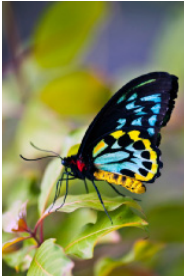


Week Four

**CREATION
BLESSES THE LORD**

And it was good



CREATION BLESSES THE LORD

So far these studies have explored scripture passages that form part of the story of God's people, and relate to Jesus Christ directly. But what of the many passages which are not tied directly to the story of God's people? This study picks up two of these, one from the Psalms and the other being a song from the Apocrypha.

Bible Exploration

Psalm 104

Both the passages suggested for this week were probably written to be part of worship – which is certainly how we generally use them today. In this worshipping spirit they offer us a sense of joy and wonder in the Lord's creation. Psalm 104 expresses with vivid detail God's intimate care for and delight in every aspect of creation – grass grows for cattle, high mountains form a habitat for wild goats, the dark gives opportunity for night creatures to feed – and all things look to the Lord for their nourishment.

The psalm also stresses the importance of times and seasons in the rhythm of creation, and that animal and human alike need to live according to the patterns imposed by the sun and the moon, and the cycle of life. This is all part of the **wisdom** (verse 24) that God shows in the divine work of creation. Further, and this is only remarkable to modernist urban westerners, in this psalm humans are not singled out from other animals: their life is interwoven with nature as a whole. Everything depends on God – it is God's **spirit or breath** (verse 30) that brings creation into being.

Verses 6-9 describe the earth in the terms of traditional concepts that understood it to float on a large abyss of salt water, waters which are hostile to God, whose divine power is shown in being able to control them. The reference to **Leviathan** (verse 26) is striking evidence of this. Leviathan is a figure from Canaanite mythology, depicted as a fearsome sea-monster. The psalm borrows from the Canaanite imagery – and transforms it: now Leviathan is no longer fearsome but domesticated. We could almost suggest that it is depicted as God's great bath-toy!

Christians and Jews have for centuries found inspiration in using this psalm in praise of God. It calls us to humility, to acknowledge that we are but one aspect of the immense inter-connectedness of nature, all of which depends on the powerful, life-giving breath of God. Psalm 104 is a good antidote to any dominating attitude we may have towards creation.

The Song of the Three Young Men / Prayer of Azariah

[The text is printed at the end of this week's study notes]

This song is not in the Aramaic text of Daniel, on which our Bibles are based, but was inserted between Daniel 3.23 and 3.24 in the Greek version, which early Christians used as their scriptures.

Anglicans throughout the world may know this text as the '**Benedicite**' (i.e. *the command, in the plural, that we Bless God*). It is under that name that it appears in the Book of Common Prayer, as an alternative canticle at Morning Prayer. It is not part of the canonical Old Testament, but is included within the '**Apocrypha**'. Which provokes the interesting question – how should Anglicans use and interpret the Apocrypha, particularly this text, which appears in our foundational Prayer Book? What authority does it have for us?

As with Psalm 104, human beings are not treated here as unique: they are summoned, along with the angels, animals, plants, landscape features and natural phenomena like frost, stars and heat to **bless the Lord**. The whole of creation is called upon to sing God's praise. What is even more remarkable is to consider the context in which this song is set: it is sung by three young men being punished for being faithful to God by being thrown into a burning fiery furnace. Their offence was to refuse to bow down to an idol of the king. The song therefore is a powerful response to the charge laid on them. Instead of worshipping a created object, they are inviting all creation to sing up and bless its divine Creator.

If Psalm 104 calls us to celebrate God's delight in creation when we feel all is going well, the **Song of the Three Young Men** challenges us to do so when things look bleak, especially for our faith in God. Whatever our situation in life, we are to regard all creatures as those who can be summoned to bless God – which might change our attitude towards how we live with them.

