

Creation, frustrated and renewed: Romans 8: 12-25 & Matthew 13: 24-30, 36-43

A sermon for 19 July 2020 by Rev Phil Wootton

I have a patch of raspberries at the bottom of my garden, and for the first time since I moved in, this year they have been truly fruitful – a forest of tall stems bending low with the weight of ruby rich fruit – a true joy to behold... and to taste! They're less of a joy, however, to harvest, for lurking hidden amongst the raspberry canes are nettles and brambles ready to sting and scratch the unwary fruit-picker. I am inclined to demand, along with the farmer of Jesus' parable, what enemy has planted these weeds in my garden, luring me in with the promise of ripe fruit, only to rip my arms and legs to shreds? An independent observer might point out that nettles and brambles weren't planted by any enemy, any more than the raspberries were planted by myself – it's pure laziness on my part in failing to prepare the ground. Right now, however, like that farmer, I would find it impossible to dig out the nettles and brambles without losing the harvest.

Jesus told parables based on the everyday experience of the peasant communities he lived among. He was not giving agricultural advice to farmers, but using analogies from what they knew, and they, much more than us, were alert to the pulse of the natural world. They knew good and bad grow up together, in human society and human nature as in their fields. Today, as we've cut ourselves off from the natural world, we believe myths about how nothing can go wrong that science can't fix; and if it does go wrong we're inclined, illogically, to blame it on God: why doesn't God stop all natural disasters? We forget we occupy a living planet formed around a molten core, with interconnected ocean currents and weather patterns and eco-systems. Shifting one thing affects everything. Our 'safe solutions' would leave a dead planet – cold, desolate and sterile. Nature inspires us by its ability to flourish in the most inhospitable of places. A documentary I saw about the island of Sicily showed the destructive power of the lava flow from Mount Etna's eruption in the 1980s. Then, the presenter showed us the grape vines that penetrated some 15 feet of lava, forcing their way up to find the sun. He was almost brought to tears at this sign of hope in adversity – before enjoying a glass of the rich red wine from those grapes.

In Romans 8, St Paul gives a vision of creation that is groaning and struggling, and yet is almost absurdly over-flowing with hope. The created order, although gloriously and wonderfully made, is somehow out of joint. Suffering and frustration is deeply imbedded. According to Paul, the reason for that frustration is human sin. Human beings, the crown of creation, fail in our calling, so nothing quite works as it should. But there is hope, says Paul. There is hope because in Christ's death and resurrection sin has been dealt with and human relationship with God, one another and the non-human creation has a chance for a restart: the first Easter Day, when Christ rose from the dead, was truly the first day of the week – the first day of God's new creation. Now, through Christ, we can truly call God Father and by the power of his Spirit take up our inheritance as God's regents on God's earth. It's quite a call! And the whole creation, suggests Paul, is straining on tip-toe in the hope of seeing it happen.

The problem is that we remain the problem. Today this has become much more obvious than in St Paul's time. We know now that human beings are destroying what God has made. If the earth is our inheritance, we are spending it with greater abandon than the prodigal son did his! We have been given a mandate to care for every species, and yet we are inaugurating what's been dubbed the 6th age of mass extinction, and this time without volcanic eruptions or crashing comets to blame. And now, in the Covid crisis, we seem to be launching another avalanche of single-use plastic on the world.

However, the picture Paul gives, whilst recognising the suffering, is above all hopeful and expectant – creation cranes its neck to see what good things we're up to! In his book *Given Half a Chance*, Edward Davey explores ten ways to save the world, finding examples from across the globe of initiatives taken to energise renewables, restore forests, manage soils, protect fresh waters, cherish biodiversity, save the oceans, make cities sustainable, reduce waste and excess consumption and eat healthy diets. There's lots of good practice out there, and plenty of ideas of how to make these things economically and politically feasible. There's an enormous distance way to go, and we need to go faster as well, so don't stop all the good resolutions we made last year – whether individually, as a church or as a country.

Something's been on my mind recently as well, as I've taken my daily ration of exercise plodding along canal tow-paths. We began in the first days of spring and first greening of the buds and the blackthorn dressed in white blossom: you could feel nature straining to be released into a new cycle of life. Since then we've followed through a spring and early summer of spectacular blooms, to the deep greens of high summer we now inhabit. It's made me question whether there are ways we can walk more humbly in relation to nature. We humans have the habit of thinking our job is to be in control, but shouldn't we really be asking what we can learn from nature, from the flow of the seasons, from the rhythm and pace and pattern of the world around us.

The Bible writers instinctively knew every part of creation lends its praise to God, each in its unique way. All living things bear the mark of their creator, and by their very growth they fulfil their purpose of glorifying God. Right now, human choirs and orchestras have been silenced, so we could do worse than listen as creation worships. Psalm 98 puts it into words: '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 judge the earth. He will judge the world in righteousness, and the peoples with equity.' And then let us as children of God's family, take up our role as key-workers in God's kingdom on earth.

Lord God, just and true, you make your salvation known in the sight of the nations: tune the song of our hearts to the music of creation as you come among us to judge the earth; through our Saviour Jesus Christ.