

***Lord, when we feel depressed or threatened, let us never forget the big picture of your Creation. Teach us to marvel at your majesty and to know our role within your Kingdom. Amen.***

## **Wonder and Majesty** (Psalm 8; Lk 18.9-14)

What embraces cattle and stars and comes wrapped?

It sounds like a **Christmas cracker riddle**. But please forgive me as the clocks have gone back (I hope you appreciated the extra hour) and the weather has gone wintry to match. Then next week, All Saints Day, we start on the Sundays before Advent and **the countdown to Christmas**. Can I hear some of you groaning?

Thinking of Christmas, as Christians we probably won't be rushing out to buy a new album by Magne Furuholmen, a keyboardist with the 80s pop group A-ha. Perhaps the **gloomiest Christmas album of the year**, it reflects the darker side of Christmas. Tracks include *A Punch-Up on Boxing Day, Hells Bells, The Season to be Melancholy and Dark Days, Dark Nights*. It's a double album for maximum misery, and themes include *"broken family ties, things we sweep under the rug and resentment hidden behind fake, jocular smiles"*. The Norwegian singer is using these songs to contrast and highlight the **original Christmas message** of hope, charity and compassion.

**Do we need cheering up** as the nights lengthen? World events and politics haven't helped recently and in most of the psalms we've looked at so far we've heard a lot about **David's problems and enemies**. We've had verses like

- *How many are my foes! How many rise up against me!* (Ps. 3, when David was fleeing from his brother Absalom)
- *My soul is in deep anguish .. I am worn out from groaning* (Ps. 6) and
- *Save and deliver me from all who pursue me for they will tear me apart like a lion and rip me to pieces with no one to rescue me* (Ps. 7).

In many cases we've had to stick at it through the gloom to reach the contrasting message of hope and salvation, **Refuge, Redemption and Rest** as Dick put it last week.

So what embraces cattle and stars and comes wrapped? As you've probably guessed, it's Psalm 8, the only one we've studied with a "wrapper", in that the **first verse is**

**repeated word for word** at the end. *Lord, our Lord, how majestic is your name in all the earth!* (vv.1,9). But there's another difference from many of the psalms we've looked at: inside this "wrapper", **Psalm 8 is positive throughout**, it's full on praise, with only brief references to "nasties" (controlled ones at that) in verse 2. This psalm is a wonderful celebration of God's creation and of mankind's responsibilities within it.

So let's think first about the creation. The **creation story in Genesis** isn't just an account of what happened long, long ago, but a theological statement in story form about the relationship of the universe to its Creator.

**Have you noticed how the creation is different in Psalm 8?** Human beings, made in God's image, remain the high spot of creation, but the **order is different**. In Genesis, of course, the climax of *mankind created in God's own image* (Gen. 1.27) comes right at the end of the account. Here, in Psalm 8, human beings come immediately after the creation of the heavens and are followed, not preceded, by the animal kingdom.

More importantly, Psalm 8 is **not just an account but a joyful celebration** of that relationship between God and creation, a poetic summary of Gen. 1.26-31. **The entire creation praises God:** even the mouths of infants who cannot yet articulate words praise God in a way that confounds all enemies (v.2). I can believe this. Our granddaughter's first utterances don't include any recognisable theological words – yet - but from just a few months old she has always been mesmerised by the leaves on trees. She almost worships them.

If, as the New Testament tells us (e.g. Romans 8) we are adopted as God's children, then a **sense of childlike wonder** is an absolutely essential element in the Christian's spiritual rucksack. Unless we can be continually surprised by God and the world around us, we risk becoming bland and boring, stifled by a kind of "I've seen it all before" mentality. Nowhere is this spirit of wonder more clearly seen than in the marvellously concise Psalm 8. Jesus quotes verse 2 (*through the **praise** of children and infants*) in the temple on Palm Sunday when the religious authorities fail to recognise him (Mt 21.16). Praise of God is especially powerful when it comes from sources we would consider weak. Although the worshippers in the temple court seemed such puny creatures in the vast cosmos (mere "babes at the breast") God had made their worship a bulwark against the tides of chaos (*enemies .. foe .. avenger*, are all listed in verse 2) seeking to ruin creation.

