilst respectful to his setting. Third, that reading Paul in this way affirms the value of sermon listeners also being enabled to develop their own subsequent interpretations of what an ecological preacher says; and ways should be sought to better facilitate this happening. In all of the above I consider the implications of my findings, both for theological understanding and future practice. In doing so, I am aware that I am reflecting upon my practice at the time the sermons were preached, but with an awareness of subsequent changes in context and practice.[1] Finally, I conclude the chapter with a sermon preached in May 2021, which takes into account some of those contextual changes, and the learning which arises from the research undertaken for this thesis.

Paul Remains Silent While the Preacher Attends to the Holy Spirit's Presence in the Ecological Context

First then, in ecological preaching, I emphasise the importance of seeing and responding to the Holy Spirit's presence in the ecological context, even before considering the church context, or engagement with biblical texts, including insights from Paul. Then subsequently, the same Spirit helps the preacher bring new interpretations to a biblical text, and may also be at work with those who listen to their sermons. So, as preacher, I also take account of the

[1] The sermons were preached in September 2018. Since then various factors have developed and changed. The reality and impact of climate change is much more widely recognised and accepted. Such acceptance, not only of the reality of the phenomenon, but also of the urgency of the threat, is reflected in a change in vocabulary: the danger faced is now described as a 'climate crisis' rather than 'climate change'. Wider acceptance of the existence of climate change, and the crisis generated by its likely outcomes, means less time needs to be given to persuading congregation about this reality. Sermons which address climate change as an accepted reality, trying to enable listeners to appropriately lament what is being lost, and to give thanks for all that continues to be good, may be more pastoral in nature that the ones I preached in this series. That said, the need for prophetic sermons, with calls to action, remains. Persuading others, when effective solutions are likely to involve significant lifestyle changes will remain challenging, both for listeners and preachers. See Anfinson, 2019, for a reminder that even those who accept the existence of climate change and its consequences often continue to deny that reality, as evidenced in their declining to make the lifestyle choices required to mitigate its impact.

possibility that listeners' interpretations may legitimately extend into areas beyond my ecological concerns.[2]

This thesis commenced with an account of the phenomenon of climate change, something that now is increasingly described as a 'climate crisis'.[3] I began the first three sermons in my 2018 series with references to the contemporary setting rather than with biblical narrative. The first sermon began with a local wind farm. The second introduced opposing views concerning climate change among different groups. The third started with an account of an experience from my time as Environmental Chaplain with Eco Congregation Scotland. That both my thesis and the majority of my sermons in the series begin in this way is not down to chance or a coincidence. Rather, it indicates the significance that the preacher's and congregation's overarching shared ecological context plays in ecological preaching.

Suggesting that preaching should start with the ecological context questions a widespread assumption that whilst pastoral theology and practice begins with the situation, normally preaching starts with the Bible.[4] It also implies that ecological preachers should attend to the world context, before considering the context of a congregation's communal life. The congregational context is far from irrelevant, so should not be ignored, but I am arguing here that preachers should pay greater initial attention to the wider context, and that homiletical research might pay greater attention to the impact of the wider context upon the preacher's practice.

In other words, I recognise the ecological context itself as the arena within which God first works to inspire a preacher's response. The events within the ecological context should receive sustained attention at the beginning of the homiletical process because of a pre-

[2] Here, I have been inspired by Fowl's emphasis on discerning how the Holy Spirit is at work in others and interpretations of Scripture that they offer in discussion. Fowl's concern, though is with interpreting Scripture in a faith community setting, not, as here, in the wider, world setting. I am arguing that before the church community conversation he envisages takes place, preachers should attempt a similarly careful discernment for the ecological setting. Fowl, 1998, 97-127 especially.

[3] A contextual change referenced in paragraph 4 of the sermon with which I conclude this thesis.

[4] An assumption both noted and questioned by Quicke in his contribution to essays on the use of the Bible in pastoral practice. Quicke, 2005. Though pioneering at the time of its publication, the collection of essays on preaching on ecology and justice edited by Dieter Hessel, exemplifies this assumption. A set of 'questions for preparers and hearers of eco-justice sermons' invites the would-be preachers to answer several questions about the role of Scripture in their sermon before beginning to ask any about the ecological context. Hessel, 1985, 126-128.

existing recognition that the Holy Spirit will be at work there, and demanding a response. This is not a call for preachers to immerse themselves in nature. We are all already immersed in nature, indeed we are part of it. Instead, preachers are invited take time, paying closer attention to ecological reality, particularly its spiritual dimension.[5] Through focusing on what God might be saying through our human experience within this universal context, preachers acknowledge that the ecological context has both a chronological and logical priority over the congregational context.[6]

It follows that if the preacher first focuses upon what God is saying through the ecological context, then during this first listening Paul must remain silent. So the preacher chooses to silence or 'mute' Paul. In my case, in the context of ecological preaching, a number of 'Pauls' are silenced. The first 'Paul' I silence is a version of the 'Lutheran Paul'. This longstanding, highly influential interpretation of his theology places at centre individual human sinfulness, and God's provision of atonement for that sin through the death of Jesus Christ, received through God's grace alone, not through any human works.[7] This is the version of 'Paul' I encountered in my childhood and youth, always in tension with my desire for a faith that integrated belief and action, in ways relevant to living in the wider social setting, not just the faith community. It is highly unlikely that I will 'unmute' this 'Paul' at any point in my ecological preaching. This is not simply a reaction against aspects of earlier church

[5] In her essay on the preacher's inner life Susan Durber makes this point about the place of the material world. She cautions against viewing developing the inner life only in terms of adding to our knowledge through additional practices or reading: 'it does mean learning to interpret and reflect on what God is teaching you through the days as you live and what the particular lens of your own life and experience brings to the interpretation of the Bible stories and traditions of the faith. You have the most rich and amazing resource in your very body.' Durber, 2010, 181. I would extend her point by arguing that that since our bodies exist only within what is termed 'the environment', then, for preachers, close attention to the ecological context as a 'rich and amazing resource' is also important for 'interpretation of the Bible stories and tradition of faith'.

[6] For an account of the possible priorities of relationship between theology and other disciplines see Swinton and Mowat, 2006, 73-93. Helpfully, Leonora Tubbs Tisdale explores the role played both by the congregational and wider contexts in preaching. Considering preaching as local theology she argues that exegeting the congregation is as important as exegeting the scriptures. Subsequently though, she gives full measure to the importance of the wider context in shaping prophetic preaching. In the latter work (which reflects her North American setting) she cites civil rights campaigns, the Vietnam War, and the Watergate scandal as formative for her approach to preaching, leading her to commend spiritual practices for prophetic witness as part of preparation for preaching. Tisdale, 1997, 2010.

[7] See Westerholm, 2019, for a succinct account of this perspective, in the context of preaching on Romans. More positively, in a homiletical context, Schade (2015) draws upon her Lutheran heritage, particularly its emphasis upon the centrality of the cross, to commend preaching which understands environmental devastation in terms of eco-crucifixion, and proclaims hope in an eco-resurrection that occurs by God's grace. Pioneering work on ecological concerns by Lutheran theologians in the twentieth century, such as Joseph Sittler and Paul Santmire, are a reminder that the 'Lutheran Paul' who is silenced here is not necessarily the Paul of all Lutherans. For the contribution of Sittler, see Pihkala, 2017 and Conradie, 2012[b], 96-101; for Santmire, see Habel, 2007, 164-177, and Santmire, 2006.

experience that I found unpalatable. It is a recognition that a theology so bound up with individual introspection will not generate the types of response needed in a time of ecological threat.

Indeed, at this point in the homiletical process an ecological preacher should even strive to silence the interpretations of Paul they find more congenial.[8] In my case, this is because that for me reconstructing the theology of Paul, or constructing a theology of Paul, is not my primary purpose. My intention here is to place an account of a contemporary situation next to a biblical text so as to generate reactions which throw light upon the situation, and suggest responses by a faith community today. In order to gain as clear a picture of the contemporary situation as possible, to hear clearly what God might be saying or doing through that, it is necessary to temporarily 'bracket out' the biblical texts. Then, once time has been given to contemplating creation, such texts, including those from Paul, can be introduced.[9]

Acknowledging that a green preacher puts the ecological context first, ahead of the biblical texts used in the sermons, has been both surprising and challenging for me. The religious traditions within which I have grown up and in which I minister today emphasise the primacy of the Bible as guide and rule for faith and life. Also, at first sight, prioritising the ecological context seemed to be in tension with my normal preparation practices for preaching, which involve giving significant time to the examination and re-examination of the Bible passages, and making frequent use of scholarly material to aid this task. Expecting to encounter God in the Bible first was in tension with my growing appreciation of the value of first contemplating God's work in creation (and by implication within me since I am part of that creation) and to make an appropriate response on that basis.

My developing conviction concerning the primacy of the ecological context in this preaching series emerged from two sources. The first was my own experiences, which drove me to

[8] For me, one such would be participationist accounts of Paul's theology that seek to integrate sanctification with justification, seeing 'life in Christ as both an individual and a communal reality … in touch with the wider creation's suffering.' Gorman, 2019, 79. Gorman's comment here follows upon his earlier work on Paul, participation, and mission. For Gorman, the commission for followers of Jesus to share good news, interpreted though the lens of Philippians 2, involves caring for creation. Gorman, 2015, 135.

[9] During the writing of the sermons considered in this thesis time devoted to contemplation of the ecological context was limited on each occasion. Of course, behind such contemplative moments, which lasted for minutes, not hours, lies attention to the ecological context over a number of years.

approach the sermons in this way. I did not preach these sermons because I encountered a set of biblical texts which of themselves revealed to me the importance of caring for God's creation, specifically relating to the phenomenon of climate change. Nor did I preach them in response to voiced concerns arising from within a congregation. Rather, in my role as Environmental Chaplain for Eco Congregation Scotland, I was confronted with news concerning the significance of climate change for humankind and for the planet at large. This led me to respond with preaching, both in that role and in subsequent ministry.

The second source for my developing convictions was growing acquaintance with the approach of practical theology, and the opportunity to locate ecological practice within this area. Practical theology, after all, is grounded in the belief that situations (contexts), when reflected upon, generate theological meanings and insights; context precedes theological systems.[10] Preaching then, understood as a theological discipline rather than a communication technique, as primary theology, supported by academic theology, is 'a classic case of practical theology, a practice-to-theory inductive method of doing theology … always rooted in concrete situations in the life of the world.'[11] This understanding of the relationship between preaching and practical theology has reassured me concerning the validity and potential fruitfulness of my approach to ecological preaching. Such preaching, as a practice, seeks to respond theologically to the aspect of our contemporary context which for humankind is all-encompassing - the planet's environment.[12] So, it follows that such preaching is first inspired by that contextual situation, not by the biblical texts, though the latter have an inescapable and distinctive part to play in both the preparation and preaching of such sermons. Of course, then, as a practice, the preaching itself can give rise to theological insight.

[10] Graham, Walton and Ward. 2005, 2-5.
[11] Pitt, 2010, 73.
[12] In terms of homiletical approaches, it follows that my preaching is located more within the inductive approach pioneered by Craddock (2011), which begins by drawing listeners into shared story as a means to commending, rather than declaring, a message. Since the early 1970s, when the first edition of his ground-breaking work was published some of the shared experiences and understandings that he might have expected to exist within a congregation may no longer do so. Hence the power of McClure's suggestion (2011, 47-66) that preachers must 'exit' from the 'house of experience' as a basis for authority in preaching i.e. in the postmodern era the idea of common human experience no longer holds. I appreciate McClure's warning against over easily proclaiming a shared human experience as the basis for the message of a sermon, especially, since I preach as a white European male. It remains the fact, though, that the ecological context is one that all people share. Granted, experiences differ, but all are affected.

My decision to prioritise the ecological context, if voiced explicitly when preaching a sermon, might seem counterintuitive or inappropriate to some in a contemporary church congregation. It might be viewed as downplaying the role of the Bible (so, SB from my reflection panel). When carried on implicitly within this sermon series, however, this approach did not seem to alarm those who listened to the sermons.[13] My decision to begin with context might be challenged in other settings. Within formal theological education, for example, historically, practical theology has been allocated a secondary role, applying insights previously discovered through supposedly primary work done in systematic theology and biblical studies.[14] From that perspective, some might argue that such a strong commitment to the primacy of the ecological context, placing it ahead of both Scripture (the subject matter of biblical studies) and the church setting, risks de-centring God, resulting in a secularised, reductive account of reality in general, and homiletics in particular. Might an ecological preacher following my approach end up as nothing more than an environmental activist with an extra qualification in rhetoric?[15]

I do not believe this is the case! Rather, my experience in trying to preach ecologically, which involved addressing the challenge of the ecological context first, has encouraged me to take with much greater seriousness the claim that this is the arena where God may first inspire us, both theologically and homiletically; in the world itself, beyond the walls of churches, and even outside the pages of the Bible.[16] In other words, by the Spirit, God first speaks to

[13] Verbal comments from those who heard the sermons preached indicated that they were made to think, but no one questioned my beginning with context rather than with the Bible. I acknowledge that this might in part reflect the theological culture of the congregation. From my reflection panel, commenting on Sermon 2, SB suggests that in congregations with which he is associated they would be likely to expect a different approach. This might suggest that my approach to ecological preaching is less applicable in Evangelical church settings. My acceptance of the reservations of HHS concerning 'readings of recovery', which is the approach taken in much Evangelical writing on creation care, indicates that this tension exists at a deep level.

[14] Friedrich Schleiermacher's approach, in establishing a theological curriculum in the eighteenth-century German university setting, has enjoyed wide and long-lasting influence. Practical theology is identified as an area in his curriculum, but only within a hierarchical structure where systematic theology and biblical studies generate the theological insights. The secondary role of practical theology, the beneficiary in this trickle-down analysis of the theological process, is to apply these insights within the church setting. Graham, Walton and Ward, 2005, 2-3, 148-149. My choice to begin with the ecological context reflects both the urgency of the ecological threat, which demands a different ordering of priorities in ecological preaching – practical before all else – and my prior personal search for a theological approach which spoke to my life experience outside of the church setting.

[15] A description inspired by the novel, *The Testament of Gideon Mack*, where an atheist is hesitating to embark upon a career as a Church of Scotland Minister, only for his cynical spouse to encourage him with the comment, 'Why do you have to believe in God to be a minister … in this day and age? A minister's a kind of social worker with an extra qualification in rhetoric.' Robertson, 2006, 120.

