

Sunday 5th February 2011

10 a.m.

Laurieston Parish Church
Morning Worship

Welcome/Notices

Introit: All creatures of our God and King (Hy. 147, v.1)

Call to Worship

HYMN 152: Praise the Lord, his glories show

Talk to the Children

Prayer & the Lord's Prayer

HYMN 144: I love the sun, it shines on me

O.T. Reading: Isaiah 40: 21 - 31 Israel's Incomparable God p. 701

Prayer of approach and confession

HYMN (CH3 #151): God, who made the earth,

N.T. Reading: Romans 8: 18-23 The future glory p. 195

Sermon: God's ongoing work of creation

HYMN 238: Lord, bring the day to pass

Offering

Choir Voluntary: Dear mother earth... (Hy. 147, vv. 4, 5 & 7)

Prayer of dedication, thanksgiving & intercession

HYMN 172: Sing for God's glory

Benediction & Sung Amen

Welcome/Notices

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Introit:

(Hy. 147, v.1)

**All creatures of our God and King
lift up your voice and with us sing:**

O praise him, alleluia!

**Bright brother sun with golden beam;
Clear sister moon with softer gleam,**

*O praise him, O praise him,
alleluia, alleluia, alleluia.*

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Call to Worship:

Dame Julian of Norwich was a woman who lived in the 14th century. She was very ill and as she was recovering had a series of visions, which she later wrote down in a book. She then became an anchoress, which means that she lived in a small cell, a room off Norwich Cathedral, where she continued to write, and to pray, and people came to her for advice. This is one of the visions that she remembered and recorded:

God showed me in my palm a little thing round as a ball, about the size of a hazelnut. I looked at it with the eye of my understanding and asked myself, “What is this thing?” And I was answered, “It is everything that is created.” I wondered how it could survive since it seemed so little it could suddenly disintegrate into nothing. The answer came: “It endures and ever will endure because God loves it.” And so everything has being because of God’s love.

We're going to be thinking this morning about God's continuing involvement in creation, and his care for all that he has made. And we begin by singing:

HYMN 152: Praise the Lord, his glories show

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Talk to the Children (Isabelle)

Prayer

Our Father, who art in heaven,
Hallowed be thy name. Thy kingdom come.
Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven.
Give us this day our daily bread
And forgive us our trespasses (*debts*)
as we forgive those who trespass against us. (*our debtors*)
And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil,
For thine is the kingdom, the power and the glory for ever. AMEN

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HYMN 144: I love the sun, it shines on me

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O.T. Reading: Isaiah 40: 21 - 31 Israel's Incomparable God p. 701
Do you not know? Were you not told long ago? Have you not heard how the world began? It was made by the one who sits on his throne above the earth and beyond the sky; the people below look as tiny as ants. He stretched out the sky like a curtain, like a tent in which to live. He brings down powerful rulers and reduces them to nothing. They are like young plants, just set out and barely rooted. When the Lord sends a wind, they dry up and blow away like straw. To whom can the holy God be compared? Is there anyone else like him? Look up at the sky! Who created the stars you see? The one who leads them out like an army, he knows how many there are and calls each one by name! His power is so great - not one of them is ever missing!

Israel, why then do you complain that the Lord doesn't know your troubles or care if you suffer injustice? Don't you know? Haven't you heard? The Lord is the everlasting God; he created all the world. He never grows tired or weary. No one understands his thoughts. He strengthens those who are weak and tired. Even

those who are young grow weak; young people can fall exhausted. But those who trust in the Lord for help will find their strength renewed. They will rise on wings like eagles; they will run and not get weary; they will walk and not grow weak.

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LET US PRAY:

Our great, incomparable God, no longer can we imagine you sitting quite literally on a throne above the earth and beyond the sky. We have been there, we human beings, and have looked down on people who seemed as tiny as ants, and it does not make us think less of you, but more, to discover that you are not

there, somewhere out in space; any more than you are here in church in the same way that we are.

You are nowhere and everywhere; far beyond creation, and in every micro-molecule of everything that you have made. And in some way that human words cannot explain, because human minds cannot begin to understand it, you are with us, one of us. Jesus Christ, in his full humanity, showed us more clearly than ever before who you are, and who we are, and that the two are somehow, mysteriously one, united by the great, binding, creative force of love.

God, we bless you for your love and care for all that you have made, and for every human being, of every race and nation, colour and creed. You are our God and we are your people. How you may be calling out to others, we do not know, and do not need to, but we are irrevocably yours: sealed with the water of baptism; the promises made for us then affirmed by our own free choice, we are yours, and glad and grateful to be so.

We give thanks for all the signs we can see, looking back, of your loving care at every stage of lives: for joys shared; tangles unravelled; horizons expanded. We give thanks for every opportunity you have given us to use our creative talents for the good of others; and for the strength and support we have received when we were so exhausted that we had nothing left to give.

