

## Year A Proper 23 Creationtide 1

Ezekiel 33: 7-11

Romans 13: 8-14

Matthew 18: 15-20

### What Is This Thing Called Love?

What is this thing called love?

This funny thing called love?

I know, to quote the opening two lines from a classic Cole Porter song may seem a strange way to start a sermon based on the three readings we have heard this morning. And especially as I am going to talk about God's creation and climate change! Hopefully by the end of the sermon it will be a bit clearer why these lines came into my head.

In our reading from the prophet Ezekiel we hear God tell him that he will be like a sentinel, a guard who keeps watch over a city. It his job to sound the alarm and warn people if he spots danger, spots something likely to cause harm to the inhabitants of the city. The guard will have done a good job if the alarm is raised in time for the inhabitants to act and remain safe.

We also note that God then tells Ezekiel what message he must give to the people Israel. There is collective guilt amongst the people, but all is not lost. God tells Ezekiel that God desires renewal and redemption; punishment for their wickedness is not part of God's plan. Ezekiel calls for people to return to God's ways.

This reading naturally leads us to consider who are the sentinels in our age, warning us about very real dangers facing us? And also, what is our role? Are we like the inhabitants in the city, who will only want to rush to safety when the alarm is raised? Or do we also have a role as sentinels?

In terms of creationtide and climate change, the first sentinels were scientists. Academics who could plot the parts per million of CO<sub>2</sub> and other greenhouse gasses against increases in global temperatures, and understood the consequences for the whole of God's creation if the trend was not just halted

but reversed. I had the honour of working with some of these academics in the School of Geosciences at the University of Edinburgh. All independently funded research concludes that humankind's activities are the cause of the massive increase in greenhouse gasses in the last 200 years. There is no doubt. Climate change is caused by human activities and has damaged and continues to damage our world and everything that lives on it (plant and animal). Species extinction is real and happening and accelerating.

So, do we leave the academics to be the sentinels crying out the warning? And if so, when the danger is imminent, where do we think it will be safe to go? Unlike in Israel, holing up behind big city walls, or fleeing out the back door into the wilderness isn't going to work. We only have one planet.

I would argue that we are also sentinels. We have all experienced climate change and the signs of it are all around us. All we need to do is open our eyes and look, just what a sentinel is expected to do – look and watch for signs of danger. And then sound the alarm.

What are the warnings of our own eyes, ears, our daily experiences? For instance, I remember in the 70's and 80's (in the days when I had a Mk 2 Cortina and I rode a Honda 175 around the lanes of Hertfordshire), that every summer drive, or when on holidays you spent ages cleaning your windscreen – a wide variety of insects had been splattered on your screen, your headlights and grille, on your motorcycle helmet's visor. This year, driving in late August in remote parts of Sutherland there were very few insect fatalities on my car windscreen. This is just one sign of climate change and species in danger.

How are we to respond to the sentinels we hear? Do we recognise our collective guilt as well as our individual part in creating this situation? I think we need to do both. In this passage from Ezekiel God is calling for the people to hear the sentinel, to hear the warning and seek to change; today it is calling us to change our habits and ways of living that contribute to damaging God's wonderful creation.

Do we do this because we want to please God? Because when you love someone you will do what is the right thing to do? I hope that is part of the motivation for our response, but not all of it. I will come back to this point shortly.

I want to move on the gospel reading. This is a challenging piece of scripture, about taking responsibility for restoring someone who has done wrong back into their community.

And just for a minute, pause and think... when you heard the reading I think you probably put yourself in the role of the person who has been sinned against, just as I did. This is what we usually do when we listen to such stories. We identify with the good guy.

But, what if God's creation has been wronged, and we are the people who have sinned against it? Ricard Rohr in the Universal Christ talks about the Christ being in everything. Christ was from the beginning of time in everything, whereas the human incarnation, Jesus, was so briefly visible to us on earth. So, have our actions, intentionally or not, damaged God's creation? The whole earth is crying out, and that by extension means we are hurting Christ, we are hurting God. I would like to think that this was sufficient motivation to seek to change in a way that honours and restores God's creation to a healthy state.

So in the gospel reading, we need to stand as one accused, not as the one pointing out the sin to the sinner. That can make us feel really uncomfortable.

