

A Sermon for the second Sunday before Lent – St Nicholas,

Marston 17 Feb 2019

Readings: *Jeremiah 17.5-10, 1 Corinthians 15.12-20, Luke 6.17-26*

Pangolin Sunday!

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+May I speak in the name of God: Father, Son and Holy Spirit

Amen

“Humans were put on this earth to suffer!” said a small boy. He was one of a class of about 50 attending a school chapel service at which I had been invited to speak about faith, evolution and conservation. His assertion came in response to my opening question:

“What are humans for, why are we here?”

I planned to take them into the mysteries and rich symbolic delights of *Genesis 2:15* In the New Living Translation: *The Lord God placed the man in the Garden of Eden to tend and watch over it*, but I was shocked to hear such a belief from a 12-year old. As he was instantly corrected by the other children, I went on to explain that this ancient text was Bible speak for telling us the human purpose. I like this translation because the Hebrew for watching over is *Shakad*, which resonates with the word *Shaked*, the almond tree: symbolic of the tree of life. Nevertheless, God’s deep purpose in humanity permeates every word of the Bible from the rooting of life in the Sabbath Peace the *Shabat Shalom* of God, onwards. So we find our peace in God when we are at peace with creation. It finds expression in today’s reading from Jeremiah:

7 Blessed are those who trust in the Lord, whose trust is the Lord. 8 They shall be like a tree planted by water, sending out its roots by the stream. It shall not fear when heat comes, and its leaves shall stay green; in the year of drought, it is not anxious, and it does not cease to bear fruit.

But the small boy's response still bothered me and I wondered whether he had been taught that humans were created to suffer, or he had concluded it from the suffering he saw in the world? In my work I study the disconnection of young people from nature, and have become aware of an epidemic of mental health issues afflicting children and young people. Our spiritual connection with the tree of life runs deep. To the people of the Bible, the natural world was their common experience. And so as Jeremiah likens a life lived in the steadfast love of God to that of a tree rooted near water, so Jesus used nature, from mustard seeds to birds of the air, to teach the people about the spiritual life. If nature is our key to the Bible, our search for God cannot be helped by a disconnection from nature? In our other readings, both St Paul and St Luke speak of how we can withstand emotional and psychological persecution, as well as physical hardship, if we find the love of God through the truth of the risen Christ:

22 'Blessed are you when people hate you, and when they exclude you, revile you, and defame you on account of the Son of Man. 23 Rejoice on that day and leap for joy, for surely your reward is great in heaven; for that is what their ancestors did to the prophets.

On Friday some 10,000 children went on strike to express their concern for the earth. The Government said it was a shame. But there is surely a resonance between the spiritual distress of the young and the extinction of life on earth: for their extinction of experience extinguishes a key path in their search for God.

But what if the child in Abingdon had been taught his theology of suffering? After all, small misunderstandings of scripture can have devastating effects. St Ignatius of Loyola, who founded the Jesuits, also wrote the *Spiritual Exercises*, which have given life-changing experiences of Christ for many. A literal reading of his First Principle states:

The other things on the face of the earth are created for man to help him in attaining the end for which he is created.

Hence, man is to make use of them in as far as they help him in the attainment of his end, and he must rid himself of them in as far as they prove a hindrance to him.

Therefore, we must make ourselves indifferent to all created things, as far as we are allowed free choice and are not under any prohibition.

But St Ignatius was inspired to faith by St Francis of Assisi and hear what the Jesuits understand by the First Principle:

God who loves us creates us and wants to share life with us forever. Our love response takes shape in our praise and honour and service of the God of our life.

All the things in this world are also created because of God's love and they become a context of gifts, presented to us so that we can know God more easily and make a return of love more readily.

As a result, we show reverence for all the gifts of creation and collaborate with God in using them so that by being good stewards we develop as loving persons in our care of God's world and its development. But if we abuse any of these gifts of creation or, on the contrary, take them as the centre of our lives, we break our relationship with God and hinder our growth as loving persons.

There is a danger when we read that we are blessed if we are persecuted for Christ's sake, that what we understand is that the blessing of Christ is *only* to be found if we are persecuted. A greater danger is that as Christians we pretend to be a persecuted minority, or construct a survivor guilt complex in an attempt to suffer with Christ. Only Christ can be Christ and however we understand the crucifixion, his suffering was so that we need not. An even greater danger then is that our perceived need to suffer justifies persecuting ourselves and others. In the same way that misunder-

standing scripture has serious consequences, misunderstanding St Ignatius has justified the persecution of creation.

The extinction of experience is an extinction of engagement with God's creation. It has many causes and finds many forms of expression. But I want to end with a story of hope, and as befits God's working in the world, with a paradoxical twist.

Yesterday was World Pangolin Day, which in the Church of England makes this Pangolin Sunday, **and this gorgeous creature, is a Pangolin.** At least it's a cuddly toy pangolin. Pangolins are unique. They are the only scaly mammal in the world. They have survived on earth for 40 million years. They are almost impossible to keep in captivity because they live almost entirely on ants. One Pangolin can eat millions of ants in a year. That's a lot of ants. Female Pangolins are wonderful mothers caring for their young for months and rolling into a ball around them if threatened. In China, Pangolins are highly sought after for their scales, which are used in traditional medicine. The scales have no demonstrable medical value. This illegal trade makes them the most traded endangered mammal in the world. They suffer terribly. Having driven the four Asian Pangolin species to the brink of extinction, the traders started on the four African species.

When she heard about the plight of Pangolins, my wife Caroline wrote a poem and she come here to day to speak on behalf of the Pangolin:

RIDDLE 4 [PANGOLIN]

I am a walking fir cone,
Trotting on two legs like the dinosaurs.
My tongue is as long as me.
I can dig all the way through concrete floors.
All scales, from toes to eyelids,
I can withstand even a lion's jaws.

But I am the colour of dust and to dust I run.
My foetus is a delicacy in Asia.

At the pinch, my hourglass is
a mill that grinds down
all that
was
I
.
1
00,
000
a year
1 every 5 minutes
a kilo of me costs \$500,
Or s0v reigns, 0b0ls, m0ns, d0ubl00ns, m0id0res—

A currency of fantasy: my scales,
Which are just keratin, like your finger nails.

Where there are sinners, there are also saints. Maria Diekmann devotes her life to protecting Pangolins. Together with a young Chinese singer celebrity called 'Angela Baby', who was inspired by the maternal instincts of Pangolins, she made a video to encourage young people not to buy Pangolin body parts. On the day it was released, 25 million people watched it on the Internet.

Disconnected from nature and traditional culture, young Chinese people express their own concern for the tree of life, and as God's love is expressed through their compassion for the Pangolin, so we might see hope for the world.

Amen