"Even young people grow weak and fall exhausted; but those who trust in the Lord for help will find their strength renewed. They will rise up on wings like eagles; they will run and not grow weary; they will walk, and not faint."

Loving God, our Maker, Sustainer and Friend; we have not always put our trust in you. We have thought that we could manage on our own; we have looked to one another for the sort of support that only you can give. Help us to put that right from now on. To acknowledge your greatness and power; to trust in your unfailing love and goodness; and in all that we say and do, in the sort of people we are, may we reflect your glory and give you the honour and praise that you deserve, through Jesus Christ our Lord. AMEN

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HYMN: God, who made the earth (CH3 #151)
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N.T. Reading: Romans 8: 18-23 The future glory p. 195
I consider that what we suffer at this present time cannot be compared at all with the glory that is going to be revealed to us. All of creation waits with eager longing for God to reveal his children. For creation was condemned to lose its purpose, not of its own will, but because God willed it to be so. Yet there was the hope that creation itself would one day be set free from its slavery to decay and would share the glorious freedom of the children of God. For we know that up to the present time all of

creation groans with pain, like the pain of childbirth. But it is not just creation alone which groans; we who have the Spirit as the first of God's gifts also groan within ourselves as we wait for God to make us his children and set our whole being free.

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Sermon: God's ongoing work of creation

As well as my 7 official nieces and nephews, I have several unofficial ones - friends' children who call me 'Auntie', as we used to do with our parents' friends, when we were small. One of these is Jennifer, who is now 27 and living in Paris, so the incident that I am remembering must be over 20 years ago, because she was just a wee tot when she came out with a theological statement more profound than most that I had heard in my three years at New College.

She must have been told at Sunday School that God was eternal and unchanging, but the next bit was entirely her own. She said, "So that means, 'If God created the world, he must still be creating it.'" Wow!! Insofar as I understand the school of theology called 'Process Theology', I think that's what it is, but coming from a four-year-old.....

'If God Created the world, he must still be creating it.' That's a vision of God far more mature than that of most adults, and yet we think that our children can't cope with more than simple Bible stories, and that they don't understand enough to take communion... But that's not where I want to go today. I want to spend some time on Jennifer's question, which is not about Creation way back then, however many hundreds of million years ago, about God, the Creator, now.

Assuming that we believe in God as the source of creation (or give the name 'God' to the mysterious life-force that brought us and all of this into being), how is God, the Creator, involved with Creation now? Did he just press the button that set off the big bang (or whatever the latest theory is) and then step back and enjoy the fireworks? Or is he as involved in the tiny details of everyday life as some of our prayers seem to suggest:

- ◆ "God, please don't let it snow on Tuesday."
- ◆ "God, please keep Brian safe when he goes bungee-jumping in Australia."

And, if so, what does it do to our image of God, to the authenticity of our faith, when it does snow on Tuesday or when Brian's bungee-rope breaks?

It was relatively easy in the ancient world to picture God 'up there'; quite literally, as Isaiah describes it, above the earth and beyond the sky, in the 7th layer of heaven looking down on human life below. If he had business to do on earth, he sent his angels down as messengers; and a few favoured individuals, like Elijah, were raised directly up to heaven (in Elijah's case, on a chariot of fire). The sun moved across the heavens because God (or one of the gods) was pulling or propelling it. He sent down rain and snow from his vast reservoirs in the sky.

We need to be careful not to over-simplify the world-view of ancient peoples, or to imagine that they were less intelligent or more gullible than we are. Isaiah's prophecy, like the Psalms, are full of poetry and metaphor. It was never meant to be taken as literal science. But it was nevertheless a lot easier to locate God in your mind before air travel and space exploration. It worries me that 400 years after Galileo, 500 years after Columbus, we are still telling children that heaven is 'up there' in the sky.

My knowledge of other faiths is very sketchy; you'd need Andrew Sarle to tell you about them in any detail. But my understanding is that for Hindus, God is everywhere in creation, part of every living thing, which is why there is such respect for life, from the tiniest insect to the sacred cows which wander freely about the villages of India. For Buddhists, God is beyond creation, and the highest goal, Nirvana, is to be released from the physical plane and be reunited with the eternal whole.

Jews and Christians, and I suspect also Muslims - the three 'people of the Book' - have had to grapple with this question of where God is and how he operates in Creation. It's one thing to affirm that God was there instructing Moses to lead his people to freedom out of Egypt: sending plagues and performing miracles to show his mighty power; leading them eventually into the Promised Land. But what happens when all of that falls apart? When the Babylonian armies march in on Jerusalem, desecrate the Temple, take a large proportion of the people, including those who sang and worshipped in the Temple, away from the Promised Land into captivity once more?