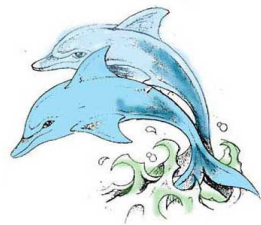
Reflection

These two prayers take their starting point from the 'Benedicite' – and then adapt it to the author's specific cultural and geographical situation.

What would you include if you wrote a 'Benedicite' linked to your country?

*O give thanks to our God who is good:
whose love endures forever.
You sun and moon, you stars of the southern sky:
give to our God your thanks and praise.
Sunrise and sunset, night and day:
give to our God your thanks and praise.
All mountains and valleys, grassland and scree,
glacier, avalanche, mist and snow:
give to our God your thanks and praise.
You kauri and pine, rata and kowhai, mosses and ferns:
give to our God your thanks and praise.
Dolphins and kahawai, sealion and crab,
coral, anemone, pipi and shrimp:
give to our God your thanks and praise.
Rabbits and cattle, moths and dogs
kiwi and sparrow and tui and hawk:
give to our God your thanks and praise.
You Maori and Pakeha, women and men,
all who inhabit the long white cloud:
give to our God your thanks and praise.
All you saints and martyrs of the South Pacific:
give to our God your thanks and praise.*

From A New Zealand Prayer Book/He Karakia Mihinare o Aotearoa page 457



And it was good

An African Benedicite (extract)

*All you big things, bless the Lord
Mount Kilimanjaro and Lake Victoria
The Rift Valley and the Serengeti Plain
Fat baobabs and shady mango trees
All eucalyptus and tamarind trees*

Bless the Lord

Praise and extol Him for ever and ever

*All you tiny things, bless the Lord.
Busy black ants and hopping fleas,
Wriggling tadpoles and mosquito larvae,
Flying locusts and water drops,
Pollen dust and tsetse flies,
Millet seeds and dried dagaa,*

Bless the Lord.

Praise and extol Him for ever and ever



Reading the Bible with Anglicans around the World

Psalm 104 in particular reminds us that even within the Old Testament the traces of an earlier world-view can be discovered. Two of the groups who took part in the Bible in the Life of the Church project reflected on the importance of engaging seriously with an indigenous world-view – which may at times challenge us to explore our Christian faith in a new way. What can we learn from the respect given to creation in many indigenous cultures to assist us in reading the Bible?

Listen to what the East African regional group reported:

The East African Anglican community as well as the entire worldwide Anglican Communion should borrow from primal societies in order to make the Fifth Mark of Mission achievable... Insights from East African primal religion and worldview were instrumental in the understanding and interpretation of the texts read during the contextual bible study.

The point that came out very strongly was that in primal societies, creation was approached and treated with awe and reverence, devoid of exploitation. Before cutting a tree, the spirits of a tree had to be appeased lest they could get angry and revenge. The same applied to hunting and fishing expeditions. The implication is that if one cuts a tree then there is need to plant more. If human beings eat animals, birds or fish, they must not put their existence to jeopardy since the future generation equally needs them.

This idea is widely held in other primal societies outside East Africa... It is critical that we begin to dialogue with primal religion and worldview, which has untapped resources that are radically helpful in engaging the Fifth Mark of Mission.'

In North America, the insights of Native American cultures were referred to, not only in relation to attitudes to creation, but also to our engagement with the Bible. One member of the group commented:

It is important to understand the common approach and attitude of indigenous peoples: in the Navajo conception, for example, Truth is seen as a mountain with multiple angles and perspectives; you can only see it properly from a minimum of four sides. Sacred truth—that is, about the universe and about God's relation to creation—needs all four directions. It has a necessary complexity that implies an interpretive humility.

This approach to truth is also applied to Scripture. There is a truth inherent in these sacred words, but you can't speak about it or engage with it respectfully and adequately without all four directions. Hence, if and when First Nations people engage in these conversations, they are careful not to respond too quickly. When it comes to scripture, many communities practice this in the structure of their gatherings.

