

Insects in Churchyards in Christ

Welcome to the new Festival of *Creation in Christ* (which we're keeping a week earlier than prescribed). This is actually an ecumenical initiative, now incorporated into the Revised Common Lectionary. For once the Church of England has moved swiftly; I don't think the Methodist Church of GB & Ireland has adopted it yet – but I wouldn't be surprised if you do (you heard it hear first).

Against the background of a broader ecumenical Season of Creation and the Orthodox celebration of Creation on 1st September, I wasn't surprised to hear that the Church of England had put something into its autumn calendar. What I wasn't expecting was the title: *Creation in Christ*. This isn't just a celebration of *All things bright and beautiful*: the festival, I read, directs us to a particular entry point into a broader exploration of creation: that, as the letter to the Colossians says, it is *in Christ* that *all things in heaven and earth were created*. The argument from the liturgists is that through the Church Year we engage with Christ's annunciation, birth, ministry, passion, death, resurrection, ascension and anticipate his coming to judge the world; what has been missing (except on the Church of England's 2nd Sunday before Lent) is his role in the act of creation (which is an ongoing process, not just what happened *in the beginning*). That idea is also picked up in John and in the Nicene Creed (*through him all things were made*); but I must say I don't find it a very easy concept to get my head round. So I'm not going to give you a top-down theological treatise – and I doubt that's what you want from me.

When I embarked on my sabbatical I was wondering if I might subtitle it *Beyond All things bright and beautiful*. You see, I resist the idea that creation is a kind of living wallpaper to what really matters to us and to God: the human world. That nature is just there for our enjoyment, therapy or utility. There was an awesome load of living things before human beings came on the scene and God saw that they were good. There are living things now we haven't yet encountered – in the depths of the ocean and the heights of the rainforests, for example – and might not get the chance to, if we continue to cause the extinction of species. And, dare I say, the way we are going, and unless God intervenes, there will be living things which outlast our species on this planet.

One of the things I sought to do in my sabbatical was to bring together my passion for the natural world and my Christian faith: how does what I believe about God inform my understanding of creation; and how does what I see in creation inform my understanding of God? Today challenges me to extend that: how does what I believe about Christ inform my understanding of creation; and how does what I see in creation inform my understanding of Christ?

As I wrote in *Outlook* this month, what I see above all is an *abundant diversity of life*. In John we read of the Word, that *What has come into being in him was life* – and then, revealing John's human bias – *and the life was the light of all people*. Only people? In Genesis God's creative word brought life to land, water and air, as well as to human beings; and from a single replicating cell, evolution has done just that. We celebrate our life in Christ: my churchyard photos perhaps show that other creatures participate in that as well.

There was a more challenging dimension to my subtitle. There is much in my photographs which is *bright and beautiful*: I've included some butterflies, bees, ladybirds – and some very nice flies. But the insect world, and nature in general, has a darker side. My photos also feature predators and parasites: a fly that inserts its egg into a living bumblebee in flight, where its larva will develop, eventually killing the bee: most people wouldn't consider that beautiful – or a Christlike way of making a living. Moving on in Mrs. Alexander's hymn, to *all things wise and wonderful*: to a naturalist such activity is a source of *wonder*; but what is the *wisdom* of it? How does it fit into a world created by God?

Did I mention bees just now? They have a dark side. Most bee species collect a pile of pollen, lay an egg on it and seal it up as a nursery for their larva. But, a long time ago, if I've understood correctly, some bees started laying some of their eggs in other bees' nest cells – saving them the bother of gathering all that pollen themselves. It was a successful strategy, for from those bees evolved cuckoo bees, which specialise in parasitising other bee nests. And this has happened many times over in different bee families; there are even cuckoo bumblebees which take over a social bumblebee colony so that its workers can raise the cuckoo's brood. In human society we would condemn such action. Are these cuckoos evil? Not in my book: they are now adapted only for this way of life; they no longer possess the hairs and body structures for the collection of pollen: how can they be considered morally responsible? Were their ancestors resisting God's will for his creation when they usurped other nests? I find that a harder question to answer. Yet out of those actions has developed a greater diversity of species and the fascinating relationship between host and cuckoo. A cuckoo is completely dependent on its host and can never outnumber it: if the host population were to crash, the cuckoo would follow: they have arrived at a stasis, a balance. Does that somehow redeem the original exploitation? Is it, in theological terms, a *happy fault*? Suffering, mortality, exploitation are intrinsic to the evolutionary process and its resultant diversity, abundance and complex inter-relationships. Survival of the fittest requires non-survival (or non-breeding) of the unfit. Jesus says God is aware of every sparrow which falls to the ground; he does not intervene to prevent it; but neither does he disregard it. In the crucifixion of Christ we see a God who does not intervene to prevent sin, but responds in love to overcome and redeem it. Is creation in Christ cruciform, cross-shaped, I wonder? An expression of divine love (as Julian of Norwich perceived) whether it results in triumph or tragedy?

What of the parasitic wasps I photographed, invading ladybirds, or beetle larvae? In my garden, over the same period, was an insight into what might happen without them. Box Tree Moth caterpillars completely defoliated my Box hedge. They have been accidentally introduced to this country; as an alien they lack parasites here. But without any control on their numbers they ate themselves out of house and home. Starving caterpillars left the defoliated hedge and crawled around the garden, in a fruitless search for food. When the next generation had eaten the few re-emergent shoots there was nothing for them, either. With no parasites, the balance of nature had broken down.

Overtaken by human activity – inadvertent in this case; but not in many others. Forget cuckoo bees: we are the most exploitative species on the planet. Just one statistic: in terms of biomass, humans outweigh the total of all wild mammals, land and marine, by a factor of five or more; but our livestock outweigh us and them combined. Unlike cuckoo bees we do have choice about the way we live out our the life we have received through Christ. Therein lies a second justification for this new festival of Creation in Christ: it reminds us of our Christian responsibilities towards our fellow-creatures and the planet we share with them. With climate breakdown and inexorable biodiversity decline, it's not a moment too soon. That John presents the Word which was from the beginning as bringing light solely to *people*, is perhaps because it's our species which stands most in need of enlightenment and redemption.