[16] As John Calvin comments, 'God has revealed himself and daily discloses himself in the whole workmanship of the universe. As a consequence, men cannot open their eyes without being compelled to see him.' *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, 1.5.1. My experience suggests, though, that encouragement is required for some

preachers through events taking place in the overarching ecological context. From a creation-care perspective this should not be surprising. After all, as Sigurd Bergmann has pointed out, the Spirit was present in this world, one which is characterised by God-givenness, before any 'man- made' environment came into being.[17] Once that is recognised, then preachers are better equipped to read the biblical texts with ecological sensitivity, and hear in them a 'word' from God for specific situations today.[18]

Reading and Responding to Paul Using an Appropriate Hermeneutical Green Lens

Accepting that God first speaks through the ecological context, inspiring ecological preaching, an ecological preacher then seeks God's voice through reading the biblical texts.[19] My conviction, confirmed by my experience in preaching the sermons in this series, is that biblical texts should be approached and interpreted using an ecological hermeneutic. Conscious use of a hermeneutical stance is beneficial because this takes into account that all of human self-understanding and learning happens in a historical and social context. The preacher's hermeneutic will be reflected both in their preparation and delivery of sermons because, as J. E. Kay argues, in addition to self-understanding and learning, language itself also has an unavoidable historical and social texture.[20] Where Kay limits his comments on hermeneutical stance to the historical and social contexts, reflecting an anthropocentric viewpoint, I also point to the unavoidable ecological context. Also, from a theological perspective, which perceives 'the environment' as part of God's creation, I recognise that

preachers (of whatever gender) to fully open their eyes to this reality and its role in the initial inspiration for ecological sermons.

[17] Bergmann, 2019, 505.

[18] Recognising the overwhelming urgency of the threat to the ecological setting, and being moved to respond to it can reasonably be interpreted in terms of a Spirit-inspired irruption of prophetic call into the ongoing ministerial or priestly tasks which focus upon the life of a church congregation. It is instructive here to note the settings and occasions of prophetic call within the biblical context. Isaiah receives his call within the setting of organised religion, but relates what is happening to the wider, political, and international political context. (Isaiah 6) As with Isaiah, so also with Moses, Elijah, Jeremiah, Amos, Hosea, and others; their call is not mediated to them via scripture, but through an awareness of God's will and call concerning the wider context. In Luke, Jesus quotes Isaiah within the context of synagogue worship when setting out the agenda for his own mission, but in that Gospel's presentation his calling is rooted in his baptism and experiences of temptation in the wilderness. (3:21-23; 4:1-20) Paradoxically then, the Bible cautions against putting the Bible first in a contemporary prophetic situation. For my understanding of the work of the Spirit in creation, inspiring the imaginative response of the preacher, see the discussion of the work of Justine Ariel Bailey, above, 27-30.

[19] A stance that locates my practice firmly within the approach advocated by HHS, where the Bible is read and interpreted using a hermeneutical lens which itself is constructed using biblical passages, and with an implied biblical creation narrative in view. Thus I am liable to use findings from the Earth Bible project in a more ad hoc manner, since its readings are validated with principles which are intentionally derived from sources outside Scripture.

[20] Kay, 2008, 96-97.

self-understanding, learning, and preaching is creaturely, which should encourage an attitude of humility in sermon delivery and reception.

Paul Tillich's sermon, 'Nature, Also, Mourns for a Lost Good', is the earliest twentieth century sermon I have been able to discover which provides an example of such a creaturely perspective, stepping back from anthropocentrism, and linking the salvation of humankind with the salvation of nature.[21] In his sermon, preached c.1947, based on Romans 8:19-22 and Revelation 21:1-2, Tillich laments modern technology's impact in insulating humankind from the rest of nature. Nature's tragic aspect (in the Romans reading) is seen in the death of all things and predation between species. For Tillich, such tragedy will continue whilst the old era endures, and 'there is no salvation of man if there is no salvation of nature, for man is in nature and nature is in man.'[22] Nature, in this sermon's understanding, is not even confined to the sensate creatures. Instead, the new city of Revelation is described in terms of its being built using the most precious element of non-animate nature. Tillich, then, through this sermon provided important early suggestions for some of the elements of an appropriate ecological hermeneutic for preaching today. For the sermons I was to preach in 2018, however, the more substantial work of Horrell, Hunt and Southgate (HHS) was key.

HHS provided me with a means to unlock the potential contributions of Paul's writings through an appropriate, developed green hermeneutical stance. This is the case not only in the writing of the sermons featured in this thesis but also will be so for my future ecological preaching.[23] Their work, grounded in an acceptance of current scientific understanding, which includes contemporary environmental concerns, fitted well with my conviction that attending to the wider ecological context should be the initial area of inspiration for my ecological preaching. After all, it is only through the observation-based findings of science that we are aware of the existence, pace, and extent of climate change, and the very high likelihood that this has come about through human activity.

An ecological hermeneutic then, constitutes the appropriate link between the contemporary world ecological context and an ecological reading of the ancient biblical texts. It provides

[21] Tillich, 1962, 82-92.
[22] Tillich, 1962, 89.
[23] For an indication of how my practice might develop see the sermon which concludes this chapter.

the means for generating a fruitful dialogue between an ecological preacher and the biblical texts. Through this conversation new insights and ideas are generated. Particularly, in my 2018 sermon series, when chosen or given texts were read using an ecological hermeneutic, the specific aspect within the general ecological framework which needed to be addressed in the sermon emerged for me, the preacher.[24]

In the lens they constructed, HHS chose to use Colossians 1:15-20, so emphasising a background narrative of the divine reconciliation of all within creation.[25] My intention was to see how fruitful it would be to replace this with other Pauline texts, particularly Philippians 2:5-11. Emphasising that Christ's lordship over creation is a humble one, rooted in his servant-like life, death and resurrection, I hoped that this would provide a better basis upon which to encourage practical responses to the contemporary environmental crisis. When used in Sermon 2, it proved highly effective as perspective from which to re-read and challenge popular interpretations of Genesis 1:26-2:3. Upon reflection, though, the main thrust of my re-reading was not a call to taking concrete actions per se, but to re-envision and so reform exploitative attitudes towards the earth which are widely held, both within church congregations and beyond. This indirect approach is less likely to stimulate practical response.

Another limitation to using Philippians 2:5-11 in this way is that it will not be read and preached upon every Sunday. In any case, when functioning as a component of a green lens, its general role is to provide a theological perspective rather than a specific interpretative re-reading of another biblical passage. In other sermons in this series, different Philippian texts were used to address specific themes, such the handling of disputes over ecological issues, the nature and role of tradition, and the role of joy in sustaining creation care activity. The successful use of these other Philippian texts for these purposes suggests that other passages, taken from across a range of Pauline literature, may also contribute distinctive insights. These can then be used to support the ecological reading which is derived from the biblical text upon which the sermon is mainly based.

[24] For a more recent example of this process, in May 2021, when the sermon which concludes this chapter was preached, taking time to think about events relevant to the world ecological context 'put me in mind of' the forthcoming COP26 climate change conference, due to take place in November 2021. This, in turn, reminded me a related event, one due to take place in the local context of the congregation in North Shields.
[25] *Greening Paul,* 117-146.

In other sermons in this series I also alluded to, or quoted Philippians 2:5-11 in support of points being made when preaching upon those Philippians passages. Even here though, in terms of general practice, there are limits to the frequency with which one text can be used in this way. Congregational listeners are liable to notice such textual leitmotif, perhaps labelling them as preacherly tics, to be endured or resented. Consequently, there is a danger that what is intended as a way to commend ecological sensibility and actions might become an obstacle to such developments. More positively, though, other additional Pauline texts could also be used to support a point being made in the sermon, so providing greater variety for the listeners. There is also potential, when preaching other sermons, to allude to the narrative which underpins Philippians 2:5-11, but not explicitly reference it for the congregation as the source for that idea.[26]

Reflecting further upon using additional readings, it is helpful at this point to consider my use of the RCL in the sermon series. Here, the outcomes were mixed. As I have already indicated,[27] I regard the RCL as flawed resource for ecological preaching. On the occasion of this sermon series I chose to make use of the RCL Gospel readings, mainly because of feeling a need to meet congregational expectations about its use, and to make my research more widely applicable, given the strong expectation of its use in different denominational settings. Positively, the Gospel readings had capacity to inspire choices of specific aspects of the current ecological situation for the content of sermons. On occasions, though, making connections between that and the addition of the Philippians passage resulted in somewhat complex interpretations. In future, I would consider preaching another ecological series, only using Pauline texts, and then comparing the outcomes with the sermons considered in this thesis.[28]

HHS's advocacy of transparency concerning interpretative practice was extremely helpful. This was true both for my own understanding of what was being attempted (and what not) in making an ecological interpretation of Pauline texts, and in guiding me concerning sharing

[26] As I do for example in paragraph 12 of the sermon with which I conclude my thesis, below. In the same paragraph, and the one that follows, I also include allusions from 1 Corinthians, 2 Corinthians, and Colossians.
[27] See above, 30-32.
[28] Hence my decision to attempt this in the sermon that concludes this chapter.

that with the congregation. So I was careful to state that the biblical texts were not being read from a neutral standpoint concerning the reality of environmental threat, including that posed by climate change. HHS's demonstration that attempts to recover an environmentalist message from within biblical texts themselves will not suffice, was also helpful to me. They encouraged me to seek interpretations that were not simply equated with outcomes from exegesis of the text. Instead, I became more concerned with discovering responses to the biblical text which arose from bringing them together with contemporary ecological concerns. Particularly, I was able to discover how encounter with Paul's thought stimulated ideas for preaching.

In principle, it should be possible to apply my practice here, not only in introducing biblical texts to the ecological setting, but also with regard to other contemporary contextual issues and interests.[29] For example, in my current local setting, a local government led redevelopment / regeneration of the town centre of North Shields is currently underway.[30] Following the approach I have suggested for ecological preaching, writing sermons in response to this situation would begin with a thorough examination of the local political, social and economic setting (including their ecological aspects). This would be not simply for the purposes of information gathering, in order to ensure accuracy in describing the situation when preaching. It would involve a prayerful attempt to discern in what ways the Holy Spirit is at work in this setting and associated events, so as to inspire me as preacher concerning the general topic for the sermon. Only then would I come to choose biblical texts, or use those provided for me via the RCL, for preaching.

It is likely, also, that preaching would not be the only way in which I sought to address a topic which is important for the life of the church congregation. Preaching, after all, although a significant element in the work of a Reformed Church minister, is by no means the whole of it. Ministers in this tradition are expected to function as representative figures, both from the

[29] This ability to make decisions about which issues and interests are addressed are a reminder here of the power which is held by the preacher. Kay (2008. 129-130) addresses the question of agency in preaching. He suggests some combination of three elements are 'in charge': God, specifically the Word of God, understood as Jesus Christ; language, or the Word-event of Scripture; and the virtuous preacher, seeking to persuade their listeners. He sees a place for all three, but emphasises the first, with God being approached in prayer by sermon writers, asking that the Holy Spirit will use their words in ways that give glory to God. In my view, what Kay has to say about a humble approach to God concerning the words of the sermon is a timely reminder for my practice, and applies equally to the choice of Bible readings and themes for sermons or discussion groups.

[30] https://my.northtyneside.gov.uk/category/1415/ambition-north-shields accessed 09/05/2021.

congregation to the wider Church and vice versa. They also are regarded as representatives of the local church within its community. Within the congregation they exercise a leadership role, including chairing important decision-making meetings. They have a pastoral role, particularly in relationship to those who are sick, and at times of death. In the Reformed there is a strong tradition in favour of having a 'learned ministry'. This is most clearly seen in the high expectation concerning preaching and teaching, with an understanding that significant ministerial time is given to these activities. The latter is often carried out through organising and leading discussion groups and Bible study events for the congregation. Learning events, involving discussion or study of the Bible are therefore appropriate as a way to extend the engagement with ecological issues which has featured in preaching

If exploring a local issue, I would be aware that I am a relative newcomer to a town in which some members of the congregation have lived all of their lives. It would be wise, then, when addressing local issues, to find ways for their voices, which come with distinctive experiences, to be heard. It would also be beneficial to achieve this in relation to exploring and responding to the shared ecological setting, where different voices can contribute out of different experiences. So now I turn to consider ways in which these additional voices might be heard.

Enabling Additional Voices and Ecological Responses to be Heard

I have argued that Paul's letters can legitimately be used to generate responses which arise from the situations and interests of his twenty-first century readers, not from the situation he originally addressed, or even the original thought or intention of this biblical author. My experience in preaching was that sermon listeners might also respond by reinterpreting what I said in 'my' sermon. Having accepted that it might be legitimate for them to do so leads me to consider how the potentially rich variety of their additional insights can best be enabled and shared.

Such sharing might occur through community reading practices by church congregations in which preachers participate. Such readings might precede a sermon, both providing inspiration for the preacher and informing the community of readers about the passage which will soon be preached upon. Alternatively, such readings could follow the preaching of a

sermon which offered an interpretation to which community readers are now invited to respond, possibly providing alternative or additional responses from their own experiences. For John McClure, such practices do not only offer additional voices. They also address the 'relational asymmetry' between preacher and listener through 'shifts of leadership in which participants express asymmetries of knowledge, resources or experience.'[31] Anna Carter Florence takes McClure's theoretical insights here and provides a series of rules and practices which are designed to encourage community readings of Scripture, not necessarily only for the purposes of preaching, but to encourage members of congregations to perform and so appropriate Scripture for themselves.[32]

I am likely to make use of such community readings in my future practice, when preaching upon ecological and other issues. Additionally, though I wish to explore the extent to which my ecological concerns might be pursued in different settings, particularly within Bible study or discussion groups. This thought is encouraged by the comments from JR and SS, two of my reflection group members.[33] Specifically, I wish to suggest the approach and practices followed in contextual Bible study (CBS) might prove fruitful, having affinities with the approach I am advocating for ecological preaching.[34] As with my preaching, CBS starts with acknowledgement of context. It involves a conscious choice of readings with that context in mind.[35] It seeks to generate reactions to the biblical text which arise from the interests and experiences of the participants rather than from the content of the biblical texts per se.[36] Some interpretations generated through CBS can threaten assumptions about what constitutes

[31] McClure, 2001, 61. I would point out that listeners do have power in how they choose to respond to what they hear in the sermon. They can accept or reject what is said; choose to stop listening; decide to reapply what is heard to a different context. That said, such responses can seldom be voiced during of the sermon, or have an opportunity to modify the message offered, in the way that participants in a group discussion might do.
[32] Florence, 2018.
[33] JR and SS. See above, 88-89.
[34] Contextual Bible study has its roots in methods introduced in Latin America and South Africa in the 1970s and 1980. This approach is group based, with the group members acknowledging a shared context, which influences their response to biblical texts. Transformation, both of individuals and groups, is emphasised ahead of intellectual mastery of the content of the text. The presence of a trained or expert facilitator is suggested to provide appropriate choice of biblical texts and to ensure good exegesis. Louise Lawrence (2019) provides a helpful introduction, describing the history and practices involved, and also providing accounts of this approach in action.
[35] Just as a preacher chooses the readings for a sermon, so in CBS the facilitator plays the key role here. This raises concerns for some, about appropriate exercise of influence and authority. Whilst enthusiastic about how CBS enables participants to link their lives with biblical texts, Peden (2005, 16) acknowledges the need to justify facilitators being allowed to set the theological direction of the group. Helen John (2019, 47), tries to overcome this in her practice, opening each meeting with a statement emphasising to group members that all contributions which come from their life experience are valid, and that they are the 'experts'.
[36]To take one example, a group, whose members were women, several of who had experienced others misusing their bodies, generated significant discussion about God's use/misuse of the bodies of Elizabeth and Mary in order to bring about the births of John the Baptist and Jesus. Peden, 2005, 16.

appropriate exegesis and application of the biblical text. This leads some to reject CBS as an appropriate way of approaching scripture.[37]

Both my ecological preaching and CBS emphasise the essential role of the contemporary context in generating interpretations. In my preaching the ecological context is overarching for humankind. In CBS more narrow, specific contexts have been favoured, either in geographical setting or shared experience.[38] That said, I believe there would potential for a CBS approach where groups are invited to acknowledge their shared experience of the ecological context.[39] Such an approach might have advantages over preaching, in terms of timing, participation and potential outcomes. First, there is more time available in a group discussion to explore an issue than there is in preaching and hearing a sermon. This enables deeper exploration of texts and issues. Second, in a group setting every member may both offer interpretations and ideas, and respond to them [40] In sermons, both preacher and listeners are free to make their interpretations of what they have read or heard, but the interpretation offered by the preacher is privileged by virtue of their status as 'preacher'.[41] Also, there is no place within the 'performance' of the sermon itself for the congregations to offer comments that might generate additional interpretations, nor, usually do sermons

[37] Lawrence (2009, 121) reports Leslie Houlden's 'less than enthusiastic' response to such readings, with his argument that 'the Bible has other jobs to do than to dance to our late twentieth century tunes.' Andrew Rogers, whilst much more sympathetic to Lawrence's advocacy of contextual approaches, challenges her to provide guidance on what constitutes acceptable and not-acceptable readings of the Bible and context. Otherwise, he argues complete hermeneutical relativism results. Rogers, 2011, 134.More positively, whilst acknowledging the importance of the historical and cultural background of the biblical texts to contemporary interpretation, Hunt advocates a greater consideration of the role of the Holy Spirit, particularly in the interpretive practices of 'ordinary believers.'Hunt, 2020, 120-212.