But I think there's an **even greater sense of astonishment**. Increasing light pollution can make it difficult for urban dwellers, but hopefully we've all had the opportunity to marvel at the majesty of the **Milky Way**, with thousands of stars visible on a clear night just as they would have been to David. I'm told that if that galaxy was the size of North America, our solar system would fit into a coffee cup. Wow! And now the three scientists who've shared this year's Nobel Prize in Physics have "transformed our ideas about the cosmos" with their work on exoplanets – "most stars are orbited by retinues of planets: there may be a billion planets in our galaxy resembling the earth".

*When I consider your heavens, the work of your fingers, the moon and the stars which you have set in place* (v.3). If we make these words from the Psalm our own surely we should be **even more astounded by the way God cares for each and every one of us**, as the next verse continues: *What is mankind that you are mindful of them, human beings that you care for them?* (v.4).

Why should a **mere speck of dust on the light years of God's calendar** matter to him? Perhaps you are reminded of that famous passage in the Gospels: *Look at the birds of the air; they do not sow or reap or store away in barns and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not much more valuable than they?* (Mt 6.26; cf Lk 12.24)

Why on earth did God bother about men and women? Because God has granted human beings a status that is only **a little lower than God** and crowned them with *glory and honour* (v.5). Other versions say a little lower than the gods or a little lower than the angels. Don't be troubled by this. In Old Testament times, surrounding peoples **worshipped a variety of deities** but that doesn't mean that other gods actually existed. Hebrew literary forms sometimes compared these gods to the Lord, sometimes downgraded them to the status of angels.

The important thing is that God said Let us make mankind in our own image, in our likeness, so that they may rule over the fish in the sea and the birds in the sky, over the livestock and all the wild animals and over all the creatures that move along the ground (Gen. 1.26). As our Psalm puts it, God entrusted to us **dominion over all other creatures**: *You made them rulers over the works of your hands; you put **everything** under their feet* (v.6). **Everything** is followed by a similar list of wild life in the next two verses.

Do we really get this **idea of dominion**? If I asked you what ruled the whole created order; you might say illness, or tragedies or political tyrants rule. Hebrews 2 helps us here. After quoting Psalm 8:5-6, it goes like this: No, we don't yet see God's plan in full technical colour, but **we do see one man, Jesus, our Redeemer!** *We do see Jesus, who was made lower than the angels for a little while, now crowned with glory and honour because he suffered death, so that by the grace of God he might taste death for everyone* (Heb. 2.9)

Hebrews 2 assures us that **Psalm 8 is no pipe dream** but something true of Christ, God's representative in the new creation. **We can see Jesus – one man is already reigning** and we are promised that one day, *in bringing many sons and daughters to glory* (Heb.2.10) redeemed mankind will reign as well.

The **Gospel set for today** fits in well, as care for other people sits alongside responsible stewardship of the environment. It is so easy, like the Pharisee, to *look down on everyone else* (Lk 18.9), to *exalt* ourselves rather than *humble* ourselves (Lk 18.14). As Christians, we are called to *love your neighbour as yourself* (Mt. 22.39) whatever the actions of selfish people in positions of influence who think they can ride roughshod over everyone else. And in this time of climate and environmental emergency, it is particularly important that we love and care for our created world, whatever the actions of national leaders in North and South America.

So **to summarise our Psalm**. In just nine verses, two of which are identical, the entire fabric of the cosmos is subtly interweaved, from *the stars* (v.3) to *all flocks and herds* (v.7). Everything has its place in God's creation, and if we are Christian First Responders we should be full of wonder and gratitude. But remember that **something far more wonderful still** is expressed in verse 4: what is mankind that you are mindful of them, human beings that you care for them? Our Creator God cares, infinitely, about those he has made. **What can we do** when faced by this vision of final glory?

The "wrapping" of Psalm 8 tells us. We might even say it is **"gift wrapped"**, for this responsible stewardship over the rest of creation is a divine gift to humanity, not something that human beings deserve or can insist on as a right. So why don't we just fall down and join in the praise of the child on a starlit night, saying **Lord, our Lord, how majestic is your name in all the earth!**