

“WHAT IS MAN THAT YOU ARE MINDFUL OF HIM?”

Psalm 8:4

It's Harvest Time – an opportunity for us to pause and consider God's goodness to us, to allow our minds to be jogged by the sight of this display of flowers and fruit and produce into reflecting on this wonderful world in which we live. Look around at the lavish diversity of colour and shape – the magnificence of a summer sunset; the intricacy of a dew-sparkled spider's web; the glorious yellow of a field of oil-seed rape; the constantly heaving blueness of the ocean. Listen to the sounds of the birds; the sighing of the evening breeze; the awesome roar of the thunder storm. Smell the fusty dampness of the autumn leaves on the forest floor; the thick, sweet scent of lilies; the hot, sharp odour of horses by the fence. Reach out and touch the rough skin of a russet apple; the smoothness of a lover's cheek: feel the hot, soft sand under your bare feet on an August beach. Savour the welcome taste of a hot cup of tea, of a plate of fish and chips at the end of a long day's walk, the sweet dark juice of a ripe wild blackberry.

What a world! What a creation! What a Creator! A Creator who provides and who pours out his goodness with a faithfulness and a predictability that we celebrate by holding our Harvest thanksgiving at the same time every year – at the end of the harvest period. And the Psalm we've read this morning is also a song which celebrates the creative energy of God within the context of his regular, loving provisions. If you followed the reading in your own Bible, you may have noticed the bit we didn't read – the dedication and musical instructions. It's to be sung to “*the gittith*”. There's always a bit of debate about what these terms mean, but the majority of scholars seem to think that this was a tune or arrangement that was used particularly to celebrate the end of the grape harvest. It's David's way of expressing his overwhelming wonder at the beauty and vastness of the universe, while thanking God for the reliability of his provision for his people.

He looks out particularly at the universe above his head. It's all part of creation – not just the bit we live in. And there, out in the blue-black vastness of the heavens, is a sight that moves him to awed humility. There's no doubt that David's knowledge of the heavens was considerably less scientific than ours is today – as one preacher I heard once said memorably in a sermon which managed to lose most people in the convolutions of his vocabulary: David has a “*pre-Copernican cosmology*”! But that didn't stop him marvelling at it. He remarks upon the vastness of it, the majesty of this infinite canopy which constantly hangs over us. It's a magnificent sight.

When you're in a place where there isn't nearly as much artificial light as there is in most towns and cities – way out in the countryside, at the edge of the sea or wherever – you can look up into the velvet blackness of the night sky and find yourself overwhelmed by the splendour of the stars and planets. There's something awesomely attractive about them. The recent interest that was engendered by the closeness of Mars is a witness to the curiosity that many people have about the heavens beyond us here. There are millions of stars and planets and galaxies and black holes and asteroids and explosions and implosions scattered across the immeasurable billions of light years of space. And in all of that, there is a uplifting mobile beauty as those shining, shimmering worlds dance across the sky.

Yet here, in one tiny part of that mind-bendingly infinite universe, is one little green planet which we call home, on which we live, which contains all we need and all we could desire. It's pretty well insignificant, this earth, if you look at it in any kind of rational way. Dr Chalmers, a scientist and Christian who was working at the beginning of the nineteenth century, wrote in his *Astronomical Discourses*: “*We gave you but a feeble image of our comparative insignificance, when we said that the glories of an extended forest would suffer more from the fall of a single leaf than the glories of this extended universe would suffer though the globe we tread upon, ‘and all that it inherits’, should dissolve.*” Who would miss this little world? What's its point in the “great scheme of things”? Where does this beautiful, comfortable, but infinitesimally small planet that we call home fit into the universe that shouts of the “*grandeur of God*”, as Gerard Manley Hopkins put it?

And as we narrow the focus of our vision to this tiny planet, as we contemplate the myriad species of plant and creature that exist upon it, as we marvel at the complexities of geology and geography; as we quail in awed fear under the attack of typhoons and tornadoes, the blazing heat of a desert sun or the blood-freezing cold of an Antarctic winter; as we reflect upon our human frailty that shakes in mortal fear at the thunder of a herd of elephants or the ravages of a microscopic virus, we ask God, as David did, “*What are human beings that you should take any notice of us?*” Why on earth does God waste his time on creatures like us who are less than specks of dust behind the old cupboard of the galaxies? Why bother with us, Lord? In another Psalm David muses on the frailty of humankind (*Psalm 62:9*) and the prophet Isaiah, in *Isaiah 40:6*, sees us as grass that lasts but a moment before being burnt up.

