

Creation Psalms

Psalm 148 – The Praises of Creation

For your reflection

This psalm lists many different types of creature as well as different elements of creation. Some are easier to imagine praising God than others. Pick one easy one and one hard one. If you were going to paint a picture of each of these created beings/elements praising God, how would you want to portray them doing that? What would you want to include in your picture? If it were a movie, what kind of soundtrack would you want?

The psalmist has thought about the world they live in and how creation, as they know it, might give praise to God. Think about your world today. What is important to you in it? What features of the world inspire you to give praise and thanks? If you were going to write a poem like this, what aspects of your world, and which creatures, would you want to include?

Verses 7 and 8 refer to monsters and dangerous weather conditions. How would you imagine such things giving praise to God? Would they have to become something other first, like a stormy wind becoming a gentle breeze, or can they praise God as they are? Think about something that frightens you and keeps you awake at night. When you pray to God to save you from it, what do you hope for God to do? How would you include it in a psalm like this one?

Verse 14 talks about God's faithful people and then about the people of Israel. (This is possibly a use 'parallelism', a device in Hebrew poetry where an idea is repeated using different wording. Each parallel illustrates the other, like looking at an object from two different directions). How do you think this reference to a particular group of people is intended to work within this psalm that is otherwise inclusive and universal?

My Reflection

Psalm 148 paints a picture of the universe not only inspiring praise from humans, but of every created being giving praise to God. Over thirty categories of creature are addressed and the word "all" is used eight times: it is a psalm of the universe, calling the whole creation to praise God. Human voices are one instrument in a great symphony of praise.

There are important themes in this psalm relating to our world today. First, how should we understand our place in God's creation: as lords and masters and extractors and consumers, or as participants alongside other creatures in community with them? A second issue is whether the majority-creation (those creatures who are not human) has intrinsic value or whether its value is only in relation to its usefulness to humans. Then, third, how do we make sense of the world as it is, and ourselves as we are, and God as God is – where is it all heading?

The psalm divides its catalogue of creatures into two, which we might crudely call the heavens (vv.1-6) and the earth (vv.7-14), with the exclamation "Praise the Lord!" at beginning and end wrapping the whole psalm (and thus the whole creation) in praise.

To start with, the angels are called upon to praise God. We are familiar with that imagery, but perhaps less familiar is the imagery of v.3, of the sun, moon and stars praising God. There may be an element here of the 'heavenly bodies' being put in their place. In the ancient world, as in some present-day spiritual paths, as well as the horoscope in your newspaper, the heavenly bodies were thought to govern our fate, sometime being identified as (or with) gods. In Hebrew thought, however, they are very definitely created things, as subordinate to God as a pebble on a beach. In Genesis 1, the sun and moon are not even needed for light on earth. Their main purpose is as clocks to mark time and the seasons. The same idea is present in Psalm 148: God created them with a command (v.5) and fixed boundaries for them (v.6).

There may be another important angle to the praises offered by these objects. As the psalm moves its focus from heavens to earth, fire, hail, snow, frost, the wind, mountains and trees are all called on to praise God. It is easy to imagine a blackbird praising God (even if in reality, like most birdsong, it is simply defending territory or advertising sexual favours). It's harder to imagine slugs and other creeping things praising God, but near-impossible to imagine how a mountain or a tree praises God. Richard Bauckham, writing on this psalm, suggests that it is simply by being themselves, within the boundaries set by God. He says,

A tree does not need to do anything specific in order to praise God; still less need it be conscious of anything. Simply by being and growing it praises God.¹

¹ Richard Bauckham, Bible and Ecology: Re-discovering the Community of Creation (2010, Darton, Longman and Todd Ltd), p.79

God is glorified when each thing or being God has made is most fully who or what they were created to be. If this is so, then perhaps we are beginning to answer some of the questions raised earlier about the nature of human praise and action. What boundaries has God fixed for us? Who are we and what is our place in the universe?

