

## **CREATION – RESTORATION (September 26, 2021)**

*Matthew 6: 25-34; Romans 8: 18-22*

Once upon a time, long, long ago in Sydney Australia, I used to be a science teacher. My first posting was to an all girls' high school in a very rough area where the students really were not interested in learning about acids and bases, electrical currents or carbon chemistry. It was challenging to come up with interesting, relevant projects that would help them learn and understand what I was supposed to teach.

To get their heads around the idea of geological time which is measured in eras of millions of years, I asked the girls to work in groups to produce a time chart where the scale was 1 cm per million years. They had to research the various eras, periods and epochs, and find out which living organisms dominated each time frame. One of the groups donated their project to my collection of memorabilia, which I have here.

The earth is estimated to be around 4 ½ billion years old, or 4,500 million years old, so a scale of 1 cm per million years means that this rolled up time scale expands to over 40 meters. The various groups really enjoyed drawing and colouring, and unrolling their projects for display up and down the corridors of the science building. I gave the girls who produced this particular project top marks for their ingenuity in including information about humanity, or homo sapiens, who have only been around for 300,000 years, or 0.3 of a cm on this time scale. They cleverly included this tab which when pulled up, shows some highlights of humanity's activity.

300,000 years out of 4 ½ billion years is not much time. Homo sapiens have only been around in the last 0.000007%, or 7/100,000 of one percent of earth's history, yet in that time, especially in the last 250 years since the Industrial Revolution, human activity has caused many changes in the biosphere, including decreasing the biodiversity and increasing global temperature which has brought about accelerated climate change.

However, this is not a science lesson, but a sermon on the theme of the restoration of creation. So, let me change gears and start again and say, "Good morning, everyone!" Or perhaps, I should say "Shalom everyone!" Shalom is a Hebrew word that is understood to mean 'peace.' When I was in Israel, I heard the word used to both greet people and to bid them farewell, a bit like people saying 'Ciao' in Italy when saying hello or goodbye to someone. But shalom has a broader and deeper meaning than just hello and goodbye, or even wishing peace upon someone.

Shalom includes the ideas of completeness, wholeness, health, peace, welfare, safety and soundness, tranquility, prosperity, fulness, rest, harmony and the absence of agitation and discord. The root word of shalom means to be complete, perfect and full.

So, why this short lesson on the etymology of shalom? Well, it fits with today's Scripture passages from Romans and the gospel of Matthew. A glance at these passages would show us that a common theme in these verses is creation. However, a prolonged look would reveal the continuity of God's plan and care for creation, including humanity.

As humans created in God's image, in his likeness, we can get a sense of God's appreciation for his handiwork. I'm sure each one of us has been amazed at the diversity of plant and animal life and the uniqueness of each species. Some life forms touch us by their beautiful appearance, such as the colour and form of an orchid. Other life forms may touch us by their beauty in motion – I think of the synchronized swimming of dolphins, or the muscles rippling under the skin of a predator cat chasing its prey. Some plants and animals amaze us by their simplicity or their complexity, others by their microscopic or gigantic sizes.

The good Lord supplied us with our five physical senses to help us appreciate his creation. So far, I have only mentioned examples that involve the sense of sight, but I can easily include relevant examples of nature that involve our other senses, such as hearing a chorus of bird songs in spring and summer, smelling the piercing sweet perfume of the butterfly bush or jasmine, feeling the velvet touch of the skin of a ripe peach or apricot, plus smelling its delicious aroma and tasting its sweet, juicy flesh if the fruit has been allowed to ripen properly on the tree.

And to enhance even more our ability to appreciate His creation, God has also blessed us with intellect and emotion. The funny faces and chunky bodies of puffin birds cause me to think that God has a sense of humour. And of course, living in this region, we just spontaneously thank and praise God when we see the mountain ranges set against a cloudless blue sky or against a rosy sunset.

Jesus and his followers were not urbanites but were poor country folk from Galilee who spent much of their time outdoors. They would have had many opportunities to observe and appreciate nature, and in fact, Jesus often drew upon nature to teach certain principles, as demonstrated in today's passage from Matthew. One can imagine Jesus enjoying his meanderings in Galilee with his disciples, imagining him watching birds wheeling around high up on warm air currents in the hill country, the birds providing the picture of unfettered, carefree movement. Or, one could imagine Jesus sitting on a large rock and looking intently at one of the many kinds of flowers growing in the fertile soil in Galilee.

