

Stewards of Creation – St Francis' Day, 2010

When Trish asked me to reflect briefly on being both a Christian and an environmental biologist, in the context of today, I immediately thought about our responsibility towards nature, especially as reflected in our relationship with the animals we know well. For me horses amongst the domestic animals are the ones I relate to best and at work I develop a close relationship with whatever kind of animal I am studying as I describe and name them in my work as a taxonomist – for that is what I am, a taxonomist; a namer.

Naming brings to my mind the second of the two creation stories in Genesis at the beginning of the Bible. Here the writer is exploring the nature of the relationship between God and humans and the rest of creation, and names are an important part of the story.

For instance did you know that this part of scripture has something to say about the world's oldest profession? Aha that caught your attention! Surprising as it may be, the oldest profession was not what you think but that of taxonomist –for in chapter 2 verse 19 of the first book of the bible it says *Out of the ground the Lord God formed every animal and brought them to the man to see what he would name them: and whatever the man called every living creature: that was its name.* Taxonomists are still working hard at this task. About two million species have been named so far and there are another eight million to go. Of course the job is becoming easier and easier all the time as we are wiping out species much faster than we can find and name them. Not that it gives one much satisfaction to name something only so you can list it as extinct.

But this talk about Genesis and naming brings us to the name of the primal human in the story, 'Adam'. This is a play on words in Hebrew with 'Adamah', which means ground and, we are told that the man was formed out of the dust of ground. Adam was born of the Adamah. We are born of the Adamah. In ancient Hebrew times a name also signified attributes of the person and is descriptive of

their character, so, like the rest of creation we are 'of the earth', evolved as part of the intricate ecological web of life. This is our home, this is our natural place.

To finally get to the point of why this passage came to mind for me today we come to verse 15 where it says God '*took the man and put him in the garden of Eden to till it and keep it.*' In the original Hebrew, these two verbs are technical terms designating specific types of responsibility. The word translated as 'to till' in fact means 'to serve', used elsewhere in the Bible to describe the relationship between humanity and God, we are to serve God and this verse then means we are also to serve the garden of this world. Further, the verb translated as 'to keep' has a legal sense of 'guardianship'. Thus '*God took the man and put him in the Garden of Eden to till it and keep it*' means we are to serve and have guardianship over the Garden of this world. This places an entirely different emphasis on our role and place in the world, especially in the light of some of our present behaviour towards it.

We do not own this world, nor yet have freeholder rights over it, but we are to be its caretakers. God has temporarily placed it in our care as trustees for the benefit of the future. We humans are tenants and stewards, responsible to our Maker for how well we look after it.

I think the idea that there is a special relationship between living creatures and humanity is not surprising to those with pets or stock. These are two-way relationships; we do serve them and have guardianship over them, and they respond to the way we treat them. The wider world is the same. As Australians, how are we caring for our land? Or, as the ancient Hebrew writer would have put it: As Adam how are we caring for our Adamah? The earth from which we come.

I would like to finish this section of our service with a couple of prayers: the first is by St Basil and was written over 1600 years ago. As you listen to the language of the prayer you will see that from the earliest days, the church saw that exploiting creation was seen as wrong and against God's values. The second is a modern

prayer and calls us to mend our ways and establish a new more creative and satisfying relationship with nature. As creatures of the earth we are to live creatively with all of nature as we do with our animal friends.

Let us pray:

O God, enlarge within us the sense of fellowship with all living things,
Our brothers the animals to whom you gave the earth as their home in common
with us.

We remember with shame that in the past we have exercised the high dominion
of man with ruthless cruelty;

so that the voice of the earth,

which should have gone up to you in song, has been a groan of travail.

May we realize that they live not for us alone but for themselves

And for you, and that they love the sweetness of life.

And again:

God of evolving diversity,

Made known in seed and soil,

And the wonder of animal worlds,

Free our hearts

From the anxiety

Which knows only domination;

Open our being

To learn from the life

With which we share the earth;

Through Jesus Christ, the Lord of the Harvest. Amen