

Sermon on Sunday 4 October

by Rev. Bill Church

CREATIONTIDE: ST FRANCIS

Any of you brought up on a diet of Matins will remember the Benedicite.

It is a very long canticle with a mesmeric refrain:

'...bless ye the Lord: praise him and magnify him for ever.'

All creation, all the works of the Lord, are urged to praise the Lord.

Beginning with the inanimate creation, including 'ye frost and cold'.

On a January morning in an unheated medieval church, those singing the Benedicite often wished the frost and cold would spend more time praising the Lord and less time freezing his congregations.

Then living things – 'all ye whales' like the whales in Psalm 104, playing in the sea as God had made them to do. And then people: 'O ye children of men, bless ye the Lord: praise him and magnify him for ever.'

The Benedicite is based on an Apocryphal addition to the Book of Daniel, but it is very much on the same wavelength as Psalm 148, our reading.

All creation is to praise the Lord – inanimate things, living things and all people. The authors were quite happy with the thought of trees, fruit trees and cedars, joining with people to worship the God who made them all.

And, in Isaiah 55, the trees of the field are to clap their hands. But they would be very unhappy with the idea that humans should worship any part of creation, whether the sun or the moon or sacred trees.

That would make the mistake of worshipping the creation rather than the Creator.

That would be not seeing God in nature but seeing nature as a god.

It is good to respect nature and wonder at it and love it and treasure it and protect it. But not more. A thankful heart is good. Grace before meals is a good habit; but a grace starting, 'We thank you Mother Earth for this food' would be the wrong side of the line.

Rather, 'Let the earth bless the Lord'. Let the grateful eaters join the earth in a chorus of praise to the Lord.

As St Francis wrote in his 'Canticle of the Sun' (the basis for the well-known hymn 'All creatures of our God and King') 'Praised be you, my Lord, through Sister Mother Earth.'

St Francis, whom we celebrate today, is famously said to have preached to the birds and tamed a wolf, but he ought best be remembered for following the words of Jesus from our Gospel in a life of poverty and simplicity, which took from the created world enough and not too much, leaving resources for others and for the replenishing of nature.

That is an example – and a challenge – for us all.

That is a way of nurturing God's creation and honouring God for his creation. 'O ye servants of the Lord, bless ye the Lord; praise him and magnify him for ever.'