[38] Lawrence, for example, describes the work of groups in five different contexts in the UK: a city, a rural village, a fishing village, within the deaf community, and in a clergy group. Lawrence, 2009, 45-120. A series of reports of CBS discussions which featured in the Expository Times have included both church-based and other groups. The latter include groups within a women's prison, and groups of homeless and vulnerably-housed people. Peden, 2005; Cornwall and Nixon, 2011.

[39] Even without such acknowledgement, ecological responses to Bible readings may emerge. One church-based group, using lectionary texts, as Scotland prepared for the G8 summit in 2005, read the parable of ten bridesmaids (Matthew 25:1-13) and responded in terms of the need for right use of ecological resources, and planning ahead for future generations. Riches, 2005, 25.

[40] I acknowledge that what is described here might resemble the potential rather than the reality for some church-based discussion groups. Whilst Riches (2015, 123) reports that group members responded positively to the CBS approach, he also comments that this was the first time they had encountered it in church life. My own experience is that on the first occasion on which I lead a bible study discussion at a church, I usually have to reposition the chairs that have been set out in straight rows to face the leader/lecturer.

[41] For some, the minster or leader remains an authority figure, which will affect what they are prepared to say in a discussion. When leading discussions I include significant time for conversation in smaller groups. I choose not to join any of the groups, allowing them to talk without the presence of the 'authority figure'. I also emphasise that the questions ask for how they respond, so their answer, whatever it is, if truthful, is the correct one.

feature calls to specific social action. Third, discussion within the group might then encourage responses which move from seeing and judging to actions.

Fruitful use of a discussion group approach, be that through CBS or another approach, needs to take into account the importance of enabling people to recognise and acknowledge the contemporary ecological context within which they live.[42] Just as my sermons began with the ecological context, so, I would argue, should biblical discussion groups which seek wisdom for responding to ecological issues. In making explicit the significance of the ecological context, the role of the group facilitator is as key as that of the preacher in the sermon. In CBS, the facilitator sets the parameters for discussion, chooses the texts which are read, and, through their knowledge of history of interpretation, guards the group against inappropriate interpretations.

So, for example, in September 2019, as part of marking Creation Time, at the same church where I preached the sermon series explored in this thesis, I organised a four-session discussion series about God and creation in the Bible. Its title was 'Not Just Genesis: Encountering God's Creation in the Bible'. It was billed as 'a chance to explore together beyond the Bible's first two chapters.'[43] As facilitator of the discussion I took steps to encourage participation. I emphasised that they were the 'experts' when asked to describe their own responses to the readings.[44] I included time within the meeting for small-group discussion where I was not present and so might stifle conversation. At the same time, though, it was I who had chosen the overall theme for the series and the themes for each session. It was I who had chosen the biblical texts that were read. And also, I was 'the Minister', a role with accompanying history and status in the congregation.[45]

[42] That is, a form of conscientization, a community education concept pioneered by Paulo Freire, which is influential in the approach taken in CBS. Freire, 1972.
[43] Themes addressed and biblical books used were, 'That All Creation Praises God' (Psalms and Job); 'That God Redeems the Whole Cosmos' (Colossians 1:15-20); 'That Cosmic Catastrophe Awaits?' (Mark 13 and 2 Peter 3:10-13); and 'That Creation Will Be At Peace' (Isaiah 11 and Revelation 21).
[44] In terms of a facilitator acting as guardian against inappropriate interpretation, my role was to encourage people to be truthful about their thoughts and feelings, not to offer answers that they think the Minister, or the Church wants to hear. For me, ensuring a Christologically inspired focus on truth (John 14:16) seems an appropriate expression of such a role in this context.
[45] Upon reflection, on another occasion, for a discussion group during Creation Time, I might suggest we read the lectionary readings each week, and ask if anything occurs to us when we do so in the light of contemporary ecological issues. This would cede yet more power to the group from its facilitator, as I would not be choosing the readings to be discussed.

Discussion groups, of course, need not be seen as an alternative to sermons on ecological issues. Both can have a place in the life of a congregation, perhaps with the preacher introducing the topic in general terms and discussion groups then addressing it in greater detail. Alternatively, a discussion group might be the first to address the issue. This would provide the preacher with material and inspiration for the sermon. Also the congregation who listened to the sermon would contain members who were prepared and informed about the issues.[46]

One More Ecological Sermon

What sort of sermon might such a congregational group now expect to hear from me? It would be one that began with the ecological context, only then moving on to consider what the Bible, in this case, Paul, might say in ways that resonate in the church's local setting. The sermon's reading of Paul would take place via an appropriate green hermeneutic, so enabling connections between first century advice and the twenty first century context to be made. To indicate how this might occur in practice I now conclude my chapter with the text of the sermon I preached in May 2021. It was preached for the same church in North Shields where I preached the Creation Time sermon series in September 2018. It responds to one of the Philippian passages that featured in the sermon series, though on this occasion it is not paired with another reading. The sermon is intended to take account of learning that arises from my journey through the Doctorate in Practical Theology with the University of Glasgow. The specific occasion for this sermon is a proposed journey between North Shields and Glasgow, and how we should understand and respond to it.

Once again, I was inspired to preach, in the first instance by my awareness of the wider context of ecological threat. This was brought into tighter focus by the prospect of the COP26 international climate change conference, due to take place in Glasgow in November 2021. (paras 3-4) This topic was concretised for the congregation in the sermon's early and concluding paragraphs (1-4, 14) by referring to an event due to take place within their local context. The interpretation I offered in the sermon draws both upon wider Christian tradition

[46] An approach advocated by both Florence (2018), in her work on 'discovering God's Word in community' and McClure (2011), in what he describes as a roundtable pulpit.

(6) and makes extensive reference to Paul's thought in Scripture (7-12). It is intended as an ethically extended response to Paul's contribution which is appropriate to our shared contemporary situation (13-14). The sermon includes suggestions for possible actions by members of the congregation in response to that local event, understood as part of a wider creation care context (5).

Ecological Pilgrimage

A Sermon preached by the Reverend Trevor Jamison for

Saint Columba's United Reformed Church, North Shields, Sunday 2nd May 2021, by Zoom

Philippians 3:4b-14

1. One day, this year, in late October, or early November, the DFDS ferry from the Netherlands will dock here in North Shields, just as usual. On board the ferry that day will be a group of people from Germany – nothing unusual in that. They will be foot passengers, but they won't then get on the bus for Newcastle, as most foot passengers do. Instead, they will be making all of their journey on foot.

2. It's no short walk either. In fact, they will have already walked all the way from Germany to the Netherlands in order to get the boat to North Shields. From North Shields, they will be walking all the way up through Northumberland to Berwick, maybe stopping off for a visit to Holy Island. After Berwick, they will swing West towards their ultimate destination: Glasgow!

3. All of the members of this group come from churches in Germany; our fellow Christians, undertaking a pilgrimage. So a visit to Holy Island makes sense, but why, in heaven's name, carry on walking to Glasgow … in November! Well, it's not because they are united by a shared devotion to, St Kentigren, also known as St Mungo, the patron saint of Glasgow. No! the objective for their pilgrimage is the SEC - the Scottish Events Campus. This consists of five interconnected, large scale meeting spaces which are normally the venue for trade exhibitions, pop concerts, and even, in December this year, God and Covid willing, Walt Disney's live concert version of *The Muppet Christmas Carol*. Our pilgrims, however, will not be there for Kentigren or for Kermit but for COP i.e. the COP 26 Summit, which is due to take place this November.

4. COP 26 is the twenty-sixth *United Nations Climate Change **C**onference **O**f the **P**arties*, bringing together heads of state, climate experts, and campaigners to agree coordinated action to tackle climate change. When, God willing, this group of pilgrims makes it to Glasgow they will be part of a whole jamboree of groups, including ones like Christian Aid, Tearfund and Operation Noah. They will use their presence in Glasgow to try to persuade the governmental decision makers to address what has turned into a climate **crisis** for the world. Humanly induced processes are leading to long term climate change, involving extreme weather events – droughts, floods, and storms. Climate change is destroying whole species, displacing whole peoples, and ravaging our domestic and agricultural landscapes and seascapes.

5. Hopefully, you will get opportunities to meet with this group from Germany, when they land here in North Shields, and as they make their way further North. Perhaps some of us could walk along with them for part of that day. Maybe some of us would be inspired to get involved in one of the online pilgrimage walks to Glasgow that will be taking place during this time. For folk in in other churches there will opportunities to provide food and overnight accommodation. And of course, we can support them with our prayers during their trek, even as we also pray concerning the course and outcome of the COP 26 conference itself.

6. But why get so involved with a group of extreme walkers from Germany? Is it because we feel a sense of solidarity with them because they are Christian believers? Is it because it's part of our shared historical Christian tradition to go walking? Pilgrimages have been making a comeback in recent years, after all. Perhaps it's because prayer has been part of God's Church for as long as we can remember. When Paul wrote his letter to the church at Philippi, from which we heard earlier, he starts with a prayer: 'I thank my God every time I remember you, constantly praying with joy in every one of my prayers for all of you.' (1:3-4)

7. Potentially, much that's good that can flow from being part of a shared religious tradition. Paul would have been the first to tell you that. As he pointed out, no one could outdo him in terms of religious credentials: circumcised, Israelite (tribe of Benjamin), impeccable Jewish ancestry, expert on religious law; and 'as to righteousness under … [that] law, blameless.'

(3:4-6) Maybe Christians who are prepared to walk all the way from Germany to Glasgow – in November - deserve the level of respect from us Paul might have expected in his time.

8. But hang on a moment. Look at what Paul then goes on to say: 'yet whatever gains I had I have come to regard as loss because of Christ.' (3:7) Paul then says that he regards not just his religious tradition but '**everything** as loss because of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord.' (3:8) He even declares concerning all things, 'I regard them as **rubbish,** in order that I might gain Christ.' (3:8)

9. Are religious traditions, and possibly everything else we possess in this world, to be regarded as **rubbish**? The effort of walking all of the way to Glasgow, in wind and rain, and possibly worse, **rubbish**? The gathering of the leaders of the world to try to save the world, including us human beings, **rubbish**? That's a peculiar way of looking at things, to say the least!

10. So, what do you think of it so far? *[Rubbish!]* Paul was never one for understatement - everything in this world is just a load of rubbish. In response to that, it would be understandable to stop listening to him, but if you did, you would miss something significant. Paul makes a point that's important for me, for you, for our Christian friends from Germany, and for everybody else to hear. It's a point about everything, so it's a point about the climate that you and yours depend upon for life and flourishing; and it's a point about COP 26, and all the Christians who are going to engage with it.

11. Paul's point is that we need to recognise the limits of all things in this world, even the things that we hold most dear, so that we don't put them ahead of gaining Christ (3:8), which is what then enables us to discover the value in all things. *[Repeat the line you've just said, if necessary.]* Seen only as things in themselves, seen only from within, pilgrimages might just be a form of walking. Seen only from a political viewpoint, from within, COP 26 might be yet another decision-making meeting that avoids making important decisions - we're not unfamiliar with that in church life either. Seen only on the human level, churches themselves

may only be a means of providing comfort, and rituals offering structure for a life which cannot be comprehended.

12. But, says Paul, having gained Christ, look again. Look at it all from the perspective of the power of Christ's resurrection which came about through the fact of his death. As Paul puts it, 'I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the sharing of his sufferings by becoming like him in his death.' (3:10) Paul invites us to see the world as though through the lens of Jesus Christ's humble, servant-like life, death, and resurrection (Phil. 2:5-11), and to make that 'Christ event' the template for how we lead our lives and order our world. Paul wants us to ask how **any** activity of ours fits in with God's action in reconciling the world to God's self through Jesus Christ (2 Cor. 5:19); in fact, God's reconciling 'all things on earth or in heaven' in Jesus Christ. (Col. 1:20)

13. In that light, look again at this group of German Christians walking to a conference in Glasgow. This COP 26 conference is about the health and survival of a world where God has been at work to reconcile that world to God's self. Being careful with what God cares for is far from rubbish. And God has gone about this through Jesus Christ, in so unexpectedly humble a fashion that some think it foolish. (1 Cor. 1:22-23) The same ones would probably regard walking across Europe to get the attention of the supposedly great and good as equally silly. But when done in conscious imitation of Christ, it's far from rubbish.

14. Paul implores us to press on to reach the goal (3:12), 'to strain forward to what lies ahead … the heavenly call of God in Christ Jesus.' (3:13, 14) Keep your focus on Jesus Christ, he says, on the power of Christ's life, death and resurrection. That's what matters. And in comparison, everything else is so much rubbish. But, once you start to see God's world through that lens – Jesus Christ – then the world's true significance is revealed, as part of God's beloved, reconciled creation. It is in valuing this world appropriately – in the light of God at work in Jesus Christ – that, rightly, some people are even prepared to walk all the way from down here in North Shields to up there in Glasgow.

17. Prayer

O God, as we walk through this world give us eyes to see it as you see it, and so to love it.

O God, as we press on towards the goal of your call in Christ Jesus, give us the faith to live for this world as he lived for it, in humble service.

