

W1: The Goodness of Creation (The good gifts of God)

Day a: Genesis 1

Day b: *Canticle of the Sun*, Saint Francis of Assisi

Day c: John 1

Day d: *The Nightingale And Glow-Worm*, William Cowper

Day e: Song of Songs 7

Day f: *To a Mouse*, Robert Burns

Genesis 1 – 2:4a

Introduction

The Jewish and Christian scriptures open with the story of creation. The story is so familiar to Christians that it is hard not to become distracted from its content by its familiar rhythms and images. We also know the end of the seven day creation story and read in anticipation of that ending. In reading the opening words of the Bible, try pausing after each day of creation to reflect on the significance of each day in the story.

Chapter 1 – 2:4a

1 In the beginning when God created the heavens and the earth, 2 the earth was a formless void and darkness covered the face of the deep, while a wind from God swept over the face of the waters. 3 Then God said, 'Let there be light,' and there was light. 4 And God saw that the light was good, and God separated the light from the darkness. 5 God called the light Day, and the darkness he called Night. And there was evening, and there was morning, the first day.

6 And God said, 'Let there be a dome in the midst of the waters, and let it separate the waters from the waters.' 7 So God made the dome and separated the water under the dome from the waters that were above the dome. And it was so. 8 God called the dome Sky. And there was evening, and there was morning, the second day.

9 And God said, 'Let the waters under the sky be gathered together into one place, and let the dry land appear.' And it was so. 10 God called the dry land Earth, and the waters that were gathered together he called Seas. And God saw that it was good.

11 Then God said, 'Let the earth put forth vegetation: plants yielding seed, and fruit trees of every kind on earth that bear fruit with the seed in it. And it was so. The earth brought forth vegetation: plants yielding seed of every kind and trees of every kind bearing fruit with the seed in it. And God saw that it was good. 13 And there was evening, and there was morning, the third day.

14 And God said, 'Let there be lights in the dome of the sky to separate the day from the night, and let them be for signs and for seasons, and for days and years, 15 and let them be lights in the dome of the sky to give light upon the earth.' And it was so. 16 God made the two great lights – the greater light to rule the day and the lesser light to rule the night – and the stars. 17 God set them in the dome of the sky to give light upon the earth, 18 to rule over the day and over the night, and to separate the light from the darkness. And God saw that it was good. 19 And there was evening, and there was morning, the fourth day.

20 And God said, 'Let the waters bring forth swarms of living creatures, and let birds fly above the earth across the dome of the sky.' 21 So God created the great sea monsters and every living

creature that moves, of every kind, with which the waters swarm, and every winged bird of every kind. And God saw that it was good. 22 God blessed them and said, 'Be fruitful and multiple and fill the waters in the seas, and let birds multiply on earth'. 23 And there was evening, and there was morning – the fifth day.

24 And God said, 'Let the earth bring forth living creatures of every kind: cattle and creeping things and wild animals of the earth of every kind.' And it was so. 25 God made the wild animals of the earth of every kind, and everything that creeps upon the ground of every kind. And God saw that it was good. 26 Then God said, 'Let us make humankind in our image, according to our likeness, and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the birds of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the wild animals of the earth, and over every living thing that creeps upon the earth'. 27 So God created humankind in his image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them. 28 God blessed them and God said to them, 'Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it; and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the air and over every living thing that moves upon the earth.' 29 God said, 'See, I have given you every plant yielding seed that is upon the face of all the earth, and every tree with seed in its fruit, you will have for food. 30 And to every beast of the earth and to every bird of the air, and to everything that creeps on the earth, everything that has the breath of life, I have given every green plant for food. And it was so. 31 God saw everything that he had made, and it was very good. And there was evening, and there was morning, the sixth day.

Chapter 2

1 Thus the heavens and the earth were finished, and all their multitude. 2 And on the seventh day God finished the work that he had done, and he rested on the seventh day from all the work that he had done. 3 So God blessed the seventh day and hallowed it, because on it God rested from all the work that he had done in creation. 4 These are the generations of the heavens and the earth when they were created.

