

Creation Psalms

Psalm 8 – Who do you think you are?

For your reflection

In v.6, the New Revised Standard Version uses the word ‘dominion’. In Christian thinking about the relationship of humans with the majority-creation, the gentler idea of stewardship is often favoured instead of the stronger dominion, even though it’s not the word used here or in Genesis 1.26. If you substitute stewardship for dominion in v.6, what difference does it make to the psalm? Will you also have to re-word the second half of the verse? Does it affect v.5 too? Try playing with different wording and see how it feels.

How do you think the psalmist, in their day, imagined human dominion (or stewardship – see above) being exercised over “the birds of the air and the fish of the sea” (v.8a)? What does this have to say to us in our day?

Think of a time when a small child has said something profound to you. (If you can’t remember such an occasion, ask a friend who is a parent of small children or a teacher). How do you make room in your life to hear fresh truth from “the mouths of babes and infants” (v.2)? How does your Church make sure it hears the voices of its young members? Can you suggest good ways for young and old to learn from each other, especially in relation to the environmental crisis?

My Reflection

Psalm 8 has long been thought to be linked to the creation account in Genesis 1.1-2.4a. However, there is little in common, other than the idea of human dominion in v.6. In v.3, the heavens are the work of God's fingers, rather than of God's word as in Genesis 1. Even the language of making in v.5 is more to do with ordering than with bringing into being. But the idea of dominion is equally problematic in both passages.

Who do you think you are? "What are human beings that you are mindful of them?" asks v.4. The same question is asked elsewhere in the bible. In Job 7.17-21, Job complains about God's attention. He feels that God never lets him alone, even just to swallow his spit. He longs for a break, for God to look away. It's a similar idea, in a way, to the sentiment of Psalm 139. But while Job feels that God's mindfulness of him has brought about his suffering, and Psalm 139 could be read in a similarly negative way, the sense in Psalm 8 is more positive, alluding to the love of God in the parallel question in v.4: "[What are] mortals, that you care for them?" This question of v.4 is asked in an almost-identical couplet in Psalm 144.3. In that psalm, the answer is full of humility: "They are like a breath; their days are like a passing shadow." Under the open sky at night, with the moon, planets and stars stretching into infinity above you, humility might be a natural response: "Why would the God whose glory is set over all this think about little me?" But who can cope with such insignificance? Perhaps that is why the answer in Psalm 8 takes a different path in vv.5-8 and asserts humanity's importance.

The danger is that one moves on too easily from a sense of God's care and love for little me, into the realm of hubris and pride. Verse 6 uses the language of power and authority. It uses the strong word 'dominion', defined in the parallel of v.6b as "you have put all things under their feet." This is dangerous stuff and feels very uncomfortable in the light of the enormous amount of damage done over the last hundred years or so under the tramping feet of human beings, whether the slaughter of industrialized warfare, or the huge number of species lost to extinction in the past few decades, or the harm being done through warming the earth by burning far too much carbon. Who do we think we are that we can take this kind of dominion over creation and trample it under our feet?

The poet Gerard Manley Hopkins lamented industrial damage in his sonnet, *The Grandeur Of God*. In it, he complains that,

Generations have trod, have trod, have trod;

and all is seared with trade; bleared, smeared with toil;
and wears man's smudge and shares man's smell: the soil
is bare now, nor can foot feel, being shod.

Shod feet cannot feel the earth beneath them, and they can do a lot more damage. When on retreat one recent summer at St Beuno's in North Wales, which had been the college where Hopkins trained as a Jesuit priest, I spent an afternoon barefoot. It's an interesting exercise to do – why not give it a go now? This will still be here when you get back, and then I'll tell you how I experienced it.

I love the feel of the earth beneath my feet. I feel it connects me much more strongly to the planet. Mown grass is super and a sandy beach is good, as is mud. However, the gravel paths at St Beuno's were painful, and on a walk through a little wood in the grounds I had to go very carefully indeed because of the holly leaves, larch twigs, nettles and thistles. Walking the same route in shoes the day before, I hadn't even noticed that there was holly in the wood, and I had thought I was being attentive. Walking barefoot is slow but heightens your attention to the world around you (your mindfulness, in the language of Psalm 8). There are many things I do not like to have under my feet. It made me mindful of the impact of my footprint on the earth, i.e. the impact of my life, so much of which is careless and indifferent – the very opposite of mindful – as I tramp around consuming stuff.

Unless I walk barefoot much more until the soles of my feet have turned to leather, I have to go shod. Even with hardened soles, I would risk picking up parasites and infections through my feet. I think Hopkins was a great romantic, and while I share some of his sense of dismay at the industrialized world, I recognize that I have to be realistic about life, and look for a way of godly living in the world as it is. We cannot afford to be romantic about nature any more than we can afford to be indifferent towards it or willfully ignorant of it. We must be realistic and mindful of the power of industrial humanity for good and bad, as well as realistic and mindful of the plants and animals (and people) and the planet itself, especially where there is pain and suffering.