Yes, God, inspire us and guide us on that journey we all share together.

Amen.

Chapter 7 Conclusion

Anthropogenic climate change is a significant threat, both to humankind and the planet we inhabit. This situation demands a theologically informed response from preachers. How effectively preachers respond will be influenced by a combination of factors, prominent among them: their own life story; their openness to the presence of God at work in the ecological context; and their ability to read and interpret Scripture from an appropriate ecological, or green, perspective.

This thesis reflects upon the preparation process, writing and delivery of four sermons I preached in September 2018, and significant resources I used to help me in that work. A measure of feedback, obtained from a small group of responders, chosen for their diverse expertise and experience, also formed part of my research. On the basis of that research, I offer comments in six areas: the first concerns the place of reflexivity in the practice of theology; the second links that reflexivity with ecology; the third relates to the plausibility and acceptance of using a green hermeneutic to practice a green homiletic; the fourth suggests how preaching and other ministerial practices might developed in the light of using such a hermeneutic; the fifth argues that preachers must be freer in their choice of readings for ecological sermons; the sixth suggests that the approach taken in preaching ecological sermons is transferable to preaching sermons on other issues. Following these comments, I conclude the thesis with suggestions for future research.

First, my research confirms the importance of reflexivity to the practice of theology.[1] Within the field of practical theology, the practice of autoethnography encouraged me to examine my personal life story, and to recognise that significant experiences within it influenced me in choosing to respond to climate change, and to do so through preaching. The important role of the Bible and the practice of preaching were emphasised in my religious upbringing and continued involvement in Reformed Christianity. Additionally, I was drawn to Paul because I perceived parallels between his contending with his religious tradition, on the basis of his encounter with Jesus, as I had contended with the theological conservatism of my Irish Presbyterian heritage. Encouraged through education to ask how my faith applied to social

[1] See, for example, Walton, 2014, xvi-xx, 97-98.

and economic realities, I was being prepared to try to find an appropriate theological response when was presented with the reality of climate change.

The benefit provided by reflexivity should not be restricted to the field of practical theology, but be employed across the discipline of theology as a whole. In this thesis, an aspect of my ministerial practice was examined in order to generate theological insight This locates my research firmly within the approach of practical theology. Yet the practice I examined involved me in grappling with questions that traditionally are addressed elsewhere in theology. These included considering God's role as creator, and the work of the Holy Spirit within creation (systematic theology); approaches to reading and interpreting Scripture, particularly Paul (biblical studies); and preaching (homiletics). Since theological specialisms cannot be sealed off from one another, and since all are practised by human beings with personal history, then it follows that all specialisms and disciplines will benefit when their practitioners practice a greater degree of reflexivity.

Reflexivity applies not only to pondering the stories of one's past but to experiences of the present. My own experiences of ministry, including preaching the sermon series described in the thesis, generate new episodes for my 'life story and theological quest.'[2] I am alerted to ask myself how experiences such as pastoral encounters, involvement in discussion groups, leading meetings and teams, engaging with groups who rent space in the church buildings, affect me in ways that influence my future choices in ministry, including preaching. Also, I must be alert when engaging with areas such systematic theology and biblical studies, Here there resides a legacy of claims to objectivity, ones which are reluctant to acknowledge the influence of the life stories upon practitioners in the choice of topics and nature of findings.

Second, from my experience in undertaking this research, I argue that in ecological preaching, a reflexive preacher should consciously seek to enter the homiletical process through the ecological context, not via reading the biblical texts or by 'exegeting the congregation'.[3] In some sense this is an extension of the practice of reflexivity. It acknowledges bodily experience as a necessary source of self-understanding,[4] but demands

[2] A description made by Pete Ward, cited in Walton, 2014, 98.
[3] So, Tisdale, 1997.
[4] So, Durber, 2000.

that this body cannot be considered in isolation from its ecological context. I experience God at work in me, but as a creature; a member of an interconnected creation, not an isolated individual being, or a part of one privileged species that somehow sits above or apart from the rest of nature. Such a realisation encourages preachers and liturgists to cultivate an appropriate humility in approaching their creator in worship; the One who also has revealed Godself to us in humility.[5] Terence Fretheim puts this well: 'Certainly human praise to God means more to God than the clatter of hail on tin roofs or the clapping of the musically inclined leaves of the aspen trees! Perhaps, but not as much as human beings would like to think.'[6]

Yet, at the same time, asking preachers to try to enter the homiletical process through the ecological context, without being influenced by the biblical texts or the church context, is inviting them to attempt the impossible! Just as HHS's hermeneutical lens 'both emerges from and goes on to shape … reading of the Pauline letters,'[7] so preachers are engaged in a spiral of interpretation. When I 'entered' the homiletical process associated with this sermon series via the ecological context, I was already carrying with me a personal history of church involvement, a knowledge of the biblical texts, and an interest in Paul. In fact, this involvement, knowledge, and interest were factors in my decision to approach the ecological context with preaching in mind. That said, however, there is value in 'bracketing out' such factors when attempting to discern what God is saying through events in the ecological context. This is done with the intention of minimising prior experiences and interests which have the capacity to influence interpretations, even though these were experienced or formed in settings which took little or no account of the existence and significance of climate change.

Considering the ecological context, whilst bracketing out other elements in the homiletical process, increases the possibility of prophetic preaching. In attempting to discern what God might be saying through processes and events taking place in the world ecological context, preachers are more likely to touch upon issues that might otherwise be marginalised because they have not fitted with the established interests and priorities in theological studies and

[5] Philippians 2:5-8
[6] Quoted in Holbert, 2011, 20.
[7] *Greening Paul,* 4.

congregational cultures. Now, increasing acceptance of the significance of climate change, characterised as a crisis, make it more likely that in future more ecological sermons will take on a pastoral note. Preachers will be equipped by the growing body of work on eco theology, with its influence extending into other areas of theology. Their listeners will have greater awareness of and concern about climate change. Work remains to be done on developing such pastoral sermons, though Sermon 4 in my preaching series, suggesting practices which sustain ecological commitment, provides an example of how such sermons might be attempted.

Third, reflecting upon the sermons that I preached, I conclude that an appropriate green hermeneutic can be constructed for reading biblical texts with integrity, so as to preach ecological sermons fruitfully. Such a hermeneutic, however, and the content of sermons produced through using it, will continue to be contested. The hermeneutical lens that I constructed is indebted to the work of Horrell, Hunt and Southgate,[8] so it is transparent in beginning with commitment to an ecological narrative through which to read Scripture. It rejects readings of recovery which claim to discover twenty-first century ecological comments within the Bible. Also, I proceeded on the basis that readers' and listeners' interests, not authorial intention, or the words of a text itself, are the main driving force for interpreting meaning.[9] Giving such authority to the reader, in this case me, the preacher, generated connections between the biblical texts in their final form (which are the ones preached upon) and the contemporary ecological context. Historical-critical questions and approaches were assigned a more minor role. So, fruitful though this green hermeneutic might be, if accepted, it sits in tension with popular assumptions concerning authorial intention and authority, and notions that historical investigation of a text will discover new meanings residing within the text itself.

There exists a challenge, then, to familiarise listeners and preachers with the rationale for, and benefits of, using a green hermeneutical lens in interpreting Scripture and preaching upon it. The amount of homiletical theory needing to be shared to meet this challenge will differ between these two groups. For listeners, informing them about the hermeneutic employed can take place as part of preaching the sermons themselves. So, for example, in the first sermon in the 2018 series, listeners were informed that we were not searching Paul's

[8] Principally in *Greening Paul*.
[9] Following Fowl, 1998.

Letter to the Philippians for evidence of his views on environmental issues. Instead, we were seeking to extend the advice he gave about a first century situation in ways that were applicable and useful to our twenty-first century ecological context.[10] To equip preachers, more substantial engagement with the rationale for employing a green hermeneutic is required. Such equipping includes education about the reality and scale of current ecological challenges; acceptance of creation care as a priority for Christian life and witness; information sharing about the approach and content of a green hermeneutic for reading and interpreting Scripture; helping preachers to recognise the hermeneutic they currently employ and how that might fit with a green hermeneutic; and opportunities to practice writing and delivery of sermons using a green hermeneutic.[11]

Fourth, changes in understanding about the process by which Scripture is interpreted for the purpose of preaching are required. Such change will also be applicable to other ministerial practices.[12] From my experience in preaching the sermons considered in this thesis, I question the popular image of a preacher crossing a 'bridge' that separates the biblical and contemporary contexts, doing so on behalf of the congregation.[13] In that metaphor the preacher journeys into the historical, biblical world that lies behind the biblical text. There, they discover information or meaning, and return across the bridge to the contemporary world, inviting their listeners to share in the story of their discovery. Instead, I argue, preachers bring together their experience of the contemporary ecological context with the final form of the biblical text, expecting this encounter will generate a 'word' for the congregation. In this latter approach historical-critical findings and the history of interpretation remain available to preachers, for frequent checking and rechecking, as a safeguard against making interpretations the text will not bear.[14] Exegesis of a biblical text, using historical-critical methods, however, does not uncover ecological meaning. This is because such meaning does not reside in the biblical texts themselves. It arises from by readers reading them using an ecological hermeneutic.

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[10] S.1.10-12

[11] For aiding preachers to recognise the hermeneutic they currently employ, Nancy Lammers Gross's use of hermeneutical journey reports to summarise the journey of interpretation a preacher travels, would be a helpful resource. Lammers Gross, 2002, 170-171.

[12] Here, 'ministerial practices' is taken to mean, ministry practised by the people of the Church, which I take to include but do not to identify only with those ordained to specific roles within the Church. This point also holds as far as preaching is concerned. It is not the preserve of 'clergy'.

[13] So challenging, for example, Craddock, 1985, 129-135.

[14] This process of checking and re-checking described as changing from 'bridge to swing' by Lammars Gross, 2002, 71-105.

Fifth, I believe that the critical importance of responding to the current climate crisis authorises preachers to have greater freedom in choosing Bible readings for preaching. This is not for the purposes of cherry-picking readings (the tendency of those wedded to readings of recovery), but to allow for thematic preaching on ecological issues. The readings from Philippians used in the sermons in this thesis are not popularly regarded as 'creation care readings', but reading them using a green hermeneutic, unlocked fruitful interpretations. Yet, in order to preach them in a series, they needed to be 'rescued' from their scattering across the RCL; a lectionary whose own hermeneutical presuppositions predate awareness of the current ecological crisis. I preach as a minister in the United Reformed Church, a denomination that commends the RCL as a resource, but does not require its use in worship. Freedom of choice is available to me, but this is not the case for many who preach within other denominational traditions. To take their position into account, revision of the RCL, in the light of understandings of the world ecological situation, which have arisen since its compilation, is urgently required.

Sixth, I believe that the approach taken in the 2018 ecological sermon series is transferable to preaching concerning other areas of social, economic, and political concern, and engaging with ecological issues in other areas of ministry. Preaching on other issues would begin with a deep discernment of the activity of God in the situation or context, before considering biblical texts or internal congregational concerns, is affirmed. Transparently reading the biblical texts from a committed point of view, based upon an underlying theological narrative, and making the congregation aware that this is what is happening, is supported. Expecting meaning to arise from the encounter between this discernment of context and the content of the biblical texts becomes the norm. I am aware that this has not happened in a thoroughgoing way in my preaching practice to date and note the need for it in future.

For example, concerning current plans for regeneration of North Shields town centre, as previously reported,[15] my homiletical approach would begin with a thorough examination of the local political, social and economic setting, not simply for the purposes of information gathering, but as a prayerful attempt to discern in what ways the Holy Spirit is at work in this

[15] See above, 108.

setting. Only then would I come to choose biblical texts for myself, or use those provided by the RCL. Congregational concerns would then be addressed in the light of what was discerned in the town setting, not set limits upon, or perhaps even prevent attention to the context of change within the town. Also, I note that my approach to ecological preaching could also be transferred into other forms of ministry. Particularly, for my future practice, with its emphasis upon responding to biblical texts out of the experience of context, Contextual Bible Study groups would be a useful means to explore and respond to the ecological crisis. In principle, discernment of what God is saying in the ecological aspects might also be applied to the practice of pastoral care, engagement with church groups and organisations, in the management and administration of congregations, and evangelistic activity.

As an ecological preacher, I am now more reflexively aware of the part my life-story plays in my preaching. That life story is inescapably ecological – I am part of an earthly system in which God is at work. With this understanding I then seek and construct an ecological lens to read Scripture for the purposes of preaching. The transferability of this approach to other areas of ministry then challenges me to move forward into being not only an ecological preacher but an ecological minister, and ecologically aware researcher. Areas for further research exist. First, concerning the preacher's early exploration of the ecological context, what methods are available to discern the presence of the Holy Spirit there, and how would such methods be evaluated? Second, the research in this thesis was weighted more towards the factors that lead to ecological preaching and the hermeneutic required for doing so. Less attention was given to congregational response. Future research might explore how members of congregations hear and respond to ecological sermons. This in turn would provide suggestions about how to further develop preaching practice. Third, although preliminary suggestions were made about how preachers might be equipped for preaching ecological sermons further research could explore this in greater depth, including the development and evaluation of relevant schemes. Fourth, I have suggested addressing ecological concerns in church life through ways other than preaching. Particularly, there is the opportunity to research the effectiveness of using a Contextual Bible Study approach with church groups as a means of increasing understanding and way of stimulating practical responses to ecological issues. This could then be compared with the impact of ecological preaching, including that which draws upon the writing of the Apostle Paul.

APPENDICES

Appendix A

2018 Creation Time Sermons Preached at Saint Columba's United Reformed Church

A.1 Sermon 1 - 02/09/2018

This sermon was delivered as the first in a series of four during Creation Time 2018. It was preached to a United Reformed Church congregation in North Shields in the North East of England, near Tynemouth and the Northumberland coast. After the morning service the congregation gather in the church hall, drinking their tea and coffee from single-use plastic cups!

The Environment: What's the Problem?

Mark 7:1-8, 14-15, 21-23; Philippians 1:21-30

1. Welcome to the first in a series of five sermons for the Sundays mornings in September - Creation Time 2018.

2. If you walk, cycle or drive North along the coast from Tynemouth you may observe a group of five large wind turbines some distance out at sea, generating enough power, so it said, to supply 34000 homes. Wind farms are useful, and some people like the look of them, though one woman told me, semi-seriously, she would like them more if only the blades of the different turbines would turn in unison with each other! How do you feel about wind farms?

3. Not everyone is convinced by the beauty of wind farms, as you would know if you perused the letters pages in the local press in the wake of the decision to build these turbines and their installation on-site. Some correspondents castigated them as humanly constructed intrusions upon the beautiful natural landscape of the North-East coast. Ironically, in my view at least, these letters were often accompanied by pictures showing the wind farm in the distance, with St Mary's Lighthouse in the foreground: the wind farm supposedly destroying a natural scene whilst a lighthouse enhanced it, yet both are human constructions. Human tastes are difficult to explain, but, just for the record, in general, I like the look of **both** wind turbines and lighthouses.

