

The Community of Creation

(A Sermon preached at St Edward's church, Cambridge, 28 April 2012)

First, a little story from the Middle Ages – From the *Life of St Benno of Meissen* (who died in 1106):

It was often the habit of the man of God to go about the fields in meditation and prayer: and once as he passed by a certain marsh, a talkative frog was croaking in its slimy waters: and lest it should disturb his contemplation, he bade it to be silent. But when he had gone on a little way, he called to mind the saying in the book of Daniel: "*O ye whales and all that move in the waters, bless ye the Lord. O all ye beasts and cattle, bless ye the Lord.*" And fearing lest the singing of the frogs might perchance be more agreeable to God than his own praying, he again issued his command to them, that they should praise God in their accustomed fashion: and soon the air and the fields were vehement with their conversation.

Another little story I like to put alongside it is this one is from the Jewish tradition

When king David had finally completed writing the book of Psalms, he rather boastfully exclaimed: 'O Lord of the world, is there another creature in the universe who proclaims your praise like me?' Hearing this, a frog approached the king and declared: 'David, do not be so pleased with yourself, for I sing more songs and praises than you do, and, furthermore, every song I sing can have three thousand parables told about it.'

It's curious that both stories are about frogs. I suppose it's because the croaking of frogs doesn't sound particularly attractive to our ears. Realising that God enjoys the croaking of the frogs because he made them and gave them that particular sound is a way of deflating our human arrogance a little. We're not the only creatures God delights in, not the only creatures that praise God. In fact, according to Psalm 148 and a range of other biblical passages all the creatures praise God. Starting with the angels in heaven, that psalm calls on all the different categories of creatures to praise their Creator, and only at the end of the list gets to us humans. It gives us the sense that there is already all the time this vast cosmic choir hymning the praises of God, and we are called to join in. When we give thanks and glory to God, delighting in God as God delights in us, we are almost literally getting in tune with the universe.

That theme – the worship of God by all creatures – runs from the OT into the NT and down through the church's tradition, especially the liturgical tradition, the medieval monastic liturgies, the Book of Common Prayer (that includes for regular use that very long expanded version of Ps 148 that it calls the

Benedicite, very little used today) and then – I think I should mention Christopher Smart because I know he's one of Malcolm's favourite poets. Smart is the poet of creation's praise, not least in the case of his cat Jeoffry. But he hasn't had many successors. A lot of modern Christians have found it impossible to take this theme in the Bible and the Christian tradition seriously. When they read Ps 148, for example, they either think it must be some kind of primitive animism or that it is just a kind of poetic fancy, not to be taken seriously. Not many churches use the Benedicite any more. It's very long and if we're really just spelling out a poetic fancy it seems just tediously repetitive and pointless.

The reason for this modern alienation from a theme that once seemed so natural is, of course, the modern instrumentalizing of the non-human world. While Christopher Smart was delighting in all the endless variety of ways the different creatures have of praising their Creator, displaying his glory, the scientific revolution was steadily getting us to treat them as no more than a resource for our use and the Enlightenment completed that process. Science and technology before the late twentieth century had splendidly humanitarian aims, but they also had a dangerously anthropocentric tendency that got us into the way of thinking about nature that has proved so disastrous. By viewing the other creatures as valuable only for our sake, only as resources, we have got to the self-defeating point of wasting, spoiling and exhausting the resources. It just isn't good enough to see environmental issues as about preserving nature for us to use or enjoy. We need to recover the sense that other creatures have intrinsic value. It's just good that they exist.

And that's what the biblical Christian theme of all creation's praise of God can give us back. Of course, the other creatures don't praise God in the same ways that we do. Frogs, I take it, are not consciously aware of God. Certainly, snow and hail, rivers and mountains are not. But they praise God by being what God made them to be – in all the endlessly diverse and particular ways they are. They reflect God's glory and give it back to him. They have the value that God gives them, the delight he takes in them. It's the value we recognize when we attend to them for their own sake. To take delight in the creatures or to wonder at them is to share, to some degree, God's delight in them, to begin to value them as God does, and to recognize them as fellow-creatures. I've taken to noticing trees in particular. West Cambridge has so many of them, and there is so much to notice about trees. All the endlessly complex patterns of their branches, all those different shapes, but they all (or most of them) have that upward direction, they reach up to the skies as though they were lifting them up to God in heaven, praising God by the whole direction in which they grow. That's a symbolism I'm giving them, if you like, but it's a way of getting into imaginative touch with the way they live for the glory of their Creator. We being human can choose not to praise God or we can do so only with our voices. The other creatures teach us to praise God not only with our lips but also with our lives. They teach us what our lives, like theirs, are really for: to live and to grow in the direction of God's glory.

Well, what I'm beginning to say there is that this idea – and, much more than that, this experience of worship as joining with all the creatures in their praise of God – puts us back where we belong in the community of creation, as I like to call it. When we join in the universal worship of God we are not set above creation, as some sort of demi-god ourselves, but set within creation, alongside our fellow-worshippers and fellow-creatures. We join the choir or the orchestra, singing our part or playing our instrument. Some people like to think we're the conductor of the choir or the orchestra. Put that into religious jargon: we're the priests of creation. But I find that sets us too much apart. It misses the sense that creation is always already glorifying God and waiting, as it were, for us to join in. The other creatures can help us praise God. They can inspire us to do so.

