

Reflection for Sunday 4th October

St Francis of Assisi

Let the waters team with living creatures and let the birds fly!

That verse, from the first chapter of Genesis tells us of the glorious generosity of God's creation. The waters are 'teeming' and the birds 'flying'; the new creation is a mad riot of colours and sounds and species. Sadly, today, their very existence is threatened as never before. David Attenborough tells us that one million of the world's eight million species are now threatened with extinction.

Christians have not always been great at dealing with all this, but today's Gospel might help us to take a different view.

Jesus is teaching his disciples about trusting God and he tells them that God cares for them just as he cares for the birds of the air and the lilies of the field. Note that God does care deeply for the birds of the air and the lilies of the field, so we must do likewise. Whatever matters to God, matters to us.

So how do we do that better? Well, Creationtide is about allowing God to change us and today we can get some help from St Francis.

The thing about Francis is that he had learnt that Christianity is all about thankfulness. He saw everything as a gift and life itself as an act of thanksgiving. To be a Christian like Francis is to be a person who lives in thankfulness to God.

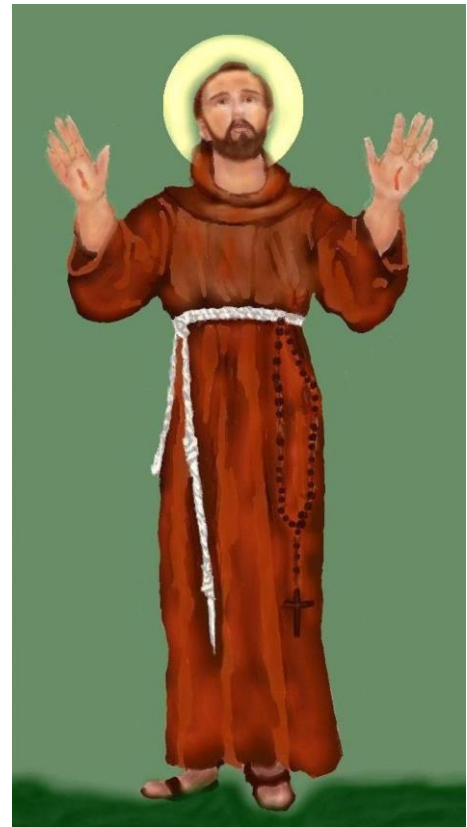
The canticle of the sun is an ancient poem which has been attributed to St. Francis and it expresses this so beautifully

"Be praised, my Lord, through all your creatures, especially through my lord Brother Sun. Praised be You, my Lord, through Sister Moon and the stars, Praised be You, my Lord, through Brother Wind...., and so it goes on, sister water, brother fire, sister mother earth and finally Praised be You, my Lord, through our Sister Bodily Death." Everything is a gift and everything, however challenging, is something to praise God for and to give thanks for.

if, after today, we do no more than follow Francis and live a bit more thankfully for all that is around us, we shall be moving in the right direction.

HYMN REFLECTION

It is a happy coincidence that this year's Creation Season ends on St. Francis of Assisi's Day. So what better hymn than *All creatures of our God and King* to think about this week? It is a paraphrase of Francis's own *Canticle of the sun*. The version we know was put into metrical form by William Henry Draper in 1919, so did not appear in either the original A & M or English Hymnal.



The first thing to note is that "creatures" does not mean animals, but everything created. The seven creatures which Francis listed, in his Umbrian dialect, were sun, moon, stars, wind, water, fire and earth. Draper's hymn does actually mention flowers and fruits, but not animals. It is a pity there is no suggestion in this essentially positive hymn that the Javan rhinoceros, Ivory-billed woodpecker, High brown fritillary and Ghost orchid might not be able to "praise Him" if we kill them off. Such a situation would have been inconceivable to both Francis and William Draper.

In the 4th century there was an Easter hymn which is now sung to the tune *Lasst uns erfreuen*. We know it as *Light's glittering morn bedecks the sky*, a translation by J.M.Neale. The tune itself was written in 1623 by a German Jesuit who, inter alia, was an activist against witch hunts. He put it to a different Easter hymn. The next hymn put to the tune was *Ye watchers and ye holy ones*, by Athelstan Riley, whom we mocked in April for his efforts to write a hymn about St. Bartholomew. Isaac Watts wrote a short hymn based on the shortest psalm, which also used *Lasst uns erfreuen*. So the tune was well established and well known when Vaughan Williams decided to use it the 1906 English Hymnal (not to our hymn then, of course). I have been unable to discover exactly where and when our words and tune were first published together.

The seven verses of the hymn do not correspond to the seven "creatures". There is not room to quote all the verses, so we will print the two we don't usually sing, and the last. Interesting that "kind and gentle death" is one laudable aspect of creation, because it leads on to an even better place.

All ye that are of tender heart,
forgiving others, take your part;
O sing ye alleluia!
Ye who long pain and sorrow bear,
praise God, and on him cast your care:
 O praise him, O praise him,
 Alleluia, alleluia, alleluia!

And thou, most kind and gentle death,
waiting to hush our latest breath,
O praise him, alleluia!
Thou leadest home the child of God,
and Christ the Lord the way has trod: O praise him, etc.

Let all things their creator bless,
and worship him in humbleness;
O praise him, alleluia!
Praise, praise the Father, praise the Son,
And praise the Spirit, Three in One: O praise him, etc.

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