

Sermon Notes



Christian Aid supporters and staff take part in the COP26 Global Day of Action march in Glasgow on 6th November 2021, walking behind Christian Aid banner.

This resource is to help you and your church to understand climate-related loss and damage and think deeply about what it means to respond as a church. In this resource you'll find:

Contextual notes covering loss and damage, the climate crisis and how the bible can help us respond

An exploration of loss and damage through the story of Zacchaeus in Luke 19:1-10

A suggested sermon outline

Links to quotes, case studies and stories from people experiencing the loss and damage of the climate crisis

Setting the Scene: The Bible

From its earliest pages the Bible is clear that God is just [Deut 32:24], he loves justice [Psalm 11:7] and calls on his people to do justice [Is 1:17, Micah 6:8].

The Hebrew concept of justice is grounded in relationship. A just or righteous person is one who is in right relationship with God and their neighbours

including especially the most marginalized groups in society, the widow, the fatherless, the foreigner and the poor [Zech 7:9-10]. When someone's actions cause harm to others Biblical justice seeks to repair damage and make good loss and so to restore peace and order to the community. [See, for example, many of the laws in Exodus 21 and 22]

In the time of Jesus injustice was rife. Israel was under foreign occupation and the tax burden was crushing. Many small holder farmers were forced to sell their ancestral land and become day labourers whilst the rich were able to expand their farms and wealth at their expense. As a tax collector Zacchaeus was a part of this deeply unjust system and like many of his colleagues, he was clearly taking an extra cut for himself.

The world we live in

In East Africa the rains have repeatedly failed; livestock deaths, water shortages and ruined harvests put millions of people in danger of famine. In Pakistan devastating floods left a third of the country under water claiming over a thousand lives and affecting tens of millions of people. And in Haiti, people shelter as their homes are damaged in yet another hurricane.



Bidale Phintsire, 56, an agro-pastoralist in Malle woreda, South Omo, Ethiopia shows his scorched maize crop. Climate change has greatly increased the frequency of droughts in East Africa.

Climate change is driving this disruption in rainfall patterns and making extreme weather events like heatwaves, hurricanes and floods much more intense. Whilst climate change affects all of us, by far the greatest impacts are being felt in the world's least developed countries.

This is staggeringly unjust: Rich nations and big corporations have emitted the lion's share of all the greenhouse gas pollution in the atmosphere, but the poorest countries stand to pay the highest price for it. Less than 4% of all the carbon dioxide pumped into the atmosphere since the Industrial Revolution has come from the African continent. Yet polluters continue to burn fossil fuels, to profit from the poison they produce, and turn their backs on the damage already done.

Christian Aid is joining with other organizations to call on polluters to pay up to repair the damage and make good the loss that they have caused.

Luke 19:1-10 (NIV)

Jesus entered Jericho and was passing through. A man was there by the name of Zacchaeus; he was a chief tax collector and was wealthy. ³ He wanted to see who Jesus was, but because he was short he could not see over the crowd. So he ran ahead and climbed a sycamore-fig tree to see him, since Jesus was coming that way.

When Jesus reached the spot, he looked up and said to him, "Zacchaeus, come down immediately. I must stay at your house today." So he came down at once and welcomed him gladly.

All the people saw this and began to mutter, "He has gone to be the guest of a sinner."

But Zacchaeus stood up and said to the Lord, "Look, Lord! Here and now I give half of my possessions to the poor, and if I have cheated anybody out of anything, I will pay back four times the amount."

Jesus said to him, "Today salvation has come to this house, because this man, too, is a son of Abraham. For the Son of Man came to seek and to save the lost."

Getting into the text

The story of Zacchaeus offers us a wonderful case study of an individual who understands the need to pay for his actions. It helps us to raise the question of what biblical justice might look like in our modern context. In your sermon you might want to draw out some of the themes below to explore loss and damage with your church.

Humour

There are some quite comical touches to the story, we might want to enter into it imaginatively. See the little tax collector clambering up the tree, imagine the laughter of the crowds, and his surprise when Jesus looks up at him and invites himself around to dinner.

Anger

Consider why some of the crowd grumbled at Jesus going to eat with this sinner. We might want to ask how we would feel if we were one of the people Zacchaeus had cheated. Perhaps we had to sell the family farm to pay our taxes, maybe we are worried we won't be able to afford to feed and take care of our family because of the money that we have been cheated out of. You can imagine the profound sense of injustice and the deep anger.

A Prodigal

Zacchaeus' encounter with Jesus changed his life. This event comes just a few chapters after the story of the Prodigal Son in Luke's gospel and it seems likely that Luke wants us to see Zacchaeus as a real life example of the figure from the parable. That appears to be the

sense of Jesus' words where he speaks of his own calling to seek and save the lost and declares that salvation has come to this house because this man too is a son of Abraham.

Doing Justice

Zacchaeus' story is, like that of the Prodigal Son, an amazing testimony to the love and grace of God in accepting all who turn to him, but it takes us further and shows us something of what that new life should look like. It shows us that the call to do justice is close to the heart of what it means to follow Jesus. Zacchaeus recognised the harm that his old way of life had done and he committed to put it right.

