

Daily Devotions from the URC

Creation

9th – 23rd September 2018



Introduction

It is increasingly common to devote some weeks at this time of the year to focusing on Creation and Christian views of it given the growing awareness of the harm that humanity is doing to this, our fragile home. Creationtide is originally an Eastern Orthodox initiative, but has now spread widely among Anglican, Roman Catholic and Protestant congregations, bringing Christians together to pray and work for the protection of the environment that sustains everyone.

*Andy Braunston
Daily Devotions from the URC Project Coordinator*

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Sunday 9th September Psalm 63

The Rev'd Andy Braunston is minister of Barrhead, Shawlands and Stewarton URCs in the Synod of Scotland

1 O God, you are my God alone;
I seek your face with eagerness.
My soul and body thirst for you
In this dry, weary wilderness.

2 I've seen you in your holy place;
Your power and glory held my gaze.
3 Far better is your love than life,
And so my lips will sing your praise.

4 I'll bless you, Lord, throughout my life
And raise my hands to you in prayer.
5 My joyful lips will sing your praise;
My soul is fed with richest fare.

6 Upon my bed I lie awake
And in my thoughts remember you;
I meditate throughout the night
And keep your constant love in view.

7 Because you are my help alone,
In shadow of your wings I'll sing.
8 You hold me up with your right hand;
To you, O God, my soul will cling.

9 All those who seek my life will die;
Down to the depths they will descend.
10 They will become the jackal's food;
The deadly sword will bring their end.

11 The king will then rejoice in God,

With all who swear by God's great name.
The mouths of liars will be closed,
And they will all be put to shame.

Reflection

The singing, or recitation, of Psalms has rather fallen out of fashion in many Protestant churches. Our hymn books have settings of them but they are rarely used; churches which use the lectionary may not have the Psalm read as one of the four readings. There are many good reasons for this but it's a shame as we become disconnected with the range of emotions that the Psalmists convey.

In the first stanza of today's Psalm, for example, we read of a physical longing for God - it brings to my mind generations of monks and nuns who, in the small hours of the night and the long hours of the day, come to chapel to sing the Psalms. People who have such a need of God that they leave their normal lives to devote themselves to prayer, worship and work never fail to impress me. The radical monastic commitment was transformed at the Reformation with the family being seen as the place for the primary encounter with God and family devotions became the hallmark of good Protestant households; though the vocation to monastic life continues to enrich the Church. In our complex lives I suspect we don't pray together much as families - I hope I'm wrong - and monastic life is outwith the experience of the Reformed tradition. However, we still have those inner yearnings for God that the Psalmist identifies and monks and nuns seek to explore. We still live in an arid wilderness where our souls and bodies thirst for God. We still aspire, as in the third stanza, to praise God and have our souls fed with His richest fare.

The challenge for us is to discover, or rediscover, how to get the rhythm of prayer, worship, silence, work, family time and recreation right so that we balance the need to be in God's presence, enriched by His grace and, at the same time, live our out vocation in the world.

God answers prayer
God forgives
God saves
God creates
God powers the life cycles of earth

This Psalm is about so much more than Harvest Festivals. It can remind us to celebrate all that God is and God does. When did you last talk to someone else in your church about good things that God had done in your life, or in your church, or in your community? Is it time to do that again?

Prayer:

God of love, we celebrate your constant presence in our lives and in our world, your faithfulness in us has never wavered.

God of justice, we acknowledge your constant presence in the life and actions of those who have challenged the prejudice and discrimination of their world.

God of mercy, we recognise your constant presence in the ones who take great risks to bring the good news to troubled peoples and places.

God of purpose, may we find within ourselves knowledge of the tasks you call us to undertake and the conviction and courage to see them through. Amen.

you call forth songs of praise.

You tend the land and water it;
you make it rich and good.
As you ordained, your streams are full
to give the people food.

You drench the furrows of the land;
you level off the ground.
You soften it with showers of rain
and make its crops abound.

You crown the year with fruitfulness;
your harvests overflow.
The grassland flourishes again;
the hills with gladness glow.

The pastures green with flocks are clothed,
the meadows covering.
The valleys deck themselves with corn;
they shout for joy and sing.

Reflection

My encounters with Psalm 65 have mostly been at Harvest Festivals, Creation-tide services, and “eco church” services, and then most often the version at 698 in *Rejoice and Sing* (although more often read than sung). However, this Psalm is far deeper, broader, and richer than my experience thus far implies.

This is one of the Psalms of affirmation, celebrating that God reigns. At first glance, this Psalm might appear to be a hotch potch of different interests, but it is a Psalm celebrating various aspects of God’s activity. It celebrates that:

Prayer

O God,
help me to recognise the longing in my being for you,
help me to seek you with eagerness,
to understand how my soul and body thirst for you,
in this arid land.
Help me to bless you with my life,
to pray and praise you,
that my lips will sing your praise,
and my life reflect your glory.
Amen

Monday 10th September

Dr Nicola Robinson is an ordinand at Northern College.

