

Green Communion Sermon

by Rev Kathy Galloway

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Readings: Psalm 146, Matthew 22: 32 – 42 and 1 Corinthians 12: 7–17

*Deep peace of the running wave to you
Deep peace of the flowing air to you
Deep peace of the quiet earth to you
Deep peace of the shining stars to you
Deep peace of the Son of peace to you*

This traditional Gaelic blessing comes from a time when people could believe with all their hearts in the deep peace of the creation. Humankind might rage and contend across borders and continents, empires might rise and fall, men and women might flower and die, to be blown away like grass in the wind, but the running wave, the flowing air, the quiet earth, the shining stars, these things would endure unchanging, promising deep peace in their stability, their beauty and their purity. They were elemental things, they were part of the substance of the universe. Even further back are these words, adapted from St Patrick's Breastplate, that great hymn of encompassing.

*I bind unto myself today
the virtues of the starlit heaven,
The glorious sun's life-giving ray,
The whiteness of the moon at even,
The flashing of the lightning free,
The whirling wind's tempestuous shocks,
The stable earth, the deep salt sea
Around the old eternal rocks.*

The Celts used to talk about the little book – that was the Bible – and the great book – that was creation, and they read God in both. The instinct to worship in response to the beauty and mystery of the universe is as old as the human story itself. The Psalm we read just now is a reminder that for thousands of years, people have looked at the world around them, and seen God as creator of heaven and earth, of the sea and all that is in them. The passionate outpouring of the Psalmist, in this, and in so many of the psalms, is a song of praise to God the Creator which echoes down the centuries and still resonates today.

But the psalm also reminds us of the limitations of humankind. It says... *don't put your trust in human leaders; no human being can save you. When they die, they return to the dust; on that day, all their plans come to an end.* This doesn't mean that we can't trust anyone; we live to a large extent by trusting in other people. We trust the good faith of our friends and family; we trust in the train driver to take the train to our destination, and not suddenly decide he was going to go somewhere completely different. We put our trust in doctors, teachers, even our politicians, to do their best within the limitations of their knowledge, their training and their own human frailties, and mostly they do remarkable things within these limitations. But all of them, if they are wise, recognise their own limitations; that must operate within certain constraints. The psalm is saying that we too have limits, that in the end, we, full of potential as we are, are created, not creator.

It's a timely reminder, because as a species, we have not been very good at recognising our limitations with regard to creation, to the earth we inhabit, and share with other species and life-forms. It is one of the most painful lessons of adulthood, realizing how little we really know, and how much less we can command. The struggle to impose our will on everything around us, including the earth, causes grave damage to the environment, to other people and to ourselves. The need to get our own way, especially with regard to energy over-consumption, is really something that belongs to the 'terrible two' stage of infant development.

Our tendency to assume that the universe is at our disposal, that it has no intrinsic worth other than its usefulness to the human species has made us careless to the point of extreme culpability.

According to a recent study the world's 7.6 billion people represent just 0.01% of all living things. Yet since the dawn of civilisation, humanity has caused the loss of 83% of all wild mammals and half of plants. We are learning the hard way that our actions have consequences; the destruction of rainforests leads to global warming; the pollution of lakes destroys localised eco-systems, the earth resists soil erosion and the loss of bio-diversity with floodwater; but the floods drown and bring diseases in their wake. It is a kind of blasphemy. How can we pray to God the Creator with integrity when we are so cavalier with God's creation?

In today's gospel, we heard again the greatest of all the commandments; to love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength; and to love our neighbours, as we love ourselves. For most of us, the word 'God' is an abstract concept, too mysterious to grasp hold of. So we seek to love God revealed in God's creation, and in those for whom people of faith are asked to have a particular care – the hungry and oppressed, the prisoners and the strangers in our land, the widows and orphans – all those who are most vulnerable, most at risk. In our time, the earth our home is vulnerable, is at risk. To love it and care for it is an expression of our love of God.

There are three things in particular about care for the earth worth noting because they are firmly rooted in love of God and love of neighbour. First, they're about starting where we are, and that means starting with the small things. Sometimes the scale of the problems seems so great that it hardly seems worth bothering. Jesus told a story of how the kingdom of heaven was like a mustard seed. He described how it was the smallest of all seeds but grew to become the largest of plants. The mustard seed was proverbial in Palestine for the smallest possible thing. Nowadays, we might refer to the atom. Both are so tiny that it is hard to conceive of the potential they contain, the energy that is needed to take them on their journey of transformation. They shift and change in appearance, in shape, they become different – and yet the harvest is there in the seed, given nurture and openness to the processes of life. The possibilities for great change in what seems small can be huge.

And starting where we are means being close enough to really see things. Keen birdwatchers are knowledgeable about all sorts of birds. But that knowledge is based on hours of waiting and watching. In the close and patient observation of creatures in the wild, human beings discover the nature of them, their particularities, their strengths; the ways in which our createdness is similar and yet different. It is the start of a conversation with all the different life-forms we share the planet with.

And second, though we start where we are, we also need to go on to make the connections to a wider world. We are all part of extraordinary eco-systems, and our actions have consequences, not just for the natural world but for people and places far away—for example, in the way we shop, so buying locally and working for trade justice, are an important part of caring for the earth. So many people living in poverty need that kind of justice so they are not forced to drain the resources of their own environments. The extent to which we participate in creating an economic, political and cultural environment which is friendly to the poorest people in our society and our world will be the extent to which all of us can befriend our own environment, our own place. Ultimately, unless we all have a home, a place of belonging, all of our belonging is endangered. If one part of the body suffers, all the other parts suffer with it.

But thirdly, you have also demonstrated the truth of the second part of Paul's saying, that when one part of the body rejoices, all the other parts rejoice with it. Because what all your activities have in common is that they really demonstrate the art of sharing. In recognising that we have to share this earth more equitably and gently, be responsible for clearing up after ourselves and not fouling anyone else's patch, you've also found yourself sharing lots of other things – creativity in music and the arts, sharing ideas, sharing across the generations, sharing resources, sharing with people in other parts of the world, sharing friendship and enjoyment. You've been revaluing the communal joys that so many people in our society have lost. And all of that leads to building community.

People sometimes get the notion that living within limits is restrictive, that it takes away freedom. But in fact, the opposite is true. When we take responsibility for our actions, we gain a different kind of freedom. We may have less things but we make less waste – and we have more room for imagination, creativity, discovery. We go deeper into our spirituality.

May being an Eco Church deepen your understanding of what it means to love God, to love your neighbour and to care for the creation. Amen.

Courtesy of Christian Aid