

**Creation Sunday, 16th Sunday after Trinity, Sept 15th 2024 – Revd Dorienke de Vries
Anglican Church Arnhem and Nijmegen**

Readings: Gen.2.4-15; Psalm 19.1-6; Rev 22.1-5; John 7.37-39

Hymns: 137, 161, 139, The love of God comes close (Offertory), 328, 301

I messed up a conversation with my hairdresser the other day... Let me tell you what happened. My hairdresser, she's called Lydia, was just starting on my hair, when another client left. Apparently this lady was about to go away on a special holiday, because there was great excitement in the well-wishes of all the hairdressers, including my own. After the door had been closed, Lydia explained to me that the lady was going to Namibia – and I pulled a face. Just couldn't help myself. Lydia noticed the disapproval in my expression, and so I shared some of my concern about the environment, some of my frustration that so many people don't seem to be aware of how bad things are – or even don't seem to care. I think I flew off the handle a little bit...

After the conversation I felt bad about myself. I thought some of my words had been too harsh. It is so hard to express your views on these things without sounding very judgmental indeed. So the next time I needed a haircut I apologized for my holier-than-thou attitude. And then we had a lovely, constructive conversation. It made me realise that many people really want to live a decent life; but often they just aren't informed enough. And so what I judge as indifference, may just be ignorance. Besides, people are different and make different life choices, sometimes for very good reasons. The conversation with Lydia made me reflect on more positive and constructive ways to talk about climate change and other environmental crises. A way of addressing the issue that does not come from a place of frustration, but from a place of peace and hope. For this reflection I turned to the Bible, and so you understand that I chose the readings for today for my own benefit as well as for yours.

First we go to our OT readings. These are texts that teach us to look at creation in a way that is vastly different from the one our culture forces upon us.

Genesis 2 tells us that God took us from the earth. The name Adam means 'dirt' or 'earth creature'. It tells us that we share every fibre of our being with the rest of the cosmos. Our bodies are put together with molecules that have been around for billions of years, and in their lifetime have formed an incredible variety of beings and life forms. When our bodies decompose after we have died, they will feed flowers and trees and insects and birds, and be used to create new life. It is a wonderful cycle, in which everything depends on everything else.

Scientific research has confirmed this inter-dependence. We are closely related to all other beings, living and non-living. This is a precarious balance. Now I am not telling you anything new when I say that our Western lifestyle has upset this balance in a way that endangers the whole planet. As Christians we bear part of the blame for this. We are all steeped in Western thinking, in the logic of capitalism. We have all played our part in exploiting, exhausting and destroying the ecosystem. We have all learned to see and treat the natural world as something that is there for us, for our pleasure, for our convenience.

But this inter-dependence means that any harm we have caused to other creatures, we ultimately do to ourselves. For instance: since the 70s 70% of our insects has become extinct, due to our excessive use of pesticides. Who will pollinate our fruits and vegetables, when the remaining 30% has also gone, which it will do if we refuse to take the trouble to find other ways of protecting ourselves and our crops?

We need a different attitude towards the natural world, towards God's handiwork. Now to get there, it may help us to see creation as an ongoing act of God. Not as a finished product, made by God and then handed over to us as his representative, but as an ongoing outpouring of God's life and creative energy. So when I am watching a butterfly, I am not just seeing something God has made, which now flutters around on its own. I see God at work now, loving this butterfly into being this very moment, and then the next and the next and the next. Before my very eyes, God is actively creating that butterfly, giving it life and colour from moment to moment.

And in the same way he is creating me, the one who is watching this butterfly with awe and delight. God is pouring his life and energy into my being this very moment, and then the next and the next and the next. And so the Divine is intimately present in each passing moment of our lives, giving us breath and being here and now.

It is like the difference between walking around in an art gallery, admiring the finished artwork, and actually being present in the artist's workshop. We are constantly living in God's workshop. We see him at work, we see all those wonderful works of art coming out of his hands. And much more than we would in an art gallery, we realize how much skill and talent and love and creativity are involved in creating all that beauty.

Psalm 19 is a wonderful example of this awareness. It looks to the natural world, and sees God. It can actually hear and understand the speech of the natural world, and in it hear the voice of God, speaking to us now.

This is a conscious way of life that we can learn to practice towards all things. And I am convinced that this kind of awareness would result in a profound change in how we interact with the rest of creation. If we could only learn to interact with the natural world like that – I am sure it would make a difference. It would come more natural to us to share our gardens, our whole environment with other creatures. We would take them into account whenever we were planning gardening or building work, to make sure that they have a good life there as well, that there is food and shelter and right of way for them.

And if only we could learn to talk about it like that, I am sure it would make a difference for our conversations – with our hairdressers and with anybody else. Because we are actually witnessing God at work now, and we can draw people's attention to that, inviting them into that same way of looking and thinking. It is so much more positive than frowning on their lifestyle and wagging our fingers at their wicked ways.

Not only do we learn to speak the language of beauty, we also learn to speak the language of hope. When we pay attention to the natural world, we will of course notice its suffering. Creation is groaning, and crying out in pain, because of what we have done to it. And so we now turn to our NT readings. Readings that save us from despair. They give us hope, not just for ourselves, but for the whole cosmos.

Revelation 22 paints a beautiful picture of the new creation. In this vision we see the river of the water of life. The water nourishes the tree of life, which produces twelve kinds of fruit twelve times a year. And the leaves of the tree are for the healing of the nations.

I find this so encouraging. God will give us a new world, a recreated, restored, cleansed and healed world, where the water of life and the tree of life are accessible to everyone. And where does this river come from? It flows from the throne of God and of the Lamb. When I was reflecting on this, I suddenly made the connection with the words of Jesus in the gospel of John: Out of the believer's heart shall flow rivers of living water. At the same time I was reminded of all the biblical promises that we will reign with Christ. They will reign with him for ever and ever, says Revelation. We will share his kingdom, his reign, his throne. So the river of life that flows from the divine throne is not just coming from God and from the Lamb. It comes from all of us who are there with him on his throne! In a way beyond our understanding we take part in God's healing work. Today, AND in the world to come.

This is the vision that inspires me today to care for God's creation. Because when that new world comes, I don't want to feel like an alien there. I want to be able to recognize it as the world I have been praying for; the world I have been working for; the world I have been hoping for. And I want to be well-prepared for what follows next. I want Jesus saying to me: Well done. You have been faithful in small things, even though they seemed pointless. You are ready now to take responsibility for larger things. Come and share my healing work on a bigger scale than you ever thought possible. Let us share this hope with those around us. Let us invite them, by our actions and by our words, to join us in this calling, to join us in this hopeful expectation.

And for this battered world, this groaning creation we pray: Amen, come Lord Jesus! Today, tomorrow, and for all eternity. Amen.