

Creation Time Resources 2014



God, Whose Farm is All Creation

Week Two – September 14th 2014

Bible Readings

Job 38: 1-18

Previously, Job, 'a blameless and upright' person (1: 1), despite having experienced a series of profound personal, social and economic disasters, declined to question God's role in these happenings. Now, however, he has done so. As this passage opens we hear the beginnings of God's three-chapters-long 'response' to Job.

God's 'response', however, does not respond to Job's situation or answer his (and the readers') questions about what has taken place. The divine tone is not contrite but caustic: 'Who is this that darkens counsel by words without knowledge?' It turns out that God is demanding answers from Job, not vice versa.

As a human being, Job was absent when God was at work in creation - only the stars, the heavenly beings were present then to respond with songs and shouts of joy. (38: 7) Nor can one who is reliant on the human eye (in pre-satellite days) hope to measure the world's extent. Humans, in their limited strength, fear the power of the seas whilst it is God who had the power to contain them. (38: 8-11)

As it is with the sea, so it is with the heavens (38: 12-15). Whether the reference is to 'the wicked' or to named constellations (translations differ) it is God who commands, whilst Job, absent at the world's beginning, is also unable plumb death's mysteries at the end. (38: 17) The divine remains elusive, declining to accept the limitations of any role assigned or implied by human questions.

Psalm 139: 1-14

As with the reading from Job this reading emphasis human finitude in contrast to the power of God. In the Job reading this is unsettling but in the psalm it is portrayed in a much more positive light.

The psalm commences with the assertion that there is nothing left to hide from God: 'you have searched me and known me'. (139: 1) Like Job, the psalmist's knowledge of God and the world is limited (v. 6) but God's knowledge of the person is total, including actions, thoughts, intentions and speech (vv.2-5). God hems in the psalmist, but the sense is of divine protection, rather than threat or rebuke. (v.5)

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God's omniscience is matched by God's omnipresence; found on land, sea and in the heavens. Job did not know the 'gates of death' (38: 17) but those in Sheol know God's presence. (139: 8) Even light and dark are not beyond the power and presence of the one who created them (Genesis 1: 3): 'the night is as bright as the day, for darkness is as light to you.' (139:12)

Human being are not above or distinct from creation. Instead, God is as much found at work in the individual as in wider creation, knitting the person together in their mother's womb, as it is poetically expressed. So the psalmist's experience leads not to worry or uncertainty but inspires praise and acknowledgment: 'wonderful are your works; that I know very well.' (139: 14)

Romans 1: 18-25

Despite references to God's wrath being against 'all ungodliness' (v.18), placed within the context of the 'creation of the world' (v.20), observed in human tendency to 'serve the creature rather than the Creator' (v. 25) it remains a challenge not to narrow interpretation of the passage to focus on individual salvation (influenced by Reformation debates) or a social focus (influenced by its use in contemporary debates over human sexuality).

Whatever historical or contemporary theological pressures come to bear, however, it is important not to lose the creational perspective in these verses. Once again God's role as Creator is acknowledged. Indeed, creation is perceived as a way in which God is known and which should elicit an appropriate response of giving thanks, though not all do so: 'though they knew God they did not honour him as God or give thanks.' (1: 21)

In the Roman setting Paul critiques religious worship which uses images of creatures (human and otherwise), along with the social / sexual practices associated with such cults. People today are much less likely to put their faith in idolatrous religious cults. Yet there is a temptation to place ultimate hope in human (creaturely) individual, social, technological, political or economic actions, as the basis for human gain or flourishing.

Saint Paul might wonder, if one eliminates or puts firmly into second place the God of creation (and justice) how will this affect ethical restraints or wisdom concerning human actions and their impact upon the planet?

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Matthew 5: 13-16

The Beatitudes have been spoken (5: 3-12) and now the Sermon on the Mount continues. Jesus' followers, not the world in general, are the ones receiving instruction: 'after he sat down his disciples came to him ... and [Jesus] taught them, saying ...' (5: 1-2)

His instruction employs images of salt and light, seen in the rural, domestic and city contexts. Salt, a product of the land, gives flavour and prevents corruption. It was sometimes seen as a symbol of wisdom (see Colossians 4: 6). Light (in a land without street lamps) shines from a lampstand in the house (5: 15) or makes a city visible from a distance, as Sepphoris was from Nazareth, a few kilometres away.

So, the disciples' lifestyle is to be distinctive, wholesome and visible. Living life in response to the beatitudes will achieve this; the poor in spirit and the mourners are blessed; meekness, hunger for righteousness and mercy characterise the Christian. They are peacemakers, though in their life they may experience persecution.

All of this was lived out in communities closely connected to the land. What use would a life of discipleship be if it did not impact on those around the disciple and upon how the land was used? One might as well have flavourless salt or bury a light under a bushel of grain. How then, should the beatitudes be applied to discipleship in today's setting, and what part will good use of the land play in visible Christian lifestyle?

Sermon Starter Thoughts

It's not easy to live life in ways which seem to go against the flow of how 'everyone' understands the world to be – religiously, ethically, socially, politically and economically. We have to be able to challenge widely shared stories that say, 'that's just the way things are'; for example, the widespread belief that large scale technologically intensive farming is the only viable way to feed a world in danger of starving.

