

SAYING YES TO LIFE

The Archbishop of Canterbury's
Lent Book 2020

COURSE NOTES

SAYING YES TO LIFE

Course Notes

A note for ministers and lay leaders

These notes have been produced by the Diocese of Bristol to support congregations in engaging with the Archbishop of Canterbury's Lent Book *Saying Yes to Life* by Ruth Valerio (SPCK). The majority of the content here is paragraph extracts from the book which summarise the major conclusions section by section. Extracts are italicised with page numbers given at the bottom of each section.

Although it would be possible to use these notes on their own, it is intended that ministers or lay leaders read the whole book to use these notes.

The extracts represent an abridged version of the text – and it is expected that ministers with knowledge of local congregations might choose to emphasise elements of the book that are not included in these notes.

Leaders may also want to interpret some of the themes according to their context. In particular, week 4 includes a much abbreviated introduction to eschatology and challenges the view that the doctrine of creation is unavoidably distinct from the doctrine of salvation. Please be aware that extra support may be needed here.

The extracts are used with permission from SPCK. Unless otherwise noted, citations from Holy Scripture are from the NIV, which is the translation used by Ruth Valerio.

Revd Dr Mark Siddall

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ASH WEDNESDAY/START OF LENT

In the beginning

(GENESIS 1:1–2)

¹ In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth. ² Now the earth was formless and empty, darkness was over the surface of the deep, and the Spirit of God was hovering over the waters.

Through these next six weeks of Lent, we are going to read Genesis 1 together and see how the themes of this opening chapter of the Bible weave their way through the biblical story and into our lives. We will use the Days of Creation to open our eyes to the world around us: to the people who live in it with their diversity, gifts and struggles; and to the other inhabitants who share our space and the environments within which we live, in all their wonder, beauty and fragility. Each chapter will look at one of the Days of Creation and will focus on the various aspects of the natural world that are created on that day. {pages xii-xiv}

During the 40 days of Lent, Christians fast or give up certain things, and dedicate extra time – on our own and with others – to prepare ourselves for the events of Holy Week and Jesus' death, which led ultimately, of course, to Easter Day and the victorious resurrection. Lent thus gives us an opportunity to reflect on our wrong-doing and its impact, and to consider what practices of resurrection hope we might then take on. {pages xiv}

WEEK 1

Let there be light

(GENESIS 1:1–5)

³ And God said, 'Let there be light,' and there was light. ⁴ God saw that the light was good, and he separated the light from the darkness. ⁵ God called the light 'day,' and the darkness he called 'night.' And there was evening, and there was morning—the first day.

Throughout the Old Testament God's presence as light acts as guidance in the darkness to show his people the way and how to follow him. Light as the presence of God is carried into the New Testament. Jesus is the light and life of the world (John 9) and 'the radiance of God's glory' (Hebrews 1:3). He is the Word made flesh, and the same power of the word of God – that brings into existence what he speaks and that brings order out of the darkness of chaos – is in Jesus too.

{pages 7-8}

Access to light and electricity is hugely important, and the good news is we have seen giant leaps forward over recent decades, with the latest figures putting the global electrification rate at 89 percent. More than 920 million people have gained access since 2010. However, there are still about 840 million people without electricity. {page 16}

While access to light, electricity and energy in general is crucial, it is also important to consider the source of that energy because of the terrible impact that fossil fuels are having on God's creation, both people and planet. From a human perspective, health, livelihoods, food provision, water supply, human security and economic growth are all seriously at risk from the Climate Emergency caused by the burning of fossil fuels. {pages 17-18}

What action will you take?

1 Learn more

Visit www.spckpublishing.co.uk/saying-yes-resources

2 Take Action

Travel less, walk, cycle, take the bus.

Use less meat and dairy.

Use efficient light bulbs, switch off appliances when not in use.

Use an energy supplier that offers renewables.

3 Use your voice

Ask your MP and council what actions they have taken to reduce emissions.

