

**October 20, 2024 – Trinity 21 – Revd Wim Kuiper
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Readings: Job 38.1-7, Psalm 104, Mark 10.35-45

We have clearly entered the season of Autumn. The swallows left my village already a few weeks ago. This week, I saw and heard a lot of wild geese flying southwards. The days are clearly getting shorter and the trees are shedding their leaves. There is something about this change of seasons that reminds us of how the nature that surrounds us has its own dynamics, its own order and way of dealing with the time passing by. It carries on with its own business in a way that is indifferent to all our human emotions, joy and sadness. We are part of the fabric of creation just as so many other creatures, great and small. In what way can the contemplation of nature help us to understand who we are and what we are here for? Help us to deal well with the reality of our own life with all its changes of seasons of growth, flourishing and withering. Should we read in nature a message from God, learn something about our Creator? Well, the Bible clearly thinks so. It often speaks about how nature reveals to us who God is. The glory and beauty of his creation, which is ordered in such a magnificent and wise way, indicates to us that God as its creator must have those same attributes. We are still in the process of understanding more about how everything in this creation works and how it all hangs intricately together within what we now call the ecosystem. And with all these new scientific discoveries, our sense of awe and wonder can in fact only get bigger. At least mine is, for instance when I look at those beautiful pictures of the universe that are produced by the Webb Space Telescope. Or, to give a completely different example, at the images of the processing of visual information by drosophila, better known as fruit flies. Irritating as they are in our kitchens, but wonderful creatures nevertheless, on which a lot of research is being done all over the world, as they also give us surprising insights in how we as human beings are functioning.

Last week, we heard how Jesus pointed towards the birds in the air and the flowers of the fields in his teaching on God's providence. Today, we have read the first half and the last verse of that beautiful creation hymn which is Psalm 104. 'O God, how manifold are your works! In wisdom you have made them all.' This sense of awe is a great way to lift us out of our own small, self-centred perspective, towards our Creator. It is indeed through observing nature that our religious feelings can and should be awakened and refreshed. In this Psalm the image of the grandeur and beauty of creation is given also as a proof that God is still active and present and engaging with it.

Contrary to the thoughts of some philosophers and theologians called Deists back in the 17th and 18th century, using the analogy of the Supreme Being or God as a watchmaker, who created everything but is since no longer involved in it. As a watch after it has been made simply continues to tick without human intervention, so they supposed creation to carry on according to its preestablished laws without any further divine intervention. But though God may be more or less hidden for us most of the time or even practically always, the Bible tells us that God is not indifferent and at a distance at all. We hear for instance in this Psalm how God's creative activity is ongoing, especially in its second half that we have not read today. For instance in verse 32: 'When you send forth your spirit, they are created, and you renew

the face of the earth'. The Psalm ends with an invitation to sing to the Lord and rejoice in him. While at the same time it does not blend out our human wickedness and sinfulness. Especially in our days we can take this as a reminder of our collective shortcomings in regard to being good stewards of God's marvellous creation, for which many of our fellow humans around the globe are already paying a high price.

This pointing towards nature is also very prominent at the intriguing end of the book of Job. When God himself takes the stage after a very long discussion between Job and his friends, in the previous 35 chapters of this book. We finally hear God's reaction to both Job's laments about the injustice of his great suffering, and to all the feeble theological efforts of his friends to find any kind of justification for it. Making a cartoon of a God who is constantly punishing and rewarding every one of us according to our deeds and our amount of piety. The change of perspective that is offered by God in his many rhetorical questions to Job brings him into a connection with the grandeur, beauty and order of creation. And thereby also with the unimaginable great glory of its Creator. That is a sobering and humbling message when it comes to all our efforts to understand God in relation to human suffering. We always have to start from the premise that God is God and that we are not. And that, therefore, in our earthly life there is a natural limit to what we can understand about God and his ways. So, unfortunately, we are not getting a clear answer on that nagging question about why there is so much suffering, especially also of people that we can only regard as innocent and actually quite good, such as Job. Pointing towards nature does not even offer poor Job a clear consolation. As nature in itself is indifferent to all this human suffering. Yet it is important that we stay in touch with the free gifts that offered to us in creation by our loving creator. Staying in touch with the grandeur and the fragility of nature also gives us some insight in what we should do with our God given life. It shows us a bigger picture of what we are part of, the fellowship with those around us and in fact with all our fellow creatures. And isn't it also something of a consolation to hear that God is in constant conversation not just with Job, but also with all of us, especially when we turn to him in our misery. God engages with his creation, with us who are created in his image. And what is more, he invites us to be his partner in this engagement for the whole of his creation. A partnership that can alleviate not only some of our own suffering, but that will spread goodness to others as well. That is the way in which God together with us is able to bring good out of all our afflictions.

God's ongoing engagement with his creation has shown itself of course also by the most excellent gift to us of his Son Jesus Christ. In him God drank this cup of human suffering to its very bitter end. A cup that became to us the cup of salvation and that we will share with one another also this morning. By doing so, we answer the invitation of Jesus to leave aside all our preoccupation with power and status. The stuff that continues to cause so much needless human suffering. Being mindful of the fact that in his eyes and in his kingdom, we are all equally loved by our Creator, with a steadfast love for us which never ceases.