

In his *Canticle of the Sun*, St Francis of Assisi wrote movingly our spiritual nearness to the created world. He wrote:

Be praised, my Lord, through all Your creatures,
especially through my lord Brother Sun,
who brings the day; and you give light through him.
And he is beautiful and radiant in all his splendour!
Of You, Most High, he bears the likeness.

Praised be You, my Lord, through Sister Moon
and the stars,
in heaven you formed them clear and precious and beautiful.
Praised be You, my Lord, through Brother Wind,
and through the air, cloudy and serene,
and every kind of weather through which
You give sustenance to Your creatures.

Praised be You, my Lord, through Sister Water,
which is very useful and humble and precious and chaste.
Praised be You, my Lord, through Brother Fire,
through whom you light the night and he is beautiful
and playful and robust and strong.

Praised be You, my Lord, through Sister Mother Earth,
who sustains us and governs us and who produces
varied fruits with coloured flowers and herbs.

The saint of Assisi lived in the late twelfth/early thirteenth century yet, sorely, do we need his words, his spiritual sensitivity, in our time. In 2015, another Francis, Pope Francis, appealed for ‘ecological conversion’.

Global warming, environmental degradation and destruction of ecosystems lead to increased flooding, soil erosion, a lack of trees, and melting glaciers. In an ecosystem, everything relies on everything else: plants, animals and every living organism. Coral reefs are rapidly disappearing due to ocean acidification, water pollution and illegal fishing. Continuous deforestation leads to extinction for many species and habitat loss is affecting lions, tigers and polar bears. The rapid explosion of the human population is demanding resources at a faster rate than the planet can replenish. It is said, 'When human beings cause the extinction of other species, they destroy creatures made by God'. What does ecological conversion mean?

It is a true joy for me to be minister at St Columba. Today marks exactly one year since my first service at which the Principal Clerk, George Whyte, preached. One of the unexpected aspects that I love the most on moving from Edinburgh is the lush, green Ayrshire countryside and rugged coastline. Living among the fields, seeing horses on the beach or along the roads of Alloway, and in all senses being nearer to nature – even hearing the cows at the *Coo Shed* – enriches my life enormously. This is our Harvest Sunday. In the 21st century, when we think of the earth and the produce of the earth, we cannot separate that artificially from human impact on the earth. Including our festival of Harvest but widening our

concern, we may speak of Creation Covenant Sunday: our covenant with creation.

In the Book of Genesis, we are told that humanity is made in the image and likeness of God. We are told also that humanity shall have dominion over every living thing. Traditionally understood, ‘dominion’ has had negative connotations: it implies power exercised carelessly for the sole benefit of human interests. However, properly understood, in the Book of Genesis dominion is to be exercised *by humanity*, by creatures which are made in the image and likeness of the Divine. We are to cultivate and care for every living thing in the manner of God, like God, in the place of God; the God of love and justice.

In the story of Noah, we are again told that humanity is made in the image of God. In this narrative, God makes a covenant with humanity, with every living creature and with the earth itself. In the Orthodox tradition, humanity becomes the priests of creation: as God-bearers, we are to lift up creation, in all its beauty and suffering, to God. In our search for an ecological theology, a conversion experience, we begin with the stories of Genesis and find that as bearers of God’s image, we are charged with caring for every living thing and for the earth itself in the manner of God, in place of the God of love.

The 13.8 billion year history of the universe is our history. We are made of hydrogen from the early universe together with the carbon and other elements which came into existence much later. The theologian Denis Edwards says:

Each carbon atom in the blood flowing through my veins and in the neutrons firing in my brain comes from a star. We are made from stardust.

The Astronomer Royal, Martin Rees, tells us that a carbon atom in a cell of a human brain has a heritage that extends back to the birth of our solar system 4.5 billion years ago. Creation's history, from the first atom to the first Adam, can be plotted through every molecule, cell, and living thing culminating with us - and perhaps others too - in creatures of consciousness. An informed ecological theology, a conversion, begins with our connectedness to the universe: we are constituted from the very fabric of creation's cloth.

St Francis of Assisi is the patron saint of ecology. Francis saw God's creatures as interconnected in one family of creation. In his Canticle, he sang of other creatures as our sisters and brothers. Not in any naïve or sentimental sense, but he wanted people to understand our kinship with every living thing. More than 99% of our active genes are identical to those of chimpanzees. In the 1860s, a cartoon appeared of a gorilla in a zoo looking out from behind the bars. The caption above its head read, 'Am I my keeper's brother?' Yes! is the answer.

Older than the tradition of Francis, St Benedict said that love for God's creation means responsible farming and preservation of the land. He sought to cultivate and care for the good things God had made.

It is important that, as Christians, we connect our ecological theology to the living memory we have of Jesus. St Paul described Jesus as the image of the invisible God. With the eye of the soul, the followers of Jesus came to see and understand that the very energy and essence of God was in Jesus. We might say that the God of the Big Bang, the star formations, the Milky Way galaxy, the planet Earth, the bacteria, the elephants and the eagles, the very same life-giving Spirit, the Originator of all things, can be seen in the face of Jesus of Nazareth.

But the Gospel of John tells us more than that: the Word became flesh. In this context, flesh is more than the limbs, muscles, sinew and skin of the human frame. Flesh means all fleshly life; it means the world of matter; it means the entire universe; the whole material cosmos. Flesh means that, in Jesus, the Word, the essence and energy of God, was present in the interconnected, inter-related world of organisms, of all living things; united with matter itself. The Word could not become flesh without being connected to the hydrogen of the primordial fireball; to the carbon, the nitrogen and every single cell that ever was.

Evolutionary history is our history. The Transcendent is present in the very fabric and fibre of matter. From within, God empowers the universe to be. The climax of evolution is the possibility of love: love of others, love of self and love and justice for our planet. Celebrating Harvest means gratitude for the hard work of farmers and fishermen; it also means caring for the earth.

Amen.