4. Wind farms generate not only electricity. They also generate strong feelings, including in churches. In my time as Environmental Chaplain for Eco-Congregation Scotland, I visited many churches, to speak to different groups, to lead worship, and to preach. Not everyone was convinced by all I had to say on every occasion, but being good church folk, they were restrained and polite. One notable exception was the person who rushed up to me to berate me, branding me as a representative of those who were imposing the obscenity of wind farms upon that part of Scotland; and this after a service in which I had not so much as mentioned a single turbine.

5. Wind farms are iconic; their existence and appearance taken to stand for a whole host of deep concerns and urgent questions about this world's environment which are deeply troubling for all concerned. Hence, wind farms generate strong feelings and disagreements not just about themselves but about the wider things they represent. Similarly, Pharisees and scribes in Jesus' time did not get upset about washing hands (7:3), cups, pots and bronze kettles (7:4) **as such**, but because of what such actions were understood to represent. Their question to Jesus was not grounded in a modern understanding of health and hygiene, but in their conviction that by failing to wash their hands before eating his disciples defiled themselves because they did not follow 'the tradition of the elders' (7:3); they were disturbing the "natural" order of things.

6. Whether it is dirty great big wind turbines or dirty-handed disciples, changes to the ways things have been up to now, often understood as the natural order of things, carry huge potential for disruption and disagreement. Jesus brands those who pose the questions and criticisms as 'hypocrites' (7:6), quotes Israel's prophetic tradition (7:6-7) against their take on the 'tradition of the elders', and goes on to make a general point that humans defile themselves not so much by failure to stick to the rules but through their own internally generated 'evil intentions' (7:21) which lead to all manner of negative actions. (7:21-23) Disputes conducted in this manner make enemies.

7. All of which still leaves us with wind farms and the contentious environmental questions that they generate. How do we deal with differing voices and deep disagreements, not just

over wind farms as such, but over the wider questions about our environment – the setting in which we live? How do we come to a mind and take appropriate action about the planet which we Christians understand to be a part of God's creation? Today's Gospel passage alerts us the fact that a specific concern raised, or question put may be only a small part of a much bigger discussion. Our reading from Saint Paul's Letter to the Philippians can help by suggesting some appropriate attitudes and actions when handling discussion, not only about wind turbines but the situation which has led to their construction.

8. I'm preaching this sermon on the basis that we are agreed on the reality and causes of climate change. The world's climate is changing in unprecedented ways and at unprecedented rates. There is a solid scientific consensus that the main cause of this radical change is our large scale burning of fossil fuels – coal, oil and gas – for the purposes of generating power, travel and manufacturing. The changes that flow from this will be seen in increased incidence of more severe weather events and long-term changes in climate that will impact us all, but most particularly those who have least in the first place.

9. If there are still some who have doubts about that widely accepted analysis I respect that and am happy to chat about it with you afterwards, in a restrained and polite fashion, of course. For the moment, however, let's proceed on the basis that we accept climate change as a reality. How should church people respond? Saint Paul is pondering that sort of question and his response may be helpful.

10. Now, to be clear, the situation that Paul and the first century Christians in Philippi faced was **not** about the environment or the climate. Paul is writing from a Roman prison to a people under pressure from others. He says they are having the same struggle that he had when he was last in Philippi (1:30), when the local authorities beat him and chucked him into prison for the night (Acts 16). That suggests to me that the congregation's current problem is local citizens who are not Christians and don't have a lot of time for those who are.

11. That's some distance away from arguments about climate change but Paul's advice resonates in our situation as it did in that of the Philippian Christians: live as Christians in the

here and now; such living involves lifestyle choices; and don't take fright if your choices lead to disagreement.

12. We live as Christians in the here and now. Paul's dilemma, either a literal one or a rhetorical one, is whether to live or die: 'to depart and be with Christ' or 'to remain in the flesh' (1:23) and support the Philippians in their struggle. Paul, convinced of their need for support, declares, 'I know that I will remain and continue with all of you for your progress and joy in faith.' (1:25) In my time preaching about environmental issues one response I often hear goes along the lines of, "we accept what you say about the need for Christians to care for creation in the here and now, but surely our main priority is to bring people to faith so that they may be assured of their eternal destiny – to be with Christ when death comes."

13. Saint Paul, I suspect, would see this as a "cop-out", a failure to live Christian faith in the here and now, because not only do we have to live in the here and now, such Christian living involves lifestyle choices: 'live your life in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ,' writes Paul, 'so that, whether I come see you or are absent, I will know that you are standing firm in one spirit, striving side by side, for the faith of the gospel.' (1:27)

14. 'Live your life in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ': Christians in Philippi were getting noticed. They were getting noticed because their lifestyle choices were bringing them into disrepute. They were not to be seen at the pagan religious festivals in which all dutiful citizens participated as part of the "natural order" of things. In their meetings they were rumoured to relate to each other without regard to the "natural order" of hierarchy, gender and social obligation. Given that the first person to join the congregation came from Thyatira, not Philippi, and was a woman to boot, what else could one expect? (Acts 16:14-15)

15. Might Christians in twenty-first century North Shields stand out from the general population because of our environmental lifestyle choices? If we were accused of living a Christian lifestyle would there be enough evidence to secure a conviction? That's a challenge, especially as, in terms of creation care, we are in danger of being left behind by some of our concerned secular neighbours rather than being leaders in the field. Over the next few weeks

we'll consider how we might develop as a congregation in that direction. For the moment, though, just give a little consideration to one widely held view that we could challenge in our actions: that considerations of cost and convenience always trump environmental concerns.

16. Living, as we do, in the twenty-first century West that seems like the natural order of things; convenience is a good and money talks. What sort of group would make environmental concerns the grounds for its choice of bank? What sort of congregation would choose a green energy tariff, even if it meant paying more? And to **really** stir things up, might a creation care oriented congregation, pay the extra cost in cash and convenience in order ditch single-use plastic cups for drinking tea and coffee after the morning service? Might they replace them with a compostable alternative or deploy the dish washing machine?

17. Start to talk about challenging the power of money and the "need" for convenience, through potential lifestyle choices and changes for Christians in the here and now, and you risk disagreement and conflict. Nobody likes disagreement and conflict … well, almost nobody. Most people shy away from conflict and Saint Paul knows that. As he tells the Philippian Christians, be of 'one mind for the faith of the gospel … in no way intimidated by your opponents.' (1:27, 28) Don't take fright and flee from conflict which arises from intentional choice of a Christian lifestyle. This is good advice for the Philippians and good advice for us; no stampede for the doors at the first sign of disagreement.

18. Given how conflict and disagreement characterise so much of the New Testament story it's surprising in a way that we don't do disagreement better as we try to discern the best way forward for contemporary Christian congregations in a world of change. Reflecting on the Gospel dirty hands incident we should be more alert to the times when the occasion for the argument is not the whole story. Washing is about who we are as much as about what we do, and wind turbines are a sign that the basis on which our society has been happily organised is changing.

19. We have some choices. Christian congregations, like this one, can be a force for positive change. Alternatively, they could be a drag on such change. Or they might be simply

irrelevant, only concerned to be with Christ and not worried about being there for others. My hope, you won't be surprised to hear, is for the first and positive one of those options; being a force for positive change. Let's heed Saint Paul's call to live as Christians in the here and now, adopting a Christian lifestyle. Let's apply that to caring for God's creation, not running away from the conversations we need to have to make that into a reality.

A.2 – Sermon 2 - 09/09/2018

This sermon was delivered as the second in a series of four during Creation Time 2018. It was preached to a United Reformed Church congregation in North Shields in the North East of England. The sermon was preached in the context of a communion service.

It refers to the previous sermon where I commented that after the morning service the congregation gather in the church hall, drinking their tea and coffee from single-use plastic cups. At the conclusion of this service the Church Secretary informed me that she had purchased compostable cardboard cups for future use!

Lords of Creation?

Genesis 1:26-2:3; Mark 7:24-37; Philippians 2:1-13

1. Welcome to Creation Time 2018 – week 2. In last week's sermon we looked at how we deal with disagreement and have good discussion around what we do about facing the threat of climate change and its impact on this part of God's creation, planet earth.

2. We acknowledged that not everyone likes the look of wind farms and I managed to get in a dig about having our post-service tea and coffee in single-use plastic cups, wondering what action this congregation would be prepared to take about that. This week I want to ask if we human beings are lords of creation. Do we have a God-given dominion over the rest of creation – remember, we're part of creation, not separate from it – and, if so, how should we exercise such dominion?

3. So, are we lords of creation? Well, some would say so, and would point to the Bible to back up their point of view: 'then God said, "Let us make humankind in our image, according to our likeness; and let them have **dominion** over the fish of the sea, and over the birds of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the wild animals of the earth, and over every creeping thing that creeps upon the earth."' (1:26) Well that's it then. The Bible has spoken, and we always listen to what the Bible says, don't we? Case closed, sermon over, time to move on to share in the Lord's Supper … or perhaps not quite yet.

4. But why the delay? After all, even those who never crack open the pages of a bible, who seldom darken the door of a church, even they take it as read that we human beings are in charge on this earth. The planet; the sea, the sky and land, with their associated multitude of creatures, is ours for the taking and the using. You don't need some ancient set of scriptures to tell you that. It's simply obvious that we human beings have superior intelligence to the other creatures. We have the technical ability to exploit the resources found on and under the surface of the planet. What more can there be to say?

5. Well, some concerned environmentalists would find something to say about all of that and do so at length. Some will question or deny the easy assumption that human beings have more worth than other creatures. They will be angered by the use, overuse and misuse of the planet's resources, warning that this will also damage humankind in the long run. Some will also point the finger of blame at the Christian Church for this state of affairs. Large scale industrialisation and despoliation of the planet began in a century and in places where the Christian Church had huge influence. Having taught that we human being were special – made in God's image – the Church then sanctioned human societies to behave as though they were God in relation to the rest of creation. That some Christians today point to Genesis 1 to support talk of dominion over creation is simply then yet more evidence for the prosecution.

6. So, things are going badly for the planet and it's the fault of those dratted Christians with their crazy scriptures, or so it is said and believed by significant numbers of people. What on earth are we going to say to that? Perhaps you can see now why the Lord's Supper, where we remember Jesus, through sharing bread and wine – resources of planet earth – may be a little delayed. Given the urgency of acting well in a world threatened by human misuse and associated climate change, we need to build a better understanding of the relationship between humankind (us) and the rest of God's creation (everything else). And to do that we need to look more deeply into the Bible than just taking a couple of verses from the first chapter of its very first book.

7. That's a big challenge because we human beings have a strong tendency to be always comparing ourselves with others (however we define "others"). We identify differences which

we then use to claim superiority. To take just one biblical example, look at the values that underpin the discussion between Jesus and the Syrophoenician woman in Mark 7. Jews and Gentiles each have a low opinion of the other. Women are widely regarded as less important than men. Adults are usually seen as much more important than children, one's own family as more important than others, and everyone as more important than dogs, who must make do with the children's crumbs and be grateful for it.

8. If you come to Genesis 1 with a mindset like that, and many people do, then its mentions of 'dominion' (1:26, 28) are likely to be understood in terms of human **domination** of the earth for human benefit. I wouldn't even be surprised if that's how the writer of Genesis 1 saw things.

9. Given, however, the mess we're in; the literal mess of pollution such as plastics in our seas; the mess that comes from extracting coal, oil, gas and large scale manufacturing; the mess we are in through changing the finely balanced climate of God's planet; we need to grapple with what it means for humans to have dominion on earth. The reality is that we **do** have a measure of dominion by virtue of our technology and industrial activities. As one exasperated Scottish Episcopal priest of my acquaintance put it in a conversation, "It's not a question of whether we have dominion. We obviously do have dominion. The question is what are we going to do with it?"

10. And the answer is that we are going to have to look at "dominion" in a new way. We need a new mindset concerning what "dominion", or "lordship", means. We need to understand how such a new mindset would change the way treat "the other"; in this case "the other" being the rest of creation. And having rethought "dominion/lordship" from the point of view of how we relate to the "other" in the rest of creation, we then need to hear the call to move from attitude to action. All of that a "big ask" but, I believe, all of this is possible, with the help of insights from the third of today's bible readings.

11. So, a new mindset about dominion/lordship: 'let the same mind be in you that was in **Christ Jesus**,' (2:5) writes Saint Paul to the Christians living in the Macedonian town of

Philippi. ‘He was in the form of God [but] did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself, taking the form of a of slave.’ (2:6-7) So much of our talk about “dominion” or “lordship” over creation is in terms of our power; the power to dig, to build, to extract, to mould. That’s quite understandable when we are reading Genesis 1 where God creates from nothing; where God divides light from dark, sea from land; where God drags the very dust from the earth and creates humankind – us – in God’s own image.

12. It’s very tempting, then, to understand our god-like power over creation as being there for our own enjoyment and use. What happens, though, if we decide to understand being in God’s image in this world in **Jesus**-like terms? After all, in and through the birth and life and death and resurrection of our **Lord** Jesus Christ we Christians believe that we get a true insight into the very nature of God. We get to see God, the creator, who is far more “other” from us than anything else in this world could ever be We get to see this God at work in the world, within present-day creation.

13. When God steps into the world in a human life what does divine lordship look like? Decide that and we will have a far better basis for understanding what kind of **human** dominion this world needs and requires.

14. Jesus’ divine lordship, exercised within creation, is a **humble** one. His approach is quite at odds with many of the human values we see at work in the discussion between Jesus and the woman. Rather than seek for a position of superiority – like Jew over Gentile, Gentile over Jew, man over woman, adult over child – Jesus, Paul tells us, humbles himself. He could have been full of ‘selfish ambition or conceit’ (2:3); he could have looked only to his own interests (2:4). Instead, full of ‘compassion and sympathy’ (2:1) for the human plight, ‘he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death – even death on a cross.’ (2:8)

15. This is the sort of mindset, this is the sort of lordship to which Paul invites the Christians in Philippi. This is the attitude and lifestyle to which understands God is calling us and equipping us: ‘work out your own salvation with fear and trembling; for it is God who is at work with you, enabling you both to will and work for his good pleasure.’ (2:12-13) In the

setting of the small Christian congregation in first century Philippi, with all the pressures they faced from those around them, there is a practical outcome as far as Paul is concerned: ‘regard others as better than yourselves. Let each of you look not to your own interests, but to the interests of others.’ (2:3, 4)

16. I wonder how Saint Paul would have applied these insights and calling in **our** setting, particularly bearing in mind the ecological challenges that God’s planet faces today? ‘Regard others as better than yourselves. Let each of you look not to your own interests, but to the interests of others.’ You can see how that might apply to relationships between Jew and Gentile, men and women, adults and children, and all of those also-human “others”: ‘regard others as better than yourselves’. What happens though if we answer that call with regard to the “other” non-human part of creation? What does it mean if with a Jesus-type of lordship – dominion – in view we regard the other part of creation as better than ourselves?

