

## Our (human) family and other animals

Genesis 1:24-31; Revelation 4:2-4 & 6-7 and 5:11-14; Matthew 6:25-34

A few weeks ago I was telling David about a book I'd just read – *Living with other creatures* by English biblical scholar Richard Bauckham – and regaled him with the story of Irish Saint Colman and his friend the fly. The upshot was David asked me to give today's sermon on the feast of St Francis. Next time I'll know to keep my mouth shut! But here goes! *Living with other creatures* is essentially about how we – the human creation – relate to the rest of God's creation.<sup>1</sup> Bauckham identifies two streams of Christian thought about the place of humans in the world: the first of these he calls the dominant tradition; the second he calls the alternative tradition.

*The dominant tradition*: has emphasised the vertical relationship of humans with God, often at the expense of the horizontal relationship with the rest of creation. As its name suggests, it has dominated Christian thought for much of the past 2,000 years and has only in more recent times, in the face of environmental degradation, been seriously questioned.

*The alternative tradition* has co-existed with the dominant. It has emphasised both the vertical relationship of humans with God as well as the horizontal relationship with other creatures. It found expression in those saints from the 5<sup>th</sup> -15<sup>th</sup> Centuries who lived in the wilderness and in the company of wild animals. It has received renewed attention as Christians look for a better way to live in the world.

Both traditions are based on Scripture but differ in how they interpret our relationship with the rest of creation. The dominant tradition sees humans as having a God-given right to use the resources of creation to benefit humankind. The alternative tradition is more nuanced. The stories of the saints portray them interacting with and respecting other creatures.

---

<sup>1</sup> What I particularly liked about the book was its historical perspective. Bauckham shows how Greek (and later Roman) thought greatly influenced the development of Christian thought. For example, in the Greek view nature was there to be used and exploited by humans. In contrast, in Jewish scripture and tradition there were restrictions placed on the use of land, the foods that could be eaten and the treatment of animals.

In Genesis Chapter 1 we heard how God created the world and found everything in it *intrinsically good*<sup>2</sup>; how God blessed all living creatures and told them to be fruitful; how God created humans in his own image and to rule over the rest of creation.<sup>3</sup> What did **you** see in your mind's eye when you listened to the story?

*Did you see a neat little pyramid with humans at the top then animals then plants and other stuff? Or did you see humans as creatures alongside their fellow-creatures?* In Genesis 1, it is worth noting humans are not created first. We don't even have a day just to ourselves. Instead we are created on the 6<sup>th</sup> day along with the other land animals. As OT scholar John Goldingay jokes: 'God did not think about us until Friday lunchtime (and you all know about the cars that are made Friday afternoon.)'

*Did you pick up that humans are meant to share the riches of the earth with other creatures?* In v 29 God gives the humans plant food to eat, and in v 30 he gives all other living creatures plant food to eat too.

*When you heard Revelation did you picture yourself right there, singing your heart out, surrounded by lions and tigers and bears, sea leopards and pterodactyls?* Well, perhaps not! But according to Bauckham, "This is not ... merely a poetic fancy... The creation worships God just by being itself, as God made it, existing for God's glory. Only humans desist from worshipping God; other creatures, without having to think about it, do it all the time."

*What did you think about God making humans to rule over creation? Did you feel uncomfortable with the idea that we are called to be rulers and masters of creation?* Never fear! The bible provides plenty of examples of **wise** rule and they are very closely related to being a servant:

---

<sup>2</sup> In contrast, the Greek view was that nature is not intrinsically good as everything physical is subject to death and decay. Only things that escape the process of death and decay are good – like ideas and concepts, human reason, the world of numbers, the 'souls' of living things.

<sup>3</sup> In the Greek view the world is hierarchical. Plants are made for animals, animals are made for humans, some humans are made subject to other humans, and humans made for the sake of the gods. Cicero, writing in 43 BC, considered that "all things in the world which men employ have been created and provided for the sake of men... we enjoy the fruits of the plains and of the mountains, the rivers and the lakes are ours, we sow corn, we plant trees, we fertilise the soil by irrigation, we confine rivers and straighten or divert their courses. In fine, by means of our hands we essay to create as it were a second world within the world of nature."

- ***In Matthew 6:25-34***, which we heard earlier, we have God himself as our example: he provides food and clothing for his all creatures.
  - ***Jesus himself: In Mark 9***, when the disciples are arguing about which one of them is the greatest, Jesus tells them that ‘if any one wants to be first, he must be the very last, and the servant of all.’ ***And In John 13***, he graphically illustrates this when he insists on washing the disciples’ feet.
  - ***In Deuteronomy 17:14-20***, we find a job description for the king. He is to rule as a *brother* over his fellow Israelites and is expressly forbidden to accumulate wealth or consider himself better than others. Having authority over others is not for his benefit.
  - Interestingly, ***in Genesis 1*** humanity is created to rule over creation, while in Genesis 2 v15 humanity is created to work the earth, to help things grow. The Hebrew words used *abad* and *shamar* carry with them the sense of ‘care and protect’ or ‘look after’.
- Humanity as both master and servant of creation.***

*So what can we learn from St Francis who lived during the 11- 12<sup>th</sup> centuries?*

Francis was one of those people who felt called by God to live differently, who chose to live in the wilderness and in the company of wild animals. This was a brave thing to do and profoundly countercultural. Think of all those dark, forbidding forests in Grimms’ fairy tales.