Genesis 1.1-25 Original Blessing

In the beginning when God created the heavens and the earth, the earth was a formless void and darkness covered the face of the deep, while a wind from God swept over the face of the waters. Then God said, ‘Let there be light’; and there was light. And God saw that the light was good; and God separated the light from the darkness. God called the light Day, and the darkness he called Night. And there was evening and there was morning, the first day. And God said, ‘Let there be a dome in the midst of the waters, and let it separate the waters from the waters.’ So God made the dome and separated the waters that were under the dome from the waters that were above the dome. And it was so. God called the dome Sky. And there was evening and there was morning, the second day. And God said, ‘Let the waters under the sky be gathered together into one place, and let the dry land appear.’ And it was so. God called the dry land Earth, and the waters that were gathered together he called Seas. And God saw that it was good. Then God said, ‘Let the earth put forth vegetation: plants yielding seed, and fruit trees of every kind on earth that bear

fruit with the seed in it.’ And it was so. The earth brought forth vegetation: plants yielding seed of every kind, and trees of every kind bearing fruit with the seed in it. And God saw that it was good. And there was evening and there was morning, the third day. And God said, ‘Let there be lights in the dome of the sky to separate the day from the night; and let them be for signs and for seasons and for days and years, and let them be lights in the dome of the sky to give light upon the earth.’ And it was so. God made the two great lights—the greater light to rule the day and the lesser light to rule the night—and the stars. God set them in the dome of the sky to give light upon the earth, to rule over the day and over the night, and to separate the light from the darkness. And God saw that it was good. And there was evening and there was morning, the fourth day. And God said, ‘Let the waters bring forth swarms of living creatures, and let birds fly above the earth across the dome of the sky.’ So God created the great sea monsters and every living creature that moves, of every kind, with which the waters swarm, and every winged bird of every kind. And God saw that it was good. God blessed them, saying, ‘Be fruitful and multiply and fill the waters in the seas, and let birds multiply on the earth.’ And there was evening and there was morning, the fifth day. And God said, ‘Let the earth bring forth living creatures of every kind: cattle and creeping things and wild animals of the earth of every kind.’ And it was so. God made the wild animals of the earth of every kind, and the cattle of every kind, and everything that creeps upon the ground of every kind. And God saw that it was good.

Reflection

“How can you possibly believe what the Bible says about the world being created in six days?” an incredulous new friend asked me.

Personally, I don’t believe that God created the world in six days (and then rested on the seventh) a few thousand years ago. I believe there is a difference between taking the Bible literally and taking the Bible

Sunday 23rd September PSALM 65

The Rev’d Michael Hopkins is minister of The Spire Church, Farnham (a Methodist and United Reformed Church) and Elstead URC, and Clerk of the General Assembly of the URC.

In Zion praise awaits you, Lord;
to you our vows we’ll pay.
To you all people will come near;
you hear us when we pray.

When we were overwhelmed by sins,
and guilt upon us lay,
You pardoned all our trespasses
and washed our guilt away.

How blessed are those you choose, and bring
within your courts of grace!
We’re filled with blessings in your house,
in your most holy place.

With awesome deeds of righteousness
you answer us, O God,
Our Saviour, hope of farthest seas
and all the earth abroad.

By strength and power you formed the hills.
You hushed the oceans’ voice;
You calmed the tumult of their waves
and stilled the peoples’ noise.

Those who inhabit distant lands
with awe regard your ways;
Where morning dawns and evening fades,

height Miriam can jump to, as has a young apple tree. Every damp patch has been dug into by Glinda in search in search of worms. Sand, kale, and daddy-long-legs, are all considered great delicacies by Valhalla, while my toes, the fence post, and the window ledge have all been tested, and rejected, as potential food by Baloo. When the sun shines, they alternate between sunbathing and sitting in the shade; when it rains, they sit under the garden table. They begrudge neither, simply responding to their circumstances, unconcerned about the future. Smaller birds often come to share in their bounty. Sparrows take down-feathers to line their nests, and a wide range of garden birds steal their corn. The hens see them but make no effort to prevent this wholesale theft. Why would they?

Enjoying the world as they do, they set an excellent example to us as we rush through life trying to save time to pack in more. We even watch television programmes in which people rush to make the perfect éclair or refurbish community centres.

Regretting focusing too hard on “laying up” money is a very common deathbed regret, so much so that half a dozen people have been accredited with saying “Nobody on their deathbed has ever said “I wish I had spent more time at the office””. We know it was Jesus who said, “Where your treasure is, there will your heart be also.” Turning that around, what you put effort into shows what you treasure, so what have you treasured today that you might regret in the future?