17. That would make human dominion over creation a very different kind of “dominion” from the word as it is usually employed; not to about digging and building, not about extracting and moulding; not about utilising and exploiting. What if, instead, we chose **not** to exploit our position of power for our own interests? What if, in relation to the land, the sea, the sky; what if, in relation to the fish of the sea, the birds of the air, the domestic beasts and the wild creatures, we decided to make sacrifices on their behalf?

18. The world would look a very different place. I strongly suspect it would begin to look more like the place envisaged where God took delight and a day of rest in order to enjoy it, as the story goes. It would also be the sort of place where we humans, of all sorts, would flourish as well. It would be the place where followers of Jesus Christ lived in the Jesus-way, joining with those others, when ‘every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father,’ and our creator. (2:11)

A.3 – Sermon 3 – 16/09/18

This sermon was delivered as the third in a series of four during Creation Time 2018. It was preached to a United Reformed Church congregation in North Shields in the North East of England.

There is reference in the to the Great North Run, a high-profile half-marathon, run annually between Newcastle upon Tyne and South Shields, just across the river from North Shields. It is a combination of race and social occasion, involving thousands of people, including some known to members of the congregation.

Radically Conservative Concerning Creation

Mark 8:27-38; Philippians 3:4^{b}-14

1. Some years ago, I was standing at the church door after a Sunday morning service, greeting members of the congregation as they exited the building. One of them shook me by the hand, saying, "Well done, Trevor. That was a really courageous sermon!" This was surprising to me for I had not intended to preach a sermon that was in any "courageous". It was also worrying, for "courageous", when applied to a sermon, implies preaching that gets you into trouble, and I certainly never intended that to happen. All I had done was to point out in the sermon that deciding what was true in a specific political situation at that time was not straightforward, even for the participants, and so neither was truth-telling, even if the truth was all we wanted to hear.

2. I suppose that touching upon something political in a sermon could be considered as courageous. Some might prefer to call it foolhardy. Yet, in this series of sermons for Creation Time 2018 we have already ventured into such territory. In the first sermon in the series we considered how Christians can have good conversations, including disagreements, about ecological issues, including the merits of wind farms. Last week, in the second sermon in the series, about being **Jesus-like** lords of creation, we considered how the Church is held responsible by some for contemporary anti-environmental attitudes which sanction misuse of the earth's resources. There has been ample opportunity for controversy.

3. This week, in a third Creation Time sermon, I am asking if we are radicals or conservatives in the way we Christians engage with environmental issues; with ecological concerns; with the challenges of creation care. And I want to do this travelling along on the way with Jesus and his disciples in Mark 8, and through joining with Christians in first century Philippi, listening to words from the Apostle Paul in the letter that he wrote to them all those years ago.

4. On one level there is nothing at all controversial or courageous in preaching about contemporary environmental issues. Right across the Christian religious spectrum many statements call attention to the urgent, significant threats facing the world in which we live. The very first encyclical from the current pope – Pope Francis – addressed these matters: *Laudato Si: **on care for our common home***. Other statements, calling for concerted Christian action on creation care come from Evangelical churches, from the World Council of Churches, and from our own World Communion of Reformed Churches. There are also a host of church-related organisations and charities with an ecological focus; the Eco Church movement being the most prominent of these in England.

5. Yet, on another level, Christian talk about ecological matters remains controversial. Some Christians believe that such talk is a distraction from more important matters, particularly from evangelism which is concerned with bringing individuals to an explicit faith in Jesus Christ as their Saviour and Lord (I'm in favour of that by the way). Others even see it as a purely secular concern being imported into the life of the Church, not just downplaying but **distorting** the gospel, and hence damaging our traditional identity as Christians. To put their argument another way, we need to protect and conserve the Christian gospel from the pet concerns of secular, politically radical, tree huggers.

6. You won't be surprised to hear that this is not the way that I see things. It's not enough, however, to just shout louder than someone else so that your view prevails. Instead, I want to celebrate Christian tradition. I also want to say that knowing Jesus tends to disrupt any religious tradition; that our tradition of travelling with Jesus today includes addressing ecological concerns as an integral part of the gospel, of Christian good news, for the world and all its inhabitants.

7. So, let's begin by celebrating all that's good about being part of a religious tradition. Personally, I am deeply grateful for growing up in an all-encompassing religious tradition – Irish Presbyterianism – even if I did not agree with every aspect of it its life, then or now. Like most congregations in this country today I see before me people who started out in a variety of Christian traditions, before finding their current home with this congregation. And, of course, Saint Columba's, as part of the United Reformed Church, located in England is the heir to a tradition of religious Nonconformity, maintaining a distance between religious life and the life of the state. We are also part of the worldwide Reformed tradition, emphasising the central role of scriptural interpretation in our collective life, and investing authority and church government in groups or councils of the Church, rather than in individuals.

8. Emotional and spiritual investment in a religious tradition did not start with the United Reformed Church! When Jesus inquires of Peter and the other disciples, 'Who do people say that I am?' (8:27) they report and reply in terms of their Jewish religious tradition, drawing comparison with John the Baptist, Elijah, and an unnamed 'one of the other prophets'. (8:28) Even when Peter takes things further, in response to Jesus demanding to know **their** opinion, his response is still in terms of traditional Jewish hopes: 'You are the messiah.' (8:29)

9. All of this would have been familiar to Saint Paul. He would have felt their close connection with Elijah, with Israelite prophets; shared their hopes for a Jewish messiah. After all, as he reminded the Philippian Christians, he was a circumcised Jewish male, from an Israelite tribe; a Pharisee concerned with the practical outworking of religious law; 'as to righteousness under the law, blameless,' no less. (3:5, 6) Such was the strength of his commitment to his religious tradition that when he perceived the early Christian movement to be a threat from within he became 'a persecutor of the church.' (3:6)

10. Perhaps, in a fast-changing world, lived in a society where this religious tradition of ours is increasingly marginalised, there is an attraction to re-emphasising those aspects and practices of the Christian tradition which have worked well for us. I have been Minister here for only three months, but I have to report to you that on several occasions, when I have asked "why do we do this?" the answer has been, "because we've always done it this way." Perhaps also, when so many of big questions which confront us – climate change and the fate

of the environment included – seem to come from secular sources, not from within the church itself, our instinct is to push back rather than to embrace them.

11. All of this might be ok if it was not for the fact that the experience of knowing Jesus disrupts faith traditions. Peter recognised Jesus as the awaited Messiah, but Jesus disrupted Peter's understanding of what constituted a messiah: 'then he [Jesus] began to teach them that the Son of Man must undergo great suffering, and be rejected' (8:31) by the very religious traditionalists looking forward to his arrival. No wonder that Peter and Jesus had a row; Peter rebuking Jesus; Jesus calling Peter "Satan". (8:32-33)

12. Saint Paul would have his own rows with Saint Peter in due time (Galatians 2:11-14) but I like to think he would have felt some sympathy for Peter if he ever got to hear about this conversation with Jesus. After all, it was meeting the risen Jesus that totally disrupted Paul's understanding of his faith tradition. Paul, like Peter, like Jesus, never stopped being a Jew, but now **everything** in his experience, his **tradition** had to be read in this light: 'I regard **everything** as loss because of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord.' (3:8) And, as those of us who were here last week will remember, Christ Jesus's **lordship** is over the whole of creation, which in turn is the model for any lordship we practise within creation.

13. Our Christian faith tradition, then, is a tradition that is endlessly open to disruption and change because of our relentless focus is upon Jesus Christ. This is alarming because disruption and change is often stressful. This is hopeful because it is about change that comes through knowing Jesus Christ. And that's the rule of thumb by which we discern how to respond to questions that are posed to us from outside of the Church. How do we understand and respond to this **in the light of knowing Jesus Christ**?

14. Too often we understand "tradition" in a "traditionalist" sense, looking **only** to our shared past in order to direct our understanding and action in the here and now. On this basis, new challenges, posed from outside our tradition, never really get a fair hearing. They just don't fit in with who and what we are, based solely upon what we once were. The experience of Jesus' disciples, however, including Saint Paul, is that Jesus demands radical

rethinking of tradition in the light of meeting and knowing him. What, for example, does knowing Jesus do to our understanding of and action concerning the pressing ecological concerns about the shared life of this planet?

15. Our Christian tradition, so to speak, is a travelling tradition. It's no accident, I think that questions about the identity of Jesus – who people said he was – got an airing as part of a journey: 'and **on the way** he asked …' (8:27) Saint Paul uses a slightly different journey image, more like the effort, energy, and the beckoning finishing line of last week's Great North Run: 'forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, I press on towards the goal for the prize of the heavenly call of God in Christ Jesus.' (3:14) When we realise our tradition is a journeying-along-with-Jesus tradition then our focus shifts from the past, much more towards the present and the future.

16. Then it becomes part of our day to day faith tradition to deal with here-and-now issues, including, though not exclusively, ecological issues, from the perspective of being people who have met with Jesus Christ. We are not, for example, expected to treat climate change as something to be believed in, as though it were a long standing Christian doctrine. We **are** expected to give full attention to the contemporary reality of climate change, as set out for us in today's solid scientific consensus; its effects upon people, creatures and planet. **Then** we bring our ongoing faith traditions about Jesus – our redeemer, our reconciler, our servant-like Lord – to bear on deciding how we should act in today's situation.

17. Back near the beginning of this sermon I asked, are we radicals or conservatives in the way we Christians engage with environmental issues. And my answer is that we Christians should be radicals **and** conservatives in the way that we engage with environmental issues. We conservative Christians value the rich faith traditions of a whole "cloud of witnesses" who have gone before us in the faith; witnesses to what God has done in creation; what God has done through one particular people; what God has done through one person, Jesus Christ, who was born, lived, taught, suffered and died on earth, only to be raised by God to new life.

18. Christians who are conservative in this sense, however, are always going to be radical conservatives, because our focus is upon Christ Jesus. This Jesus is forever disrupting old certainties in the light of what is going on now and what is still to come, as both Saints Peter and Paul could have told you. Suggesting that Christian churches change the way we are in the light of ecological challenges to the planet and to our society is **radical**. Saying that we should do so because our focus is upon **Jesus**, not upon previous church habits and traditions, is as conservative as conservative can be. Christians: ecologically concerned; religiously radical conservatives.

A.4 – Sermon 4 – 30/09/18

This sermon was delivered as the final one in a series of four during Creation Time 2018. It was preached to a United Reformed Church congregation in North Shields in the North East of England.

Joy or Fear: what motivates us to care for God's creation?

Mark 9:38-50; Philippians 4:1-9

1. If you can keep you head whilst all around you are losing theirs …

… you're out of touch with the situation.

When problems arise, you don't look to someone who is so laid back that they are horizontal, so chilled-out that they can't be bothered to take action in a crisis. Standing in the middle of the road, with a great juggernaut heading your way, fear is not only natural but helpful. It encourages you to get moving before you get run over.

2. So, there is a positive place for fear in living out our individual, congregational and community life in a healthy way. On the other hand, fear is not good as dominating basis upon which to live individual or community life. If you want to see that truth in action, consider Jesus' disciples in Mark chapter nine.

3. John comes running to Jesus with what he sees as a crisis: 'Teacher, we saw someone casting out demons in your name, and we tried to stop him, because he was not following us.' (9:38) Don't you just have to love that, 'because he was not following **us**.' John could have said, "because he was not following you, Jesus,", but oh no, the problem, as John saw it, was that he was not following "us". Suffering people were being rendered demon-free **but** through the offices of someone who has not first signed up as an "official" disciple of Jesus. How terrible!

4. John, and possibly other disciples, are responding to this unnamed, uncredentialled person upon a basis of fear. They fear that their territory is being trespassed upon, that their identity as Jesus' disciples is being usurped. This leads them to analyse the situation in negative rather than positive terms. They **could** have run to their teacher with good news, that the spiritual healing that he had pioneered was now spreading beyond their own circle. Instead, they interpret this activity as something beyond the pale: 'we tried to stop him.'

5. I start with this Gospel story because in this sermon – our final one for Creation Time 2018 – I want us to consider the roles fear and joy play in motivating us to care for God's creation. Particularly, I want us to think about how we cooperate with other people and groups in caring for God's creation. How do we work with others who are environmentally committed, but not on the basis of Christian or religious faith?

6. Here in North Shields, and in North Tyneside, there are groups of national organisations such as Greenpeace, Friends of the Earth and the Transition Towns movement, plus some locally grown ones, all are committed to care for some aspect of the life of this planet. None claim religious faith as their reason for doing so. Are we truly open to cooperate with such groups to further the care of God's creation or are we a bit like Jesus' disciples, wary of working with those who are outside our group?

7. You might say, "of course we are open to working with people and groups like that" but I have to tell you that there's not a lot of evidence of churches working hand in hand with secular groups on environmental concerns. In fact, in general, churches just don't have a big track record of cooperating with non-church groups as equals in the pursuit of shared goals. We are not unlike those early disciples of Jesus, more concerned to protect their "turf" than affirm those doing in Jesus' name the sort of thing that Jesus was asking of his own followers.

8. Of course, there is a difference here. Secular ecological activists are not going around employing the name of Jesus Christ; there's no danger of that. They are, however, surely, from our perspective, doing God's work in caring for God's creation. It's not so much a question of checking whether they are naming the name above all names (Philippians 2:9), so

much as looking and having the spiritual insight to see whether the Holy Spirit is at work their ecological activities. Like those first disciples of Jesus, we twenty-first century followers of Christ could do with taking to heart Saint Paul's admonition to the believers in Philippi: 'The Lord is near. Do not worry about anything.' (4:5, 6)

9. It's natural to worry, to be fearful about the current situation and the future of the Church, including this church. You don't need me to re-rehearse all the issues and factors which have led to this church and churches around here becoming more marginal in the life of this area. We have been swept up by social forces which make Christian congregational life more difficult and challenging. So, there is a temptation to hang on to what we have, to circle the wagons, and to look inwards, including with regard to care for creation.

10. To go down that route would be most unfortunate, and not just because it will lock us into further numerical decline. After all, who wants to join a group that is nervous and inward-looking? Being open in joining with others to work on shared concerns is much the better way. It opens us up to being enlivened by the energy of others and, I believe, we in churches can offer a positive, specific contribution to secular groups (which may contain fellow Christians, don't forget) that will help them to flourish as well.

11. And a great potential contribution of Christians is to address the problem of **fear** as a driver of environmental activity. We've already looked at the interesting difference in the rhetoric employed by secular environmental groups and faith-based ones earlier in the service. Remember those word clouds? *[See images at end of sermon.]* Remember how the language secular groups used on their websites about the challenges facing the environment were emmeshed in the language of fear: security, threat, and greed, debt, disaster and extinction. Faith-based groups spoke of justice, hope and the generations, neighbours, interconnection and the web of life, creation care, justice and the future.

12. Standing in the middle of the environmental road, with the juggernaut of ecological disaster bearing down upon us, it's reasonable to be fearful, and fear might provide an impetus for action. Narratives of fear and doom, however, are insufficient as the basis for

ongoing action. In fact, things soon begin to weigh heavy, with high levels of despair and burnout among environmental activists.

