

As it was In the beginning

Although science has undermined the credentials of Genesis 1 as an account of how the universe has come to be as it is, it still moves me. It is majestic: with the power of his voice, God calls inanimate and animate creatures into being, to fill the dark and windswept watery void with light and life. Scholars who try to identify the sources underlying the opening books of the Bible assign this to the so-called priestly strand: the account reflects ritualistic desire for order and drama (contrast the narrative-based account in Genesis 2, where God gets his hands dirty moulding the first human being from the dust of the ground, before setting him to tend the garden he had planted). In chapter 1 creation builds day by day. God first makes space for life; and then he populates it abundantly. *Swarms* of living creatures are commanded to *fill the sea*; birds *multiply* over the earth. And there is diversity: plants *of every kind*, sea creatures *of every kind*, beasts *of every kind*. *Sea monsters* and *creeping things* have their place; and everything is provided for (although, in its innocence, I note this is a vegetarian world). And as his handiwork progresses, God is pleased by what he has made: he repeatedly *saw that it was good*.

Although human beings arrive at the end, sharing the sixth day with the other creatures of the dry land, this is not a human-centred creation. Everything made up to that point has intrinsic value: the reason for its existence lies in God's creative word, not in its degree of utility to humankind. Although humans are charged to *fill the earth and subdue it*, that doesn't imply they are to displace everything else; rather they are to *have dominion*: to exercise stewardship over God's world.

This is, of course an ancient text – and a lengthy one! But I would like to promote it for presenting us with a positive view of the natural world, in its entirety (so not just the bits we like) and of which we are a part, as a wonderful work of God, in which he delights and towards which he has given us responsibilities.

On Wednesday this week, General Synod will consider material for a proposed *Feast of God the Creator* on the first Sunday in September. But at the moment, this 2nd Sunday before Lent is the one the Church of England has given us to focus on this fundamental dimension of the identity and activity of God the Father and (the New Testament tells us) God the Son – something otherwise neglected in our Calendar and the Revised Common Lectionary on which our readings are based. And something arguably neglected in the Church. It is heartening to see something of an awakening within the Church of England on the ecological and environmental front – and among its parishes, not only through its national stance.

Maybe our previous neglect is partly the fault of the New Testament, where the natural world is rather in the background. Despite Jesus' ministry in Galilee, Christianity took root in urban settlements within the Roman Empire. Even the Gospels have few references to nature, rather than agriculture. In today's passage, Jesus draws attention to the birds of the air and the lilies of the field, but only in order to convey a message about misplaced anxiety about physical needs among those who should be concentrating on the kingdom of God. It's message about human life, to those who are *of more value* than the birds. It's easy to see how Christian faith and salvation might gain a focus on the human world, to the exclusion of the rest of creation.

There is something of a dichotomy and dilemma today, because this year today, being the 2nd Sunday in February, is also *Racial Justice Sunday*: some churches will be marking that; and not without good cause. I want to say that both are important; and I can find connections between them. Exploitation of the natural world and exploitation of fellow human beings often went hand in hand in colonial history and are still present in attitudes and policy today. Those most vulnerable to climate change are those in other parts of the world who have contributed the least to its causation; yet how often are their voices heard in the debates about net zero? The diversity of human races is akin to the diversity of all creation: in our collect, we pray that God would teach us to *discern his hand in all his works and his likeness in all his children*.

Despite the human-focussed teaching in today's Gospel reading, Jesus there affirmed God's care for the birds and the flowers (feeding and clothing them): it's not that humans matter but nature doesn't: both matter to God and therefore should matter to us.

Attempting to pitch people and wildlife against each other is a disturbing feature of a number of political pronouncements relating to planning and development, where nature is presented as getting in the way (Norwich's proposed western link road is one example). If human needs and aspirations are promoted as trumping environmental concerns, nature will continue to suffer death by a thousand cuts. People like me who love nature unavoidably observe, as we grow older, that there isn't as much of it around as there used to be. It's not nostalgia: there is no shortage of data to back it up. No river in England qualifies as being in good overall health. Increasingly, marine fish stocks are unable sustain the level of fishing we'd like to impose. I could go on. Does God also see *that it is not good*? What we need are complementary, not adversarial, approaches and solutions to the challenges we face. We need to work with the rest of creation, not against it. What we've come to accept about human-induced climate change should teach us that if we continue to promote human development at the expense of the natural world, we are likely to discover down the line that we have been sawing off the branch on which we are sitting.

That accords with my reading of Genesis 1: presenting us with a positive view of the natural world, in its entirety and of which we are a part. The natural world is not a nuisance. It's not dispensable. It's not just the domain of those, like me, who are interested in that sort of thing. It's not just a resource for human development or a stage on which salvation plays out. It is a wonderful work of God, in which he delights and towards which he has given us responsibilities.