Today's readings challenge us to take on that difficult task. We might work on assumptions that this is our world. From within our own mental, moral and practical resources, we alone construct and maintain its structures and systems. To such

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attitudes the words, 'who is this that darkens counsel by words without knowledge?' comes as a timely challenge.

Our readings from Job, from Psalm 139 and from Romans demand that we begin from the perspective that we live in God's world, a part of God's creation, of which we are a part. Human knowledge has limits; not present at creation, never having seen the 'gates of death' (Job). In contrast, God has always been present and knows all there is to know about us (Psalm 139).

If our 'stories' ascribe ultimate worth to the things we create, make and manufacture rather than to the one who created us, the result (Paul argues) is that we are religiously and ethically led astray. Living life together, including organising our land use and food production, requires a robust set of values that enable us to challenge prevailing assumptions. This includes beliefs that the latest technological solutions must be best.

Jesus' teaching deploys images from his cultural setting to challenge his followers to express the values of the beatitudes in ways which subvert 'what everyone knows'. Questions and qualities of poverty (spiritual and material), mourning and meekness, righteousness (or justice) and mercy, purity and peace making must guide Christian approaches to living in God's world, including how its food is produced and shared.

Prayers

Prayer of approach

O LORD, you have searched me and known me. (Psalm 139: 1)

When we sleep and when we wake: **you are with us.**

When we are home and when we are away: **you are with us.**

When we are alone and when we are together: **you are with us.**

Yes, you are with us now: **we worship you, O God.**

Prayer of adoration and confession

We praise you, O God, for you give us life and land and the means to live.

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We praise you, O God, for in your Son, Jesus, you have entered into this world of farms and fields, of families and friendship, so that our lives might flourish

We praise you, O God, for through your Holy Spirit you help us truly see creation's space, and make us long to share it with all our fellow creatures.

Yet we are loath to acknowledge all we owe to you.

As scripture says, 'they are without excuse, for though they knew God, they did not honour him as God, or give thanks.' (Romans 1: 21)

You are the Creator but we put faith in the things we create.

You are the Creator but we put ultimate faith in our wealth creation.

You are the Creator but we put ultimate faith in our technological 'fixes'.

You are the Creator but we put ultimate faith in ourselves.

So, forgive us, we pray, for these and our other failings.

Silence

And as we experience the good news of your forgiveness, help us to use well the good things of your world.

Amen

Prayers of intercession

O God, you call us to be salt in your world.

O God, you tell us to let our light shine before others, so that may see our good works and give glory to you.

Hear us as we pray for your world.

We pray for all farmers, particularly those with family farms. We thank you for the work they do and for the food that they produce from land and sea.

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We pray for all farmers who face uncertainty and worry, particularly those who farm where the climate is uncertain and the growing season now difficult to anticipate.

We pray for all farmers under economic pressure. May governments be supportive; banks be helpful; food suppliers deal justly.

God of Creation

Hear our prayer

We pray for our food, giving thanks for all that we have, remembering all who work to make sure it is safe to eat and good for our bodies.

We pray for opportunities to build family, friendship and fellowship through sharing food and drink.

We pray for the times we eat and drink as means to celebration, and we pray for strength to show restraint when tempted to excess.

God of Creation

Hear our prayer

We pray for churches that are a source of food to those in need, remembering particularly the work of food banks in our own nation.

We pray for church cafes, that they would be places of welcome and safety, where food is both nutritious and delicious.

We pray for church and community food growing projects, for community gardens and allotments, places where people grow food and grow together as people.

God of Creation

Hear our prayer

And in the quietness hear us as we bring you our individual hopes and concerns, seeking your wisdom, your love, your support, your strength.

Silence

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God of Creation

Hear our prayer

Amen

Hymn Books Used

BBC Songs of praise (SoP) Church Hymnary 4 (CH4) Common Ground (CG)

Hymns Ancient & Modern: New Standard Edition (AMNS)

New Century Hymnal (NCH) Rejoice and Sing (RS) Sing Praise (SP)

Singing the faith (StF)

Job 38: 1-8

O worship the king all glorious above (CH4, RS, StF, AMNS)

Is this the way you made the world? (CH4)

Eternal Father, strong to save (CH4, RS, StF, AMNS)

I danced in the morning (Lord of the Dance) (CH4, RS, StF, AMNS)

Creating God, your fingers trace (RS)

Joyful, joyful, we adore thee (NCH)

God marked a line and told the sea (NCH)

Psalm 139

You are before me, Lord, you are behind (CH4, RS, StF)

O God, you search me and you know me (CH4, StF)

O Lord, you have searched me and you know my name (StF)

I was on you mind long before you formed the earth (StF)

There is no Moment of my life (StF)

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Romans 1: 18-25

- The spacious firmament on high (CH4, AMNS)
The Spring has come, let all the church be part of it (CH4)
Great God of every shining constellation (CH4)
God's will for creation (CH4)
Let all creation dance (CH4)
Tell me who made all of creation (StF)

Matthew 5: 13-16

- Longing for light, we wait in darkness (CH4, StF)
You are salt for the earth, O people (NCH)
Thou / God, whose almighty word (Ch4, RS, StF, AMNS)