God of yesterday, of today, and of tomorrow, help us to live in today, to move on from yesterday and to leave tomorrow in your hands. Open our eyes to your treasures guiding our values so that we may lay up what is good in your sight valuing what you value. Amen.

faithfully. Taking the Bible faithfully means that I read the Book of Genesis not as a scientific textbook but rather for the stories of faith and wisdom and for the insight into our living God.

A God who is with us in every moment: past, present and yet to come. A God who is still creating and re-creating our world today. And that means a God who is still creating and re-creating our understanding of our world.

Diana Butler Bass writes in her book *Grounded*: “God is not a far-off Weaver of the Web, like God once depicted as the Watchmaker who assembled creation and left it to run on its own. No, God is part of the web, entangled right here with us.”

So, what does that “entanglement” mean for the way we approach and engage with creation?

When we think and act out of greed and destructiveness. God is with us.

When we think and act out of apathy and indifference. God is with us.
When we think and act out of compassion and conservation. God is with us.

Yet, it is only with the last statement that I think it can be truly said that “And God saw that it was good.”

Prayer

Creator God, who created and continues to create all that lives and grows on our world. We pray for our beautiful, diverse world. A world that is often polluted, abused or taken for granted. You are with us in yearning for a world characterised by compassion and conservation. In Jesus’ name, we pray. Amen.

Tuesday 11th September

John Collings is a Lay Preacher and a member of Rutherglen United Reformed Church

Ps. 33.1-9 'The Word of the Lord in creation'

Rejoice in the Lord, O you righteous.

Praise befits the upright.

Praise the Lord with the lyre;

make melody to him with the harp of ten strings.

Sing to him a new song;

play skilfully on the strings, with loud shouts.

For the word of the Lord is upright,

and all his work is done in faithfulness.

He loves righteousness and justice;

the earth is full of the steadfast love of the Lord.

By the word of the Lord the heavens were made,

and all their host by the breath of his mouth.

He gathered the waters of the sea as in a bottle;

he put the deeps in storehouses.

Let all the earth fear the Lord;

let all the inhabitants of the world stand in awe of him.

For he spoke, and it came to be;

he commanded, and it stood firm.

Reflection

"In the beginning" are the three words that start both Genesis and John's Gospel. Here the Psalmist is reflecting on this world that God created and on his own life. He exhorts the readers to rejoice and praise God using voices and musical instruments. We are reminded that all the work that God does is done in faithfulness.

we focus on good news, rather than law. Can you break the chains of law for a neighbour in need today?

God,

Your yoke is light when we lift the burden together in love, help us to live more simply, in faith, truly believing in your good news, which turns our human desire for rules and certainty upside down.

Amen.

Saturday 22nd September

Helen Wilson, Local Preacher, South East Northumberland Ecumenical Area

St Luke 12: 16 - 20 A Parable for our times?

Then he told them a parable: 'The land of a rich man produced abundantly. And he thought to himself, "What should I do, for I have no place to store my crops?" Then he said, "I will do this: I will pull down my barns and build larger ones, and there I will store all my grain and my goods. And I will say to my soul, Soul, you have ample goods laid up for many years; relax, eat, drink, be merry." But God said to him, "You fool! This very night your life is being demanded of you. And the things you have prepared, whose will they be?" So it is with those who store up treasures for themselves but are not rich towards God.'

Reflection

Each morning, I drag myself sleepy-eyed to the end of the garden to let my hens out. Regardless of what sort of day they had yesterday, they rush into the garden ready to start a new day on a breakfast of corn.

If, later, they're still hungry, they work hard at foraging. My six-foot fuschia has been plucked bare below the height of two feet, the

head, and not the tail; you shall be only at the top, and not at the bottom—if you obey the commandments of the Lord your God, which I am commanding you today, by diligently observing them, and if you do not turn aside from any of the words that I am commanding you today, either to the right or to the left, following other gods to serve them.

Reflection

This is one of those readings in Hebrew Scriptures that Jesus will later turn on its head. The start of the last sentence is particularly telling: ‘The Lord will make you the head, and not the tail; you shall be only at the top, and not at the bottom—if you obey the commandments of the Lord your God.’ Jesus contraindicated this understanding of the Law many times throughout his teachings, but perhaps most notably in the beatitudes, when he made it clear that the first would be last and the last would be first. Maybe following the letter of the Law isn’t so appealing or important after all... Jesus implied, in-fact, that if you tried to be ‘only at the top’, you would end up at the bottom. Combine this with Jesus’ commandments to love God and love each-other, and you might find the Law seriously wanting.

