

Psalm 33

*Laudato si*, paragraphs 76 & 77

Luke 12.22-31

Just over 100 years ago my grandfather sold 750 acres of grazing land in the Western District, a little to the north of Mortlake. And he bought 1500 acres of land in the northern Wimmera which was being cleared for grain farming. The bush and mallee gum was cleared and in spite of drought and windstorms and the depression, the family made a life there and eked out a living. In the 1920s and up until the post war years the wheat crops they grew were stripped with a harvester drawn by an eight horse team. The grain harvesting could take six weeks in the summer, working six days a week.

In late 2003 I went to do some ministry supply over the summer in that district. I met people who recalled my mother's family and because of this I found I had a natural entrée in the district. It was towards the end of the millennium drought and there was a lot of angst about the viability of grain farming, given the long term climate trends and the mechanisation of agriculture and the loss of population in the towns of the district. The town closest to where my grandparents had lived was at the time declared to be the poorest town in the state. One farmer I spoke with said that with the machinery he had at that time he could harvest in one day what it used to take my grandfather six weeks to harvest.

For six weeks my grandfather and uncles and the men who worked for them would tread the ground that was yielding their crops. They knew the ground intimately. I recall my mother's stories about the family's relationship to and dependency on the land. Their existence and wellbeing depended on good rains and stable weather. But it seemed rarely so. She told stories of extended droughts and dust storms which stripped the ground of its topsoil and dumped it somewhere else, hundreds of kilometres away. Beneath my mother's recounting of her life there was a sense that they had done the wrong thing; clearing all that country, trying to do with it something which was at best marginal.

She was in her own way prophetic about the family's pathway of so-called progress that had ravaged the earth. In a sense she had an embodied sense of the creation; a lived relationship with it. It was a lived experience of the creation; lived through year in, year out, which came from watching the sun rise from below the long horizon and watching its long path to sunset. Watching for the coming rain or the impending dust storm and knowing what to do to make the most of the rain and protect against the dust which got into everything. Learning how to tend and nourish plant and animal in what can be a challenging, marginal environment. Nevertheless, she loved it, and it was in her, as I found it was in the people I met in 2003. Somehow in their flesh and bone.

My mother's embodied, en fleshed sense of God's creation she gave to her five children and shared so generously with her grandchildren, teaching them to be attentive to the smallest sign of life and beauty in the natural world.

In a sense she didn't need to have a theology, or a doctrine of creation; it was in her.

But the world has changed utterly since 1922. At the time my grandfather moved to the Wimmera, the population of the world was around 2 billion people. One hundred years later it is now over 8 billion. Four times. The technological advances of the past 100 years have been extraordinary to both preserve and nourish life. Advances in medical science, our longevity, the measures to limit child-mortality, our ability to feed ourselves have expanded incredibly. But what of a doctrine of creation? How can a doctrine of creation speak into the crisis we are facing. A climate conflagration. We are in trouble.

All our technology has enabled the people of the planet to accelerate like never before in human history. But we are recognising that something must change in the way we live as humans on the planet if it is to remain habitable for human life. In our hubris we imagine the same technological mindset which got us here, can also get us out of the predicament. But this would be to ignore the earth's call to us to care for creation; to notice the creation as gift to us, not simply resource for exploitation. As Pope Francis says: *Nature is usually seen as a system*

*which can be studied, understood and controlled, whereas creation can only be understood as a gift from the outstretched hand of the Father of all, and as a reality illuminated by the love which calls us together into universal communion.*

The young people of the planet have been born into a world which is under threat. For those of us who are older and have benefited from the abundance and freedom of life in Australia maybe have no comprehension of the sense of impending doom that hangs over the likely arc of their lives. Francis speaks of the world as coming about as the result of a decision, not from chaos or chance. *That the creating word expresses a free choice. The universe did not emerge as the result of arbitrary omnipotence, a show of force or a desire for self-assertion.*

Maybe this contrast between creation, seen as gift of love, exercised by divine choice and the human display of omnipotence, force and self-assertion which is weakening our planet's systems is the crux of the matter; the spirit which has brought the crisis about.

What word of hope does the church have to speak into this space? What word of hope does the church have to say to children and young people that the purpose of your life is not to realise a trajectory of unimpeded progress as measure of your worth but that you are a child of God, living in a creation which is gift and blessing; and that your purpose is simply to enjoy the abundance and beauty of creation.

Do not worry about your life, what you will eat, or about your body, what you will wear, says Jesus.

Marking the Season of Creation may provide us with a bit of colour and movement in the church year but the truth is that the church has deep work to do in thinking about human's place in the creation. Humanity in the last century has realised unprecedented technological power. But ethically and philosophically we are like hormone driven teenagers, in awe of our own power but without the self-awareness, nor the moral and mental and spiritual maturity to limit our behaviour.

Certainly, humanity may be able to muster the political will and the technological knowhow to limit global warming, but this doesn't absolve us of the religious quest of reimagining ourselves as part of creation; to reconnect with our creatureliness. To humble ourselves and remember we are humus, and to humus we shall return. The words, *Remember you are dust and to dust you shall return* are said to us on Ash Wednesday; if we are courageous enough to hear them.

We may feel we have had our time, that there is little left for us to do. But we have children and grandchildren, maybe great grandchildren. And maybe our age gives us some authority to speak, with humility and wisdom. To offer another, slower way which is attentive to the rhythm and pulse of creation.

As we mark the Season of Creation, I pray we may come to be able to consider our own lives as gift in this wondrous whole we call creation; a cosmic gift which brings us to birth and which gives us life and that we may be able to come to understand more deeply who we are as children of God.

Andrew Boyle