

Psalm 8

Laudato is – paragraphs 210, 211 & 213

Matthew 6. 19-21

I can't exactly remember when it was, but I think it might have been when I began a subject in European history in year 12. We began our study at the end of the medieval era, sometimes known as the dark ages, around the 1300s; a time which gave way to what is called the modern era and the Renaissance. I can recall our teacher began by talking about how the renaissance changed how humanity understood itself. The dark ages were characterised by a deeply negative view of human nature, particularly shaped by the church – the view man was inherently sinful, and humanity broken, always tending towards evil.

What, my teacher said, happened in the renaissance was there was a flourishing of thinkers, authors, statesmen, scientists and artists around Europe who began to learn and celebrate the capacity of the human. People like the endlessly inventive Leonardo d Vinci, scientists like Copernicus and Galileo, writers like Dante Alighieri and Shakespeare and Chaucer, thinkers like Erasmus, who uncoupled his thought from the church's constraints, and artists like Michaelangelo and Raphael. It was a period of immense cultural flourishing and as a result of all this, a new human self-understanding emerged. A new self-confident understanding of what it meant to be homo-sapiens – the self-conscious creatures - began to develop.

We stand on their shoulders. In our schooling we are exposed to all of these people studying the works Shakespeare – whether we get it or not, exposed to the work of da Vinci, Michaelangelo. As we heard a couple of weeks ago from Brian Cox: the work of present-day astronomers still builds on the work of Galileo.

... what are human beings that you are mindful of them,
mortals that you care for them?

In the two creation myths at the beginning of the book of Genesis there are two accounts of the human coming into being. In the first, the man and woman are created on the sixth day of the creation and are the culmination of it – given dominion over all the plants and animals, indeed, the whole earth. 'Let us make humankind in our image, according to our likeness;'

Then comes a second account of the creation; a quite different one, with the man Adama formed from the dust of the earth and then the breath of God gives life to him. The woman follows to accompany the man. (spawning all sorts of negativity about the status of women)

Both these two accounts both give the human divine-animation – firstly, the human somehow created resembling God, then, secondly, with the very breath of God as the animating life-force.

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The rather cheeky French philosopher Francois Voltaire, living in the 18th century, wrote “In the beginning God created man in His own image, and man has been trying to repay the favour ever since.” That is we have succumbed to the temptation to try and make God in our image. Maybe Michaelangelo representation of God creating Adam, portrayed on the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel, hasn’t helped – God simply a slightly bigger human figure.

Since the Renaissance we have developed our own creation myth where we can have power, indeed dominion over the earth and create utopia, get back to paradise, make a perfectly ordered and controlled world. Our lives have been undergirded by the myth of progress.

Pope Francis writes of the myths of modernity, pointing out the belief that our scientific and technological brilliance will be able to get us out of the impending climate crisis. There has been and continues to be amongst too many who are influential in our world that we can pull ourselves up by our bootstraps. Reverse the potential for a storm such as has hit the south-east USA in the last 48 hours?

But, Francis writes: *Environmental education should facilitate making the leap towards the transcendent which gives ecological ethics its deepest meaning. It needs educators capable of developing an ethics of ecology, and helping people, through effective pedagogy, to grow in solidarity, responsibility and compassionate care.*

The driving myth of modernity is that of progress; that we are getting ahead. The myth of progress has its roots in the confidence of the Renaissance in human capacity; not that we are *not* immensely brilliant. It’s just that this is not all that is needed. Francis calls for an instilling of the ability to make a leap toward the transcendent; of enabling that divine breath in us of making the leap toward God, to the mysterious presence of God in all that is, and for us to be changed by this knowledge; this soul knowledge, not head knowledge.

You see most of us were given the creation myths as explanations of how the earth came into being; of how the human came into being. They were not given to us as myths to tease our imaginations and cause us into imaginative wonder about what it means for the very breath of God to infuse creation. It was just information. It is no wonder so many have abandoned the church. And it is the mindset which undergirds Creation-science – a Biblical literalism that claims the two creation myths are explanations of how.

Our primary myth is the myth of unimpeded progress. It’s there every night in the news in the Finance Report; it’s there in every election campaign and promise by a politician: growth, growth, growth. You can have it all! It’s your right!

I recently received an invitation for John Pesutto’s office to an event entitled *Hawthorn Voices of a Generation* where students from local schools would speak on a topic relevant to the future of our community and nation. This year the finalists addressed the topic - “How do we ensure prosperity for future generations of Victorians?” The event was billed as an opportunity for young people from the Hawthorn state electorate to showcase their passion, vision and hope for our future. I wasn’t sure that prosperity was an issue in Hawthorn. Is progress at risk?

Francis uses the term *developing an ethics of ecology, and helping people, through effective pedagogy*. For those who have been teachers maybe you know the term pedagogy. But pedagogy is not just about the stuff taught, about dispensing information, rather about forming people, it’s about the method of teaching that enables people to be thinkers, to

provoke curiosity, to be life-long learners, to ask: why is it so, in order that people who can reflect on the decisions they are considering making and the impact of those decisions. Francis writes: *Only by cultivating sound virtues will people be able to make a selfless ecological commitment* ... An ecological commitment is about is about a life-orientation.

Wendell Berry, an American poet and farmer, amongst other things, who we heard from a couple of weeks ago and will from again later, writes about the future, reflecting on the language we use about the world we are leaving to our children and grandchildren. You know the rhetoric: all this will be yours one day; we talk about the world our children and grandchildren will inherit; the world we will leave to them. And we speak of our technology in faith-like terms; that it will save us, that there will be a technological solution; a breakthrough. It's just around the corner. We are funding ... say the politicians; at the same time as they issue new coal and gas licenses.

Wendell writes: The higher aims of "technological progress" are money and ease. And this exalted greed for money and ease is disguised and justified by an obscure, cultish faith in "the future." We do as we do, we say, "for the sake of the future" or "to make a better future for our children." How we can hope to make a good future by doing badly in the present, we do not say. We cannot think about the future, of course, for the future does not exist: the existence of the future is an article of faith. We can be assured only that, if there is to be a future, the good of it is already implicit in the good things of the present. We do not need to plan or devise a "world of the future"; if we take care of the world of the present, the future will have received full justice from us.

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I have a friend who is Switzerland at the moment. I know her every move thanks to Instagram, such is the advanced state of our technology. At the end of each day, she posts the highlights of the day. She went to an art exhibition in a town called St Gallen, near Zurich, on Friday. Why do I need to know this? What difference does it make to me, to "my" world and my life. But there it is. Friday night, Swiss time, she posted a quote from a woman called Christina Agapakis, exploring the nexus between human development and technology: "Technology doesn't exist as something separate from people – our values are embedded in the technologies we build, and the technologies shape our experience of the world." The thought echoes Francis' warning about the blind-faith in technology and how, once we have created it, it then shapes us; and shaped our children.

As homo-sapiens, the thinking ones, we might reflect on these things and the choices we are presented with, whether they are good choices now and what the impact of them will be in time and so the vision of what kind of world we might be embodying on this particular day.

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