Paul picks this up later, not by implying that the Law ought to be, or is, abolished, but by teaching that only faith can truly fulfill the Law (Romans 3: 31). Many people have read Paul’s teachings as an exhortation to follow the Law, but I think that this understanding is problematic. Paul does not tell us to keep the laws laid out in the Torah, suggesting that any attempt to do so would be futile, we all break the Law in tiny ways daily... Rather, Paul suggests that faith in Jesus is all that is required of us in order to fulfill the Law today.

Am I saying that we should ignore the Hebrew Scriptures? No. Am I saying that all law is useless? Absolutely not. Rather, I suggest that we consider our own lives carefully, before condemning others; that we prioritise faith in Jesus and love for God and our neighbor, and that

Do we respect the faithfulness of God in the way we treat the world He created?

God made the host of the heavens by the breath of his mouth and we burn fossil fuels and pollute the atmosphere.

He gathers the waters of the sea as in a bottle and today we throw away millions of plastic bottles every year and some of these end up in the oceans where they help to destroy many of the sea creatures that God created.

While many people seem to live and care nothing about this earth there is a growing movement of Christians who are working to change attitudes and reduce the damage we do to God’s world. Christians have a chance to lead the world by changing what we do as individuals, as churches, as a denomination and as Christians. Eco Church and Eco Congregation Scotland unite churches who want to stand against the destruction of God’s world by making small, or large, changes. As we stand in awe of God and of all that is created we have to choose, do we continue to destroy it or do we make changes that start to change the world. The world stood firm when God spoke and yet is being eroded by human action, we have to show our respect for God, for God’s creation and for all creatures by changing and lessening our impact on this fragile earth.

Prayer

Loving God we are sad when we see the damage to your world. We praise you for the majesty and diversity of all that you created. We ask your forgiveness for all the damage we have done. We ask that you guide us as we strive to do better and that you help us when we fail and show us what we can do to change how we treat this world. Amen

Wednesday 12th September

The Rev'd Ruth Watson, minister of Patricroft and Worsley Road URC

Romans 1.18-23 'Creation proclaims God's presence'

For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and wickedness of those who by their wickedness suppress the truth. For what can be known about God is plain to them, because God has shown it to them. Ever since the creation of the world his eternal power and divine nature, invisible though they are, have been understood and seen through the things he has made. So they are without excuse; for though they knew God, they did not honour him as God or give thanks to him, but they became futile in their thinking, and their senseless minds were darkened. Claiming to be wise, they became fools; and they exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images resembling a mortal human being or birds or four-footed animals or reptiles.

Reflection

There is a danger in wanting to know too much. At the end of the film "Indiana Jones and the Kingdom of the Crystal Skull" (warning - spoiler alert!!) the character Irina asks for all knowledge. When she is receiving it, she realises that it is too much to bear and asks for it to stop. Her request is denied and her head literally explodes through too much information.

In an age of enlightenment, science and discovery, we are in danger of presuming to know too much and the window through which we see God becoming smaller and smaller. But the acquisition of knowledge should make our "God shaped" window bigger as we become more and more amazed at how the world works. We can never know everything, but we can be inspired by all we see and attribute all to God, not just the bits we can't explain. If we worship knowledge, or the objects of our discovery, we deny God and stir his

For love and empathy.

Give us the confidence where necessary

To make a stand and rebuke

The elements that frighten others.

Amen!

Friday 21st September

Alex Clare-Young is an ordinand at Westminster College.

Deuteronomy 28: 1-14 God's blessing in the natural order

If you will only obey the Lord your God, by diligently observing all his commandments that I am commanding you today, the Lord your God will set you high above all the nations of the earth; all these blessings shall come upon you and overtake you, if you obey the Lord your God: Blessed shall you be in the city, and blessed shall you be in the field. Blessed shall be the fruit of your womb, the fruit of your ground, and the fruit of your livestock, both the increase of your cattle and the issue of your flock. Blessed shall be your basket and your kneading-bowl. Blessed shall you be when you come in, and blessed shall you be when you go out. The Lord will cause your enemies who rise against you to be defeated before you; they shall come out against you one way, and flee before you seven ways. The Lord will command the blessing upon you in your barns, and in all that you undertake; he will bless you in the land that the Lord your God is giving you. The Lord will establish you as his holy people, as he has sworn to you, if you keep the commandments of the Lord your God and walk in his ways. All the peoples of the earth shall see that you are called by the name of the Lord, and they shall be afraid of you. The Lord will make you abound in prosperity, in the fruit of your womb, in the fruit of your livestock, and in the fruit of your ground in the land that the Lord swore to your ancestors to give you. The Lord will open for you his rich storehouse, the heavens, to give the rain of your land in its season and to bless all your undertakings. You will lend to many nations, but you will not borrow. The Lord will make you the

Most commentaries on this passage see its main message as Jesus demonstrating his divine nature and challenging the disciples to fully grasp this fact. That is certainly true. But for me, it also shows Jesus' full humanity.

