

Sixth Sunday after Trinity

THE GROAN OF CREATION

Today we read a passage from St Paul's Letter to the Romans in which he writes of the groan of creation – a phrase that seems especially relevant in these times of global warming.

INVOCATION

+ In the name of God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen

The Lord our God, the Almighty, reigns.

We lift up our hearts in thanks and praise:

Glory to you, O God!

PRAISE

1 God of mercy, God of grace,
show the brightness of your face.
Shine upon us, Saviour, shine;
fill your world with light divine;
all your saving health extend
unto earth's remotest end.

Let the people praise you, Lord;
be by all that live adored.

Let the nations shout and sing
glory to their gracious King;
at your feet their tribute pay,
and your holy will obey.

Let the people praise you, Lord;
earth shall then its fruits afford.
Unto us your blessing give;
we to you devoted live,

all below and all above,
one in joy and light and love.

PERSONAL REFLECTION

Almighty God,
to whom all hearts are open,
all desires known,
and from whom no secrets are hidden:
cleanse the thoughts of our hearts
by the inspiration of your Holy Spirit,
that we may perfectly love you,
and worthily magnify your holy name;
through Christ our Lord. Amen.

As we come before God asking him to cleanse our hearts that we may worship and follow him in Spirit and in truth. In a time of silence reflect on your life in the last week, asking God to amend what is wrong, and to affirm what is good.

Then say:

You were sent to heal the contrite:
Father, have mercy.

You came to call sinners:
Christ, have mercy.

You plead for us at the right hand of the Father:
Lord, have mercy.

Almighty God have mercy upon me,
forgive me my sins,
and keep me in eternal life. Amen.

PRAYER FOR THE DAY

Creator God,
you made us all in your image,
and all creation reflects your glory:
may we discern you in all that we see,
and serve you in all that we do;
through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

READINGS

Read: Romans 8.12-25

*I reflect on this passage in chapter 1 of my recent book, **Light in the Darkness** – the excerpt is given below.*

Verses from Psalm 86

Teach me, O LORD, your way,
so that I may walk in your truth,
single-hearted to fear your name.

I will praise you, LORD my God, with all my heart,
and glorify your name forever.
Your mercy to me has been great;
you have saved me from the depths of the grave.

The proud have risen against me, O God;
a band of the ruthless seeks my life.
To you they pay no heed.

But you, O God, are compassionate and gracious,
slow to anger, O LORD,
abundant in mercy and fidelity;
turn and take pity on me.

O give your strength to your servant,
and save the son of your handmaid.

Show me the sign of your favour,
that my foes may see to their shame
that you, O LORD, give me comfort and help.

ALLELUIA

Alleluia, alleluia!
You shall love the Lord with all your heart
and with all your soul
and with all your mind
and with all your strength.
Alleluia!

Read: MATTHEW 13.24–30

In this parable Jesus teaches that distinguishing between the good and the bad is for God not for men and women. St Paul said much the same: 'Do not pronounce judgement before the time, before the Lord comes...' (1 Corinthians 4.5). The human desire to play at being God is seen in all of life, and nowhere are its results more catastrophic than in the climate crisis now upon the world.

[NB: The explanation of the parable (Matt. 13.36–43), which turns the parable into an allegory, is not an original part of the words of Jesus, and is probably Mathew's own addition.]

REFLECTION

The Groan of Creation

The power of love that characterised Jesus' ministry to individuals is also at work on a cosmic scale, and it motivates our hope for the better care of our world. The amazing wild-life television series of recent years, particularly those made by Sir David Attenborough, have shown us how love has disposed the world. As we delight in its wonder and beauty, we share in the delight of God, who 'saw all that

he had made, and it was very good.' (*Genesis 1.31*) We see too, the malign effects of the lack of love. At one and the same time we see the beauty, unity, order and fragility of the natural world, and the dire effects of the wanton exploitation of its resources, and we are invited to understand that just as the power of love disposed the world and sustains it, so it is by the power of love that its disorder will be healed and its fulfilment accomplished. This was St Paul's vision of the world: a single unity, created and sustained by a love that cherishes things as they are, seeks the best for them, desires them to grow, and does not exploit or dominate. In a remarkable passage in his letter to the Romans, he connects the destiny of the planet, indeed of the whole universe, with our own human destiny, which he describes in terms of hope:

The created universe waits with eager expectation for God's sons to be revealed. It was made subject to frustration, not of its own choice but by the will of him who subjected it, yet with the hope that the universe itself is to be freed from the shackles of mortality and enter upon the glorious liberty of the children of God. Up to the present, as we know, the whole created universe in all its parts groans as if in the pangs of childbirth. What is more, we also, to whom the Spirit is given as first fruits of the harvest to come, are groaning inwardly while we look forward eagerly God to our adoption, our liberation from mortality (*Romans 8. 19-23*).

St Paul echoes the understanding of his time that just as the human creation is subject to sin and decay, so is the whole created order; and just as Jesus came to liberate men and women from sin and death so that they may share the glory of Christ, so that too is the destiny of creation. The belief at the time, says C. H. Dodd, was that 'the material universe would be transfigured into a substance consisting of pure light or glory, thus returning it to its original perfection as created by God.' This belief is founded on the notion that the universe, like Jesus, points forward to the new world that is to be,

when, in N. T. Wright's words, 'its beauty and power will be enhanced and its corruptibility and futility will be done away.' St Paul will have had in mind the prophecy of Isaiah, 'See, I am creating a new heavens and a new earth' (*Isaiah 65.17; 66.22*), the fulfilment of which John of Patmos saw in his final vision (*Revelation 21.1*). This strong biblical witness to the truth – the truth that the destiny of humanity and the destiny of the material world are intimately linked – speaks so clearly to our time. Both the natural world and humankind are disordered; both groan to be free from all that shackles them, and deliverance will come only when men and women allow the truth to shape their desires and exercise properly their responsibility both to one another and as stewards of the earth.

As with the creation stories, we do not look to St Paul for scientific information, but for an understanding of relationships and of moral value. It is the truth of creation that motivates the hope that the relationship of humankind to its environment will be re-ordered to reflect the divine purpose. Because the process of climate change is slow it has not, until now, presented itself as a dramatic crisis like the banking crisis of 2008, but it is a crisis none the less and far more serious. Like all crises it is also an opportunity. The hope must be that we seize it properly. Some, like Naomi Klein in her book *This Changes Everything*, argue that effective action requires fundamental changes to the world economic system. There is no doubt that such changes are necessary. An economic system that measures outcomes by exclusively financial criteria has no way of putting a value on things that cannot be traded, like the air we breathe and the ecosystems that are basic to life, a failure potentially catastrophic in its consequences, and made worse by the tendency to pursue short-term economic goals. This is not just a feature of modern capitalism; collective regimes like the Soviet Union and China also have a materialistic outlook, and under them some of the worst environmental disasters of the twentieth century occurred. Seeking economic solutions, like the trade in carbon credits, may present the

illusion of progress, but they raise false hopes; they seduce us into believing that the system can fix it, and that no change in lifestyle needed. The truth is otherwise: the system can't fix it, and lifestyle changes are essential, as we are now learning. As Pope Francis says, the environment cannot be protected solely on the basis of financial calculations of costs and benefits:

'The environment is one of those goods that cannot be safeguarded adequately by market forces. Where profits alone count, there can be no thinking about the rhythms of nature, its phases of decay and regeneration, or the complexity of the ecosystems which may be gravely upset by human intervention. Moreover, biodiversity is considered at most a deposit of economic resources available for exploitation, with no serious thought for the real value of things, their significance for persons and cultures, or the concerns and needs of the poor.'

However, more than economic change is needed. St Paul points us to the way our hope can be fulfilled when he connects the future of the planet to the moral future of humanity. Just as Jesus said that the things that defile us come from within our hearts (*Mark 7.20-23*), so the systems that govern us are determined by the kind of people that we are. As with all major problems today, climate change is at root a spiritual challenge rather than a technological, economic or political problem, something that journalists and other opinion-formers, tend not to address. Notably, Rowan Williams begins his discussion of the climate crisis not with the facts about the crisis, but with what it means to be human, one species in a diverse world disassociated from its environment. This spiritual challenge is akin to the challenge Jesus posed to Nicodemus, the Samaritan woman and the rich young man: What shapes your life? What motivates you and defines who you are? The answers to these questions determine the structures and values of the society we create and the systems we put in place. Both capitalism and socialism define progress in material terms, and