Questions for reflection

- *What do you think is the significance of the order in which the components of earth are created, starting with light and finishing with rest?*
- *Does creation build up to a climax – or is it a single unfolding event?*
- *Genesis clearly sets out different parts of creation – which are the most important parts and how do they connect with the others?*
- *God tells humankind to “fill the earth and subdue it” and to “have dominion” over “every living thing”. What do you think this means? How has humanity interpreted these commands?*

Some further reading

___ (2008) *The Green Bible*

Celia Deane-Drummond (2008) *Eco-Theology*

John Haught (2008) *Is Nature Enough?*

Haydn (1797), *Creation* (a musical setting of the start of Genesis)

Canticle of the Sun, Saint Francis of Assisi

Introduction

In "Canticle of the Sun," Saint Francis of Assisi (c1182-1226) praises God for some of the wonders of the earthly world. Saint Francis was a Monk whose life and writings had a significant influence on the Church as did the orders of nuns and monks he founded. Francis believed that everything in the natural world was a gift from God and, as such, deserved to be appreciated and valued. His deep care for everything which exists was also borne out of a feeling of intimate connection with all creation; Francis refers to the sun, wind, air, and fire as his brothers, and to the moon, stars, earth and water as his sisters.

Saint Francis is the Patron Saint of Ecology and also a figure much loved by non-Christians. Pope Francis named his second encyclical 'Laudato Si', invoking a phrase from Francis' Canticle of the Sun (Praise be to You). In it, the Pope wrote that Francis served as both a guide and an inspiration, in particular highlighting his invitation for us to 'see nature as a magnificent book in which God speaks to us and grants us a glimpse of his infinite beauty and goodness'.

Canticle of the Sun

Most High, all powerful, good Lord,
Yours are the praises, the glory, the honour,
and all blessing.

To You alone, Most High, do they belong,
and no man is worthy to mention Your name.

Be praised, my Lord, through all your creatures,
especially through my lord Brother Sun,
who brings the day; and you give light through him.
And he is beautiful and radiant in all his splendor!
Of you, Most High, he bears the likeness.

Praised be You, my Lord, through Sister Moon
and the stars, in heaven you formed them
clear and precious and beautiful.

Praised be You, my Lord, through Brother Wind,
and through the air, cloudy and serene,
and every kind of weather through which
You give sustenance to Your creatures.

Praised be You, my Lord, through Sister Water,
which is very useful and humble and precious and chaste.

Praised be You, my Lord, through Brother Fire,
through whom you light the night and he is beautiful
and playful and robust and strong.

Praised be You, my Lord, through Sister Mother Earth,
who sustains us and governs us and who produces
varied fruits with coloured flowers and herbs.

Praised be You, my Lord,
through those who give pardon for Your love,
and bear infirmity and tribulation.

Blessed are those who endure in peace
for by You, Most High, they shall be crowned.

Praised be You, my Lord,
through our Sister Bodily Death,
from whom no living man can escape.

Woe to those who die in mortal sin.
Blessed are those whom death will
find in Your most holy will,
for the second death shall do them no harm.

Praise and bless my Lord,
and give Him thanks
and serve Him with great humility.

Questions for reflection

- *St Francis sees light, wind and fire as tools through which God influences the world. How might that change your view of them?*
- *What can we learn about God and His plan for humanity from considering the natural world?*
- *How connected do you feel to the elements of creation which St Francis sets out?*
- *What could we do today to recognise the value of all creation?*
- *What lessons can we learn from the Canticle of Creation?*

John 1, 1-23

Introduction

The opening of John's Gospel deliberately mirrors the opening of Genesis placing Christ with God in the act of creation. John's Gospel shares much with the three other Gospels of Mark, Matthew and Luke, which are collectively known as the Synoptic Gospels, but it also has some distinctive characteristics. For example it does not employ parables in the same way the others do and John gives Christ new titles drawing on nature such as the Lamb of God, Bread of Life and the Vine.

John 1

1 In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. 2 He was in the beginning with God. 3 All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing

came into being. What has come into being 4 in him was life, and the life was the light of all people. 5 The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it.

6 There was a man sent from God, whose name was John. 7 He came as a witness to testify to the light, so that all might believe through him. 8 He himself was not the light, but he came to testify to the light. 9 The true light, which enlightens everyone, was coming into the world.

10 He was in the world, and the world came into being through him; yet the world did not know him. 11 He came to what was his own,^[c] and his own people did not accept him. 12 But to all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God, 13 who were born, not of blood or of the will of the flesh or of the will of man, but of God.