He is seeking respite from a punishing healing tour among the villages close to the Sea of Galilee. The previous verses end on something of a down note with Jesus articulating the wearying nature of discipleship; He seems oppressed and burdened. It is no surprise then that he sleeps in the boat as it progresses out from the shore.

Archaeology suggests that the typical fishing craft of the time would have been quite small. Yet so shattered is Jesus that He can fall asleep among the likely shouting of instructions and general hubbub of those steering the boat. In this manner, Jesus experiences the constraints and frustrations of being human. He gets it.

But He then complements His humanity by His reaction to the turbulent meteorological conditions. I think it is telling that He first of all responds directly to the frightened men. Even though He is challenging the disciples to think about their faith, He is also showing love by putting them first. Only secondly, does He deal with the winds and the sea in giving them clear instructions to cease and desist.

The promise of Jesus, enshrined in His life, death and resurrection, shows the trajectory we must all take from being fully human to being one with Him. He understands what it means to be human, is always with us during the storms of our lives and in the end will calm our fears.

Prayer

Lord of all
Through the wearying storms of life
We look to you

wrath. If we accept that knowledge of Creation and Creation itself comes from God, we worship God and wonder at His works.

Prayer

Lord of Creation, to you be all praise. We can never fully understand all that you have made, but we can stand in awe of all that we can see, hear, smell, taste and touch. You have given us our senses to feel and our brains to learn more of you. May we use our knowledge to grow in our wonder of you as we explore the world around us.
Amen

[Thursday 13th September](#)

Kirsty-Ann Mabbott, Church Related Community Worker

St John 1.1-14 'The Word becomes part of Earth'

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. What has come into being in him was life, and the life was the light of all people. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it. There was a man sent from God, whose name was John. He came as a witness to testify to the light, so that all might believe through him. He himself was not the light, but he came to testify to the light. The true light, which enlightens everyone, was coming into the world. He was in the world, and the world came into being through him; yet the world did not know him. He came to what was his own, and his own people did not accept him. But to all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God, who were born, not of blood or of the will of the flesh or of the will of man, but of God. And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father's only son, full of grace and truth.

Reflection

Do you remember the rhyme “sticks and stones may break my bones but names will never hurt me”? I remember enduring some very cruel words when I went to school and this phrase kept ringing in my ears, but I never understood it because words hurt more than people gave them credit for.

We see in the media the number of people who take their own lives because of the torture they endure through words. This is because words have power. Edward Bulwar-Lytton is credited with saying “the pen is mightier than the sword”, so I’ll say it again; Words. Have. Power. For many this is no surprise, but if we acknowledge our words have the power to alter the direction a person’s life takes or even lead someone to end their life, just stop and think about the power of God’s Word.

God’s Word spoke all of creation into being...let that really sink in for a moment...God’s Word was with God at the very beginning before ANYTHING and then that Word was spoken and EVERYTHING came into existence. I am awestruck by that powerful, creative building Word. And yet, this powerful Word became frail human so that we could better understand God and God’s great, all-encompassing, all-consuming Love for us, some of the very things spoken into creation.

Our voices can be echoes and signposts that point to the inspiring, God with us, Creation building Word, or they can be used to crush and damage Creation. Free will gives each of us a choice everyday as to how we use our words, my challenge to you today is to go out into the world and share only God-inspired words today, words that affirm, love and give honour and wholeness to others of God’s spoken creation.

Prayer

Creator God –
connecting us to you,
confirming your glory before us –
help us to see where we put up barriers
that separate us and others from you.

Show us your goodness and glory.
Unite us through your creation.
Make us your people,
in all your diversity and brilliance,
that we may reflect your created unity in the world. Amen.

[Thursday 20th September](#)

Paul Simon, Elder, Hadleigh URC

Matthew 8: 23-27 Jesus in command of creation

And when he got into the boat, his disciples followed him. A gale arose on the lake, so great that the boat was being swamped by the waves; but he was asleep. And they went and woke him up, saying, ‘Lord, save us! We are perishing!’ And he said to them, ‘Why are you afraid, you of little faith?’ Then he got up and rebuked the winds and the sea; and there was a dead calm. They were amazed, saying, ‘What sort of man is this, that even the winds and the sea obey him?’

Reflection

Man shouts at cloud is a modern and slightly glib euphemism for pointlessness. Here we have this story of Jesus doing just that. In fact, he rebukes the storm that is causing such chaos. Rebukes: severely tells off or expresses extreme disapproval of. And the winds and the sea do indeed listen and shut up!

