

# Franciscan Prayer – God in Creation

Sermon at St James Lower Hutt by the Rev Derek Lightbourne October 3<sup>rd</sup> 2021

Keynote Bible passages: Genesis 1.20 – 31a, Mark 16.14 - 20

The time we spent in lockdown gave opportunity to be more aware of our environment. We could appreciate the beauty, smell the fragrances, hear bird-sounds, breath in more fresh air and reflect inwardly. Today's sermon is 'creation-focussed' prompted by insights from the scriptures, and from our own observations. We celebrate St Francis, with his love of creation and being associated with animals. We consider what is termed 'Franciscan prayer'.

There are three aspects in this and as we observe and ponder you are invited to come on a 'tour'. I've entitled the screen photo, 'He leads me beside still waters.' The photo is taken from the Eastwoodhill Arboretum near Gisborne and see the reflections, the blend of colours and the stillness....in the autumn.

First then 'Look at.' That was the response of the Psalmist 'When I look at the heavens.... Then it was Jesus who said, 'Look at the birds of the air.....' For me it's like the creator God is as a Divine Artist in the ever-changing colours of a sunrise or sunset. Someone has described it as being the infinite beauty of God. GM Hopkins wrote 'The world is charged with the grandeur of God.' What then is our response – as of praise and thanksgiving? In the letter to the Colossians we read 'As God's chosen ones,...be thankful, and with gratitude in your hearts sing psalms, hymns, spiritual songs to God. (3.16). We note also the believers in the early church were aware of God in creation as they began their prayer 'Sovereign God, who made the heaven and earth the sea and everything in them...' and St Paul in Athens proclaimed 'The God who made the world and everything in it, who is Lord of heaven and earth.... (Acts 17.24).

Thus, in our praise and thanks we can incorporate praise of the God of creation as we observe that which is around us or look at photos or on other media. The liturgy also includes ascriptions of praise of creation. 'Now we offer our thanks and praise to God for this good land, for the beauty of these islands, for the wild places and the bush, for the mountains, the coast and the sea.'

2) There's a second focus also whereby we experience creation. We read in the praise of Psalm 148, *in relationship* with the created order. The Psalmist wrote: Praise the Lord from the earth, you sea monsters and all deeps...mountains and all hills, fruit trees and all cedars, wild animals and all cattle, creeping things and flying birds...' It was this insight that was so grasped by St Francis, as in the prayer 'Brother Sun and Sister Moon, Praise to you my Lord, through our sister Mother Earth, who sustains and governs us, and who produces various fruit with coloured flowers and herbs.'

Pope Francis also has written of this relationship on Earth in what he describes as 'Our Common Home': '..our very bodies are made up of elements of the earth, we breath her air, and receive life and refreshment from her waters'. We can also include a more meditative aspect as we are mindful of Luke's observation: 'Jesus would go away to lonely places where he would pray.' (5.16) This would surely have been out in the countryside, by the lake, up a hill.

For a moment take yourself to the screen picture as you think 'He leads me beside still waters'. Be there, walk alongside the lagoon, mindful of the colours, the variety of trees, the reflections....

And the response inwardly: 'Be filled with the Spirit, as you sing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs among yourselves, singing and making melody to the Lord *in your hearts*, giving thanks.....' An insight from Ephesians (5.19)

When we take quiet times, retreat opportunities these can expand our prayer horizons and enrich our insights into God's awesome creation, '...the moon and the stars which you have established.'

3) We read in Genesis of the establishing of *God's relationship with humanity* - 'let us make humankind in our image'. This suggests the very presence of the Divine in who we are. In this regard our prayer life will be enriched by what writers describe as '*Sensate prayer*' - that is use our senses - sight, sound, touch, smell and taste. Sensate prayer is concerned for simplicity, immediacy and awareness. It seeks to stay in the present, awareness of God. Thus, there's the 'touch' of receiving the bread the body of Christ in communion, and the taste of wine when we are able. There's the 'touch' of a holding cross folk find helpful in their devotion. Sight and sound we are more familiar with as a candle symbolising the light of Christ present, and in music. Smell or fragrance, as in the rosary in the catholic tradition.

This interweaves with nature, thinking for example in the Psalms, 'I will lift up my eyes to the hills, from where does my help come from? My help comes from the Lord, who made heaven and earth'..... and 'You lead me beside still waters, you restore my soul....' Jesus' own prayer included awareness of creation, 'I thank you Father, Lord of heaven and earth....' (Mt 11.25) and creation awareness was also conveyed by Jesus in his final appearance: 'you will be my witnesses, in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria and to the ends of the earth (Act 1.8). The first disciples were to 'preach the good news to the whole creation' translated from the Greek *cosmos*, words from today's gospel reading.

'As an expression of this inter-relationship we might regard ourselves as *partners with God* - in concern for creation. The Genesis reflection reminds: 'God saw everything he had made, and indeed, it was very good,' (1.31) However there's problems presently on the planet as we realise the environment is in real trouble. Pollution, waste, rising sea levels, more intense weather patterns with storms and droughts, rising temperatures worldwide. And more recently the effects of a pandemic causing much suffering.

Well-known folk and organisations like David Attenborough and Greta Thunberg and the United Nations are speaking out. And they offer solutions, laying out a more environmentally friendly future - regarding energy use, conservation of water, what humans eat, attending to inequality among people and nations, and providing healthcare. Attenborough suggests 'we know what to do, it is a case of having the will to do it.'

*In concluding*, Christians have a vital role, in partnership with God and together-through prayer and action. Mission is an imperative of the church and if we need the way ahead on today's theme it lies in the fifth Mark: 'To strive to safeguard the integrity of creation and sustain and renew the life of the earth.' The song composed by Shirley Murray reminds us, 'Touch the earth lightly, use the earth gently, nourish the life of the earth in our care, gift of great wonder, ours to surrender, trust for the children tomorrow will bear.'