It isn't completely clear which Old Testament Law Zacchaeus had in mind with his actions. But in making this payment and committing to giving half of his possessions to the poor it is clear that Zacchaeus understood the need to pay for the damage his actions had caused and that he went over and above even the strictest interpretation of the law in doing so – his generosity reflecting God's grace to him.

Impact

Zacchaeus was not the only one whose life changed that day. When he repaid those he had wronged he would have mended the broken and unjust relationship he had with his neighbours and transformed their lives. In doing justice Zacchaeus restored to them the means to take care of themselves and their families, the means to be resilient in the face of life's storms, he renewed their hope for the future.

Response

As we bring the world of the text alongside our own world, the challenge is to consider what it means for us as followers of Jesus today. What does it mean for us to do justice in an unjust world? You may wish to talk about some of the following responses.

Act – the Old Testament prophets called out again and again for justice in their society. It often made them unpopular, even amongst those who shared their faith, but their vision of God's character and justice compelled them to speak. By joining the campaign for a loss and damage fund we stand in the tradition of the prophets and of Jesus himself who reminded the Pharisees that doing justice was one of the "weightier matters of the law." Matthew 23:23. Join the campaign by using this church activity pack:

caid.org.uk/riseuppayoutpack

Pray – Zacchaeus must have seemed a very unlikely convert to the people he had cheated, but that is surely a part of the reason that his story is recorded for us in

scripture. He reminds us that God can act in anyone's life and can change the hearts and minds of even those who, like Saul of Tarsus, are most strongly opposed to the kingdom message. We should pray for decision makers in government and in big corporations – God has acted in our lives, he can act in theirs too.

Give – By supporting the work of Christian Aid you can help to respond to disasters caused by severe weather events, build the resilience of people in the Global South so they can face the changing climate with renewed confidence, and help us to amplify their voices through our campaigns for climate justice.

Putting your Sermon Together

This section suggests some important things to consider as you prepare your talk and offers a sermon outline which you can adapt or work up into a full script if you prefer.

Consider whether you want to write your talk out in full (recommended for those new to preaching) or use an outline with some key quotes and stories that you plan to use noted down.

How long have you been asked to speak for? If you don't preach regularly, you might find it helpful to practice your sermon beforehand and to time yourself. Even a great sermon will lose its impact if people are starting to look at their watches.

Think about your audience. Consider the kinds of examples and comparisons that might speak to them. For example, if your church has connections with a country which is suffering the impacts of climate change this would be a great way to connect with the issue of loss and damage. Or maybe there is a good example of someone putting a situation to rights within your church or community, or even a reference from TV or other media that you are confident will speak to them.

Don't forget to pray for your audience and yourself as you prepare to speak to them.

Suggested Sermon Outline

Introduction

It's often good to start with a point of contact with your audience. This could be the sense of injustice we all feel when we are wronged, or a specific example or story that will resonate with your congregation.

Most people will feel that when damage is done that it is only just that it should be put right but it may be worth pointing out that this aspect of making good damage and restoring relationships is central to a biblical

understanding of justice.

Getting into the story

Jesus was a brilliant story teller – he knew that stories have a way to fire the imagination and engage an audience that few other forms of communication do. As you get into the story of Zacchaeus try to do it as a story teller, not a recounter of facts. Help your audience to see Zacchaeus in the tree, to enter into the emotions that he must have felt and those that the angry crowds were feeling.

Making Connections

Good preaching brings together the world of the Bible and our own situation. Try to connect the injustices that people were facing in Jesus' day including those caused by Zacchaeus and people like him, with some of the examples of injustice caused by the climate crisis. It would be great to include a story or quote here from someone directly affected by the climate crisis – check out the links at the end of this document for some loss and damage stories from the frontline of the climate crisis.

Adding Tension

A great way to hold interest in a sermon or talk is to add some tension that gets the listeners wondering how it can be resolved. Here you could mention how most countries have so far refused to act on loss and damage, how progress will require a very significant change of heart on the part of many world leaders.

Moving to Hope

This is a good news story. Zacchaeus must have seemed an incredibly unlikely convert but through meeting Jesus his life was changed and he acted to make good the harm his actions had caused. Jesus still has the power to change people today. Some countries are already acting on loss and damage others can follow, but there is much to be done.

Actions we can take

Though this story contains a message of hope it is important not to ignore that challenge it brings. It's great to end a sermon by challenging your congregation about actions that they can take as individuals and as a congregation. What can they do to call for climate justice, to change their own lives, to give and to pray. Our church activity pack caid.org.uk/riseuppayuppack contains some creative suggestions about ways that we can engage with our MPs and other decision makers.

Loss and Damage Testimonials

Climate facts and figures have some value in explaining the issues, but stories help us to connect at an emotional level, to empathise with our global neighbours.

We have worked with our partners to create three short (2min) loss and damage video testimonials from people on the front line of the climate crisis in Rwanda, Sierra Leone and the Soloman Islands.

caid.org.uk/l&dvideos

If you have the technology available in your church, you might want to share one or more of these videos in your service. Alternatively, on that page we have also provided transcripts of these stories that you can use either in whole or to quote from in your sermon.

In using these resources it's important to see the speakers as capable and resilient people who are being pushed beyond their means to cope by climate injustice.

Where possible amplify their voices as part of your sermon.