Reflection

I suspect we've all had those moments in our journey of life where we find ourselves pushed to the outside of our community, our Church, our family, or found ourselves at the edge of our faith. There are those who feel this more pronounced than others. We have neighbours and friends among us who are ostracised because they have come from overseas, are cohabiting while unmarried, are single parents, are living through bereavement or illness, have lifestyles or jobs we find difficult, are less wealthy or have visible or invisible health concerns. Sometimes it's "society" that makes people feel disconnected, vilifying the outsider, the different or the disadvantaged, while at other times it's the Church, or even ourselves, who force a wedge between people.

For those of us who have felt the separation from our fellow humans or from God, the passage in Romans 8 gives us hope. We are given the reminder that there is nothing in all creation that can separate us from the love of God in Jesus. God's created order doesn't separate us from God's love. Instead it is us, in all our flawed humanity, who cause separation and division.

Despite all we do as people to put up barriers, alienate the outsider, or discriminate against God's people who we fail to recognise, God's created order, Roman's 8 suggests to us, is the glue that sticks us to God and is the method by which we are brought close to one another. In creation we see God's goodness, beauty and majesty writ large on a canvas before us – with its diversity and brilliance, through miniscule and magnified glory. In such creation we are reconciled to one another and to God through all that creation shows and reflects of the limitless love of God. Creation confirms and connects. Can we live out creation's unity in our life as Christian disciples?

Prayer

Living Word

It slips our mind how powerful and creative your Word is and for that we are sorry.

Enable us to live by your Word and to be examples of your Word in creation today.

Help us to speak love to all the world so as to Honour you and be part of your Kingdom creating.

In and through the power of your Word. Amen.

Friday 14th September

Alex Clare-Young is an ordinand at Westminster College.

Genesis 1.26-28 Humanity created in God's image.

Then God said, 'Let us make humankind in our image, according to our likeness; and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the birds of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the wild animals of the earth, and over every creeping thing that creeps upon the earth.' So God created humankind in his image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them. God blessed them, and God said to them, 'Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it; and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the air and over every living thing that moves upon the earth.'

Reflection

This text has been interpreted narrowly in ways which can lead to the exclusion and harm of Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Trans people, as well as to a troublingly narrow understanding of the image of God in humanity. God creates humankind, masculine and feminine, and this, like the rest of the Genesis creation narratives, is relayed in a liturgical

pattern of binaries; masculine and feminine, night and day, darkness and light...

As Austen Hartke notes in his recent book, *Transforming* (2018), taking these binaries literally is problematic. Surely as well as day and night, God created those in between times, dusk and dawn. Surely as well as darkness and light, or black and white, God created and continues to create the murky greys, dusty browns and brilliant rainbows that are apparent throughout creation. Surely as well as creating 'male' and 'female' God also created me and the hundreds of thousands of other trans and intersex people who we risk excluding with narrow interpretations of Scripture.

Literal readings of the Genesis creation narratives are certainly legitimate but, like much of Scripture, there are many different ways to read these passages; which contain beautiful, mythic, liturgical truths, that are deeper than science or fact.

Stonewall research tells us that two in five trans people have experienced a hate crime and that a similar amount have suffered discrimination or harassment (*Trans Report*, 2017) all because they don't fit neatly into the binary of male and female. To what extent are narrow interpretations of Scripture at the root of their oppression? What binaries are holding you captive, and is there a more creative way to read Scripture, and to live life?

Creative God,
We are sorry that there are times when we find it difficult to read between the lines.
We are sorry that there are times when our interpretations of scripture have unintentionally lead to pain for others.
We are sorry that we have merely tolerated difference, rather than welcoming it.

the Good News.

As we pray, help us to listen to what you have to say to us.
Help us to remember that You are the rock which cannot move.
Help us to remain grounded in the love of Your Son, Jesus Christ,
In whose Name we pray.
Amen!

[Wednesday 19th September](#)

*The Rev'd Dr Matthew Prevett, Minister, St Andrew's URC,
Monkseaton and Northern Synod Minister*

Romans 8.28-39 Creation in no way separates us from the love of God in Christ.

We know that all things work together for good for those who love God, who are called according to his purpose. For those whom he foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, in order that he might be the firstborn within a large family. And those whom he predestined he also called; and those whom he called he also justified; and those whom he justified he also glorified. What then are we to say about these things? If God is for us, who is against us? He who did not withhold his own Son, but gave him up for all of us, will he not with him also give us everything else? Who will bring any charge against God's elect? It is God who justifies. Who is to condemn? It is Christ Jesus, who died, yes, who was raised, who is at the right hand of God, who indeed intercedes for us. Who will separate us from the love of Christ? Will hardship, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword? As it is written, 'For your sake we are being killed all day long; we are accounted as sheep to be slaughtered.' No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.

let the towns of Judah rejoice
because of your judgements.