No wonder the people complain that "the Lord doesn't know our troubles or care if we suffer injustice". No wonder Psalms were written, crying out to God, "Where were you when we called on you? Were you sleeping? We thought you were the one who never slumbers nor sleeps!" "We've heard about the wonderful things you did in the past - where are you now?"

One answer, for the prophets, was to say that the people had brought this trouble on themselves; that their suffering was punishment for their sin. The book of Job is a challenge to that argument in its simplistic form; an argument which is still clearly in the back of people's minds when you hear someone say, as I

often do, "I don't know why this should happen to him or her; s/he was such a good person".

The unique Christian answer to the question, "Where is God now in creation, and what is God doing?", is a very different one, though it is implicit in the prophet's affirmation of God's love and care despite all evidence to the contrary:

"Israel, why then do you complain that the Lord doesn't know your troubles or care if you suffer injustice? Don't you know? Haven't you heard? The Lord is the everlasting God; he created all the world. He never grows tired or weary. No one understands his thoughts. He strengthens those who are weak and tired."

Note that here, unlike in the Exodus story, God doesn't solve the people's problems, defeating the enemy and releasing them from captivity, but gives them the strength to cope:

"Even those who are young grow weak; young people can fall exhausted. But those who trust in the Lord for help will find their strength renewed. They will rise on wings like eagles; they will run and not get weary; they will walk and not grow weak."

The unique Christian answer to the question, "Where is God in Creation?", is not an answer at all, but a person: a human being so filled with the essence of God that people coming into contact with him didn't need to ask any longer, "Where is God?"; "Why has he abandoned us?". They fell on their knees and said, "Surely, this is the Son of God."

The Christian year, which we follow in Church, is very strange and distorted. We spend over a month looking forward to Christmas and celebrating the child's birth; and the child is no sooner out of nappies before we're into Lent and looking forward to Easter. To

some extent that reflects the emphasis of the Gospels, which are heavily weighted towards the last week of Jesus' life and what happened next. But it's important, in this 'ordinary time', to reflect on this man who made such an impact on the world by his very ordinariness, and his understanding of ordinary people. He didn't free his people from the hated Romans. He wasn't miraculously spared from suffering: on the contrary, he suffered the most horrendous death that human cruelty can devise, and did nothing to resist it.

So if he does represent the eternal God, the one who created the heavens and the earth, we have an entirely new picture of his eternal creativity. Here is God, as never before, doing a new thing, while revealing an aspect of himself that has always been true. Where is God when people are suffering and crying out for help (cf. Jewish people and the holocaust)? He is right there with us; alongside us; sharing our pain and giving us strength to bear it.

"Those who trust in the Lord for help will find their strength renewed. They will rise on wings like eagles; they will run and not get weary; they will walk and not grow weak." AMEN

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HYMN 238: Lord, bring the day to pass

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Offering

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Choir Voluntary: (Hy. 147, vv. 4, 5 & 7)

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LET US PRAY:

God our Maker, you surround us daily with your loving care; you have shown us in Jesus the true extent of your love; how far you are willing to go to hold us and hold on to us; to draw us back to you and make us whole.

We give thanks for all that we have known of your love and care, coming to us in the most practical of ways through neighbours and friends; and in subtler ways that often we recognise only looking back: giving us the strength we needed to come through life's trials and temptations; not just surviving but coming out stronger and wiser and more able to stand with others in their times of sadness and struggle.

We pray for any who, today, for whatever reason, are questioning your power or your love. Those who would like to believe, but in all honesty cannot; those who believed once, but now no longer do, perhaps because of some tragedy that has come their way, and like Isaiah's people long ago, they cry out, "God doesn't know our troubles; or, if he does, he doesn't care."

Lord, reach out to us, and to all who are struggling to cope, in whatever way you know is needed. With answers to our questions; or assurance that you do not mind us asking. With tangible, practical care from tangible, practical people. With a new sense of awe and wonder as we contemplate the majesty of creation and our infinitesimal place in it all.

And as we think of creation, so we pray for our planet: finite, as we are, but beautiful, abundant, and in danger from our carelessness and greed. Help us to learn from our children, and to have them in mind as we make choices about how we live; how

we share; how we care for this world which you made and have never stopped loving.

You have made us in your image: help us to use our creative gifts to do things differently from now on: to find new ways of caring for one another and enjoying creation to the full; so working as your partners in the ongoing work of bringing order out of chaos; beauty out of brokenness; and life out of death.

These things we ask, and our offerings we bring, in the name of Jesus, who came to bring us life in all its fullness. AMEN

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HYMN 172: Sing for God's glory

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Benediction:

**Those who wait on the Lord will renew their strength;
they will rise up on wings like eagles.
They will run and not grow weary;
they will walk and not faint.**

Go now in the all-sustaining strength of God's love,
and may the blessing....

Sung Amen

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