And this is where, **potentially**, we Christians can make a positive contribution, even as at the same time we welcome the support that others can provide in our caring for creation. As the climate change activist and author, George Marshall, so memorably puts it, it's a case of "what the Green Team can learn from the God Squad."[1] He argues that what the secular green team, with their high levels of burnout, can learn from the God Squad, is a set of widely practised communal habits that enable you to keep going when the going gets tough.

13. A lot of these practices will sound very familiar to us, I would guess, to the point of sounding obvious, but perhaps we take our church experience too much for granted. Marshall mentions the importance of being committed to a belief or values that transcend the current situation so that your ecological activity never becomes the be-all-and-end-all of life. Thus, disappointments associated with it never totally dominate your life and well-being. That sounds to me like our belief that ecological challenges are always seen in the context of living life in a world created by a loving God.

14. Marshall also talks about the importance of meeting together regularly for mutual support, an environment where people feel able to confess their shortcomings and failures. You would hope that weekly worship provided something of that. He also speaks of creating opportunities to share experiences and desires about how things could be made better in the present and the future: anyone for Church Meeting or Bible discussion groups?

15. Of course, it's all very well to say that church **could** help other groups in these ways. That depends on churches, like us, practising what we preach in this regard. And to help us to do that, once again, it's helpful to listen to Saint Paul.

[1] Chapter heading in *Don't Even Think About it: Why Our Brains are Wired to Ignore Climate Change.* London: Bloomsbury, 2014. 217.

16. Firstly, let's be energised by joy, not dominated by fear: 'Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice!' (4:4) This is not a call to wishful thinking; reality avoidance which fails to address the distress of those convinced of the disaster coming with climate change. No! Saint Paul says, 'rejoice **in the Lord** always.' Rejoice, because we think and act with the belief that we remain always in the mind and care of our creator.

17. Secondly, let's own up to our failings and shortcomings, because that is the necessary preliminary step to resolving them. In Paul's situation, he had to address disagreement, sincere disagreement as far as we can know, between long-established members – leaders? – of the congregation in Philippi: I urge Euodia and I urge Syntyche to be of the same mind in the Lord.' (4:2)

18. The Church wasn't perfect then, it hasn't been perfect since, and it isn't perfect yet. There even might well be something in that charge that the Church has played a role in morally licensing the misuse of the planet's resources by overemphasising how important we human beings are in comparison with the rest of God's beloved creation. Modelling the ability to disagree and then to come to agreement, to acknowledge getting something wrong and moving forward; these are valuable practices not just for churches but for others too.

19. Then, thirdly, let's not be afraid to express our hopes, desires and fears, both for ourselves and this world. Share them with others and share them with God. And once again Saint Paul provides the necessary pointers: 'Do not worry about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God which surpasses all understanding will guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus.' (6:6, 7) Prayers, supplications, thanksgivings; prayers about the world, supplications for the future of the world, thanksgiving for all that we receive from this world; prayerful practices attuning our hearts and minds to the concerns and positive possibilities of living life fruitfully in this part of God's creation.

20. Caring for creation is doing God's work and will. That's the case whether or not those doing it call upon the name of Jesus Christ. We Christians are called not only to work with

each other but work **with others** in doing what we believe to be the will of God. In this process we will receive from others. We can also make a distinctive contribution, particularly in making **joy**, not fear, the basis for ecological action. So, along with Paul, I say to you, 'Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice! Let your gentleness be known to everyone. The Lord is near. Do not worry,' (4:4, 5, 6)

From Bomberg, Elizabeth and Alice Hague. 2018. 'Faith-based Climate Action in Christian Congregations: Mobilisation and Spiritual Resources.' *Local Environment*, 23(5), 582-596, DOI: 10.1080/13549839.2018.1449822. Last accessed 08/04/2018.

Appendix B – Abandoned Attempts to Preach Sermon 4

B.1 – First Attempt

Sermon 4 – FIRST ATTEMPT – abandoned

Joy or Fear: what motivates us to care for God's creation?

Mark 9:38-50; Philippians 4:1-9

1. So, are you and optimist or a pessimist, or something else altogether? Optimists are those who believe that we live in the best of all worlds. Pessimists are those who fear that the optimists are right! Which are you? Are you an optimist or a pessimist, or are you trying to be something different from either?

2. I'm doing my best not to be optimistic **or** pessimistic about issues such as climate change and the challenges involved in caring for God's creation in effective ways. Instead of being optimistic or pessimistic I'm trying to be **hopeful** instead. That's different from being optimistic. Optimism, either consciously or subconsciously, depends on calculating the odds on how we expect things to turn out. In December 2015 nations of the world successfully negotiated the Paris Climate Change Agreement, putting in place thought-through measures to avoid a rise in the world's temperature that would risk runaway climate change, greatly impacting the world: I was feeling optimistic. In June last year President Trump announced that the USA would withdraw from this agreement: cue pessimism about the planet's future.

3. As a Christian concerned about this small part of God's creation called planet earth I need to find good grounds, some reason, not merely to be blown along by the warm winds of progress which trigger optimism or be buffeted by the setbacks which sink so many of us into pessimism. How can I be hopeful whatever the circumstances; hope, based upon what God intends, accomplished in ways that I cannot anticipate, either in my optimistic or my pessimistic phases? How can I have the hopeful confidence of a Saint Paul, urging his fellow Christians in Philippi, 'Do not worry about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God.' (4:6)

B.2 – Second Attempt

Sermon 4 – SECOND ATTEMPT - abandoned

Joy or Fear: what motivates us to care for God's creation?

Mark 9:38-50; Philippians 4:1-9

1. Welcome to my fourth and final sermon for Creation Time 2018. This is the final Sunday of Creation Time, celebrated every September by more and more churches around the world, where we remember, give thanks, and pray for God's creation; effectively for us, remembering, giving thanks to God, and praying for planet earth. After all it's the only planet in this universe that humankind can affect for good or ill, at least so far.

2. Previously, we've had sermons on the best ways Christians should discuss our environment; on what is involved in being **Jesus-like** lords of creation; in recognising that Christian creation care is both radical – it's challenging – and conservative – it's rooted in a living Christian tradition. This week, we conclude – for now – by exploring what motivates people in general and Christians in particular, to act on environmental concerns. What works better: joy or fear?

3. So, let's start with fear. When challenging situations arise are you the calm sort or an inveterate worrier? When things seem to be going wrong how do you respond? Are you like Maria, the singing nun in *The Sound of Music*, preaching the advantages of denial: "When the dog bites, when the bee stings, when I'm feeling sad, I simply remember my favourite things, and then I don't feel so bad"? Alternatively, are you more of the *Dad's Army* Private Fraser school of instant defeat and despair in the face difficulty: "We're doomed, I tell you, all doomed"?

4. Worry, grounded in fear, is a reasonable response when faced with issues around environmental damage and climate change. At some level, worry is a helpful thing, so long as it leads to positive, effective attitudes and actions. Unfortunately, instead, it also leads to

denial and despair: “when the storms surge, when the drought comes, when we’re feeling bad” simply remembering our favourite isn’t going to cut it. Nor is the eat, drink and be gloomy response of the Private Frasers of the world going to be of much help. Instead we need to confront our fears, our worries, so that they do not lead us into defensiveness, denial or negativity.

5. Take a look at the disciples who are following Jesus: what a bunch of worriers. ‘John said to him [Jesus], “Teacher, we saw someone casting out demons in your name, and we tried to stop him because he was not following us.’ (9:38) Note the ‘he was not following us’, not “he was not following you”! John and hid fellow disciples are worried. They fear that someone else is muscling on their territory. They are the ones who have put in the hours, trailing across the Palestinian landscape in the footsteps of their teacher, Jesus. If anyone has the first century copyright on using his name, they do, not some Johnny or Jemima come lately, who is proving unnervingly successful and doing what they thought was **their** job.

6. The disciples’ **worry** about being displaced leads them to respond negatively: ‘we tried to stop him because he was not following us’. In their worry, in their fear, they are more concerned that their situation and status is preserved than that people should be demon-free. They could have done with a dose of the attitude of Saint Paul: ‘do not worry about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God.’ (4:6) Don’t get totally wrapped up in the situation to the extent that you can’t see it from a God-perspective. If you look at things that way they become more hopeful.

7. And I believe we can fruitfully compare the attitude of Jesus’ disciples then, confronted with an outsider who nevertheless heals in Jesus’ name, with our attitude towards others today who care for God’s creation but **without** acknowledging the name of Jesus or the existence of God when doing so. There are a host of groups and individuals doing good work on our environment. There are the well-known national and international environmental groups; Friends of the Earth, Greenpeace, the Transition Towns movement, for example, which do their good work without feeling they have to bring Jesus into it. Then there are many local groups around here: Friends of Northumberland Park

Appendix C – Preaching Journal for 2016 Creation Time Sermon Series

Preaching Journal (PJ)

Elements and Decision-making Processes in Preaching Sermons on Philippians in September 2018 – entries made as and when they occurred to me during that period. The fourth service did not include a sermon.

PRELIMINARY THINKING (PT)

PT1 - 26/08 – aware that I come to this process with a background, both in terms of a life history and journey, and an amount of specialist knowledge, even before I begin thinking / writing each sermon.

PT2 - 27/08 – Second day working through the structure that underlies my context, practice and preaching

PT3 - 28/08 – third day as above

PT4 - 28/08 – reminder to self that I want preparation for these sermons to mirror my normal practice – and I need to state in the thesis what constitutes my "normal practice"

PT5 - 28/08 – At what point did I decide it would be a good idea to introduce Paul into this process? And why? – need to chart my relationship with Paul and why I need to bring him to the forefront – did so to some extent in "Paul and me" review over three written pages

SERMON 1 (S1)

S1.1 -28/08 (12.50) – SERMON 1 – I need to bear in mind Fowl's work on reading scripture together with ongoing (good) disagreement as an integral part of that process

S1.2 - 29/08 (a.m.) - reading through the Mk and Phil passages, verse by verse and making notes of what strikes me (usual practice) – added the theme for the day as a heading before reading passage

S1.3 - 29/08 I chose to look at the Mk passage first (though I would have an idea of what the Phil passage is about). This is because I see Paul's contribution as one of "added value" OR has the Gospel passage been made "[passive" in light of the environmental context and the epistle then has the "active" role in shaping/framing the "scriptural" response?

S1.4 - 29/08 – note and ponder where I have * in the notes, and ask why I made that decision.

S1.5 - 29/08 – re Phil reading – am I looking at comparison/contrast with my setting OR an "extension" of Paul's approach in a new setting – reminder of "non-identical imitation"

S1.6 - 30/08 - prevaricated before getting back to preparation – even had nap – now move to look at commentary notes, discovering that I had nothing on the Mk passage beyond Hooker notes from 1993-1994

S1.7 - 30/08 – using Marshall on Phil further increases my focus on 1:27-29 – unity, action, disagreement, suffering with Christ

S1.8 - 30/08 – As I began looking at commentary notes I started an "ideas sheet" – thoughts from "conversation" with the commentaries

S1.9 - 30/08 – I felt I had to get a sense of commentators' views on identities of the opponents – which I did. Now ready think, outline, and write the sermon.

S.1.10 - 31/08 – a day off

S1.11 - 01/09 – A sermon which starts with context at ECS as the way into wider climate change debate, then to the Mk story as disagreement within a tradition. Phil passage = from the outside (3:2 a different group) AND Phil offers a response which is usable in our setting – 'live your life …' i.e. Christian faith is about living, not just about thinking about it

S1.12. - 01/09 wrote the sermon

S1.13 - 02/09 (a.m.) – minor tweaks

S1.14 - 02/09 – responses after the sermon

"Thank you. That made me think." (female 70s)

"That sermon made me think, which is what it's all about." (female 70s)

"That was great. What are we doing with the recording." (male 30s)

"I noticed that it was videoed. We are away for the next two weeks. Would like to see them as this is your thing." (female 70s)

S1.15 - 02/09 – thoughts arising from delivering the sermon

- Place of humour/laughter
- Felt it was ok but not my best
- Problem of experiment changing the situation (part of the reason that I am writing them in "real time")
- Not done in the best personal circumstances

SERMON TWO (S2)

S2. 1 - 06/09 (11.50) – Coming late to preparation due to "normal" ministerial workload – this is the second sermon for this week. Need to write it in a day! Struck by how familiar all three passages are to me. The gen passage is prob. Familiar to everyone (in Church at least), the Mk passage is upon which I preached a powerful sermon at AUC three years ago, I have lived with Phil 2 for 3+ years now, looking at it as the main additional lens to add to Horrell et al

S2.2 - 06/09 (11.55) – normal preparation practice begins by reading the passages, taking notes to see what "jumps out" at me **for the occasion and purposes of preaching**, with "Lords of Creation" title, referring to ecological theme of how humankind relates to the rest of creation, both sensate + non-sensate.

S2.3 - 06/09 – picked up on the thought that "image" trumps "dominion" because it is **God's** image and the whole account is telling us about God before it tells us of creation

S2.4 - 06/09 – Mk passage – I was intrigued to notice that 'he entered a house' and that 'he did not want anyone to know that he was there'. On another occasion this might be the "launch point" for the sermon. On this occasion I choose to pass. What have I / will I choose

to "dismiss" when deciding how to preach this (and other) sermons. What are/were the factors that led to this decision (and others)? An example of where the ecological lens excludes some otherwise legitimate options. MAKE A LIST OF "EXCLUSIONS" AND REASONS

S2.5 - 06/09 – Phil passage – very aware that I am using this twice in the series. Previously my message has been on a 'mindset' exemplified in 2:5-11, now on how it bears fruits in the relationship with the other, with the other widely defined

S2.6 - 06/09 - Phil – stopped verse by verse reading @ v.5 – because over-familiar with 6-11? (although intend to reference it in the sermon) – because this will receive greater emphasis on Week 4 (though how to do this with children … !?)

S2.7 - 06/09 – don't feel the need to make notes from commentaries or to peruse the ones I have – time and tiredness or familiarity / have idea of where it is going in the sermon (see blue highlighted part of "things to ponder" sheet)

S2.8 - 08/09 – wondered about the balance of elements in the sermon

S2.9 - 09/09 – when preaching the sermon wondered if it was too abstract

Comment after sermon: "I thought that was very good but don't know I understood all of it" (female 50s)

S2.10 - 09/09 – after the service the Church Sec informed me that she had purchased compostable cardboard cups for use in post-service tea and coffee

I had positive conversation with two of the kitchen team and another church member about the carbon footprint of plastic cups and merits of compostable/recyclable single use cups versus deploying the dishwasher

SERMON THREE (S3)

S3.1 - 10/09 – Now need to get prep done for next Sunday's sermon – **time pressure** and feelings of not being able to "perfect" the sermon

- Being grounded in the "proper" use of academic sources – what is their appropriate place?

- Why understandings of the role of the HS is of comfort here, but not and excuse! (Affinities with the relationship between faith and works.)