They begin by reading the text three times and, with each reading a question is asked:

- (1) what stands out for you,*
- (2) what do you hear God saying,*
- (3) what is God calling us to do?*

It is believed that God is present when you engage the text; God is actively involved and speaks when the community engages with the text.

Questions for Discussion

1. In what ways do we need to learn to live more in harmony with 'times and seasons' than is the case in the Western world at the moment? What might this mean for our life-styles?
2. How far can or should we learn from indigenous, pre-biblical cultures in our attitude to creation? Does the fact that Psalm 104 draws on non-Israelite mythology offer an example for us?
3. Does the fact that the '*Benedicite*' comes from the Apocrypha mean that we read it differently to texts that come from the Old and New Testaments? Does the fact that we can find it in the Book of Common Prayer make any difference to how we use it?
4. '*Sacred truth—that is, about the universe and about God's relation to creation—needs all four directions. It has a necessary complexity that implies an interpretive humility. This approach to truth is also applied to Scripture!*' How far do you agree with this comment about the need for an '*interpretive humility*' in relation to scripture?



Sharing our Insights

What do you want to share with fellow Anglicans as a result of your study and discussion?



Are there comments you wish to feed back into the Bible project? You may wish to do this directly via the Anglican Communion website or email them to the Bible project coordinator. For further details turn to this section in Week Five.

Closing Prayer - A hymn from Australia

*Where wide sky rolls down and touches red sand,
where sun turns to gold the grass of the land,
let spinifex, mulga and waterhole tell
their joy in the One who made everything well.*

*Where rain-forest calm meets reef, tide and storm,
where green things grow lush and oceans are warm,
let every sea-creature and tropical bird
exult in the light of the life-giving Word.*

*Where red gum and creek cross hillside and plain,
where cool tree-ferns rise to welcome the rain,
let bushland, farm, mountain-top, all of their days
delight in the Spirit who formed them for praise.*

*Now, people of faith, come gather around
with songs to be shared, for blessings abound!
Australians, whatever your culture or race,
come, lift up your hearts to the Giver of grace.*

May be sung to PADERBORN
© Elizabeth J. Smith 1956-



The Song of the Three Young Men / Prayer of Azariah

Bless the Lord all you works of the Lord: • sing his praise and exalt him for ever.

Bless the Lord you heavens: • sing his praise and exalt him for ever.

Bless the Lord you angels of the Lord: • bless the Lord all you his hosts; bless the Lord you waters above the heavens: • sing his praise and exalt him for ever.

Bless the Lord sun and moon: • bless the Lord you stars of heaven; bless the Lord all rain and dew: • sing his praise and exalt him for ever.

Bless the Lord all winds that blow: • bless the Lord you fire and heat; bless the Lord scorching wind and bitter cold: • sing his praise and exalt him for ever.

Bless the Lord dews and falling snows: • bless the Lord you nights and days; bless the Lord light and darkness: • sing his praise and exalt him for ever.

Bless the Lord frost and cold: • bless the Lord you ice and snow; bless the Lord lightnings and clouds: • sing his praise and exalt him for ever.

O let the earth bless the Lord: • bless the Lord you mountains and hills; bless the Lord all that grows in the ground: • sing his praise and exalt him for ever.

Bless the Lord you springs: • bless the Lord you seas and rivers; bless the Lord you whales and all that swim in the waters: • sing his praise and exalt him for ever.

Bless the Lord all birds of the air: • bless the Lord you beasts and cattle; bless the Lord all people on earth: • sing his praise and exalt him for ever.

O people of God bless the Lord: • bless the Lord you priests of the Lord; bless the Lord you servants of the Lord: • sing his praise and exalt him for ever.

Bless the Lord all you of upright spirit: • bless the Lord you that are holy and humble in heart.

Bless the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit: • sing his praise and exalt him for ever.

Common Worship: Services and Prayers for the Church of England (2000) (including the Psalter as published with Common Worship)