Reflection

This is one of the Psalms written by the sons of Korah (Temple assistants). Whilst the Book of Psalms is widely regarded as a collection of Prayers, this example is described as a song. Indeed, as I read it, I can't help but think of (and sing to myself) hymns and songs which come to mind, particularly Sing unto the Lord a New Song (actually inspired by Psalm 96), which reminds us that, 'He is greatly to be praised'.

A key message of the Psalm is that God's presence is our security. Having, as a youngster, come through the ranks of the Boys' Brigade and served for a short time as an Officer, I'm reminded of Will your Anchor Hold? written by Priscilla Jane Owens, which, in common with Psalm 48, contains the two parts of the Boys' Brigade motto: Sure and Steadfast. The hymn asks some searching questions, but the chorus provides an emphatic answer:

We have an anchor that keeps the soul
steadfast and sure while the billows roll;
Fastened to the rock which cannot move,
Grounded firm and deep in the Saviour's love!

Ultimately, this Psalm provides us with three key tools for our Christian lives: it is a prayer/song; it is in Scripture; it reminds us of hymns to sing.

Prayer

Lord God,
Help us to read Your Word for all its worth.
Help us to sing Your praises, not to ourselves but so others can hear

Help us to understand all that lies between the binaries, in our own lives and in the lives of others. Amen.

Saturday 15th September

The Rev'd John A Young retired minister Scottish Synod, member of Giffnock URC

St Mark 10.42-45 Modelling a new way of acting in creation

So Jesus called them and said to them, 'You know that among the Gentiles those whom they recognize as their rulers lord it over them, and their great ones are tyrants over them. But it is not so among you; but whoever wishes to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wishes to be first among you must be slave of all. For the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many.'

Reflection

Along with my sisters, I was brought up within Scottish Congregationalism – which, from time to time, struggled with leadership in the Church. It was widely held that the 'mind of Christ' should be expressed through discussion in the Church Meeting. This polity, derived from the apostle Paul's, was widely accepted as the norm. Admirable in itself, this could allow a number of vocal strong minded individuals to dominate discussion and decision making. Some of these voices were distinctly anti-clerical. No doubt a few egocentric ministers misusing the Church Meeting would encourage such a stance.

At the General Assembly of the Congregational Union of Scotland dominant voices were heard from time to time. After one rather contentious gathering, in private, my late father was encouraged to express his view. His considered opinion was that ministerial leadership had to be by consent, expressed in the phrase 'primus

inter pares' (well he had been a Latin teacher). 'First among equals' allowed leadership in the Church to flourish on the understanding that it was not status which mattered, but the exercise of gifts granted by God for the good of the Church and her mission.

Jesus' followers struggled with leadership. They were promised greatness and took as their model contemporary examples – both Jewish and Roman. Existing models of behaviour were not what Jesus had in mind at all – for them, or us. To be a servant or slave was one difficult role which he espoused - along with the title 'friend' of Jesus, a role very different from the imperial claim of 'Friend of the People'.

The Church, throughout history, has drawn many differing conclusions about how leadership should be exercised. Each has its strengths and weaknesses. The leadership style of the United Reformed Church is conciliar, one which is a shared dependence of participating members seeking 'the mind of Christ'. It stands or falls by the willingness of all to contribute what they can. How are your gifts (and mine) being used?

Prayer

Gracious God,
you have given us many gifts
of heart and mind
some of which we prefer to harbour
rather than share.
Open our lives to your Spirit
that our reluctance to offer
ourselves for your work
may give way to generosity
and sharing the mind of your Son.
AMEN

Tuesday 18th September

Jeff Newall is a Lay Preacher and member of Christ the Vine Community Church, Milton Keynes.

Ps. 48.1-11 Mount Zion as the 'city of God' that rejoices in God's presence.

Great is the Lord and greatly to be praised
in the city of our God.
His holy mountain, beautiful in elevation,
is the joy of all the earth,
Mount Zion, in the far north,
the city of the great King.
Within its citadels God
has shown himself a sure defence.

Then the kings assembled,
they came on together.
As soon as they saw it, they were astounded;
they were in panic, they took to flight;
trembling took hold of them there,
pains as of a woman in labour,
as when an east wind shatters
the ships of Tarshish.
As we have heard, so have we seen
in the city of the Lord of hosts,
in the city of our God,
which God establishes for ever.

We ponder your steadfast love, O God,
in the midst of your temple.
Your name, O God, like your praise,
reaches to the ends of the earth.
Your right hand is filled with victory.
Let Mount Zion be glad,

hydrologically and archaeologically.) To the author of this part of the Book of Isaiah, imagining a repopulated city, of perhaps 5,000, would have sounded like heaven. Indeed it needed to be a new creation as much of the previous city was razed. This vision of settled stability, then as now, is attractive to inhabitants of central market towns based in an agrarian society.

