

Today is the feast day of St. Francis of Assisi, the patron saint of animals, merchants and ecology. Francis had a tumultuous life, suffering grimly towards the end, and finally dying in 1226 at the age of only 45. We know him mostly because of his famous love of animals, to whom he apparently often preached, perhaps not as eccentric as we might think. Our Psalm reading today, number 148, is known as St. Francis's Psalm, because of a very important canticle, or poem, he wrote just before his death that mirrors Psalm 148, called the Canticle of Creation, or as it is sometimes known, the Canticle of the Sun. (The Canticle is printed on the back of your bulletin today for you to read at your leisure). Incidentally, it is thought to be the first poem written in Italian, rather than Latin. Writing in the language of the people, especially in the thirteenth century, is I think a profound indicator of the importance of the piece and its message.

As we heard in its reading today, Psalm 148 is a praise for God's universal glory, where all that God has created is instructed to praise God, from the heavens to the creeping things, from kings to all people, young and old.

5“Let them praise the name of the LORD,
for he commanded and they were created.

6He established them forever and ever;
he fixed their bounds, which cannot be passed.^[a]”

This Psalm comes just about at the end of the Book of Psalms, drawing us in to a culminating crest of praise. Here, all of creation gives praise. Indeed, you may have noticed that the Psalm echoes the Genesis creation story, in some places word for word. The psalmist evokes the sun, moon and stars, then continues the catalog citing the utmost heavens, the waters above the heavens, sea monsters, deeps, crawling things and winged birds. All of these appearing as they did in the great Genesis creation narrative.

It is perhaps a little absurd to imagine a mountain, or a centipede for that matter, giving praise to God. Realistically, how can this possibly be achieved? Can a mountain think or feel? Is the centipede spiritual? Is a stream aware? These are of course our terms, as humans, but we may be a little arrogant in assuming these descriptions are the same for all God's creation. We, who have been created in the image of God, are possibly a little too quick to assume that humans have a monopoly on praise. We are, after all, but a very small part of creation. Remember, all creation belongs to God and is subject to God's will.

As I pondered this dilemma I suddenly remembered the first time I saw Lake Louise, on the border of British Columbia and Alberta. At an elevation of 1600m, the turquoise glacial fed lake is surrounded by towering peaks and ancient glaciers. Many of you will have also been there at one time or another. I was so moved by this place, I cried. I witness praise for God every time I visit Lake Louise. Surely this is a place praising God. It is

ancient, powerful, glorious and almost indescribably beautiful. When I say glorious, I mean in the true sense of the word, an immortal place full of glory, glory to God. Is this not a description of God? How could it possibly be anything else? And in the same way, the purple/blue head of a hydrangea in full bloom, or a sapphire, or a beetle, or anything else God has created, seeps praise in its own unique way. Seeps praise by its very being, here and now as part of God's creation. These inanimate things do not need voices to praise God, and for that matter, neither do we. We were all created by God, however imperfect, and we praise God by virtue of that truth.

That lake, surrounded as it is by ancient glaciers, that hydrangea, that sapphire and that beetle are all, like me, part of God's creation. We are related. We are connected to each other through our maker. Praise is, don't forget, an act of relationship. It represents gratitude and thanksgiving, acceptance and awe, hope and peace. God works to redeem all of God's creation which, because of sin, interferes with that relationship. In Romans 8:22-24, Paul writes,

²² We know that the whole creation has been groaning in labor pains until now; ²³ and not only the creation, but we ourselves, who have the first fruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly while we wait for adoption, the redemption of our bodies. ²⁴ For in ^[a] hope we were saved.

God seeks to be reconciled with all of creation, not just humans. God is committed to all of God's creation. When all of creation praises God, that eternal redeeming relationship is nurtured and healed.

St. Francis understood that in creation we are all kindred, that our relationships in creation are family relationships. As the Canticle states, birds, fire and wind are our brothers, the stars, moon and water our sisters, our very planet our nurturing mother. Understanding these powerful relationships, and our place as humans therein, might serve to shift our perspective just a little. As one Franciscan scholar writes, "It is within creation where divinity and humanity became one, when Jesus was amongst us and it is within creation that God's Holy Spirit dwells with us today." When Jesus was amongst us, did we not feel that relationship with God more closely? When God took human form was this not the moment when our relationship with God, when God's love for us, was keenly evident?

As the hands and feet of Christ, how might the Church respond to this perspective? How do we represent our relationship with creation? Do we understand our role and does our behavior respect God's love and redeeming grace towards all creation? There is, I think, a moment for humility here. As humans, whether it be because of our opposing thumbs, or our rather extraordinary facility with language, or probably for some other combination of reasons, we have had a tendency to romp around as though we owned the place. We do not. I think the COVID-19 pandemic has reminded us that we are but small players in the grand scheme of

things, and we might well try to remember this. Creation is a complex, interwoven, delicate design, where we are but one of many. When we all praise God, our relationship with God, and with all that has been created here, is nurtured and reconciled, as the glory of God shines upon all.

Rejoice in your praise of God, however that may happen, together with all of creation. Praise through prayer, song, dance, meditation, through a smile, a meal, a sigh or a tear. Watch for praise seeping from the hills and rivers, from our loving pets, from the stars at night, from an act of kindness. Living our lives in the confidence of God's love and committed relationship with us and with all of creation that is our kin, and with the love of Jesus Christ our Lord, is good praise indeed.

Amen.