4 Give

Christian Aid and Tearfund are both engaged in helping the world's poorest avoid the worst consequences of Climate Change.

WEEK 2

Let the waters be separated

(GENESIS 1:6–8)

⁶ And God said, “Let there be a vault between the waters to separate water from water.” ⁷ So God made the vault and separated the water under the vault from the water above it. And it was so. ⁸ God called the vault “sky.” And there was evening, and there was morning—the second day.

Water is a powerful symbol throughout the Bible. Jewish thinking says that God specifically put his people in a land with no major rivers precisely to help them remember that God was the ultimate provider of water and of all their needs. {page 26}

As Jesus tells the Samaritan woman he meets at the well – she who has had to collect her water in the heat of the day because she has been rejected by her village – he is the one who gives living water: ‘Whoever drinks the water I give them will never thirst. Indeed, the water I give them will become in them a spring of water welling up to eternal life’ (John 4:14). {page 32}

Water is a truly amazing part of our world and of what enables life to exist. Although freshwater covers less than one percent of the earth’s surface, we are utterly dependent on it for our survival and it provides the habitat for about ten percent of the world’s known species. In the 20th

Century, freshwater fish have had the highest extinction rate worldwide among vertebrates and, overall, freshwater species numbers have seen an 83 percent decline since 1970. An 83 percent decline means that, in the last 50 years, eight out of every ten freshwater species has been wiped out!

Could you stop for a moment to allow that figure to sink in and consider how this relates to our faith in a God who made this world to be teeming with life? {pages 38, 41}

What action will you take?

1 Pray

When you turn on a tap, flush the toilet, have a shower, put on the washing machine or dishwasher - remember those who do not have easy access to clean water.

2 Give

Support organisations like Toilet Twinning (toilettwinning.org) and Well Boring (wellboring.org) that improve hygiene and access to clean water.

3 Take Action

Install rainwater butts, clean your car less, use green cleaning products.

Large amounts of water are used to produce clothing such as jeans as well as sustain the animals that are used for meat. Reducing our consumption, mending and reusing our purchases is a 'hidden way' to use less water.

WEEK 3

Let the land produce vegetation

(GENESIS 1:9–13)

⁹ And God said, 'Let the water under the sky be gathered to one place, and let dry ground appear.' And it was so. ¹⁰ God called the dry ground 'land,' and the gathered waters he called 'seas.' And God saw that it was good. ¹¹ Then God said, 'Let the land produce vegetation: seed-bearing plants and trees on the land that bear fruit with seed in it, according to their various kinds.' And it was so. ¹² The land produced vegetation: plants bearing seed according to their kinds and trees bearing fruit with seed in it according to their kinds. And God saw that it was good. ¹³ And there was evening, and there was morning—the third day.

This is a God who loves to bless; a God who delights in growth and richness, who wants his creatures to live in fullness of life. Some years ago I made a tapestry that hangs proudly on my wall of a peacock in the woods. Can you imagine how I would feel if I came home one day to find my daughters had put it on the floor and were using it to wipe their muddy feet? I'd be horrified . . . devastated . . . so upset! Well, I can tell you with complete certainty that would never happen. Why? Because they love me and would never dream of doing something so terrible to the tapestry I value so much. And they love it too, because I love it.

God's affirmation of the goodness and value of this world (not a sinking vessel) spurs us on therefore to take care that we do not wipe our footprints all over it, leaving it damaged and wrecked. {pages 54, 57}

Every region of the world has its issues with deforestation. In South America, the Amazon is being lost due predominantly to forest conversion for cattle ranching for beef, and just today as I am writing this, a new report has come out claiming satellite imaging has shown that an area of Amazon rainforest roughly the size of a football pitch is being cleared every minute. Safeguarding the Amazon, which captures 25 percent of global carbon dioxide emissions, is vital in the fight against climate change. {pages 72, 74}

What action will you take?