It's also true that we can put their praise of God into human forms that praise God in a different sort of way. A poem or a painting can take our appreciation of nature and, so to speak, offer it as our praise of God. I'm sure some of you saw the David Hockney exhibition at the Royal Academy. Like many people, I was bowled over by it. I'd say he's become a new Monet. He doesn't mean to be praising God with his painting, any more than Monet did, but that is what the paintings do. They put the value of the creatures, something of what God finds delightful in his creatures, into their own particular human ways of celebrating nature. They are re-expressing – creatively re-expressing – nature's own praise of God.

But let's not forget we belong in the poems and the paintings along with the trees and the water-lilies. In the modern attempt to subjugate nature, to bend it to our purposes, to exploit it, we forgot that we're part of it, and it took modern ecological science to teach us how interdependent we are with the other creatures that share the earth with us. If we ruin them we ruin the ecosystems we all depend on, we and the other creatures alike. The term community of creation (or variations on it) was used by some of the pioneering ecologists like Aldo Leopold. We need to take what they've taught us on board, but I use the term community of creation for the Bible's vision of the world. That puzzles some people, because the Bible and the Christian tradition have got a reputation for being the source of the modern domination of nature. Isn't it Genesis that first set us up as rulers of creation, apart and above it, and gave us the licence to use it for our own purposes? That people have got that impression is not too surprising because that is how the Bible got to be read very often in the modern period.

That verse in Genesis: God gave humans dominion over the other creatures. Now (I guess many of you will know this) Christians have been saying for several decades now, very loud and clear: that's not a charter for exploitative domination, but for responsible stewardship. Genesis gives humans a role of caring responsibility for other creatures - is the way I'd like to put it. It's actually a very realistic recognition that we humans do have exceptional power and exceptional vision. We of all creatures on earth can, so to speak, envisage the biosphere with all its myriads of different sorts of creatures *as a whole*. And that means we can use our exceptional power, through science and technology,

to take responsibility for it. We have entangled ourselves with the lives of other creatures to an exceptional extent and it's both our privilege and our responsibility that we can think about that and try to make it mutually beneficial rather than destructive.

If we understand the Genesis dominion in that way, it is plainly very important and never more so. But what often gets neglected is everything else the Bible says about humans and other creatures – indeed, everything else that Genesis itself says. The grave limitation of the Genesis dominion, if we take it by itself, is that it puts us in a purely vertical relationship to the rest of creation. It sets us over creation. But our horizontal relationship to the other creatures is just as important: that we are ourselves part of creation, we belong in it, the other creatures are precisely our fellow-creatures in the community of creation, all of us creatures of God the Creator. The dominion is a special role of responsibility that humans have, but it's a role within the community, a role in relation to other creatures. If we forget our own creatureliness, our creaturely limitations, our interdependence with other creatures, if we think of ourselves as demi-gods, that's the way the dominion goes wrong. The great mistake of technology at the height of the drive for human mastery of the world was overconfidence, a sort of hubris. People thought they could calculate and control the effects of what they were doing. It was mainly the unforeseen and unintended consequences that, accumulating over the modern period, brought us into an age of continuing ecological crisis. We aspired to be gods and we're certainly not yet weaned of that error. But in Genesis that was the primal human sin, not the responsibility we are truly called to.

Now I've focused on the theme of all creation's praise of God as one way (I haven't time to talk about other ways) in which the Bible and the Christian tradition teach us our proper relationship to the non-human creatures. One key thing about it is that it puts us into right relationship with the other creatures and with God at the same time. There's a kind of triangular relationship (which the Bible assumes throughout) between us and God and the rest of creation. We have to get the whole triangle right if we're going to get either our relationship with God right or our relationship with other creatures right. Another key point about this theme of all creation's praise of God is that it's not just an idea, it's an experience and a practice. It's by joining the praise of God by all creation that we experience ourselves as belonging to the community of creation and we begin to practise community with other creatures.

But, finally, I need to take up the obverse of creation's praise of God, which is creation's groaning, creation's mourning, creation's cries of distress to God. This runs through the Bible too. The biblical writers didn't, of course, understand what we now know scientifically about the interconnexions between all life and the way that human activity can affect the rest of creation in destructive ways that aren't immediately apparent. But they did have a strong sense of a kind of bond between humans and the rest of creation, so that when humans go wrong the other creatures suffer too. Especially the OT prophets were aware of that, so that when they denounce the evils of society in their time they depict also what we would call a sort of ecological death, the

devastation of the land, the vegetation withering, animal life failing. They depict the land mourning and the creatures crying out to God. Hosea, for example:

There is no faithfulness or loyalty
 or knowledge of God in the land.
 Swearing, lying and murder,
 and stealing and adultery break out;
 bloodshed follows bloodshed.
 Therefore the land mourns,
 and all who live in it languish.
 Together with the wild animals and the birds of the air,
 even the fish of the sea are perishing.

It's a kind of vision of creation suffering from human evil, so that can no longer praise God, but instead can only pour out laments to God.

That's what Paul's talking about in the passage we read: "the whole creation has been groaning and in travail until now." The prophets say it about specific junctures of human wickedness. Paul gathers all those prophecies up and sees it as characteristic of this world's history that the rest of creation is groaning under the weight of human evil. Human sin is not only against God and other humans, but also an abuse of the rest of the created world, and of course we can now fill out that picture with all the destruction humans are very concretely bringing on other creatures in our time. The hope for creation, therefore, in Paul's view is that human life must be renewed. The rest of creation will not be free to be itself, as God means it to be, until we also are liberated from the arrogance and greed that are ruining God's world.

So the Psalms talk about the worship of all creation in which we join. Paul and the prophets talk about the groaning of all creation in which we share. But for the groaning there is an end, a prospect of liberation, for which we can hope. The truly eternal thing is the praise.