In the psalm, humans are placed towards the end of the list. But we should be careful about assuming this means we are the climax. The psalm's list of creatures is not otherwise in order of increasing greatness. If it were, we would have to say that a slug, amongst the creeping things of v.10, is greater than the mountains of v.9 or the angels of v.2. I don't think there's any hierarchy within the psalm's list of creatures. Verse 13 calls on all earthly creatures to praise the name of the LORD, whose name alone is exalted and whose glory is above earth and heaven. The universe exists for God and in God. It does not exist for the benefit of humans. The world is not intended to be at our disposal. There is a wildness to nature as depicted in this psalm. The wild animals of v.10 (as in Job chapter 39) live beyond the awareness of humans, but in the psalm they praise God. Even the sea monsters, feared in ancient myths and legends as bringers of chaos and destruction, are called on to praise God. Even the stormy wind does God's will and praises God who is wild and free and greater than the universe itself: God, whose glory is above earth and heaven. Bearing in mind biblical passages like Job 39-41 or Psalm 104.17-26, it seems that God delights in the praises of these wild and dangerous beings, who praise God by being who they were created to be.

Perhaps humans, the most dangerous of all God's creatures, are different and dangerous because we can choose not to praise God. We have the power and the capability to break the boundaries of who we are and seek mastery over each other, mastery over creation and mastery even over God. As in the stories of Eden and Babel, or even in the response in Psalm 8 to the question, "What are human beings?" we have a tendency to exalt ourselves beyond our proper place:

You made them a little lower than God,
and crowned them with glory and honour.
You have given them mastery
 over the works of your hands,
you have put all things under their feet. (Psalm 8.5-6)

We are able to choose hubris rather than humility, and our praise and our relationship with God and our relationship with the majority-creation is turned in on ourselves and made to serve our own wants and our own convenience at any

cost, with that cost being paid by the creatures under our dominion, including human creatures. The works of God's hands are trampled into the earth under the feet of powerful consumers intent only on their own glory and honour and pleasure. This is not Psalm 148's peaceful picture of praises, with humans participating alongside all other creatures in giving glory and honour to God. This is a broken world.

Human intelligence and technological skill have done a lot of good, for example in medical advances. But you don't have to look very hard to see how other people suffer and other creatures suffer when we combine our power with pride and ambition, and cross the boundaries fixed by God,. In a broken world, broken over thousands of years of ungodly human action, the stormy wind (literally and metaphorically speaking) doesn't always do God's will. Coming back to a place of praise and glory to God and finding our rightful place in the praises of creation may be part of the answer to the healing of the world. Maybe a place to start is that question – Who are we?

If you drove your hand (or a spade if you prefer) into the surface of this planet we call Earth, you might dig out some ... earth. In Genesis 2, God takes some of the earth of Earth and makes a man. In the Hebrew in which it was written, God takes some *adamah* and makes *adam*. It works in English, too: God takes some humus and makes a human.

We are of the earth. We are earth creatures. We are part of this earth planet, this living planet with its hot, red beating heart, mother to billions of living creatures. We are mud people. It's important to keep that connection with the mud, with the earth, with the humus, if we are to have the humility to be truly human, like Jesus. Bishop James Jones has said that the only title Jesus claimed for himself was Son of Man, which in Hebrew or the Aramaic Jesus spoke, would have been Son of Earth². Perhaps our humanity can be measured by the humus under our nails; in other words, by how connected we are to the earth and the creatures with whom we share the earth. We are people of earth, living amongst creatures of earth, on earth, where we pray for God's will to be done as in heaven. We are mud creatures alongside other mud creatures (although the mud was made from star dust), and all is held within the love of God, whose glory is above earth and heaven.

Paying attention to who we are and paying attention to the creatures around us is an important step in the healing of the world. In the same way that you feel

² From a talk I heard him give in Coventry Cathedral in 2015

valued when someone remembers your name, the study of animals and plants, cloud formations, stars – whatever appeals to you – even at the basic level of learning to spot the difference, helps develop an appreciation of them and the feeling that they have a value in their own right, and it leads us to praise the Creator. Richard Bauckham says that, “Sharing something of God’s primal delight in creation enables us also to delight in God himself.”³ (Or as Alice Walker puts it, more earthily, “It pisses God off if you walk past the color purple in a field somewhere and don’t notice it.”⁴) When our praise is true, it will be because we are taking our place alongside fellow creatures, taking notice of them and valuing them for what/who they are, rather than dominating them. We will find joy and peace and our own healing as we join in the praises of the community of creation.

At the end of the psalm, in v.14, mention of Israel could be written off as a hubristic addition to the psalm, or it could be a way of adding a relational, covenantal dimension that delivers the psalm from simply being about praising a God who is exalted and great. The reasons for praise given in the psalm so far, in vv.5-6 and 13, have been about God’s greatness. In vv.5-6, the heavenly beings are told to praise God because God created them and fixed their boundaries. In v.13, the earthly beings (perhaps especially the humans in vv.11-12) are put in their place as they are reminded that God alone is exalted. In the structure of the psalm, v.14 is the equivalent of v.6, so that earlier idea of boundaries may help us understand v.14’s reference to Israel.

