

**Bishop Olivia's Sermon for Season of Creation Joint service with Vaxjo  
Wednesday 11<sup>th</sup> September 2024**

Readings: Psalm 8 and Romans 8:19-23

It's lovely to have the opportunity to be together today in this Season of Creation, and many thanks to Hannah and Sara who have put this joint service together.

The American theologian and environmentalist, Wendell Berry wrote this:

*We cannot live harmlessly or at our own expense: we depend upon other creatures and survive by their deaths. To live, we must daily break the body and shed the blood of Creation. The point is, when we do this knowingly, skilfully, reverently, it is a sacrament. When we do it ignorantly, greedily, clumsily, destructively, it is a desecration. In such desecration we condemn ourselves to spiritual and moral loneliness and others to want.*

Wendell Berry is saying that we cannot walk on the Earth without impact. The way the natural world works is that life depends on death. Just as our life with God depends on the death of Christ, and our redemption (and that of the whole of creation, according to St Paul) is assured by his resurrection, so we cannot live without the sacrifice of other parts of the interdependent web of life on Earth.

We are all part of the same Life. What matters is our attitude, our fundamental understanding of this.

Wendell Berry says, we either recognise the sacramental quality of all our interactions with the natural world, which, when they are done knowingly, skilfully, reverently, take on holy quality. Or we trample mindlessly through the rest of the natural world, thinking only of our own wants and desires – and in this way we desecrate whatever we touch and set ourselves outside of the circle of God's grace.

Psalm 8 speaks of awe and wonder at the vastness of the heavens and the smallness of humankind. In English certainly, and I expect in Swedish, it speaks in beautiful and poetic language. But many of us these days are uneasy with the hierarchy of creation it describes. God, the creator at the top of the pyramid; humankind a little bit lower down, and under our feet all animals, birds, fish – the rest of creation. This scheme sits uncomfortably with us, we who know the incalculable damage of human greed and destructiveness which has resulted from exactly the sense of entitlement which this and other passages from Scripture have instilled in us. Western capitalism – extractive and exploitative – is the result. And we should note that it emerged hand in hand with Western missionary expansion. And it hasn't ended well.

So, we search for other ways to describe the complexity and intricacy of the relationships which bind us and the rest of creation together; the astonishing complex adaptive system which we know it to be.

The reading from Romans 8 acts as a counterbalance.

Our relationship with God's creation is an issue which transcends borders, cultures and time. The environment of the Earth sustains us, feeds us, clothes us, warms and cools us, heals us, shelters and houses us. What does it mean for us to be stewards of God's creation, especially in a world where environmental degradation is increasingly evident.

The picture St Paul creates is of creation groaning in pain or hopelessness but looking to a future of renewal and redemption. Creation, which is subjected to futility, decay and also human-wrought destruction, looks forward to a time when along with humanity, it will be set free to flourish in a redeemed world.

I would love to hear a conversation between St Paul and Wendell Berry – there would be such power in a fusion of their ideas.

From the very beginning, in the book of Genesis, God gave humanity the mandate to "till and keep" the garden (Genesis 2:15) - to care for the earth as God cares for us. Stewardship is about recognizing that everything we have, everything around us is a gift from God, including the environment. It presents us with a mandate to use these gifts wisely. And it has a future dimension: ensuring that all God's gifts are available not just for ourselves, but for future generations. We are called to be agents of healing, to work towards the liberation of creation from its bondage to decay.

Our hope is not passive; it is active, urging us to participate in the renewal of all things. advocating for policies that protect the environment or supporting sustainable practices in our communities. Whatever the action, the important thing is that we do something. The redemption of creation and our own redemption are intertwined. When we care for creation, we participate in God's ongoing work of redemption.

Our environmental responsibility is, therefore, not an optional extra but a core part of our Christian discipleship. Pollution, deforestation, climate change, and the extinction of species are all signs that creation is suffering under the weight of human sin and negligence. We are desecrating the Earth which has been entrusted to our care.

Care for creation is not just a political issue or a scientific concern: it is a deeply spiritual one. It's about honouring the Creator in the way we live, gently and respectfully knowing our place as an embedded part of the whole magnificent enterprise.

And how shall we understand this magnificent enterprise?

God has many voices. In addition to Scripture, we have many other ways to understand God's work of creation: the language of science, of poetry, of art, as well as the language of the natural world itself when we immerse ourselves in it.

Science teaches us the breathtaking wonder of the complexity, intricacy and interdependence of the natural world, from the density of a neutron star to the mycorrhizal networks under the forest.

Poetry gives us language to express it in new ways.

Through the eyes of artists we glimpse things we haven't noticed before.

May we be a people who listen to the groaning of creation and respond with compassion and action. May we be a people who live out the hope of redemption not just for ourselves, but for all of God's good creation. And may we be faithful stewards, honouring the One who made us and recognising the sacramental quality of our interactions with God's Creation. Amen.

Lord of all Creation, bless us in our hearts and relationships, our lives and stewardship and in all working individually and together to care for that which you have entrusted to us, in Jesus Christ our Lord.