

**Sermon for Creation Time Season Week 1**  
**by The Reverend Colin James at All Saints Church Wokingham on 2**  
**September 2018**

(The epistle reading was James 1.17-end. The gradual hymn was "When I survey the wondrous cross")

Why on earth should we sing a familiar Good Friday hymn on the first day of Creationtime?

Obviously, I believe there's a good reason, or I shouldn't have chosen it! The clue lies in the line, "Were the whole realm of nature mine..." The realm of nature is not yours or mine. It belongs to God. He created it and has never walked away from it. But he has entrusted it in a special way to us humans, created in his own image. So it's not ours to dispose of. It is ours to cherish as a precious gift. If we do that, it can be a source of sustenance and delight, both for us and the generations coming after us.

Yet as we look at the world around us, no-one would suspect us of having cherished it. I'll not depress you with a list of examples. There's no need; we all know that the "dominion" the Psalmist tells us God gives us "over the works of his hands" has been turned into selfish exploitation for our own gratification and the pursuit of power.

God's gifts were meant to be cherished and to be generously shared. Our first reading began with the inspiring words, "Every generous act of giving, with every perfect gift, is from above, coming down from the Father of lights, with whom there is no variation or shadow of change."(17) God is the ultimate source of love, but also of generosity. God is generosity personified and is utterly faithful and reliable.

The main lesson this teaches us is that we have nothing we can properly call our own or pass on to others, which doesn't in the first place come from God. We remind ourselves of this every time we join in the words of King David, "Yours, Lord, are the greatness, the power, the glory, the splendour and the majesty.... for everything in heaven and on earth is yours. All things come from you and of your own do we give you."(cf 2 Chr 29.11,14) We say them often enough, but when did we last pause and let this truth, and its implications for us, sink in? We have nothing to offer to God that we didn't first receive from him. If he's given us dominion over creation, it's so that we should behave in a godlike way, as beings reflecting his image and his nature.

Our epistle goes on to remind us, "In fulfilment of his purpose he gave us birth by the word of truth, so that we would become a kind of first fruits of his creatures." This adds a further dimension. We are more than a part of a creation from long ago. We are part of a new creation brought about by the "word of truth", that is by Jesus Christ.

If we're to reflect God's nature, we must never lose sight of what that nature is. It's twofold. In the first place it is quite simply loving and generous, as seen in the

original creation. But that's far from the whole story. When we humans messed things up, our own lives and everything we touched, God didn't leave us to our fate. He entered the mess we had made and, in the person of Jesus, offers a new way back into his presence.

Without God's help we can never emulate the level of his utter commitment, and live lives of perfect love and generosity. There is a gap between us which can only be bridged with his help. We still hang on to a sort of memory of how things should be, but by itself that's not enough. As Jesus teaches us, "If you who are evil know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father in heaven give good things to those who ask him." (Mt 7.11) Because we can't attain something, that's no reason to give up trying. We need to tap into the power of God's love. And the means he has given us to do this is to live in Christ. That sounds fine, but how do we set about it? And can we ever hope to succeed?

I know I've spoken before about the wise advice I was given many years ago by an elderly nun who was at that time my spiritual director. She used to say very little, but this precious gem more than made up for the hours of silence! "The longer I live, she said, the more I realise that we are to praise and thank God at all times, but especially when things are going badly and we feel no inclination to do so." She'd come to understand that it's only when we develop the will to look beyond our present troubles and dwell on God's love and faithfulness that we can break out of the prison of our own self concern.

Our feelings of misfortune or disappointment are often very real, but they don't even begin to balance God's gifts of life, and of the world we live in. And the list could go on forever. Of course we in the prosperous first world don't have far to look to see how much better off we are in so many ways than most other people across the globe.

As children we were taught to sing, "Count your blessings. Name them one by one, and it will surprise you what the Lord has done." Those simple words, embedded in countless memories, have surely offered untold strength and comfort in times of distress and despair.

But they're so much more than just an anchor to hold on to in a terrifying storm.

They are, or should be, a constant reminder of our place in the scheme of things, and how we should respond to it. Put quite simply, God is good, loving and generous. And we're only living up to our vocation as his children created in his image, if we are too. People have long tried to find ways of suggesting that Jesus didn't quite mean it when he said, "Be perfect... as your heavenly Father is perfect." (Mt 5.48) He had no illusions about our ability to achieve this. Which is why he comes to our help, to inspire men and women to lives of love and generosity which may even surprise themselves.

The more we contemplate the wonders of God's creation, and dwell on his goodness in our lives, the more surely we should want to work with him in sharing the blessings we've received with all people. There are of course very many ways of doing this, too many to go into now. Lots of them involve offering service to others.

But that must never make us neglect the urgent need to offer money to further God's work. And in this context we should be thinking not just of what we give through the church, but how we choose to spend all our money. One of our past bishops once admitted that he realised with a shock that he was spending much more on his summer holiday than he gave in a year to God's work. It's a good thing, he suggested, to look at every part of our spending, to see how it reflects the things we really think are important in life. "Every generous act of giving, with every perfect gift, says St James, is from above, coming down from the Father of lights...".

As God invites us to receive his gifts with grateful hearts, just as surely he calls us to use those gifts in his work of love and generosity in his church, and for the good of his children across the world.

"Were the whole realm of nature mine, that were an offering far too small. Love so amazing, so divine demands my soul, my life, my all." (549)

*Colin James*