

# Harvest 2019

## Sermon Notes

Season for  
**change**

### Introduction

These sermon notes for a Season for Change/Harvest thanksgiving service are based on 1 Kings 21 and Luke 16:1-13. These passages can help us reflect on how social class and position have a significant bearing on human flourishing, and provide us with the challenge and inspiration needed for a season for change.

Sermon pointers are also provided, based on the Revised Common Lectionary passages for the Season of Creation. This year, it focuses on biodiversity – something the EcoVeg project encourages in India, as it works in harmony with the land.

### Position as power?

- King Ahab (1 Kings 21) and the rich man (Luke 16) occupy the highest position in society, one by royal status and the other by wealth. In these passages, their words set the actions in motion, yet they are quite passive participants.
- Jezebel and the dishonest manager hold something of a “middle-manager” role: they appear to be the most active and influential in directing the course of events.
- Naboth and the master’s debtors are both affected by the actions of the more powerful in society, and experience very different consequences.
- Naboth experiences the ultimate exclusion from his land: an experience still known by too many around the world. The debtors are instead brought into a more equal relationship with those considered above them.

### Breaking barriers of exclusion

- Today in India, millions of people are excluded from society because of the caste system; they live with prejudice and exclusion from birth.

- One in five people in India are Dalits, who are regarded as outcasts. Members of this community, and women in particular, do not have rights to secure a sustainable, independent future for themselves.
- They rarely own land, but often work long hours doing menial jobs in fields belonging to others. Not only is it back-breaking work, it exposes them to dangerous agricultural chemicals. This is an exclusion that Christian Aid partner SAAL is determined to change.

### Reverence for the land

- The land was in his name: he was Naboth the Jezreelite. Jezreel was fertile and lush – just as the land of Tamil Nadu in India once was.
- For Ahab to ask Naboth to leave his ancestral home shows a profound disregard for both the law and the land. Leviticus 25:23 states that the Israelites should not sell their inheritance. As far as Naboth was concerned, the land belonged to God, who had given it in trust to Naboth’s ancestors.
- Naboth was far from powerless. His reverence for God and the land gave him the strength and conviction to resist Ahab - but at the cost of his life. Defenders of human rights and land rights still all too often face this violent fate today.

- Naboth's reverence for the land is a value that modern chemical farming has neglected. As one farmer from Tamil Nadu explains: 'Chemical farming makes you dependent, it damages the soil and the environment.'
- We do well to remember from Naboth that the land belongs to God - we get to steward it for a time. As Wendell Berry challenges: 'If we believe, as so many of us profess to do, that the Earth is God's property and is full of His glory, how can we do harm to any part of it?'
- Chemical farming also damages people. Farmers in Tamil Nadu describe the health damage they believe that farm chemicals are causing, including diseases of the stomach and uterus, lungs and skin.
- This is why Christian Aid partner SAAL runs an organic EcoVeg project in India. It educates people in the advantages of chemical-free production, and provides training in organic methods and farming as a business.
- Demand for natural, nutritious food is growing. Not only is it better for the land and healthier for those growing it, the project provides an income opportunity for India's excluded communities. EcoVeg has reached nearly 5,000 farmers. Over one-third are from excluded communities; nearly half are women. It is changing the lives of many for the better!

### **A rightful place in society**

- The manager is resigned to his deserved fate: being sacked for squandering the rich man's property.
- He decides to do a pre-emptive move to win friends and influence people by dropping their debt, or reducing it at least - perhaps to what it was only supposed to be in the first place. He hopes this will be enough for them to show him kindness when he is made destitute.
- Jesus is demonstrating that wealth can be used differently. Like the land, it belongs to God and is to be used for the purposes of God's will. Money itself is to be put in its rightful place in society.
- In this case, it can be used to overturn social hierarchies and to create new, more equal relationships: 'Indeed, outsiders and those lower down on hierarchies now become the very ones we depend upon to welcome us – not only in their homes in this life, but even in the "eternal homes"': (Lois Malcolm)

- As a member of India's higher Thevar caste, Selvi has chosen to use her wealth and position in just such a way. She opened her home to Kasthuri, a Dalit woman who had been abandoned by her family and excluded even from her own community. "I want to break any form of slavery and exploitation of women, whether it is due to caste, class or gender," she says. The picture below shows Selvi and her mother with Kasthuri and Mathi, on the steps of their home.
- Selvi also shared her land to set up a women's farming collective. The women are part of the EcoVeg project. They are trained in natural farming techniques, and have received marketing and logistics support to start a business. It has given Kasthuri - and Selvi too - everything they wanted: a place where excluded people can build a better future for themselves.

