



## Finding the Trinity in Creation

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Year B, Trinity

Isaiah 6: 1-8, John 3: 1-17

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“I think God might be a little prejudiced.  
For once They asked me to join them on a walk through this world,  
and we gazed into every heart on this earth, and I noticed God  
lingered a bit longer before any face that was weeping,  
and before any eyes that were laughing.  
And sometimes when we passed a soul in worship  
God too would kneel down.  
I have come to learn:  
God adores her creation.”  
- Francis of Assisi

For many St Francis is remembered for such things as rejecting a life of privilege for one of poverty, and creating a new approach to Christian monasticism. However his greatest offering to Christian theology is often reduced to something of a caricature: Francis preached to the animals. Yes, Francis did preach to the animals, but in doing so he was helping Christianity recover a neglected part of its tradition.

While we should always be careful in making generalisations, I can say quite broadly that for most of its history Christianity has taken only minimal interest in the natural world. At its worst, Christianity’s view of the natural world has been destructive and bears some responsibility for the ecological issues facing the world today.<sup>1</sup>

These problems stem from the opening chapter of the book of Genesis, where God tells humanity “Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it; and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the air and over every living thing that moves upon the earth.”<sup>2</sup> In particular the word subdue has had a particularly negative impact on the way much of humanity has viewed the natural world. Surely it’s not that simple, you may wonder. After all the same

narrative in which that statement is found concludes with the words, “God saw all that had been made, and indeed it was very good.” The opening passage of Genesis does affirm the inherent goodness of the created world.

While our Jewish forbears maintained a strong relationship with the earth, evidenced through expressions such as “the land of promise”, early Christians were influenced by platonic philosophy that emphasised the spiritual as being superior to the physical. It was this influence that shifted Christian thought away from the here and now to focus on the life yet to come, that is life after death. The result of this was that the negative relationship between humanity and nature established in the Genesis narrative was reinforced by dualistic thinking that not only placed humanity as more important than nature, but heaven as being more important than earth.

The understanding of earth as simply a place of trial and testing before true life begins in heaven has ultimately had a devastating effect on how Christians have treated the physical world. We have treated the earth with about the same level of reverence that we reserve for a bus stop, a queue at the supermarket or a waiting room at the doctors. Earth is not a place of waiting, it’s a place for living.

When Francis began to engage with creation, and to affirm God’s love for the physical world, he was swimming against the tide of Christian thought. He is not the only one to have done so, but his impact on the world is such that today he is regarded as the patron saint of ecology and environmentalism. Many of Francis’ followers down the centuries continued to engage positively with nature. Some like St Bonaventure came to uphold creation as sacred and as a true reflection of the divine.

What this really means is that while much of Christian interaction with the environment has been negative, there is within our tradition a minority viewpoint that affirms the sacredness of all that has been created. We can rightly claim that God is revealed through creation, both in the act of creation itself, but also through what has been created. While dualistic thought can lead to the false assumption that

God is removed from the world, Franciscan thought has recovered the view that God is very much present in all we experience.

Trinity Sunday, is the day set aside each year when we contemplate the holy mystery which is God's inner life. At their worst theological descriptions of the inner workings of God focus purely on spiritual matters with no reference to creation. God remains aloof, in heaven, separated from the world. How can such a view of God help us towards a positive reassessment of the world we inhabit?

In reflecting upon the Trinity, C. S. Lewis made a helpful comment in reminding us that a doctrine is not God. A doctrine is more like a map. In the case of the doctrine of the Trinity, it is a map that has been based on the experience of many Christians over a great period of time.<sup>3</sup> What that means, is that while the map is far from perfect, most would agree that it is the best map available.

So what does this map of the Trinity tell us? By the end of the 20th century the one area of firm agreement between Trinitarian scholars was the God is relational. The three persons of the trinity exist as a holy community, deeply engaged and interrelating with each other across time, and even before time. Our God is a social God within God's very being. But this relationality is not simply contained within God. The Trinitarian relationship is not found within a God who stands apart from creation, but as a dynamic creative energy within creation. For us the way to delve more deeply into God is to plunge more deeply into life itself.

So how can creation help us to know our Trinitarian God more fully? In the church setting we sometimes make light of those who describe themselves as spiritual rather than religious. We get frustrated with the ease with which they cast off the challenge of working out faith within a community in favour of long walks on the beach. But in our critique of such trends away from organised religion we run the risk of devaluing spiritual practices that are enriching and dare I say it, essential to deepening our relationship with ourselves, each other and the divine. Contemplation of beauty is a deeply nourishing form of prayer. Contemplation is distinctly different to our liturgical forms of

intercessory prayer that sometimes suggest that our relationship with God is simply demand and supply. Long walks on the beach are a necessary part of being a Christian.

Any type of religious practice that draws us beyond ourselves and causes us to respond in awe for all that exists is a sacred experience. It is all too easy as humans to stray into an egocentric view of reality that places us in the centre. Ok I'll own that one. It pains me to admit it, but I am not the centre of the universe, but, I am a unique expression of God's creative work in the universe. I have a place, you have a place, we all have a place, as part of this creation.

Bill Bryson in his wonderful book, a Short History of Nearly Everything points out that our bodies are formed from elements that were created in the depths of a star, millions of years ago. In fact every single thing you are seeing right now, was formed in this way. The atoms that form your body, have travelled a very long way to become part of you. And when we are gone, the atoms which form each of us continue of their journey through the universe. Our atoms will go on to form other living beings who will live uniquely different lives to ours. Because our atoms do not really belong to us, they are an expression of the creative energy of this universe.

Isn't that overwhelming. Such thoughts help us to glimpse just how massive God's creation is. Such thoughts help us appreciate just how vast and intricate God is. Albert Einstein once said, "The most beautiful thing we can experience is the mysterious. It is the source of all true art and all science. Those to whom this emotion is a stranger, who can no longer pause to wonder and stand rapt in awe, is as good as dead: their eyes are closed." What a thought! The most beautiful thing we can experience is the mysterious. So let us open our eyes and give thanks to God. Amen