

“What God has made clean, you must not call profane.”

If food is not profane, is it sacred? Is all creation sacred?

Since the dawn of mankind, humankind has altered the landscape to his own advantage. But we only have to go back a couple of generations to see how our relationship with the land has changed. When my grandparents were young, like many families they kept a pig. As the piglet grew it became tame, enjoying being scratched and grunting with pleasure as it saw its owners approach with scraps. In due course, that pig which had been a part of the family was sent to slaughter. Tears were shed. But the meat was eaten with full knowledge of the life that had been lost. It was precious, so thanks were given and nothing was wasted.

Now we buy from supermarkets, and don't like to think too much about where our food comes from. The adverts imply that cheese and butter come from cows in green grassy fields, but the reality is that most of our dairy produce comes from cows kept in huge factory farms. The palm oil in many foods is grown on plantations on land that recently was virgin forest. The crops are sprayed with insecticides, and fungicides and selective herbicides. Our soil is so depleted that we have to use huge quantities of artificial fertilisers. We are losing species at an alarming rate. Our increasing dependency upon technology has led to a demand for rare earth metals, such as lithium. The environmental impact of mining for these is huge. Add to this pollution from cars and aerosols, and the ever increasing surge of plastics in the soil, the air and the water, and, above all, the emission of greenhouse gases which is leading inexorably to global warming, and we have to conclude, that we have indeed treated all God's creation as profane, something there for our use, a commodity.

And the worst of it is, we have known about the damage we are doing for decades. Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring* was published in 1962. I learnt about global warming when I was in the sixth form at school. But we have been sleepwalking towards disaster. We have thought of ourselves as separate from nature, above it. We have even used scripture to justify our dominion over nature.

This was the view of St Augustine. In his vision of the last things, there was no place for nature apart from man. Humans alone mattered eternally. This viewpoint, that rational humanity was far and away superior to the rest of nature reached its height in the enlightenment. This theology of creation, strengthened by scientific mechanistic approaches to study, has led to a further diminution of the

importance of nature in the minds of many. But both St John's gospel and Paul's letter to the Colossians speak of the cosmic Christ, of creation of nature *for* Christ indicating a value that goes beyond our use of nature. Creation *in* Christ goes far further, leading to a sacramental view of nature, of God's immanence in all creation. To damage nature damages God. Our duty of care becomes divorced from self-interest.

But for now it is self-interest that is causing us to wake up. Now we have no excuse. Previous generations did not realise the damage they were doing. We know. Our children are properly frightened for their future. Extreme weather has caused flooding and hurricanes, and drought and fires. We have begun to realise that the whole of the earth is interdependent. What happens in one country affects another. We understand more and more about how each species interacts with others, how loss of one species impact upon many others (and that includes humankind). Take the ash tree as a local example. Ash is one of the predominant trees in Somerset and ash die back is rife in the Mendips. There are about 90 million ash trees in Britain, far more than there were elms. There are 50 species which are totally dependent upon the ash and another 1000 that will be extremely adversely affected by the ash's demise. But we look in our garden and see the blue tits and the greenfly and think there are still plenty of birds and bugs about – where's the problem? We are like those Roman rulers of the fourth and fifth centuries who could not believe that their civilisation was coming to an end.

But all is not doom and gloom. This is Easter. Christ is risen, Therefore we can have hope. Not a Mr Micawber 'something will turn up' kind of hope, but a dynamic active hope, a determination to do something. And there are many signs of hope. There is a product that can be added to cattle feed that makes cows produce far less methane. It makes the milk more expensive. There are signs that many news ways of producing solar power will become available. Some farmers are ploughing less, preventing the release of carbon dioxide locked in the soil escaping into the atmosphere. People are eating less meat. But always it seems as though we are playing catch up. Too little, too late.

There are things that only governments can do – like passing legislation to ensure that all new builds are energy efficient, and we can lobby for such changes. But we also have to change. Are we prepared to eat less meat and dairy, to travel less, to make our clothes, our phones, our furniture, our gadgets last longer? Are we prepared for the impact this will have on industry and employment. We do not remember the Mendips as they were before Bishop Ralph of Shrewsbury cut down the forests to provide common grazing ground for the poor. The rich flora and landscape of the Mendips that we love is preserved by grazing cattle and sheep. Are we prepared to lose this? Change is never easy. It is far too tempting to resist change and to argue that while the US, China and India continue to expand their use

of fossil fuels what we do will make no difference. But if we care about the world's poor, and if we care about this beautiful world and all the life forms that share it with us, then we cannot wait for others. We must act, and act alone if need be.

But how do we motivate ourselves to do this? It is so much easier to give a few pounds to Christian Aid than to change the way we live, particularly when the short-term consequences of changing are unappealing. So hard to think about the world as it will be in 50 or 100 years time if we do nothing. But we can motivate ourselves to do this, if we rediscover our sense of the sacred. Look, really look, at the trees and marvel at the way in which they can pump water from their roots into the leaves. Think about the way in which they can communicate with each other, warning each other about predators, through the mycorrhiza in the soil. Discover the symmetry and pattern. Count the seeds in a whorl of a sunflower, and you will find that it is always a number in the Fibonacci sequence. Go up on to the Mendips and look at the plants. In a small patch of land you can find over 100 species of plant. Listen to the bird song.

And read Psalm 65, 'the little hills shall rejoice on every side' . or Job Chapter 38, which speaks of God's intimate relationship with nature and firmly reminds Job of his (lowly) place within that creation. Reread John 1 'All things came into being through him', or Colossians 1 'In Christ all things in heaven and earth were created'.

We encounter Christ in creation. Earth is shot through with heaven. We catch glimpses of God through creation. It is the inspiration for our own creativity. Messiaen was inspired by bird song. This great Cathedral church contains beautiful carvings of nature.

Do not let us sleepwalk into a new barbarian age, where there is no beauty, no reverence, no awe.

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Mary Bide 19/05/2019