Perhaps Psalm 8 is being realistic about human power and authority. That power, and its impact, is much greater now than three thousand years ago (or whenever the psalm was written) so it is all the more urgent to consider its challenging question: "What are humans?"

One possibility is that the psalm simply shows us how hard we find it to embrace insignificance, and how easily we can move from humility to hubris, even to the

point of claiming a status only a little lower than God (v.5) (or, better translated, “the gods” or “heavenly beings”). We would be wise to listen to any discomfort this hubristic assertion causes us, and reflect on the refrain that opens and closes, and so wraps around, the psalm: “O Lord, our Sovereign, how majestic is your name in all the earth!” (vv.1, 9)

Another possibility, suggested by Walter Brueggemann, is that the psalm holds in tension human authority and praise for God’s glory. In his understanding, both are needed. Simply praising God would be abdicating human responsibility. If God is sovereign over creation, does that mean that we can blame God for all that is wrong in the world and insist that God sorts it out? On the other hand, asserting human power without giving praise to God is precisely to move beyond our place in the divine ordering of creation and usurp God. What may be envisaged in the psalm is a kind of partnership where humans act as God’s agents on earth, acting on God’s behalf and in God’s way: paying attention to, caring for and serving the creatures over whom we can be so powerful. That is why the psalm wraps humanity’s status with God’s greater glory. In acknowledging our power and role (ministry?), we don’t assert our status in any hubristic way but humbly give glory to God in all things.

Psalm 8 is quoted in the New Testament in Hebrews 2.6-9, in which the psalm is applied to Jesus, his crucifixion and resurrection. In this Christological reading, the question is not so much, “What are human beings, the sons and daughters of Adam,” (v.4) but “What is the human, the Son of Man?” The answer comes in Jesus, who laid glory aside to take the form of a servant and humbled himself to the point of death, to be raised to life in glory (Philippians 2.5-9). If we read the psalm in this way, dominion is understood as obedience to God, power is the ability to choose to serve, and the feet under which all things are placed are nailed to a cross. If you want less of the supplement (i.e. New Testament), something of this kind of reading could be deduced from the somewhat obscure v.2, where praise comes from the mouths of “babes and infants” – those who are least powerful and least articulate. This praise from the least is what defeats God’s enemies (perhaps an allusion to creation myths involving a divine struggle against a chaos monster, out of which the world emerged). As Jesus pointed out, those who want to enter the kingdom of heaven must become like little children (Matthew 18.3). Perhaps it is in this attitude of simple delight (or praise) and humble love that human power within creation takes its truest, most godly, form, wrapped around in the glory of God.

Ideas For Praying With Psalm 8

Outdoors

Take off your shoes and socks and go for a walk. Through awareness of the ground underfoot, pray about how you relate to the world.

Find a big tree and lie down (or kneel) under it and look up. What if God is bigger than the tree? Become mindful of how you feel and tell God. Ask God what s/he wants to say to you.

Indoors

Recall a time when you saw a really clear night sky and how it made you feel. If it's hard to remember, and you don't have the opportunity of a really clear night sky right now (if you do, go outside and look!), search online for the 'Earthrise' picture taken from Apollo 8, or look at pictures of the night sky. Talk to God about how you feel in relation to the grandeur of the universe. Ask God how s/he feels about you.

Prayers

Prayer of Confession

Gentle God,
we have the world at our feet
but we have not trodden carefully.

We have grown too big for our boots.
We have trampled the poor into the dust.
We have walked rough-shod over the works of your hands.
We have trampled on your earth
until the waters are dirtied and the air is polluted
and animals and plants alike
bear the print of our sole.

The beauty of your creation
is obliterated under our feet
and we are sorry.

Gentle God, forgive us.
Help us tread in the footprints of Jesus.
Make us mindful of the poor and vulnerable,
whether human or otherwise.
May we use the gifts you have given us
and the power that we have
to care for them as you care for us;
for the glory of your name,
gentle God of love and life.
Amen

God and Me

One hundred billion galaxies in the universe
and counting.
Two hundred and fifty billion stars in the galaxy
and counting.
One hundred billion planets around them
and counting.
And me.

One hundred billion pebbles on this beach
and counting.
Three hundred and twenty-one million cubic miles of water in the ocean
and counting.
Thirty-three thousand species of fish
and counting.
And me.

Five thousand trees in this wood
and counting.
Fifty million blades of grass in this clearing
and counting.
Three hundred and fifty species of insect in this oak tree
and counting.
And me.

God beyond measure,
who was, and is, and is to come,
whose glory is set above the heavens,
eternal, infinite, endless.
And me.
And me?

Fear not, I have redeemed you.
I have called you by your name, you are mine.
You are precious in my sight, and I love you.

God of grace and love,
Thank you.

Collect

Almighty God,
you have blessed the human race with power
and entrusted to us the works of your hands;
keep us mindful of the smallest and least,
that we may care for them with greatest honour;
for the glory and majesty of your name.
Amen