

“ALL CREATION PRAISES GOD”

Psalm 104:1-18

Many years ago, when I was much younger and lived at home in Winchester, we used to have a little dachshund called Nikki. He was a friendly little dog and at times seemed almost human. My Dad obviously thought he was nearly human, because we often used to come in unannounced and find him talking quite intently to the dog. Indeed, in more recent years I have come across Sally talking quite animatedly to a hamster. During lockdown, as the ownership of pets has apparently increased, many people will have talked to their animals simply because there's no-one else around at times. And some people – maybe some of you, even – talk to their plants, as it's supposed to help them grow and flourish. Prince Charles has taken a lot of stick over the years because he has said that it's good to talk to your plants, for all kinds of reasons. We'd be quite surprised, though, if they spoke back to us, wouldn't we?

If you watch television a lot, you can get quite used to the idea of non-human creatures and inanimate objects behaving like human beings – many adverts have talking objects as diverse as vegetables, toilet bowls, cars and so on. And a lot of people talk to their electronic devices now, asking for help from Alexa, Siri and the other manifestations of artificial intelligence that they have lying around their homes – indeed, I read a newspaper article about a Japanese man marrying his version of Alexa! Cartoons are full of non-human things acting like humans: that's a tradition that has come up through the folklore of fairy tales and fables (the talking wolf, the three little pigs, the Billy Goats Gruff and so on). If you've ever seen Walt Disney's masterpiece *Fantasia*, you may remember the sequence that goes with *The Sorcerer's Apprentice* where Mickey Mouse (a talking mouse) gets the broom sticks to behave like water carriers.

And in the Bible there are stories that have non-human objects talking to humans. In *Exodus 3* there is the story of the talking bush, where God communicates with Moses in the desert through a bush that is not only burning, but able to speak. Later on, in *Numbers 22*, we have the story of Balaam's donkey, who turned round and spoke to his master. In both cases they were talking about God, making known something that he wanted to communicate with human beings.

And it still happens today. Maybe not in the same way that it did for Moses and Balaam – we don't find dogs in the street stopping to have a conversation with us, nor the geraniums engaging us in a chat about the weather – but creation communicates with us in a wordless way about the ways in which God is at work in our world. Again, in the Bible we do find passages that speak specifically about such things. Listen to these words from *Psalm 19*. The poetry is great, as is the meaning behind it.

*The heavens declare the glory of God;
the skies proclaim the work of his hands.
Day after day they pour forth speech;
night after night they reveal knowledge.
They have no speech, they use no words;*

*no sound is heard from them.
Yet their voice goes out into all the earth,
their words to the ends of the world.
In the heavens God has pitched a tent for the sun.
It is like a bridegroom coming out of his chamber,
like a champion rejoicing to run his course.
It rises at one end of the heavens
and makes its circuit to the other;
nothing is deprived of its warmth.*

What those lines are saying is that, if you look around you and really think about what you see, you begin to wonder if someone did actually put it all together and continues to be involved in sustaining it all. Look around you at this time of year, for example, and you'll see everything out in full leaf and bloom and around us here, there is the sight of fields full of crops waiting to be harvested. Why does that happen every year with such amazing regularity? Because God has set it up that way and he is a faithful God.

Those few verses really speak of the way in which creation itself talks to us about God: the earth and the heavens are one way – among many others, admittedly – of pointing us towards God:

*Day after day they pour forth speech;
night after night they reveal knowledge.
They have no speech, they use no words;
no sound is heard from them.
Yet their voice goes out into all the earth,
their words to the ends of the world.*

But the Bible is also very clear about the way in which all of creation praises God. The *Psalms* are full of ways of expressing this idea, as we see, for example in the words we read just now from *Psalms 104*:

*The Lord wraps himself in light as with a garment;
he stretches out the heavens like a tent
and lays the beams of his upper chambers on their waters.
He makes the clouds his chariot
and rides on the wings of the wind.
He makes winds his messengers,
flames of fire his servants.*

Or these words from *Psalms 98*:

*Shout for joy to the Lord, all the earth,
burst into jubilant song with music;
make music to the Lord with the harp,
with the harp and the sound of singing,
with trumpets and the blast of the ram's horn –
shout for joy before the Lord, the King.
Let the sea resound, and everything in it,
the world, and all who live in it.
Let the rivers clap their hands,
let the mountains sing together for joy;
let them sing before the Lord,
for he comes to judge the earth.*

*He will judge the world in righteousness
and the peoples with equity.*

And we sometimes sing a song that uses these words from *Isaiah 55:12*:

*You will go out in joy
and be led forth in peace;
the mountains and hills
will burst into song before you,
and all the trees of the field
will clap their hands.*

(An old lady some of you may remember – Mrs Chesterfield – would never sing that chorus because she said it didn't make sense. I pointed out that they were words from the Bible and she changed her mind!) But can you imagine the scene of mountains and hills bursting out into song? If you have ever had the opportunity of travelling to the Alps or the Tirol or some other mountainous area of Europe during the spring, you'll have some idea of the beauty of the creation that God has put together. I remember walking through a valley in Austria at the end of the ski season when the mountains were still covered with snow, but the valley was filled with spring flowers and green trees, the snow-swollen streams were splashing along as if they really were singing and the cattle were coming out of the barns for the first time with their bells ringing around their necks – it really was as if the whole valley really was singing to God the Creator. Beethoven tried to capture something of that in his Sixth Symphony – the *Pastoral Symphony* – which is again in *Fantasia*, although given a pagan treatment.

This is the idea of all creation calling out in praise to God simply for being in existence at all. And as we see evidence of God's goodness all around us, so it should excite us, too, and inspire us to worship him – not to worship creation itself, but the force behind it, the God who made it and sustains it. But even if we don't, creation still expresses its own worship. Do you remember the story of Jesus' entry into Jerusalem on Palm Sunday? As the people were calling out in praise to Jesus, the Pharisees told Jesus to calm them down and tell them not to make so much noise. Jesus replied, *"I tell you, if they keep quiet, even the very stones will cry out."*

We are part of that amazing creation and we can praise him simply for that – for the fact of our existence and the way in which God sustains us – and for the joy of being able to experience all that is around us. But we have so much more for which to thank God than the trees or the hills do – God loves us so much that he has not only created us, but redeemed us, given us a way to deal with the consequences of evil that we see affecting our world. God sent his Son, Jesus, to help us regain our original relationship with him as Jesus died on the cross and then burst out of the tomb so that we can actually spend eternity with him in his Kingdom, in his re-created world, a place that is so glorious that no-one has ever been able to describe it adequately.

That doesn't mean we are not to take care of this world now, to act as good stewards of the creation. That's what God created humanity for – to be co-managers with him, rather than plunderers of all that he has made. In our desire to take all that we can from the world's resources to satisfy our own wasteful and selfish appetites, we have left a bit of a mess and we see some of the devastating effects of that around us now – pollution, loss of much that God created, inequality, uncertainty – and we have a duty to fulfil the mandate God gave humanity at the very beginning: “*to work [the Garden of Eden] and take care of it*” (*Genesis 2:15*).

One way to help us – to inspire us – to do that, is to look around us at what God has made and to praise him for it. As summer draws to a close, and the colours and sights and sounds and smells of autumn will soon be upon us, take time to appreciate the beauty of God's creation. Praise him for it. Never take it for granted. Enjoy responsibly what he has given you and join all nature in the worship of our Creator. But thank God, too for the gift of Jesus and the promise through him of an eternity with God in the renewed creation of his fulfilled Kingdom.