

The Rector's Sermon

Sunday 5th September 2021 -Creation Sunday

May the deep peace of the running wave be with you

May the deep peace of the flowing air be with you

May the deep peace of the quiet earth be with you

May the deep peace of the shining stars be with you

May the deep peace of the Son of peace be always with you. Amen

This traditional Gaelic blessing comes from a time when people could

believe with all their hearts in the deep peace of the creation. Humankind might rage and contend across borders and continents, empires might rise and fall, women and men might flower and die, to be blown away like grass in the wind, but the running wave, the flowing air, the quiet earth, the shining stars, these things would endure unchanging, promising deep peace in their stability, their beauty, and their purity. They were elemental things; they were part of the substance of the universe.

The Celts talked about the little book - which was the Bible - and the great book – which is creation, and they read God in both. The instinct to worship in response to the beauty and mystery of the universe is as old as the human story itself. Psalm 146, for example, reminds us that for thousands of years, people have looked at the world around them, and seen God as creator of heaven and earth, of the sea and all that is in them.

‘Happy are those... whose hope is in the Lord their God,

who made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that is in them;

who keeps faith for ever; who executes justice for the oppressed; who gives food to the hungry.’

This passionate outpouring of the Psalmist is a song of praise to God the Creator which echoes down the centuries and still resonates today.

But psalm 146 goes on to remind us of the limitations of humankind.

‘...don’t put your trust in human leaders; no human being can save you. When they die, they return to the dust; on that day, all their plans come to an end.’

This doesn’t mean that we must not trust anyone; society only functions well when we trust in other people. We trust the good faith of our friends and family. We put our trust in doctors, teachers, even our politicians, to do their best within the limitations of their knowledge, their training, and their

own human frailties, and mostly they do remarkable things within these limitations. But all of them, if they are wise, recognise their own limitations; that must operate within certain constraints. The psalm is reminding us, lest we forget, that we too have limits; that in the end, we, full of potential as we are, are created, and are not creator.

It's a timely reminder, because as a species, we have not been very good at recognising our limitations with regard to creation, to the earth we inhabit, and share with other species and life-forms. The struggle to impose our will on everything around us, including the earth, is causing catastrophic damage to the environment, to other people, and to ourselves. The need to get our own way, especially with regard to energy over-consumption, belongs to the 'terrible twos' stage of infant development. We urgently need to grow up.

Our tendency to assume that the universe is at our disposal, that it has no intrinsic worth other than its usefulness to the human species, has made us reckless to the point of extreme culpability.

According to a recent study the world's 7.6 billion people represent just 0.01% of all living things. Yet, since the dawn of civilisation, humanity has caused the loss of 83% of all wild mammals and half of all plants. We are learning the hard way that our actions have consequences; the destruction of rainforests leads to global warming; the pollution of lakes destroys localised eco-systems, the earth resists soil erosion, and the loss of biodiversity, with floodwater; but the floods drown and bring diseases in their wake. It is a kind of blasphemy. How can we pray with any integrity to God the Creator when we are so utterly cavalier with God's creation?

In today's gospel, we heard again the greatest of all the commandments; to love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength; and to love our neighbours, as we love ourselves. How do we love the Lord your God when the word 'God' is an abstract concept, too mysterious to grasp hold of? We love God revealed in God's creation, and in those for whom people of faith are asked to have a particular care – the hungry and oppressed, the prisoners and the strangers in our land, the widows, and orphans – all those who are most vulnerable, most at risk. In our time, the earth our home is vulnerable, is at risk. To love and care for our common home is a vital expression of our love of God.

There are three things about our care for the earth worth noting, because they are firmly rooted in love of God and love of neighbour. First, it's about starting where we are, and that means starting with the small things. Sometimes the scale of the problems seems so great that it hardly seems worth bothering. Jesus told a story of how the kingdom of heaven was like a mustard seed. He described how it was the smallest of all seeds but grew to become the largest of plants. The mustard seed was proverbial in Palestine for the smallest possible thing. Nowadays, we might refer to the atom. Both are so tiny that it is hard to conceive of the potential they contain, the energy that is needed to take them on their journey of transformation. They shift and change in appearance, in shape, they become different – and yet the harvest is there in the seed, given nurture and openness to the processes of life. The possibilities for great change in what seems small can be huge.

And starting where we are means being close enough to really see things. Keen birdwatchers are knowledgeable about all sorts of birds. But that knowledge is based on hours of waiting and watching. In the close and patient observation of creatures in the wild, human beings discover the nature of them, their particularities, their strengths; the ways in which our createdness is similar and yet different. It is the start of a conversation with all the different life-forms we share the planet with.

Second, though we start where we are, we also need to go on to

make the connections to a wider world. Whether we like it or not, that is what those from Extinction Rebellion, camping for the last two weeks on Blackheath and demonstrating up in central London, are calling on us to do.

For we are all part of extraordinary eco-systems, and our actions have consequences, not just for the natural world but for people and places far, far away. For example, examine the way we shop. Buying locally and working for trade justice, are an important part of our stewardship for the earth. So many people living in poverty need that kind of justice so they are not forced to drain the resources of their own environments to gratify our over filled bellies.

The extent to which we participate in creating an economic, political, and cultural environment which is friendly to the poorest people in our society and our world will be the extent to which all of us can befriend our own environment, our own place. Ultimately, unless we all have a home, a place of belonging, all our belonging is endangered. If one part of the body suffers, all the other parts suffer with it. We are witnessing this all too clearly with the devastation of Hurricane Ida and the forest fires in California and Greece. In Greece, in the 10 days to 7 August, nearly 57,000 hectares (140,000 acres) were utterly destroyed by fire.

But thirdly, we will be demonstrating the truth of the second part of

Paul's saying, that when one part of the body rejoices, all the other parts rejoice with it. Because what all our activities have in common is that they really demonstrate the gift of sharing. For when we share this earth more equitably and gently, when we take responsibility for clearing up after ourselves and not fouling anyone else's patch, we find ourselves sharing in lots of other things – creativity in music and the arts, sharing ideas, sharing across the generations, sharing resources, sharing with people in other parts of the world, sharing friendship and enjoyment. We've been revaluing the communal joys that so many people in our society have lost. And all that leads to building strong, healthy, flourishing community.

People often complain that living within limits is restrictive, that it takes away freedom. This needs to be called out, for the opposite is true. When we take responsibility for our actions, we achieve a far greater, more transformative way of freedom. Yes, we may end up with fewer things, but we will

make less waste – and we will create more room for imagination, creativity, discovery. We will be freed to go deeper into our spirituality and be liberated to fully love as God so fully loves us.

On this Creation Sunday, may our desire at St Margaret's to be an Eco Church, deepen our understanding of what it means to love God, to love our neighbour and to love and care for God's wonderful, endlessly evolving world.

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