It is also right to consider who in this world has already been made to suffer by climate change, by the actions of other humans? Maybe the people who have suffered and should be pointing our sins out to us are people whose lives have been made unsustainable – persistent droughts, failed irrigation systems, sweeping fires across forest and farmland, hurricanes and tornados demolishing houses, businesses, hospitals, civic infrastructure, floods washing away houses and livelihoods. If any such person was to come to us and point out our sin how would we react? Would we listen, and be welcomed back into communion with that person? Or would we not listen, and that person would need to gather more witnesses to the damage caused and present the information to you. Would we listen then? If we would not listen would it need a much larger group – what Matthew envisages as being a whole church congregation – need to bring the evidence to bear before us?

And if someone still denies the impact of humankind's activities on the planet, and refuses to see the damage done to the lives of fellow humans - let alone to animals and plant-life, to the soil and to the oceans, what should we do? Matthew says we should treat them like a tax collector or gentile. This passage seems to suggest that we give up on them and know that we have tried hard to

include them in our community, to remain in communion with them, but they have been unwilling to acknowledge the sins, the damage this causes to the community and we must leave them to God's judgment. That sounds kind of OK, but just how practical is that?

Perhaps the passage from Romans can help us answer this?

Paul wrote, in response to the Jewish teachings about the commandments, the Law of the Torah, "'Love your neighbour as yourself.' Love does no wrong to a neighbour; therefore, love is the fulfilling of the law."

We are to be influenced and should follow the new commandment in all we do. If we love someone we are not asked to give up on them. We are asked to continue loving them, even if they have chosen to deny the science of climate change. And maybe, in continuing to love them, we will listen and understand them better, we will be able to continue a dialogue with them, and not just treat them as a pariah.

And we need to be aware, that for people already badly affected by climate change, that they have the hard task of loving us, members of the nations that pollute the world more than most others.

"'Love your neighbour as yourself.' Love does no wrong to a neighbour; therefore, love is the fulfilling of the law." These two sentences in Paul's letter to the Romans should also speak to us, no, shout out to us, as a reason why we individually and collectively as a society and a nation would wish to change. Our neighbours are the members of a Pacific Island community who land has disappeared beneath the waves due to rising sea levels. Our neighbours are farmers in East and Southern Africa who have endured years of drought, with crop failures and the death of their cattle. Our neighbours are Malawian farmers whose crops have been washed away by unprecedented levels of rainfall, whose soil is also washed away by the rains, making farming so much harder. And these are just the human neighbours. The animals that have suffered cannot speak and seldom make the headlines. Maybe pictures of emaciated polar bears and their dead cubs may be something that shocks us to action? Maybe?

This passage from Romans is an urgent call for action – and it speaks in to our lives today just as it did to its first readers. To live the life of Jesus today, to live out our new lives in Christ now; to let our lives be shaped by our hope for the world. Paul asks us to 'put on the Lord Jesus Christ'.

In terms of caring for God's creation, for all peoples of the world, for all animals, for all plantlife, for the soil and the oceans, I wonder what 'putting on the Lord Jesus Christ' looks like to you?

We are called by Jesus to love our neighbour as ourselves. As Paul said, 'Love does no wrong to a neighbour; therefore, love is the fulfilling of the law.'

How can you show that love, in action, to our global neighbours, by our lives that generate greenhouse gasses here but have a global impact?

What can we do individually to change? What can we do collectively to change our lives but also the policies and practices of our nation?

*What role do you think the church has to play in standing watch over creation? What role does the church have in calling the people of God to respond when danger is imminent, threatening our communities?*

I hope you agree that we are all called to be sentinels, we must raise the alarm. I hope you agree we have all sinned against God's creation and our fellow humans who suffer as a result of climate change. We may not have realised just how much our behaviours have contributed to climate change, but that is no longer a defence. We have the indisputable facts.

Cole Porter wrote:

What is this thing called love?

This funny thing called love?

Today, I think love is about changing, it is about seeking renewal, it is about accepting that we need to urgently change in order to save God's creation. Love is recognising that our behaviours are causing pain to our neighbours, and we want to be in loving whole communion with them.

Love is the way. Love thy neighbour.

How will you respond in love to the climate emergency?

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The 'gradual hymn' was a lovely rendition of 'Where Have All the Flowers Gone' with stunning visuals as well as great singing by Dolores Keane and Tommy Sands.

You can see it using this link [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8i3e\\_uXlALU](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8i3e_uXlALU)