14 And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father's only son, full of grace and truth. 15 (John testified to him and cried out, "This was he of whom I said, 'He who comes after me ranks ahead of me because he was before me.'") 16 From his fullness we have all received, grace upon grace. 17 The law indeed was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ. 18 No one has ever seen God. It is God the only Son, who is close to the Father's heart, who has made him known.

19 This is the testimony given by John when the Jews sent priests and Levites from Jerusalem to ask him, "Who are you?" 20 He confessed and did not deny it, but confessed, "I am not the Messiah." 21 And they asked him, "What then? Are you Elijah?" He said, "I am not." "Are you the prophet?" He answered, "No." 22 Then they said to him, "Who are you? Let us have an answer for those who sent us. What do you say about yourself?" 23 He said,

"I am the voice of one crying out in the wilderness,
'Make straight the way of the Lord,'"
as the prophet Isaiah said.

Questions for reflection

- *What do you think the writer of John's Gospel is telling us about Jesus's place in creation by modelling his opening on Genesis?*
- *If we consider that all creation "came into being" through God, how might that change our views?*
- *The wilderness is an important idea in the Bible – for Israel on the exodus from Egypt; where John spends part of his ministry and where Jesus is challenged by the Devil. What role does the wilderness play in your life?*

The Nightingale And Glow-Worm, William Cowper

Introduction

William Cowper (1731-1800) was one of the most popular English poets of the 18th century. He wrote the words to hymns including 'God moves in a mysterious way' and 'O for a closer walk with God'. He knew John Newton, who wrote the words to 'Amazing Grace' and wrote some poems to support the campaign to abolish slavery.

Cowper struggled with mental health problems for much of his life and found some solace by living in the countryside. Many of his poems, like this one, consider the role of different animals and elements of nature.

The Nightingale And Glow-Worm

A Nightingale that all day long
Had cheered the village with his song,
Nor yet at eve his note suspended,
Nor yet when eventide was ended,
Began to feel, as well he might,
The keen demands of appetite;
When looking eagerly around,
He spied, far off upon the ground,
A something shining in the dark,
And knew the glow-worm by his spark;
So stooping down from hawthorn top,
He thought to put him in his crop;
The worm, aware of his intent,
Harangued him thus right eloquent:

'Did you admire my lamp,' quoth he,
'As much as I your minstrelsy,
You would abhor to do me wrong,
As much as I to spoil your song,
For 'twas the self-same power divine
Taught you to sing, and me to shine,
That you with music, I with light,
Might beautify and cheer the night.'
The songster heard his short oration,
And warbling out his approbation,
Released him, as my story tells,
And found a supper somewhere else.

Hence jarring sectaries may learn,
Their real interest to discern:
That brother should not war with brother,
And worry and devour each other,
But sing and shine by sweet consent,
Till life's poor transient night is spent,
Respecting in each other's case
The gifts of nature and of grace.

Those Christians best deserve the name,
Who studiously make peace their aim;
Peace, both the duty and the prize
Of him that creeps and him that flies.

Questions for reflection

- How does the glow worm convince the nightingale not to eat him?
- What is the lesson that Cowper intends us to learn from this poem?
- What “gifts of nature and of grace” do you think that God has given humanity?
- What kind of peace do you think humanity might need to come with nature?

Some further reading

Thomas Traherne, *Eden*
Henry Thoreau (1854), *Walden*

Song of Songs 7

Song of Songs, also called Song of Solomon, has sometimes been a source of embarrassment for western Christianity. The sensual language found in Song of Songs reflects the common experiences of human love, lust and sexuality. The passage below is typical of the wider book in that it uses similes to move repeatedly between descriptions of animals, fruits, jewels, human creation and the human form. The writer is trying to convey a sense of great desire and beauty and in order to do this needs to draw on every part of creation to convey the greatness of his or her love.