as long as we do so our hope for the right ordering of creation will not be fulfilled. The truth, which in creation stands before us, requires us to redefine our notion of progress. As Pope Francis says, 'a technological and economic development which does not leave in its wake a better world and an integrally higher quality of life cannot be considered progress.' For many their quality of life has actually declined in the midst of economic growth, through the deterioration of the environment, low quality food, the depletion of resources, lack of jobs, and exploitative working practices. Talk of sustainable growth 'absorbs the language and values of ecology into the categories of finance and technocracy, and the social and environmental responsibility of business often gets reduced to a series of marketing and image-enhancing measures.' The true basis for hope is the holistic vision of St Paul. Hope demands that ecology and society are considered together; that questions of justice shape policy on the environment. At one and the same time we need, as Pope Francis says, to hear '*both the cry of the earth and the cry of the poor.*' It was through the power of love that creation was disposed, and it will be only through the power of love that our hope for its re-ordering will be fulfilled. N. T. Wright expresses this eloquently: the wider vista that Paul opens up, he says, is the invitation to live within the horizon of God's new creation, which began with the resurrection of Jesus and will continue until the whole world is transformed under the just and healing rule of God's children. There is nothing passive about this; accepting God's invitation is not to sit back and wait for his salvation to be revealed. Rather, as Paul's call to personal transformation (*Romans 8.12-17*) makes clear, 'the Christian is to embody the tension in bringing the new to birth already within the old.' This, Wright avers, is the context for all Christian work in the areas of ecology, justice and aesthetics: 'If the creation is to be renewed, not abandoned, and if that work has already begun in the resurrection of Jesus, it will not do simply to consign the present creation to acid rain and global warming and

wait for Armageddon to destroy it altogether.’ Christians must be in the forefront of bringing the signs and foretastes of God’s eventual full healing to bear upon the created order in all its parts and at every level. And this includes dealing effectively with issues of justice, corruption, oppression and war. If the beauty and grandeur that we see in creation are the foretaste of what is to be revealed, then ‘it will not do to regard beauty and its creation and conservation, as a pleasant but irrelevant optional extra within a world manipulated by science, exploited by technology, and bought and sold in the economic market place.’

The groan of creation has both opened our eyes to the nature of truth, and also opened up new perspectives of hope. The situation may be bad, and worsening, but there are possibilities of good worth striving for; there are many signs that we are learning to love creation as something given, with value in itself, and not just as something instrumental, a means to an end. We are made for communion, not consumption, and protecting God’s handiwork is not an optional or secondary aspect of Christian life; it essential to a life of virtue. It is the power of love that opens our eyes (as it did for Nicodemus), motivates us to change our notion of progress, and enables us to re-order the relationship of humanity and the planet. This is the way of truth.

(Pope Francis is quoted from his enclylical letter Laudato ‘si, and N. T. Wright from The New Interpreter’s Bible.)

Pause and reflect.

RESPONSE

Father, Lord of all creation,
ground of being, life and love;
Height and depth beyond description,
only life in you can prove:

You are mortal life's dependence:
thought, speech, sight are ours by grace;
Yours is every hour's existence,
sovereign Lord of time and space.

Jesus Christ, the man for others
we, your people, make our prayer
help us love, as sisters, brothers
all whose burdens we can share
where your name binds us together
you, Lord Christ, will surely be
where no selfishness can sever
there you love the world may see.

Holy Spirit, rushing, bringing
wind and flame of Pentecost
fire our hearts afresh with yearning
to regain what we have lost
may your love unite our action
nevermore to speak alone
God, in us, abolish faction
God, through us, your love make known.

PRAYERS

A time of free prayer and intercession. You might like to use this five-fold pattern:

For the Church

For the World

For family, friends, neighbours and the local community

For the sick and all in need, near and far

For those who have died

At the end:

Merciful Father, accept my prayers,
for the sake of your Son, our Saviour, Jesus Christ.
Amen.

CONCLUSION

Our Father...

The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ,
The love of God,
and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit,
be with us all, now and for ever. Amen.