- 1** **Connect** with Creation. Take a walk in local woodland.
- 2** **Consider** how your actions impact on forests, whether through meat that comes from deforested land or wood and paper products you may buy. What steps could you and your church take in response?
- 3** **Reflect** on Psalm 1, asking God to root you deeply into him through the rhythms and practices of your life.

WEEK 4

Let there be lights in the sky

(GENESIS 1.14–19)

¹⁴ And God said, 'Let there be lights in the vault of the sky to separate the day from the night, and let them serve as signs to mark sacred times, and days and years, ¹⁵ and let them be lights in the vault of the sky to give light on the earth.' And it was so. ¹⁶ God made two great lights—the greater light to govern the day and the lesser light to govern the night. He also made the stars. ¹⁷ God set them in the vault of the sky to give light on the earth, ¹⁸ to govern the day and the night, and to separate light from darkness. And God saw that it was good. ¹⁹ And there was evening, and there was morning—the fourth day.

The main reason given for the creation of the sun, moon and stars is to separate day and night and to be 'signs to mark sacred times, and days and years' (Genesis 1:14). The sense of rhythm is clear and is engrained into the patterns of the natural world and therefore into our patterns too. We live by a natural rhythm of day and night and we know how it feels when that pattern is disrupted. {page 84}

In Matthew Jesus' birth is announced by a star that alerts the magi and leads them to where Jesus lies. The Word who was with God and was God in the beginning; the Word through whom all things were made; the Word who brings

light into the world ... his birth is accompanied by a night sky illuminated by the glory of the Lord and by a bright shining star. The heavens do indeed declare the glory of the Lord as, in the incarnation, the Creator takes on the flesh of his creation, and comes to live among us so that we might be redeemed and brought back to life in God. And then, his death – as he bears our sin in his earthly body – is accompanied by a dramatic response in the natural world, as the sun stops shining. {page 93}

Scripture often uses the sun, moon and stars to speak about the end of the world, or perhaps more correctly the ends or purposes of the world. For many years, the dominant view within Christianity has been that, at some point in the future, God will destroy this world in judgement and we will spend eternity in heaven. However, we have seen that God's physical creation is loved and he declares each part of it good which presents a challenge to the view that Creation is unavoidably divorced from redemption. There are many passages in the Old Testament where prophets speak of the future hope of God's people, but Isaiah 65:17–25 needs noting because it is the passage that the prophet John quotes when he talks about seeing 'a new heaven and a new earth' (Revelation 21:1). The context for Isaiah's words is the time when the people had returned from exile and were looking forward to the rebuilding of their nation. The words are clearly spoken into that situation, but contained within them are the seeds of a wider hope in God's plans for the future. We see here that the future hope that developed in the Old Testament had a very physical dimension and

*encompassed the wider natural world and human society, people and animals living together peaceably. This was the foundation for Christian thinking about God's plans for the future and Revelation 21 and 22 give a picture of a garden city with land, trees and water – **the renewal of Creation and not its destruction**. Whatever we think of God's future plans, today we must understand ourselves as His Creatures called to care for His Creation. {pages 99, 100, 102}*

What action will you take?

1 **Worship**

How can you bring the breadth of creation into your church worship? Think about incorporating nature into liturgy, prayer and songs – and perhaps even worshipping outside.

2 **Learn more**

This chapter has had a strong focus on God's future plans. What stood out to you? Is there anything you struggled with? Talk these things through as a group.'

3 **Look back** over the last chapters and reflect on what things you have committed to do and whether or not you have done them.

WEEK 5

Let the waters teem with living creatures and let birds fly

(GENESIS 1:20–23)

²⁰ And God said, 'Let the water teem with living creatures, and let birds fly above the earth across the vault of the sky.' ²¹ So God created the great creatures of the sea and every living thing with which the water teems and that moves about in it, according to their kinds, and every winged bird according to its kind. And God saw that it was good. ²² God blessed them and said, 'Be fruitful and increase in number and fill the water in the seas, and let the birds increase on the earth.' ²³ And there was evening, and there was morning—the fifth day.

