

Belonging meditation

We are all different. It's not simply that there are different species, or tribes, or families; each individual is unique and particular. We probably don't stop and think about this enough.

The Victorian writer John Ruskin said: "An animal must be either one animal or another animal: it cannot be a general animal, or it is no animal."¹

We realise this when we attempt to replace a pet that has died with another of the same breed. The new cat or dog or whatever may be the spitting image of the one we loved and lost, but it is not that one. It is simply itself. And like its predecessor, it cannot be replaced. What's more this is true for the little things that we might not normally notice. If you look closely at the daisies springing up among the grass in your garden or a park it becomes clear that each flower is just a little different from its neighbours.

It's also true for us. People sometimes say in a eulogy 'They broke the mould when they made him'. But of course there is no mould to break. We are each unique creations. The natural order is one of almost unimaginable extravagance. Every bit of it is bespoke.

The fact that we are singular, unique, and irreplaceable should remind us that each human life is a precious treasure; each of us matters - not on account of what we do or have or of where we have come from or what we have achieved - but simply because we are. This is what Jesus seems to be getting at when he invites his followers to consider the lilies and the birds; he reminds them that what may in human terms appear at first glance to be just an example of a type and thus of little worth - two a penny - is instead treasured as a significant individual by God. Not only that,

Jesus remarks on the beauty of the flowers. The extravagance of creation is not simply about variety and proliferation; it is about glory.

But this sense of uniqueness can sometimes seem a burden as much as a blessing. Being the only one of anything can feel lonely. That's perhaps why we like those quizzes that tell us what type of personality we have. It means we can identify with a group. For, after all, we are social animals and we need to belong.

Yet we make a mistake if we think our uniqueness cuts us off from others. Ruskin put his finger on it when he wrote:

...in differing [from his fellow], each assumes a relation to, his fellow; they are no more each the repetition of the other, they are parts of a system; and each implies and is connected with the existence of the rest.²

Just as each individual daisy forms part of a clump or carpet of flowers and has its own place both there and in the meadow in which it grows, so we each have our place in the diverse body that is the human race, and beyond it in the cosmos. We are singular but part of a system. We are small yet we are part of something bigger. We have our special place, and we have our allotted time.

And when our time comes and we face our singular death alone we find that, in the words of the writer to the Hebrews:

You have come to ...the heavenly Jerusalem, and to innumerable angels in festal gathering, and to the assembly of the first-born who are enrolled in heaven, and to God the judge of all, and to the spirits of the righteous made perfect, and to Jesus,...

¹ Ruskin, J. (1903-12). Works of John Ruskin, 39 vols, ed. by E. Cook & A. Wedderburn, London: Longmans Green & Co., III. 34.

² III. 37-8