

**2<sup>nd</sup> Sunday before Lent, Year A**

**Genesis 1.1 – 2.3 • Romans 8.18-25 • Matthew 6.25-34**

**12 February 2023**

**Christ Church, Chelsea**

**Sam Hole**

“For the creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the children of God.” (Rom 8.19)

May I speak...

This morning I have three stories about creation that I want to share with you.

The first story.

“In the darkness something was happening at last. A voice had begun to sing. It was very far away and Digory found it hard to decide from what direction it was coming. Sometimes it seemed to come from all directions at once. Sometimes he almost thought it was coming out of the earth beneath them. Its lower notes were deep enough to be the voice of the earth herself. There were no words. It was hardly a tune. But it was beyond comparison, the most beautiful sound he had ever heard. It was so beautiful he could hardly bear it...

...and so on, and so on, the song going on as the blackness is lit up with thousands of stars, and then as the sun rises for first time on the fresh soil of a world as yet devoid of trees, or bush, or grass. Digory looks around.

“The earth was of many colours: they were fresh, hot and vivid. They made you feel excited; until you saw the Singer himself, and then you forgot everything else.

“It was a Lion. Huge, shaggy, and bright it stood facing the risen sun. Its mouth was wide open in song and it was about three hundred yards away.”

C.S. Lewis in *The Magicians Nephew*, the first book of his Narnia series.<sup>1</sup> Genesis chapter 1 imagines God speaking the cosmos into being. And the world is, as Genesis puts it over and over again, good. For Lewis, it is almost as if it does not do justice to the truth to declare that ‘In the beginning was the Word’. Rather, the magical land of Narnia is born as Aslan sings it into being. The creation of all that is, is heralded by the song that is so beautiful that one can ‘hardly bear it’.

Story number one. The creation is good, beautifully good.

Story number two. As told by one of his first followers, Saint Francis of Assisi preaches to the birds.<sup>2</sup>

The blessed father Francis was travelling through the Spoleto valley. He reached a place ... in which a great multitude of birds ... gathered ... . When Francis ... saw them, he ran swiftly toward them, leaving his companions on the road. ... When he was already very close, seeing that they awaited him, he greeted them in his usual way. He was quite surprised, however, because the birds did not take flight, as they usually do. Filled with great joy, he humbly requested that they listen to the word of God.

Among many other things, he said to them: "My brother birds, you should greatly praise your Creator, and love Him always. He gave you feathers to wear, wings to fly, and whatever you need. God made you noble among His creatures and gave you a home in the purity of the air, so that, though you neither sow nor reap

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<sup>1</sup> The connection of Genesis 1 and *The Magician's Nephew* is made by Lucy Winkett, *Our Sound is our Wound*, (2010), p.10.

<sup>2</sup> Thomas of Celano, *The Life of Saint Francis of Assisi*, 1.xxi. Accessed at <https://franciscantradition.org/francis-of-assisi-early-documents/the-saint/the-life-of-saint-francis-by-thomas-of-celano/675-fa-ed-1-page-234>

[Mt 6.26],<sup>3</sup> He nevertheless protects and governs you without your least care." ... [A]t these words, the birds rejoiced in a wonderful way according to their nature. They stretched their necks, spread their wings, opened their beaks and looked at him. ... Then he blessed them, and having made the sign of the cross, gave them permission to fly off to another place.

We are in complex terrain here. This is more than the spirituality of, say, the nature documentary which calls us to wonder but claims no deep meaning to creation, no hidden meaning to uncover. But it is not to go as far as, say, the world summoned up by the movie *Avatar*, with its portrayal of a creation that it itself the bearer of the divine. The world is good; it is a sign of the glory of God. But, this passage also suggests, God cares for creation, for each individual living creature. And, even more than that, the story takes us into even more imaginative territory, to one of the farthest reaches of what Christians have affirmed about the created order: through Francis's act, we are called to ponder whether it is possible that the things of this creation are somehow alert to, responsive to, the Spirit of God at work in the world.

A third story. I remember, many years ago, hiking in a deserted valley high in the Italian Alps. We were walking on a path that worked its way slowly up a steep slope. But I had to move carefully, because to my right, down that steep slope, was a huge glacier. Look up the mountain and all you could see was the glacier, stretching up the sky; look down and you could see the glacier, an impassable mass of dirty grey ice, dust and rock, curving away around the hillside I had just ascended. The valley was deserted. The air was still. But the place was not silent, because the glacier itself was a noisy beast: creaking, scraping, groaning, as it made its way down the mountainside. And that noise sticks in my mind: it seemed to be, I recall, a groan from the earth itself.

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<sup>3</sup> These words appear in today's gospel reading.

And here we are in the world of our New Testament reading, of Romans chapter 8. The apostle Paul depicts the cosmos not as some static creation of God, even if good, even if at times responsive to God's Spirit. Even more than all that: 'the creation waits with eager longing ... groaning in labour pains', as it waits for the new creation. Here we are in the framework of apocalyptic thought;<sup>4</sup> much like that striking tale from Matthew's gospel of the moment at Christ's death of the darkening of the sky followed by the earthquake (Matt 27.45, 51): the world itself reverberates as God's son hangs lifeless on the cross.

It is a truism today to recognise that we need to pay attention to the world in which we live. We are a long way from the sense, perhaps all too common in our Christian past, of humanity's calling being to 'fill the earth and subdue it' (Gen 1.28).<sup>5</sup> And we are a long way, too, from any sense that the planet's natural processes are part of any divine command: our hearts ache as we see the death and destruction wrought in Turkey and Syria this week.

So we do well to care for our planet in its fragile state; through our Eco-Church endeavours; through our individual stewardship of this world's resources. We do well, too, to celebrate the goodness of creation around us. We do well to look, more mystically, for where we might see God's spirit alive in the cosmos. But perhaps as we ponder the world we may also come to hear the groaning of the cosmos – and, Paul insists, the groaning of Christian souls – the groaning that longs for the time when God will come to make all things new.

And we have likely groaned too this week, at the very sad news of the death of Fleur de Villiers. For so many of us, our first encounter with Christ Church will have been through Fleur, greeting us as we walked into this space for the first time. I think of how it was Fleur who so often could be seen ringing the bell, calling people to worship or

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<sup>4</sup> On the inspiration from apocalyptic literature, and in particular 4 Ezra, see Brendan Byrne, S.J., *Romans*, Sacra Pagina, p.256.

<sup>5</sup> On which see Lynn White, Jr, 'The Historic Roots of our Ecologic Crisis', *Science* (1967), 1203-7

proclaiming the moment of consecration during the eucharistic prayer. She loved this church – its worship, its music, its people – and enthused others to love it too. Indeed she was, as one email I received appropriately put it, a ‘force of nature’. She gave so much to our community, and we – I – will miss her enormously.

And when we ponder such sad moments, perhaps it is hard not to imagine the whole creation – the pews around us, the trees in our church gardens, the birds around us – groaning with longing for the time when God will create the new heaven and the new earth. For we too wait for the ‘redemption of our bodies’, for an end to suffering. We acknowledge the pain that so often exists in God’s creation. And we hope and trust in God’s future welcome to a place where mourning and suffering and pain are no more.

‘God saw everything that he had made, and indeed, it was very good.’ (Gen 1.31a) But, ‘I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory about to be revealed to us.’ (Rom 8.18) If now we can enjoy the music of God’s good creation, how awesome will the sound of heaven be?