As we have seen in previous days, God looks and sees that it is good. One gets a sense that the creation, with its colour, vibrancy and diversity brings incredible pleasure to God. God pronounces a blessing on his creatures telling them to be fruitful. It is good for us to note this because although we are familiar with God's blessing on Adam and Eve to be fruitful and fill the earth, we sometimes miss the fact that that God gives that blessing to all his creatures. {page 109}

There is much in the Bible about learning from the natural world. For example, there are many things we can understand from birds but birds are facing a crisis. In the UK there are now half as many in the countryside as there were

forty years ago. Habitat loss and climate change are killing vast numbers of birds that were once common. The biblical scholar and preacher John Stott reflects on Jeremiah who saw the evils of habitat destruction: 'I looked at the earth, and it was formless and empty; and at the heavens, and their light was gone ... I looked and every bird in the sky had flown away' (4:23–25). It is a warning of a possible return to pre-creation chaos and Stott says in response: 'Let's resolve to do all we can to protect and preserve our unique God-given environment, and so continue to enjoy its God-given biodiversity, not least its fascinating birds.' {pages 114, 119}.

What action will you take?

1 Watch

Professor Meric Srokosz from the National Oceanography Centre at www.spckpublishing.co.uk/saying-yes-resources. These notes have focused on bird life, but ocean life is also struggling.

2 Reduce plastic use

Look around you or around your house and notice your plastic use. What can you reduce or stop using altogether?

3 **Think back** to a personal experience with birdlife or the ocean. How did that experience glorify our Creator God?

PALM SUNDAY/PASSION WEEK

Let the land produce living creatures and let us make humankind in our image

(GENESIS 1.24–31)

²⁴ And God said, "Let the land produce living creatures according to their kinds: the livestock, the creatures that move along the ground, and the wild animals, each according to its kind." And it was so. ²⁵ God made the wild animals according to their kinds, the livestock according to their kinds, and all the creatures that move along the ground according to their kinds. And God saw that it was good.

²⁶ Then God said, "Let us make mankind in our image, in our likeness, so that they may rule over the fish in the sea and the birds in the sky, over the livestock and all the wild animals, and over all the creatures that move along the ground."

²⁷ So God created mankind in his own image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them.

²⁸ God blessed them and said to them, "Be fruitful and increase in number; fill the earth and subdue it. Rule over the fish in the sea and the birds in the sky and over every living creature that moves on the ground."

29 Then God said, "I give you every seed-bearing plant on the face of the whole earth and every tree that has fruit with seed in it. They will be yours for food.

30 And to all the beasts of the earth and all the birds in the sky and all the creatures that move along the ground—everything that has the breath of life in it—I give every green plant for food." And it was so.

31 God saw all that he had made, and it was very good. And there was evening, and there was morning—the sixth day.

*Many of us know the pleasure of seeing a deer leap across a field, a hedgehog scurry under a hedge or perhaps the warmth of being welcomed home by a much-loved dog. Encounters like these are precious as they underline the connection between us humans and the wider animal world. In her 2016 Archbishop of Canterbury's Lent book, *I Am With You*, Episcopal priest Kathryn Greene-McCreight said: 'There is no true humanity without other creatures of God.' This underlines the point that there is no true humanity without other humans: a human on their own is not fully who they are meant to be. But humanity does not only exist within the human community: without the wider community of creatures that God has created, we cannot be what we have been created to be and we are the poorer for it. {page 137}.*

As with the creation of vegetation, sea creatures and birds, the land creatures are made 'according to their kinds'. This reflects the overall stress in the Hebrew Bible on appreciating and respecting the distinct nature of different kinds of

creature. Rabbi Norman Solomon argues that God and the text are concerned with biodiversity and the preservation of each separate and distinct species. In other words, we share this world with the most incredible and wonderful mix of strange, colourful, funny, scary, cuddly, scaly, odd, tiny, huge creatures that we could ever possibly imagine! Pause for a moment to think about the animals that live around you and give thanks to God for such an abundance of life.