Mention of Israel enriches the text by evoking the story of a covenant people, from God calling Abram through to the prophets’ visions of what salvation will look like on the day of the Lord. That call comes without condition or coercion. It is a call to respond to grace and live within the boundaries God set out, including compassion for the weak and the vulnerable, economics based on grace rather than grasping, care for animals and care and respect for the land – boundaries that would enable all creatures to be their true selves and to flourish. Psalm 148 reflects this grace of God throughout: although the language is mostly in the imperative voice (“Praise God...”), those imperatives are summed up in two invitations: “Let them praise ...” God’s glory may be above earth and heaven, but praise is not a duty and it is not a device to manipulate God. It is a celebration of the life God gives, entered into freely as a gift in response to a gift. If the world is broken by humans overstepping our boundaries and dishonouring God, how

³ Richard Bauckham, [Living with Other Creatures: Green Exegesis and Theology](#) (2011, Baylor University Press). I failed to make a note of the source for this quote, but I have tracked down to this book.

⁴ Alice Walker, [The Color Purple](#) (1983, The Women’s Press), p.167

much more will healing and salvation come when we do choose to respond in humility and grace and take our true place in creation's symphony of praise to the God who, according to Psalm 145.9, is filled with compassion for all s/he has made.

From a primrose to an oak, from a robin's song to a fox's yowl, from the sun's embrace to the rain's gentle kiss, the universe is charged with the grandeur of God and praises God in an infinite variety of voices. I can choose – or not – for my voice to be part of that great chorus and to honour God with my whole being. It's a choice of humility over hubris, of learning to value other creatures for being themselves, of taking time to pay attention, and of participating in the life of the love of God.

Ideas For Praying With Psalm 148

Outdoors

Find a place to sit outdoors. Take a few moments to slow your breathing, to feel the weight of your body and to become present in this place and at this time. Ask God to open your eyes. Let your attention fix on a tree, a plant, a flower, a bird singing – whatever grabs you. 'Listen' to the creature in order to perceive how it gives glory to God. Give your own thanks alongside the creature. Don't rush on, but when you feel ready, let your attention move to something else and repeat the listening and thanking. Keep going for as long as feels right. Finish by saying the Lord's Prayer, bearing in mind that when you say 'Our' and 'Us', you include the creatures with whom you've been praying.

Indoors

In the 'For your reflection' section above I asked: *The psalmist has thought about the world they live in and how creation, as they know it, might give praise to God. Think about your world today. What is important to you in it? What features of the world inspire you to give praise and thanks? If you were going to write a poem like this, what aspects of your world, and what creatures, would you want to include?*

Write that poem!

Prayers

Let us praise the name of the Holy One,
for God's name alone is exalted.
God's glory is above earth and heaven.

Hallelujah!

Let all creation give God praise.

Let us praise for sun and moon,
the beauty of the stars at night,
for the blueness of a summer sky,
and the splendour of thunderclouds,
for the glory of sunset,
and the uplift of a rainbow.

Hallelujah!

Let all creation give God praise.

Let us praise for oceans and rivers,
for mountains towering over green valleys,
for forests and fields,
spring blossom, summer flowers and autumn fruits,
for ordered gardens
and plants bursting through cracks in pavements.

Hallelujah!

Let all creation give God praise.

Let us praise for birds and beasts,
for the blackbird's song
and the tawny owl's call,
for amazing sea life,
for fox cubs at play,
for horses, sheep and cats,
for the snail's exquisite shell
and the hum of bees.

Hallelujah!

Let all creation give God praise.

Let us praise for human beings,
for our rich variety of races, languages,
sexualities and worldviews;
for enquiring minds and artistic expression,
skillful hands to make and mend;
for care, compassion, commitment and love.

Hallelujah!

Let all creation give God praise.

Let us praise the Creator
for such abundance and diversity
in all that has been made.

May the words of our mouths
and the meditations of our hearts
and the outcomes of our deeds
be pleasing in your sight
and give you honour and glory.

Hallelujah!

Let all creation give God praise.

Amen.

Collect

Creator God,
who has made all things
to flourish in a rich web of life;
strengthen us in gentleness and compassion,
that the words of our mouths and the service of our lives
may always be in harmony
with the praises of all the community of creation,
through our Saviour, Jesus Christ.
Amen.