And yet, as David sings here, God has somehow, for some reason, “*made us a little lower than the heavenly beings, crowned us with glory and honour, made us rulers over the works of his hands*”. As the writer R E O White puts it, we are “*between nothing and deity, abject and august, dust divinely cared for.*” That captures something of the paradox inherent in all this. When he got to this line in the Psalm, C S Lewis wrote, “*I walk in wonders beyond myself*”. It’s a mystery why God cares about us, why he bothers about us. We will never know in this life – but that doesn’t mean we can’t celebrate it.

God loves us. God cares about us. God somehow has a purpose in all this. It’s difficult to understand, difficult to accept sometimes, but we take it on faith that it is true. In fact, although we are insignificant and although we have as a race caused trouble beyond our apparent potential, God loves us so much that he was prepared to send his Son, Jesus the Christ, into our world – into this tiny little planet in a corner of his vast created universe – to enable us to get to know him better. Through Jesus, you and I can renew our acquaintance with the being who made all this. We may not understand the picture, but we get to know the Artist – and we get to know that he loves us.

That is amazing – even more amazing than marvelling at the stars, the planets, the richness and fecundity of creation on this little planet here. God made us, he looks on us with affection, he loves us, he sent his Son to sacrifice himself for us and for the renewal of our distorted and corrupted relationship with the Creator. God sees us as much loved human beings and he wants the very best for us. That’s what we give thanks for here today. We do that both in through the symbols of daily provision here at the front, but also through the symbols of our eternal preservation here on the communion table.

And yet, although God looks upon and pours his love upon every single human being on this planet, *we* seem to see them differently. God has sacrificed his Son for us, so much does he value us. But we are guilty of undervaluing each other. We fail in our calling as human beings – let alone as followers of Jesus the Christ – to recognise humanity in others. We praise God for the advantages we enjoy here today: supermarket shelves overflowing with choice, the food we want when we want it, running water, heat and light, energy and fuel, education and health services that are second to none (whatever the cynical media try to tell us), peace, justice, good government. And even as we thank God for them, we deny them to others.

Rather than make generic drugs cheaply available to those who so desperately need them, we try to ensure that the drug company shareholders get the highest return – and many of you are the shareholders. Rather than offer the best of our education and health to those who have nothing of either, we sell them the best of our demonic technology for warfare and torture (again, for the benefit of rich western shareholders – some of you). Rather than give those who just about survive on farming their little plot the assistance they need in growing crops to feed themselves, we take their land, grow crops for ourselves and make them our slaves. Rather than looking at the poor and marginalized and disadvantaged of this world – and of our society – as God looks at them, as people created “*a little lower than the heavenly beings*”, *we* look at them as people created a lot lower than *us*: not as those who are made to be “*rulers over the works of God’s hands*”, but people over whom *we* can rule economically, militarily, culturally.

If, looking at the awesome magnificence of this universe and grappling with the paradox that we are somehow created to fulfil a prominent purpose within in, we believe that we are “*crowned with glory and honour*”, that God did love us enough to send his Son to live with us and die for us, then we have to believe that that’s true of all humanity. And if we accept that, then we have to acknowledge our need to share what we have and what we are with all men and women.

It’s not enough to come here once a year to thank God for what we’ve got if we do not do something the rest of the year to help those who do not have even the bare necessities of life – let alone the prodigal luxuries that we enjoy (and much of which we throw away). Nor is it enough to come here once a week and thank God for the love he has shown us in Jesus the Christ if we do not do something the rest of the week to share that love with the neighbours, colleagues and friends with whom we rub our expensively jacketed shoulders in this world day by day.

The Psalmist asks God, “*What are human beings that you should take any notice of them?*” That’s the question we need to be asking ourselves this morning. Do we care about the rest of humanity? Do you want to do something about their plight – material, physical, spiritual? If you don’t, then this morning’s service is a vain and hypocritical waste of time. If you do want to do something, have a look at the details on the Tearfund leaflet you were given as you came in this morning and visit their web-site or send for their magazine – or pop into the Christian Aid office in The Close (right on the corner opposite the west door) – or talk to me or Sally or Dorothy Outen. Humanity may be “*dust divinely cared for*”, but God often uses us as channels of that care.