S3.2 - 10/09 – Reflecting on SERMON 2, most of the congregation did not know whether to laugh at, "the Bible has spoken, and we always listen to what the Bible says, don't we?", with those who did so, laughing quietly!

stuff has become, to some extent, a taking up my cross to follow Jesus

S3.3 - 10/09 – looking at 8:27 'on the way' and seeing "tradition" = being alerted to something in the biblical text by the theme I am bringing to the service/sermon, which follows on from conscious choice of ecological perspective, which sets the terms for what follows

S3.4 - 10/09 – questions in my mind about integrating Son of Man/Earth into sermon when the lens is supposed to be a Philippian one

S3.5 - [On holiday11/09-14/09]

S3.6 - 15/09 – re 8:38 – I thought to consult commentaries, which made we wonder about the appropriate role/place for such insights in the sermon writing process and in preaching it

S3.7 - 15/09 – from Phil 3:8, wondering what my life would look like if I had never known Jesus Christ – sobering, frightening – sense of deep gratitude to God, to my parents, to Church, which formed me. Paul was formed by his tradition, yet was capable of radical change, grounded in the interplay between his tradition and encounter with Jesus. My experience is different, being aware of Jesus from the time I was aware of anything at all. Radical encounter for me, then, more likely to come from exposure to new ideas about God/Jesus (academia) OR through a new life experience/insight/situation to which I then apply my Christian perspective, which is grounded in my tradition / faith life experience. Paul, as those like Wright affirm, remained a Jew, but a radicalised one. I, then, should not fear that new situations lead to loss of faith, but that they offer the opportunity for faith transformation.

S3.8 - 15/09 Just to write/articulate the thought that this is becoming, at least in part, a spiritual diary/journal, as much as it is an academic exercise.

S3.9 - 15/09 – Is part of my 'warming to' Paul an outcome of realising that we both grew up in tradition which has transformed us?

S3.10 - 16/09 – (reviewing sermon before printing) struck by how I try to persuade the listeners to my side e.g. pointing out that this is something that lots of churches do

S3.11 - 16/09 Comments after service

"I'm really enjoying all this creation stuff. I think about it when I am doing my yoga." (yoga teacher, F 60s)

"I know it's not just about thinking [reference to previous week's sermon] but my mind is just full having listened to that." (female 50s)

S3.12 - 16/09 – I feel better about the sermon after preaching it – why? – but still think that it needed to be grounded in stories/examples

S3.13 - 16/09 – another set of post-service conversations re tea and coffee, this time about the merits of cardboard cups (mostly positive) versus using "real cups" and the dishwasher

FOURTH SERVICE (SER)

SER 1.1 - 17/09 – reluctant to get started on the preparation – partly, at least, down to this being an all-age service where I am not certain/confident about identity or number of young people. What difference does it make to my preparation that the "normal" congregational context is changed?

SER 1.2 - 17/09 choice of hymn etc flowed smoothly, as it turned out

SER 1.3 - 18/09 - Mk passage – my concerns cause me to put the focus more on the latter half of the passage – the place of the vulnerable/children, rather than Jesus' prediction of his death and resurrection (except, perhaps, as a look back to the previous weeks)

SER 1.4 - 18/09 – Phil 2:5-11 As I approach the passage to re-read it, I realise that it is a big challenge to articulate this effectively for an all-age setting

SER 1.5 - 19/09 – still struggling to fit Phil 2:5-11 into a slideshow format for all-age and say something about climate change!

SER 1.6 - 19/09 – That Paul's contribution here is that Jesus did what Jesus said, thus encouraging Jesus' disciples (including us) to do things, which gives me the chance to share some Eco Church stories

The phenomenon of new meaning breaking out of scripture when one is **forced** to confront a reading (or be confronted by it) in what seems to be unpromising circumstances.

SER 1.7 [Personal circumstances prevented me from further work 20/09-22/09]

SER 1.8 - 23/09 No mention of the **content** of the service afterwards, though described as "good" and "challenging"

SER 1.9 - 23/09 – my own dissatisfaction with the content, lacking focus and clarity, failing to effectively apply Paul's "added value" – is this because the work was already done in the Gospel passage?

SERMON FOUR (S4)

S4.1 - 24/09 – Monday morning, the sun is shining, and I have a feeling of, "thank God, I'm now approaching the last of these services"! At same time, strong feeling of accomplishment as far as the congregation is concerned. Also feel that I have generated lots of material for the thesis and I have more focus for writing. Suspect my findings will be variable about the use of Paul. Wonder if it will call for another sermon series, applying the insights?

S4.2 - 24/09 - generally positive feeling as I begin to address service planning – preaching rather than all-age as my comfort zone?

S4.3 - 25/09 – feeling happy to re-read the text (having at last done my much-needed filing – importance of personal environment)

S4.4 - 25/09 – wrestling with others doing the same thing but **in a different name** – differs from Mk 9

S4.5 - 26/09 – a frustrating day in terms of sermon writing – **twice** decided to scrap sermon as the initially promising outline was going nowhere in practice.

In both cases felt as though I was writing a sermon to answer philosophical/theological questions rather than meet the needs of **the congregation**, producing something that looked more like a lecture than a sermon.

In both cases got hooked by presentational possibilities for an introduction which were inconsistent with what I wanted to say theologically and ecologically – keeping presentation and performance in their proper place in preaching – place of the congregation in preaching

S4.6 - 27/09 (a.m.) – Now feel that I have a better basis for a sermon – outline came together in my mind in the course of evening/night time, in the shower and on the loo in the morning (need to keep the idea "in mind" so as to be able to put it on paper and retain it).

S4.7 - 27/09 – wrote the outline first thing when I got to the desk. Now spending morning on other work and will return to it to review and then start writing – the need for me to have the sermon in my head before I start writing (Myers-Briggs ES/NTJ)

S4.8 - 28/09 – wrote the sermon during the day on Saturday, revising it in the evening (and further hand-written tweaks on Sunday – just matters of wording/presentation or something more?)

S4.9 - 30/09 – preached the sermon, feeling reasonably happy with it. Wondering, however, if it really applied (yet) to the St Columba's URC context or how I would like it to be

Comments after the service:

"You obviously put a lot of preparation into those services" (female 70s)

"You should print off copies for us to read afterwards. There's such a lot there and my brain moves too slowly to take it all in."

Appendix D

Questions for Reflection Panel on Sermons Preached in 2018 Creation Time Series

Thank you for agreeing to be a member of this reflection panel, providing feedback to me on a series of five sermons preached in September 2018. This sermon series responds to the current severe ecological challenges facing the world, seeking to encourage new thinking and positive actions from members of the congregation. *The Letter of Paul to the Philippians* provides a reading for each of the sermons.

Please respond by answering the questions below as you feel appropriate.

Please also take the opportunity to comment on any aspect of the sermon you find significant.

The Questions

- What did you understand to be the subject or focus of the sermon? Was this clearly expressed by the preacher?

- Did you feel that the Bible was used appropriately in the sermon? If so, in what ways? Do you have reservations about the use of scripture? If so, what are these?

- Did your theological understanding develop or change because of this sermon?

- Was there appropriate clarity concerning the nature of contemporary ecological challenges? Do you feel that the bible passages were effectively linked to ecological concerns? If so, how? If you think they were not, in what way was this the case?

- Were you challenged to change an action or adopt a new practice based on this sermon?

- Do you think what was offered to the congregation

  - Encouraged new ways of understanding the ecological situation?
  - Encouraged practical responses?
  - Sat within the Christian tradition?

- If you watched a recording of the sermon, are there comments you would like to make about the “person of the preacher” and the delivery of the sermon?

- Finally, are there any comments or reflections you would wish to share because of hearing or reading this sermon?

Appendix E – Sermon Preached in 2007

Sermon on Romans 13: 1-7 preached by Trevor Jamison, a minister in the United Reformed Church in the United Kingdom at Allisonville Christian Church, Indianapolis, October 7th 2007

In 1982 Argentina invaded the Falkland Islands, or as Argentinians preferred to call them, the Malvinas. Under the then Prime Minister, Margaret Thatcher the British government assembled a military task force to regain the islands, one of Britain's most far-flung possessions that many of the British public had not even realized existed and most could not have located on a map of the world. It was during that time that I saw a magazine cover whose picture and headline has stayed with me ever since. The magazine was the American publication, *Newsweek*. The full size front page picture was an aerial shot, taken above the Royal Navy base at Portsmouth in England. It showed one of the nation's two aircraft carriers, jet fighters and helicopters crowding the deck leaving dock and setting out for the South Atlantic. Seeing it off were a horde of small ships and private yachts. At the edge of the shore was a huge crowd of people – anxious family and friends and probably a large number of other well wishers and simple sightseers. It was an arresting image but what has kept it in my memory was the headline emblazoned across the cover of the magazine … *The Empire Strikes Back*.

It is said that one picture is worth a thousand words but on this occasion just **four** words illuminated unexpected depths and dimensions of an image. With just four words we were not only drawn into present reality but were reminded of the historical context of a once extensive empire, a remnant of which had now come back to haunt a nation living in much reduced circumstances. At the same time the nod towards the title of the recently released *Star Wars* movie reminded us that although all of *earth's proud empires pass away*[2] new ones, or their equivalent, inexorably arise to take their place, if not here then at least in galaxy far, far away.

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[2] From the hymn, ***The day thou gavest, Lord, is ended*** **by** John Ellerton (1826-93)

So be it, Lord; thy throne shall never
Like earth's proud empires, pass away;
Thy Kingdom stands, and grows for ever,
Till all thy creatures own thy sway.

We are reminded that at in every place, in every time, past present and future, Christians, no matter how they might attempt to insulate themselves from the world, will find themselves confronted with **the authorities** and at some point the demands of the authorities will conflict with what we believe as Christians. Since authorities, imperial or otherwise, exist at all times, everywhere, it is no surprise that St Paul and the Christians in Rome had to wrestle with such questions. What **is** a surprise, a **shock** to many of us, is what Paul declares on this matter:

Let every person be subject to the governing authorities, for there is no authority except from God … therefore whoever resists authority resists what God has appointed and those who resist will incur judgment. (13: 1-2 NRSV)

Paul goes on to declare rulers are not a terror to good conduct but to bad, that representatives of government are God's servants or ministers, and that followers of Jesus should cooperate fully with them, including in the matters of paying taxes and customs duties.

Now, in attempting to follow these injunctions literally there has been an enduring conscientious tradition amongst some Christians of quiet cooperation with the God-given authorities. But this has not been the response of the majority and we should be clear about what is being said. Paul is not advocating passive resistance to perceived injustice, like some early example of the much admired Gandhi, leading a campaign of passive resistance against British imperial government in India. No, Paul is advocating not passive resistance but **non**-resistance. It did not take long at all for Christians to express doubts about this idea. In the wake of Roman imperial persecution against Christians, persecution which we believe claimed Paul's life, Christians wondered how it could be that God appointed the authorities if part of the role of the authorities was to persecute God's people.

Also, there have been too many occasions when this word from Paul has been used not to bring freedom but to justify bondage. To take one example from less than thirty years ago:

The Bible … has a message for the governments and the governed of the world. Thus we read in Romans 13 that every person be subject to the governing authorities. There is no authority

except from God. Rulers are not a terror to good conduct, but to bad conduct, Do what is good and you will receive the approval of the ruler. He is God's servant for your good.[3]
The words of P W Botha, Premier of apartheid-era South Africa, addressing the black denomination Zion Christian Church on April 7th 1985.

I'm preaching to you today on the basis that most or all of us gathered for worship in this place are agreed that this scripture passage is not a simple justification of political subservience but needs to be open to an interpretation that allows for some critical assessment of authorities on the basis of Christian values such as peace, justice and freedom for all peoples. I'm confident that most of you will be with me on this, if for no other reason than that to argue otherwise is to claim that the thirteen former colonies must repent of their resistance to the divinely appointed authority of King George iii of Great Britain and Ireland and that they must now return to British rule! Well I'm not going to try to preach that message today, partly because I don't believe it, but mostly because I want to get out of here in one piece.

The question remains, however, if we don't take Paul's words here at face value, how are we to take them? In what way does the scripture have authority for or over us? These are urgent questions facing Christians not only here but around the world today – Christians in Myanamar, Christians in the Congo, Christians in Darfur, Christians in Zimbabwe – how do we respond to the authorities? And it's worth just saying, how believe we should respond to the political authorities also provides us with guidelines as to how we respond to authority as we encounter it in everyday life – parents, teachers, managers; and yes, the authority residing in **religious** leaders, such as ministers and even including the preacher.

Firstly, we take Paul's words seriously which leads us to look **above** the governing authorities. As Paul says, *those authorities have been instituted by God* … and *rulers are not a terror to good conduct but to bad*. How does an authority – a government, manager, teacher or parent – wield authority? Does this reflect the just and loving nature of the God who bestowed the gift of authority? After all, just because God gives you some gift does not mean that you then justified in **mis**using it. God gives us the gift of speech, but not that we might defame others; hearing but not that we should use it to indulge in listening to gossip; bodies but not that we

[3] Quoted in Mark Reasoner *Romans in full circle: a history of interpretation. Louisville, Kentucky, Westminster John Knox Press, 2005. p. 129*

should use them to do violence to others. So, in coming to a judgment about the authority of kings, presidents, teachers, ministers or parents we ask, how, does their conduct fit with what we know of the one who is king over kings and presides over presidents; teaches the teachers and ministers to the ministers; who is present as both mother and father to us all.

Knowing the nature, mind and will of God is of course not a simple task, never mind knowing how to apply that to everyday political and social situations. So looking **above** the authorities needs to go along with looking to authorities **around us** in order to help us in make these discernments. Amongst such authorities we have the wider authority of scripture. We don't just consider seven verses from one book in isolations from the sixty-six in the Bible when making our decisions. For example, what effect does it have on how we understand Paul to remember the divinely sanctioned successful revolt of Israelite slaves against an Egyptian Pharaoh's divinely appointed authority? What do we make of the careful ambiguities of Jesus concerning taxation and the authorities, that we should pay to Caesar what is due to Caesar and **pay to God what is due to God**?

We look **around us** not only to the scriptures but also to those authorities that are our fellow Christians, both in the present and in the past. We look back to American Christians who defied the governing authority and its legislation because they were convinced that both slavery and racial segregation were against the will of God; we look back to those prepared to give their lives to say that elected or not, a Nazi regime must not command the support or submission of German Christians. And today, appropriately on World Communion Sunday, we look around us, to Christians in today's world whose experiences and actions have much to teach us about the extent and the limits of Christian submission to the governing authorities.

Armed with the wider authority of scripture, supported by the authorities of Christian witness, past and present, we still listen to Paul's words with all seriousness. We acknowledge the God-given authority of governments that provide security, structure and prosperity to our societies; we acknowledge the existence and need for authority in so many areas of our lives – political, social, educational and domestic. So we respond positively to Paul's call for **submission** to authorities, to *pay to all what is due to them - taxes to whom taxes are due, revenue to whom revenue is due, respect to whom respect is due, honour to whom honour is due* – but not without some thought and perhaps not on every occasion.

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