### **A season for change?**

- The oppression and abuse of the marginalised does not go unnoticed by God. Elijah is sent to speak truth to power and pronounce judgement on Ahab and his household for their actions. The ancient story of Naboth's Vineyard serves as a reminder to all who use their power and privilege to exclude and oppress others. Their actions do not go unheeded, no matter what lengths of deception they may resort to.
- God sees when power and privilege exclude and marginalise across the world today. With the prophet Elijah, the EcoVeg project speaks truth to the powers that seek to marginalise and exclude in India today. It demonstrates a season for change and this is something that we can all participate in - sharing our resources, campaigning for justice and praying for change.



**Selvi's kindness gave Kasthuri and Mathi a home.**

# Season of Creation

## Sermon Pointers

The Season of Creation begins on 1 September, the Day of Prayer for Creation, and ends on 4 October, the feast day of St. Francis, the patron saint of ecology in many traditions.

The following notes are based on one or more of the Revised Common Lectionary passages for each Sunday in the Season of Creation.

### Sunday 1 September

**Jeremiah 2:4-13**

**Hebrews 13:1-8**

On this Day of Prayer for Creation, our prayer might be that of humble repentance. To be mindful of how our self-sufficiency and neglect of God's will have separated us from our Maker and from the rest of Creation.

We can only imagine that God's lament in the face of a changing climate is on a par with the final words of the Jeremiah reading: 'Be appalled, O heavens, at this, be shocked, be utterly desolate, says the Lord, for my people have committed two evils: they have forsaken me, the fountain of living water, and dug out cisterns for themselves, cracked cisterns that can hold no water.' (Jeremiah 2: 12-13)

It is our hope that the EcoVeg project in India offers a glimpse of hope and light by demonstrating another way to live in relationship with the land and with each other. 'To farm organically rather than chemically is to respect the value of the land. It is to 'eat its fruits and its good things,' as described in Jeremiah 2:7. And by including those most marginalised, the EcoVeg scheme models the love encouraged in Hebrews 13 – one that is mutual and regardless of caste.

May we be inspired and challenged as agents in the season for change, on this Day of Prayer for Creation.

### Sunday 8 September

**1 Philemon 1:1-21**

Reading Paul's letter to Philemon with 21st century sensibilities, we might find the theme of slavery in the Bible unsettling. Paul does not condemn slavery as we might prefer, reading this today, but he at least calls for those who were slaves to be treated as equals. Paul goes to lengths to ensure that Onesimus, the slave in question, is to be accepted as a family member, to be welcomed back to the home of Philemon as if he were Paul himself!

In the Season for Change story of Selvi and Kasthuri, we see something of this challenging of the status quo. Selvi may not be overturning the caste system in India, but by welcoming outsiders like Kasthuri and Mathi into her home as family, she is demonstrating another way. She is exemplifying the season for change which is much needed in how we care for all of Creation, including each other as human beings.



'I want to break any form of slavery and exploitation of women': Selvi

## Sunday 15 September

**Luke 15:1-10**

Reading or hearing the parables of the lost son, sheep and coin gives us reason to pause in this Season of Creation, with its focus on biodiversity. Headlines tell us how many species are being lost to pesticides and chemical farming, and how many glaciers are receding, meaning communities are losing their water supply. In the light of our Harvest story, focusing on those excluded in India, what does our society lose by excluding people on the basis of gender or caste?

Seeing the passion of the father, the shepherd and the woman in searching for the thing that is lost reminds us that our retrieval of biodiversity, species and climate justice is much more sustainable and tenacious if it is rooted in love. A love that never gives up. And the hope that, in the end, there will be much cause for rejoicing.

## Sunday 22 September

See notes above on Luke 16:1-13

## Sunday 29 September

**Jeremiah 32:1-3a, 6-15**

**Amos 6:1a, 4-7**

**1 Timothy 6:6-19**

**Luke 16:19-31**

The lectionary readings for this Sunday point to the challenge of inequality, and to those who seek their own gain over caring for those who are oppressed and on the margins. These are a challenging set of readings to engage with at a time when we traditionally give thanks for the abundance we enjoy. What place do our possessions have in our hearts and lives? It is a call to contentment rather than having more. And to participate in a season for change where all can have enough and 'take hold of the life that really is life.' (1 Timothy 6:19)

More Season of Creation sermon pointers will be available from the Southern African Faith Communities' Environment Institute (SAFCEI) on the weekly pointers pages in August.

**[caid.org.uk/sermon](http://caid.org.uk/sermon)**