The word translated as 'lily' in verse 28 includes several different plants such as the autumn crocus, the anemone and the gladiolus. Each plant has a fragile beauty that could easily be destroyed by one sweep of a scythe or the trampling by a donkey's hoof. The freedom of the birds, the beauty of the flowers – each is God-given, and Jesus' appreciation of God's bounty is reflected in his reference to creation in his teaching.

Jesus had a strong, lively sense of the goodness of his Father, the creator of the world. His whole spirituality was so vastly different from those teachers who insisted that the present world was a place of shadows, gloom and vanity, and who thought that true philosophy consisted in escaping this world and concentrating on the things of the mind. This was not Jesus' mindset. His teaching grew out of his experience. When he told his followers not to worry about tomorrow, we must assume that he led by example. He had the skill of living totally in the present, giving complete attention to a present task, and celebrating the goodness of God here and now.

Jesus wanted his followers to be the same. When he urged them to make God their priority, it is important to realise what he was saying about God. He was telling them that God is not distant from the world, who doesn't care about beauty and life and food and clothes. He was talking about the Creator himself who has filled the world with wonderful and mysterious things, full of beauty, energy and excitement. Jesus was speaking about the Creator who wants his human creatures above all to trust him and love him, and receive their own beauty, energy and excitement from him.

When Jesus told his followers not to worry about what to eat, or drink or wear, he did not mean that these things do not matter. He was not telling his followers, including us, that we should prefer to eat and drink as little as possible and to wear the most ragged clothes, just to demonstrate that we despise such things. Neither was Jesus instructing his followers to be irresponsible, to not plant seeds and reap harvests, or to not work at spinning and weaving to make clothes. Rather, he was teaching them, and us, to do these things with joy, because God our Father is the creator of all and he does care for us.

God is not a mean tyrant who is out to get us and make life difficult for us. However, we do live in a fallen world. We live in a world that is full of anxiety, a world, to use Paul's description from today's passage in Romans, a world which "has been groaning in labour pains", a creation which is waiting "to be set free from its bondage to decay". These words are found in chapter 8, the chapter that is often described as the best and most encouraging chapter in the book of Romans. How can this be so? Well, it's because in chapter 8, Paul describes how Jesus Christ sets things right, especially in the life of

contradictions of people who want to serve God with all their heart and mind, and who are pulled by the influence of sin to do something totally different.

In chapter 8, Paul wrote that the Spirit of life in Christ is like a strong wind and it has magnificently cleared the air, freeing us from a fated lifetime of brutal tyranny at the hands of sin and death. In his Son, Jesus, God personally took on the human condition. He entered into the disordered mess of struggling humanity in order to set it right once and for all, to bring about 'shalom.' Let me read to you extracts from Eugene Peterson's paraphrase of chapter 8 from the *Message* translation of the Bible:

*I don't think there's any comparison between the present hard times and the coming good times. The created world itself can hardly wait for what's coming next. Everything in creation is being more or less held back. God' reigns it in until both creation and all the creatures are ready and can be released at the same moment into the glorious times ahead.*

*Meanwhile, joyful anticipation deepens. All around us, we observe a pregnant creation. The difficult times of pain throughout the world are simply birth pangs. But it's not only around us; it's within us. The Spirit of God is arousing us within. We're also feeling the birth pangs. These sterile and barren bodies of ours are yearning for full deliverance. That is why waiting does not diminish us, any more than waiting diminishes a pregnant mother. We are enlarged in the waiting. We, of course, don't see what is enlarging us. But the longer we wait, the larger we become, and the more joyful our expectancy.'*

That was Eugene Petersen's paraphrase of some of Romans 8, including the verses that were read out today. The verses make more sense if we look at the verses from the perspective of the eventual arrival of 'shalom', when all of what God has created is restored to harmony, is completely perfect and full because the rupture within humanity, the rupture between humanity and creation, and the rupture between humanity and God has been comprehensively and completely dealt with through the work, death and life of Jesus Christ. In his love for what he created, in his love for us, God provided Jesus. In Christ, we see the original and intended shape of our lives.

As bearers of God's image, we have the responsibility and privilege of caring for God's creation. Christians in particular can be motivated by Scripture. We can choose to love and care for the Earth because it is God's very good creation, and because we can care for the most vulnerable people on the planet. But we have not done this well. Our day-to-day choices and attitudes are often driven by our culture and lifestyle preferences, and not the Bible. The science is clear: because of human activity, we see effects like species extinction and climate change. Lament and repentance are appropriate, but as followers of Jesus we must not despair. We can choose to move forward with "rational hope," accepting the enormity of the problems we face while taking action with the hope of restoration, with the hope of shalom in view. Amen.