

SERMON – 28/7/24

Psalm 8:1-9

Matthew 21:12-16

'[Lord,] When I consider your heavens, the work of your fingers, the moon and the stars, which you have set in place, what are we that you are mindful of us, human beings that you care for them?' (Psalm 8:3-4)

As we reflect this summer on some of the Creation Psalms, today I want to reflect on the nature of God as the 'Mindful Creator.'

What are human beings? What am I? What are you? What are the thousands of people who suffer each day in poverty across much of our world? What is the person killed or injured in a terrorist attack or in the cross-fire of battle? What are the ordinary people who just go about their business day by day? What are we, and where do we fit in to the wider creation?

I often turn to the psalm that we read this evening. I can remember it making a big impact upon me as I read and reflected upon it as a teenager more years ago now than I care to remember. And it never ceases to amaze me how, when I come back to it again, it has lost none of its power to move me by its simple and yet profound exploration of the significance of things.

There will be many people who, like the psalmist, are moved to awe and even worship as they stop and stare at the creation that surrounds us – in all its immensity and intricate detail – but for many the subject of their worship is, if not the environment itself, then some distant and mysterious Creator, rather than the God who reveals Himself as the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. For such folk, the answer to the question 'What are we? What are human beings?' is that we are just another part (however wonderful) of the created order, but no more.

It is one of the most natural things in the world to want to give praise to God, to a higher hand, to the hand that made us, and people in all cultures (without ever having to be taught) have fallen on their knees to worship a higher being of some description. But while many people genuinely worship a Creator God, seeing clearly that the hand that made them is divine, they

have not grasped or comprehended (or even heard about) the love so amazing of the Creator which is revealed in all its fulness in His Son Jesus Christ and which, once grasped, demands our everything.

The creation psalms provide a vehicle for many more people than confessing Christians to praise the Creator, but how much more there is to know of God in Jesus Christ, by whom and for whom, says Paul, all things were created, and in whom all things hold together.

At a first enthusiastic reading, the creation-loving, Creator-God-worshipping individual, may be comfortable in taking the opening words of the psalm on their lips. 'O LORD our Lord, how majestic is your name in all the earth!' (v.1) But it is easy for us to skip over something vital in what those words are actually expressing. Our English translations cannot put across the full sense of what is written in the Hebrew. They are reduced to using the word Lord twice – O LORD, our Lord – whereas the original has two different words. One is the title that we might use in reference to a peer of the realm but the other is actually a *name* – in the Hebrew written YHWH with no vowels, sometimes sounded out as Yahweh or as Jehovah. It was an attempt to put into writing the Hebrew *name* for the LORD that was too holy to be uttered but which was probably an abbreviation of the name by which God revealed Himself to Moses at the burning bush - I AM WHO I AM. It is the name by which God *relates* to his people, the name by which He wishes us to call upon Him, and so the psalmist's shout of praise is one which is addressed not to a distant, albeit wonderfully creative God, the Sovereign Lord and Master, but to the LORD of the covenant who knows and loves His people and longs to be known and loved by His people.

God is not a Creator who has done marvellous works in bringing all things into being while remaining exalted and distant from what he has made. He is a God who desires to enter into fellowship with people as we come to know Him by name fully in Jesus Christ.

But the psalmist goes on to reveal the extent of God's desire to relate to humanity in the next startling phrase of the psalm.

“Through the praise of children and infants you have established a stronghold against your enemies, to silence the foe and the avenger” (v.2). Though God is rightly exalted as the mighty King of the Universe, the psalmist proclaims that He takes delight in the praises of the least little one. If you have ever heard children talking about God or singing his praises in words that come from their hearts you will know that they utter simple but profound truths and with an unforced faith from which we all have something to learn. Despite having worked with children throughout my adult life, and despite having been a parent, I know that I have a lot yet to learn about children. They certainly don't make life easy either in the home or in the church, but if we take seriously what is written here, we must guard against simply dismissing what children have to contribute or patronisingly patting them on the head. God sets *great* store by what the little ones of this world have to say. God is surely worthy of all honour and glory – indeed the whole universe sings His praises – but it is a measure of His character that He prefers the genuine praises of children and infants to any of the pomp and splendour of what the world might consider appropriate.

Jesus personified the character of God in every way and it is no accident that He had a great deal of time for children and for the poor and weak of the world. It was the religious folk who criticised Him while the children recognised Him for who He was and shouted, ‘Hosanna to the Son of David.’ ‘Do you hear what the children saying?’ the chief priests ask Him, and He points them to this psalm for the answer to their question: ‘Have you never read, “Through the praise of children and infants you have established a stronghold against your enemies.”’ Instantly Jesus’ critics are silenced. How can they stand against a choir of children? Indeed, God *had* silenced the foe and the avenger!

But finally, we have said that God has made Himself known to us by His name, and we have said that He delights to receive honour from the lowly and not just from the great. But we also find that God doesn't only reach out to us or pay heed to us – He does more for us still, lifting us up and exalting us.

“When I consider your heavens, the work of your fingers, the moon and the stars, which you have set in place, what are we

that you are mindful of us, human beings that you care for them? You have made them a little lower than the angels and crowned them with glory and honour." (vv.3-5)

Even in the face of the great acts of creation, when solar systems were set into motion and the mountains and seas were given a place, in the face of a creation where human beings can seem so small and insignificant, God has crowned *us* with glory and honour; He has given *us* a place that is only a whisker below Him; He has given us minds that enable us to reach out to the stars in exploration and delve into the secrets of the atom; He has given us the power and ability to make a name for ourselves; He has made us rulers over His creation. We have been given a privileged position as human beings, and we have been called to a yet higher position in Christ.

On the night I was ordained, long after everyone else had gone home and most people were in bed I went for a walk to clear my head. It was a beautiful, starlit evening. I looked up at the heavens, at the stars which God had created and put in their places, and I remembered these words from our psalm: 'When I consider the heavens, the work of your fingers, the moon and stars that you have set in place, what am I that you are mindful of me?' Who is any one of us, that we should be taken up and used in God's eternal purposes? And yet that is exactly what He does. He raises us up, far, far beyond what we deserve.

Do you know yourself to be loved by God to that extent? Well, that is His promise and that is His Word.

Perhaps you see why I often turn to this psalm? All that we read here and all that we experience of God's grace in His service, sheds light on the nature of the majesty of the God we praise – not the expected majesty of a great king, but the humble majesty of the God who makes himself known to us by name, who delights in the praises of the little ones, who raises up and uses the very least of us in His service.

The psalmist grasps the wonder of it all – perhaps that is why the closing words of the psalm, although they are identical to the opening ones, sound so different the second time. 'O LORD our Lord, how majestic is your name in all the earth!' Majestic as the

mighty Creator of the universe, yes, but how much more majestic as the gracious Saviour of the world, who reaches out to us and calls us each as individuals, who delights in what each one of us can offer in worship and service, uniquely as the person we each are.

What are human beings? Who am I? We are what God has made us, each one of us, and we are held in the hollow of His hand. He knows and loves us more wonderfully than words could ever say. The question is not so much whether God knows and loves us but whether we know and love Him. So let me ask you this morning: Do you *know* the Lord? And if so, do you call upon Him?

One writer suggests that although the last verse is the same as the first, it sounds an octave higher! So may our praises go on sounding higher and higher as we meditate on the grace of God towards us in Jesus Christ, and respond in faith. 'O LORD our Lord, how majestic is your name in all the earth!'