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Giving Glory – Psalm 19

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You don't need me to tell you that the earth and its creatures are suffering and that many are dying. The news brings us daily more terrible reports of melting glaciers and polar icecaps, droughts and desertification, floods and acid rain, forests being burned and felled at record rates, and mass species extinctions. For many of us, the pain and grief of all this is almost overwhelming and (if you are like me) it tends in different directions – sometimes to avoidance and semi-denial, sometimes to fear and desperate action, sometimes to paralysis and despair.

Many Christian communities and churches are looking for ways to respond to the ecological crisis – from green churches and environment commissions, to environmental advocacy and consciousness raising, even the Earth Bible project which reads the Scriptures from the perspective of the earth (like feminist criticism taught us to read the Scriptures from the perspective of women). We respond in our worship too – we have in the lectionary now a 'Season of Creation', Creation Sunday – which gives us the chance to remember liturgically that the earth is God's good earth, given to us to 'care for and delight in' as one of the Eucharistic prayers puts it, whose suffering and degradation calls us to repentance.

At Benedictus we are going to join in this season of remembering and repentance. And over this time I'm going to invite you to reflect with me in a bit more depth on what it means to understand our world as *created*. What difference does or could it make to the way we live to relate to our world – plants, rocks, seas, sky, stars

and animals – not just as ‘the environment’, but theologically, as ‘the creation’? Often we Christians just use these words interchangeably – ‘creation’ is just a more poetic way of saying ‘environment’. Maybe this way of speaking encourages us to make some relatively ‘motherhood’ statements about our God-given obligations to be stewards of the good earth or we praise God for the beauty of the earth – but many committed environmentalists would be just as clear about our obligations to love and care for the world, just as grateful for its amazing splendour. So really, what difference does it make to our actual living, our actual inhabiting of our world, to understand God as creator and ourselves and everything else as created, as creatures?

Before I go there, let’s think a bit more about what ‘creation’ means. To say that we, that the whole universe is *created*, is to say that whatever is, exists because God is its source, has given it being – it is to say that God wills/wants it to be. *And*, it is to say that whatever is, is called to be what it is created to be, called to be itself. The more what is created is itself, the more it shows forth the Creator – the more it reflects what God is – or (in the words of our psalm) the more it ‘declares the glory of God’.

This leads us to an important difference between the human and the non-human creation. The non-human creation cannot but be itself, and by being itself gives glory to God, proclaims God, makes God known. ‘The heavens declare the glory of God: and the firmament proclaims his handiwork; One day tells it to another: and night to night communicates knowledge. There is no speech or language: nor are their voices heard; Yet their sound has gone out through all the world: and their words to the ends of the earth’.

The human creation, on the other hand, has much more difficulty. We regularly fail to ‘be ourselves’, we lose ourselves, we try to be someone else, we don’t feel we are enough as we are, we hide ourselves. How and why this happens is a long and complex story – it is probably an anthropological and cultural story, to do with the formation of

consciousness; for each of us, it is a personal, psychological story, to do with our wounding and deformation by things that have happened or not happened in our lives. All this, this loss of simple 'being', is what the Christian tradition speaks of in shorthand by speaking of the 'Fall'. This is the condition from which we need to be redeemed into wholeness, if we are to give God back our being, reflect God's gift of life in ours. So when the psalmist turns from the non-human creation to humanity, he praises the Law and the precepts of God – it is following these, being taught and cleansed by God, that restores us to ourselves, so that 'the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart' might be acceptable in God's sight – maybe even capable of manifesting God like the firmament does.

This seems a long way from the ecological crisis though. What difference does all this make to our relationship to the earth? Well, what happens when we are not *being* ourselves? When our being is deformed or out of alignment or false? Usually what happens is that we seek compensation in some way, we grasp at fullness, we try to fix our being by doing, or using, or having. We start to do damage – to ourselves, to other people, and to the world around us. So the rampant consumerism and consumption of our culture, for example, is just a reflection of a fundamental mis-alignment, a desperate search for 'being' through 'having' or 'consuming' or 'doing' our lives.

And this is where knowing God as creator is radically transforming. You are, I am, because God wills it, because God is the source of your life. It's not because of anything you've deserved or earned or achieved. Your first and primary call is simply to be yourself – to give God back the self you have been given. Of course, that will mean some doing and some having – we are to participate in life, we are given tasks to fulfil and relationships to forge and so on. But none of this is ever in the service of justifying our being, or compensating for not being enough. Our being is a gift – what there is to do is to receive it, honour it, delight in it, be it. 'The glory of God is a human being fully alive'

(Irenaeus). The more we let ourselves be, the more we can let what is not us be as well – we can honour its independent existence, its sheer mysterious otherness. We don't need to own it, or dominate it, or control it – and if we do need to use it (for food or shelter), or put some limits on it for our security, we can do all this with a spirit of humble respect and gratitude, only using what we need, treading lightly on the earth. And, how wonderful is this? It is our fellow creatures, the non-human creation that is content simply to be itself, that can teach us this if only we let it. The poet Gerard Manly Hopkins expressed all this incomparably in his poem, 'As Kingfishers Catch Fire':

As kingfishers catch fire, dragonflies draw flame;
As tumbled over rim in roundy wells
Stones ring; like each tucked string tells, each hung bell's
Bow swung finds tongue to fling out broad its name;
Each mortal thing does one thing and the same:
Deals out that being indoors each one dwells;
Selves -- goes itself; myself it speaks and spells,
Crying What I do is me: for that I came.

And he goes on, reflecting exactly the psalmist's vision that by being itself, each thing reflects God's being. For Hopkins, though, in the fullness of human being, God's being looks like Christ.

I say more: the just man justices;
Keeps grace: that keeps all his goings graces;
Acts in God's eye what in God's eye he is --
Christ. For Christ plays in ten thousand places,
Lovely in limbs, and lovely in eyes not his
To the Father through the features of men's faces.

This is why the way of prayer, contemplative prayer, a practice of learning simply to be is a necessary first step to engaging our current crisis. It is itself the beginning of healing and the possibility of a healing response.