Two recurrent themes in the stories of these saints are their feeding and protecting animals. One famous story about St Francis concerns a fierce wolf that was terrorising the townspeople of Gubbio. Francis goes out from the safety of the town to meet the wolf in his lair. He asks Brother Wolf to stop eating the townsfolk of Gubbio and in return they will leave out food for him. Brother Wolf agrees to this and returns with Francis to Gubbio where the pact between the wolf and the town of Gubbio is sealed by the wolf laying his paw in Francis’ hand. Francis, it seems, understands ‘human rule’ in terms of peace and reconciliation, of seeking out the best outcome for both parties, and acknowledging the mutual interdependence of all creation.

In a similar way Irish Saint Colman depended on his three friends – the cock, the mouse and the fly – to assist him with his devotions. The cock crowed in the middle of the

night to wake him up for prayers, the mouse woke him in the morning by nibbling his ears, and the fly would keep his place on the page of the Scriptures as he meditated on the words!

This is quite a different view from the one that has, up until recently anyway, dominated not only Christian thinking but Western culture. For example, 16<sup>th</sup> century English philosopher and scientist Francis Bacon (himself a committed Christian) believed the way to recover the human dominion over the earth lost at the Fall and so liberate humanity from illness, disease and poverty was through science and mastering the laws of nature. *'I am come in very truth,'* he wrote, *'leading you to Nature with all her children to bind her to your service and make her your slave.'* Note it's all about nature serving us. This attitude – that nature is there for our use and exploitation – arrived on these shores with European settlement. In 1840 Karori was covered in dense forests and abundant bird life. Within the next 40 years it was almost all gone.

Recently Sheila, Linda and I went to a lecture by Prof Geoff Bertram about the problem of valuing nature. During question time someone asked him how would you go about valuing “ecosystem services” – this is the buzz word for the services our planet provides like clean water supply; climate regulation; nutrient cycles etc. Being an economist, Prof Bertram suggested you might start by imagining a divine landlord up there calculating the amount of rent due from the inhabitants of the earth based on the ecosystem services he's providing. The landlord would soon find the cost of providing these services was so astronomical – and unpayable by the inhabitants – that he might be forced to let them live rent-free! So folks, we're squatters! In an uncanny way Prof Bertram hit the nail on the head. The earth is not ours to trash or dispose of as we wish. As the Psalmist says: 'The earth is the Lord's and the fullness thereof.' (Psalm 24).

We are now aware (as Bacon wasn't) that the natural world and its benefits are not limitless and that aggressive human use of nature (in the last 200 years in particular) has made and is making the world a worse place. Climate change threatens not only millions of human beings but also thousands upon thousands of species of plants and animals. What should our response as Christians be? What does it mean to embody 'wise rule'?

I'm still trying to work my way through this. I think first of all it must involve **repentance** for the blind way we are/have been trashing the earth, particularly 'us' in 'richer' economies trashing the planet at a far greater rate than those in 'poorer' economies.<sup>4</sup> What's so unjust too is that it is those who are poorer, the ones who pollute the least, who will suffer the worst effects of forecast drought, floods and sea level rises predicted by the UN Panel on Climate Change.

I mean **repentance** in the sense of a change/a transformation of heart. We need to seriously look at our patterns of consumption: our use of fossil fuels, our use of water, the food we eat, has it been produced in a way that preserves and maintains the health of the planet? Change is hard. I know from experience. In July I signed up to a plastic-free month but abandoned it halfway. Way too much of what I bought came wrapped in plastic or in plastic containers. I think I needed a community – like you here at St Michael's – to keep me on track! I want to find a way of living in the world that is respectful of God's good creation.

I leave you with some verses from St Francis' *Canticle of the Sun* – which is itself based around Psalm 148:

“Be praised, my Lord, through **all Your creatures**, especially through my lord Brother Sun, who brings the day; and You give light through him...

Be praised, my Lord, through **Sister Moon** and the **stars**; in the heavens You have made them bright, precious and beautiful.

Be praised, my Lord, through **Brothers Wind and Air**, and clouds and storms, and all the weather, through which You give Your creatures sustenance.

Be praised, my Lord, through **Sister Water**; she is very useful, and humble, and precious, and pure...

Be praised, my Lord, through our sister **Mother Earth**, who feeds us and rules us, and produces various fruits with colored flowers and herbs...

Praise and bless my Lord, and give thanks, and serve Him with great humility.”

Gillian Cameron, 6 October 2013

---

<sup>4</sup> On population figures, China has CO<sub>2</sub> emissions of 5.3 tonnes per person per annum; India 1.4 tonnes per person per annum; New Zealand 7.8 tonnes per person per annum; and United States a staggering 17.2 tonnes per person per annum.