Introduction

Expressions of Praise

- 1 How graceful are your feet in sandals,
O queenly maiden!
Your rounded thighs are like jewels,
the work of a master hand.
- 2 Your navel is a rounded bowl
that never lacks mixed wine.
Your belly is a heap of wheat,
encircled with lilies.
- 3 Your two breasts are like two fawns,
twins of a gazelle.
- 4 Your neck is like an ivory tower.
Your eyes are pools in Heshbon,
by the gate of Bath-rabbim.
Your nose is like a tower of Lebanon,
overlooking Damascus.
- 5 Your head crowns you like Carmel,
and your flowing locks are like purple;
a king is held captive in the tresses.
- 6 How fair and pleasant you are,
O loved one, delectable maiden!
- 7 You are stately as a palm tree,
and your breasts are like its clusters.
- 8 I say I will climb the palm tree
and lay hold of its branches.
O may your breasts be like clusters of the vine,
and the scent of your breath like apples,
9 and your kisses like the best wine

that goes down smoothly,
gliding over lips and teeth.
10 I am my beloved's,
and his desire is for me.
11 Come, my beloved,
let us go forth into the fields,
and lodge in the villages;
12 let us go out early to the vineyards,
and see whether the vines have budded,
whether the grape blossoms have opened
and the pomegranates are in bloom.
There I will give you my love.
13 The mandrakes give forth fragrance,
and over our doors are all choice fruits,
new as well as old,
which I have laid up for you, O my beloved

Questions for reflection

- *The relationship between lovers, or a husband and wife, is often used in the New Testament as a metaphor for the relationship between Jesus and the Church. How could this reading be used as a metaphor for the relationship between humanity and nature?*
- *What amongst creation generates in you the kind of intense desire as expressed in this passage? What do these desires say about you and God's desire for all of creation?*

Some further reading

Margery Kempe (1438), *The Book of Margery Kempe*

To a Mouse by Robert Burns

Introduction

Robert Burns (1759-1796) is Scotland's national poet and known as 'The Ploughman Poet', amongst many other nicknames. He was the oldest of seven children of a farmer who repeatedly moved and had an unsettled life himself, dying young with 12 children.

To a Mouse is an apology from Burns to a field mouse after disturbing its nest when out ploughing. He considers this act to be more broadly symbolic of man exerting its control over nature, and upsetting the balance of relations between people, animals and the environment. The poem is written in the Scots dialect, and will be easier to understand if you read it aloud (you could even try a adopting a Scottish accent!). If you would like to read a standard English version, you can find it here: <http://www.robertburns.org/inenglish/extracts.shtml>

To a Mouse

Wee, sleekit, cow'rin, tim'rous beastie,
O, what a panic's in thy breastie!
Thou need na start awa sae hasty,
Wi' bickering brattle!

I wad be laith to rin an' chase thee,
Wi' murd'ring pattle!

I'm truly sorry man's dominion,
Has broken nature's social union,
An' justifies that ill opinion,
Which makes thee startle
At me, thy poor, earth-born companion,
An' fellow-mortal!

I doubt na, whiles, but thou may thieve;
What then? poor beastie, thou maun live!
A daimen icker in a thrave
'S a sma' request;
I'll get a blessin wi' the lave,
An' never miss't!

Thy wee bit housie, too, in ruin!
It's silly wa's the win's are strewin!
An' naething, now, to big a new ane,
O' foggage green!
An' bleak December's winds ensuin,
Baith snell an' keen!

Thou saw the fields laid bare an' waste,
An' weary winter comin fast,
An' cozie here, beneath the blast,
Thou thought to dwell-
Till crash! the cruel coulter past
Out thro' thy cell.

That wee bit heap o' leaves an' stibble,
Has cost thee mony a weary nibble!
Now thou's turn'd out, for a' thy trouble,
But house or hald,
To thole the winter's sleety dribble,
An' cranreuch cauld!

But, Mousie, thou art no thy lane,
In proving foresight may be vain;
The best-laid schemes o' mice an' 'men
Gang aft agley,
An'lea'e us nought but grief an' pain,
For promis'd joy!

Still thou art blest, compar'd wi' me
The present only toucheth thee:
But, Och! I backward cast my e'e,
On prospects drear!
An' forward, tho' I canna see,
I guess an' fear!

Questions for reflection

- *What does Burns see that he has in common with the mouse? And what are the major differences he can see between them?*
- *Is "man's dominion" a good or bad thing for the mouse and for nature more widely? How does this link to the Genesis reading we looked at earlier this week?*
- *Burns is truly sorry for destroying the mouse's "wee bit housie". Is there a time when you have inadvertently killed an animal or destroyed its home? How did it make you feel? When could a Christian justify this kind of act?*
- *How do nature and humanity share similar plights?*

Some further reading

Robert Burns, *Banks of Cree*

Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner:Part VII*