Ecology is a new subject, the word itself only coming into general use in the latter half of the 20th Century. With the increasing disconnect from religion there is a decreasing appreciation of the breadth of understanding contained in a compilation of books from one area, though across many centuries. Based on thoughts of a New Jerusalem I have been told that no one could call themselves both Christian and ecofriendly as Christianity knows nothing about the countryside - the only future it recognises is urban.

Isaiah would have had no idea that his vision of well-grown trees cultivated by the same family, becoming a micro-ecosystem, would resonate down the millennia. He would be aware that olives, figs and vines harboured many other species. Writing on one of the hottest days this year, the provision of shade for many to lie down is realised as a boon. That sharing is one of the key thoughts of this passage, used in many contexts - that we lie down, share together, more than room for all. All are necessary for a complete functioning system, there is no destruction of species, no genocide, on the mountain of the Lord.

Prayer

Grant us, Lord, to be glad and rejoice that there is room for all, in the shade of your care for your Creation is a complete system. Help us to delight together that we can live valuing the ecosystem you have given us, for its care is blessed and in it we hear your word. Amen

Sunday 16th September Psalm 64

The Rev'd David Coaker, minister of Grays URC and a chaplain to the Moderators of GA

Hear me, O God, as my complaint I voice;
From threat of enemies protect my life.
Hide me from every plot of wickedness
And from the rage of evildoers' strife.

They whet their tongues until they are like swords,
Their bitter words like deadly arrows aim.
They shoot in secret at the innocent,
And suddenly attack him without shame.

They spur each other on to evil deeds;
Their snares they cover, saying, "Who will see?
We surely have devised a perfect plan."
How cunning human minds and hearts can be!

But with sharp arrows God will shoot at them,
And suddenly they'll be struck down and slain.
So, using their own words, he ruins them
And all who see will treat them with disdain.

All people then will fear and will proclaim
The works of God and think upon his ways.
Let righteous people glory in the LORD!
He shelters them; so let them give him praise.

Reflection

'Sticks and stones may break my bones but names will never hurt me.'
Apart from when they do.

Now, as in the ancient world, words can have great power. Labels we carry from childhood, whether attached by family or teachers, can haunt us throughout our lives. They can become who we see ourselves as. They can be a filter through which every other word of praise or insult can be attenuated or amplified. They can cast a shadow that can be hard for others, and ourselves, to truly be aware of.

We can also apply such labels to other people without being aware of it. We build up a set of assumptions throughout our lives and place different people in our defined categories. This can be from a first impression, long, hard experience, or from what other people have told us. These are the lenses through which we look out on the world. They save us the effort of thinking about everything, disturbing our plans, and changing our attitudes.

We need to be challenged to re-evaluate our responses or assumptions from time to time. To think about why we reacted in such a way, felt a certain emotion, or had a particular thought. We can't do it all the time, or we'd never get anything done. But perhaps when our response surprises us it deserves to be reflected upon?

Prayer

Listening God, hear my fears; embrace my anxieties.

I give thanks:

for when the right words come to me in reply;
for when a stranger challenged the mob;
for when in the heat of conflict, a word or gesture defused the situation;
for the relief when an adversary scuttled away to the sound of laughter.

Remind me that I am your beloved child and bear your image.

Assure me that I am loved and valued.

Help me to listen for your words and rest in your embrace. Amen

Monday 17th September

The Rev'd Ruth Browning, retired minister, Thornbury URC

Isaiah 65.17-25 A dream of an ecosystem where humans and animals live in harmony.

For I am about to create new heavens and a new earth; the former things shall not be remembered or come to mind. But be glad and rejoice for ever in what I am creating; for I am about to create Jerusalem as a joy, and its people as a delight. I will rejoice in Jerusalem, and delight in my people; no more shall the sound of weeping be heard in it, or the cry of distress. No more shall there be in it an infant that lives but a few days, or an old person who does not live out a lifetime; for one who dies at a hundred years will be considered a youth, and one who falls short of a hundred will be considered accursed. They shall build houses and inhabit them; they shall plant vineyards and eat their fruit. They shall not build and another inhabit; they shall not plant and another eat; for like the days of a tree shall the days of my people be, and my chosen shall long enjoy the work of their hands. They shall not labour in vain, or bear children for calamity; for they shall be offspring blessed by the Lord— and their descendants as well. Before they call I will answer, while they are yet speaking I will hear. The wolf and the lamb shall feed together, the lion shall eat straw like the ox; but the serpent—its food shall be dust! They shall not hurt or destroy on all my holy mountain, says the Lord.

Reflection

The author of the first part of the Book of Isaiah knew Jerusalem, with a population of a few thousand at most, was subject to periodic drought. The digging of a supply tunnel to an intermittent spring would allow a re-populated Jerusalem, with fertile gardens, to be much safer from invaders with a far more secure food source. (Hezekiah's tunnel to Siloam, is interesting geologically,