BENEDICTUS
contemplative church

3 October 2026

A Community of Praise (Psalm 148)

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One day this week, I looked out into our courtyard and saw flurries of brown moths everywhere. They were fluttering between trees and shrubs, coming up against the windows, tangling themselves in the washing on the clothes line. At first I thought some unusually large spring hatching was occurring in our garden. Only later did I hear on the news that the moths were appearing up and down the south east of Australia in huge numbers. Not a plague, but the biannual migration of the bogong moths from their lowland breeding areas to the high alpine caves where they'll spend the summer, escaping the heat.

What's been especially exciting is the sheer number of moths on the move. A few years ago, prolonged drought caused their population to plunge. The bogongs, which had been ubiquitous in my Canberra childhood, were now classified as endangered and their decline had devastating impacts on the also endangered mountain pygmy possum, for which they're a key food source. I had wondered if we would ever see them again. This year, it seems, the population has recovered and scientists have been unabashedly celebrating on the nightly news, sharing something of the wonder of these small, fragile seeming creatures who travel hundreds of kilometres, navigating using the Milky Way and the earth's magnetic field. As one scientist put it, this is 'extraordinary because these insects will only make this journey to and from the mountains once, so it's not like they can learn how to do this … It's all built into these wonderful insects' brains already… It's incredibly complex navigation that they're using to travel these huge distances'.[1]

[1] Eleanor Drinkwater of Western Sydney University's School of Science cited in 'Bogong Moths are on the Move', *Australian Geographic*, 30 September 2026 (https://www.australiangeographic.com.au/nature-wildlife/2026/09/bogong-moths-are-on-the-move/)

Today we celebrate the coming of Spring in the southern hemisphere, and we mark the end of our liturgical Season of Creation. Given the state of our world, this liturgical season is necessarily marked by grief and lament. Over the past few weeks, we've sought to be present to the earth's cry; we've sought honestly to acknowledge the impact of human heedlessness and greed, and face up to what is required of us all. Yet the bogongs remind us that in the midst of all this suffering and travail, the life of the world still has its own energy and integrity, its own resources and capacity to find a way.

I'm conscious of the danger of speaking like this. Please do not hear my words as a licence for complacency, as if we don't have to worry about changing our behaviour because life will go on no matter what. It is clearly within our human power to destroy the conditions for life on earth as we know it, so I am emphatically not saying we can all just relax and keep going about our business as usual, as if there are no consequences for ramping up greenhouse gas emissions, destroying forests and plundering the oceans.

What I do want to suggest, however, is that somehow it also matters, even in times like ours, to celebrate the life that is given, to honour its resilience, to wonder at its mystery and strange beauty. Michael Leunig's prayer of thanksgiving for Spring, which I've always loved, speaks of the need to let ourselves be moved by spring's 'vast and gentle insistence that goodness shall return, that warmth and life shall succeed'. The bogongs speak to me of this vast and gentle insistence. They remind me that despite everything, despite us, there is life apart from us, other than us, moving to its own rhythms, responsive to its own imperatives.

In the biblical tradition, this confidence in life is reflected in the sense that nature has its own relationship with God, its own destiny and purpose. God has made a covenant with all created things and they are called, just as human beings are called, to praise their maker. And it seems to me that this notion of nature praising God offers something rich and important, something that may even help to reconfigure humanity's relationship with the whole.

So how is nature said to praise God in this tradition? At one level, it praises simply by being what it was created to be, thereby pointing to the giver of its life. 'The heavens

declare the glory of God', says Psalm 19, 'and the firmament proclaims God's handiwork. One day tells it to another, and night to night communicates knowledge'. (Psalm 19. 1-2). No words are needed, no voices are heard, yet its sound goes out to all the world. Psalm 148, which we heard tonight, seems to go even further, exhorting the world not just to be itself but actively to offer its praise. 'Praise the Lord from the earth, you sea monsters and all deeps, fire and hail, snow and frost, stormy wind fulfilling his command! Mountains and all hills, fruit trees and all cedars! Wild animals and all cattle, creeping things and flying birds … Let them praise the name of the Lord' (Ps. 148. 5-10, 13). In a similar vein, St Francis of Assisi whose feast we celebrate today, saw his own impulse to praise being answered by and expressed with and through his creaturely kin: 'Be praised, my Lord, through all your creatures … through Sir Brother Sun, 'through our Sister, Mother Earth, who sustains and governs us, and who produces various fruit with coloured flowers and herbs'.

Of course, these psalms, St Francis's Canticle of the Creatures – these are human texts. So is this notion of nature being called in some sense to praise God just a human projection? Is it merely a poetic expansion of our human impulse to give thanks for the good things of mother earth? In other words, does the idea of nature praising God really say anything about the life of the world, about its inner energy and relationship to God? Well, I don't know … but some theologians suggest it does. After all, if – as our tradition maintains – all things are created by the Word of God and animated by the Spirit of God, this suggests the possibility of at least some congruence between the inner life of the world and ours.

Franciscan theologian Dan Horan notes that certain features, 'cognition, moral reasoning and emotion – once thought to be exclusive to humanity can be found in varying degrees in the non-human world'.[2] Could these continuities between human and other than human beings point towards what he calls 'the divine bestowal of creative

[2] Dermot A. Lane, *Nature Praising God: Towards a Theology of the Natural World* (Dublin: Messenger Publications, 2022), p.89.

agency to all living things'?[3] And if so, why couldn't we take seriously the possibility of nature responding to the gift of its life, of nature (in some sense) offering praise to God?

Another theologian, Thomas Berry, famously argued that for those with eyes to see, 'the universe is not a collection of objects, but a community of subjects'.[4] Similarly, John Haught suggests that 'interiority' is part of nature. He sees 'the sky, the sun, stars, rivers, the rain, mountains and rocks as "pulsed with an inner life"'.[5] It's this pulse, perhaps, which St Francis and the psalmist had learnt to hear – and whose voice indigenous peoples have perhaps never stopped hearing. It's this depth of listening which seems urgently needed not only if human beings are truly to recognise and celebrate the fullness of life, but also if we're to take our rightful place in joining and helping to enable a community of praise.

I began by acknowledging that it is difficult, in our time, to celebrate the gift of the natural world with unmarred delight. We're so acutely conscious of its vulnerability and struggle; so aware, as Gerard Manley Hopkins put it, of how 'Generations have trod, have trod, have trod; And all is seared with trade; bleared, smeared with toil; And wears man's smudge and shares man's smell'.[6] And yet, isn't there also a risk that, because of our grief at the suffering of creation, we forget to celebrate the life that is given, to let ourselves wonder at it and rejoice in it? This forgetting, in its own way, seems a denial of something that matters for the ongoing life of the whole.

Parker Palmer wrote of the necessity of learning to live in the tragic gap – neither allowing ourselves to be overwhelmed or defeated by all that's wrong, nor glibly optimistic that everything will turn out for the best. Somehow we must be willing to hold the whole of it together, to live the tension. So as we celebrate Viriditas, the greening of Spring and the return of the bogongs, let us pray to abide in that tender, open-hearted place where life is given and possibility renewed. Let us play our part in the world's call to praise.

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[3] Lane, *Nature Praising God*, p.90.
[4] Lane, *Nature Praising God*, p.87.
[5] Lane, *Nature Praising God*, p.87.
[6] Gerard Manley Hopkins, 'God's Grandeur'.