{pages 138-139}

As we have worked our way through Genesis 1 during this course, we have seen how the Bible is not only a story about human beings but a story about the whole world – indeed the whole universe! The story centres around people and God's unfolding relationship with them, but the wider natural world is never far away, and the biblical text is full of trees, birds, fish, fields, gardens, stars, insects, the sun and moon, flowers, seas, rivers, rain, clouds, wind and animals. However, a world that God has created to be teeming with life is instead losing its life at an unparalleled rate. Thoughtlessness and selfishness make us all complicit. But alongside our sinfulness, we also bear the imprint of God in our own lives and that means we can act and bring about hope.

{pages 140, 146}

What action will you take?

1 Discuss

Pope Francis calls this world 'our common home' and biblical scholar Richard Bauckham talks of 'the community of creation'. What do these terms say to you?

2 Justice

We know that men and women of all racial and religious backgrounds are made in God's image. In what ways do/can you reflect God's image in your own life in relation to other people and the wider world?

3 Eat and ask!

What am I eating? How fast do I eat my food?
Where do I eat? With whom do I eat? Where has my food come from?

EASTER

The seventh day

(GENESIS 2.1–3)

¹ Thus the heavens and the earth were completed in their vast array. ² By the seventh day God had finished the work he had been doing; so on the seventh day he rested from all his work. ³ Then God blessed the seventh day and made it holy, because on it he rested from all the work of creating he had done.

As we come to the end of the first story of creation we have witnessed a beautiful symmetry in the narrative we have been reading, with its creation of spaces first and then the creatures to inhabit them. God now stops and rests. Tragically, in the very next chapter of Genesis, we see humanity fall from our intended state of shalom to a place of discord and enmity on all levels: with God, with one another, and with the wider created order. The rest of the Bible is the story of how God works to bring restoration: to put back to rights what has gone wrong and bring about the Sabbath rest that has been promised. {pages 164-165}

So too we approach the end of our Lenten travels, turning our eyes now to the empty tomb and the resurrection of Jesus. As we come out of Lent and into Easter Sunday, we proclaim again our belief that Christ has died and Christ has risen – and that he will come again. As Amy Plantinga Pauw says: ‘Easter is God’s seal that the last word on creaturely life will be peace and praise, and the joy of that hope is already seeping into the present.’ {pages 164-165}

What action will you take forward?

At Tearfund, we talk about **Pray, Act, Give**.

Pray is where we start and what undergirds everything we do. We pray because we believe prayer works and because it changes things – ourselves included.

As part of our prayer, we must then **Act**. As you finish this book and move out of Lent into Easter, go to www.spckpublishing.co.uk/saying-yes-resources and look again at the wealth of information that is there. **We cannot do everything. God will break your heart over particular issues, and that is where he is calling you to get involved. What resurrection practices will you take on in your life?**

Finally, one very tangible resurrection practice is to **Give**. Giving connects us with people and places around the world as we use our money to bring relief and help change situations. It challenges our own attitude to money and material goods, and causes us to delight in being generous to others rather than focusing on buying more things for ourselves. Of course, we cannot support each and every issue. But, ask yourself today, am I being as generous as I could be? Has God stirred my heart about particular issues in *Saying Yes to Life* that I could start supporting financially? {pages 168-169}

Writing for the New York Times on the moral crisis of climate breakdown and the charge to the Church to respond, Archbishop Justin said: 'As people of faith, we don't just state our beliefs – we live them out. One belief is that we find purpose and joy in loving our neighbours. Another is that we are charged by our creator with taking good care of his creation.'

***Resurrection churches, resurrection lives.
This is the calling that is on us as we look at all
that God has made and say yes to life.*** {page 169}

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