

A vigil was held in the chapel on the theme of humans in creation on 16 March 2025

This file includes the texts used in the vigil, both the general introduction, the introduction to each reading, and the collects following the readings. All these were written by the chaplain, Nigel Cooper.

Introduction to the vigil

Vigil – a time to be vigilant, like a sentry on watch, looking and listening for the one who comes silently. The one who may be an enemy trickster for us to disarm, or a friend with crucial intelligence to share for us to digest and act upon.

We are adapting the traditional structure of a liturgical vigil in that we are interspersing much music in what might otherwise be periods of silence. The core structure remains, however, a series of Bible passages, followed by a psalm (in our case, successive sections of the Benedicite, which is not strictly a psalm as it is from the Apocrypha) and then a minute's silence. We are not extending the vigil over the night – we shall stop in time for dinner – but we shall be lighting candles to carry us through the dusk into the dark.

The focus of our attention in this evening vigil lies in our bewilderment: what is the role of us humans in nature? This has never been straightforward. We are not at ease with our behaviours as we presume other animals mostly are. When the natural world is hostile towards us, we wonder if it is our fault or just random fate. The ancients faced the same dilemma. And judging by the literature left to us, including the Bible, they answered it sometimes one way, sometimes the other. And if nature or the gods were angry with us, was that due to our failure to fulfil the cultic rituals or to our moral sin? We can read both analyses in the Bible, and both are picked up in our own day in the dispute between those who insist on maintaining gender distinctions (to avoid a Mary Douglas-type of pollution) and those who point to the injustices of society as the root of all our ills.

With the rise of the sciences, both natural and human, we have the potential for greater clarity. We understand, for instance, that earthquakes happen at plate boundaries. That is the reason for more earthquakes in Japan than Britain, not the behaviours of the respective societies. We also know that many natural events cannot be precisely predicted, only given some sort of probability function. It is the scientific form of luck as to whether a person is in the wrong place at the wrong time when a quake strikes. Although, as luck, the thunderbolt could still just be an expression of Zeus's displeasure, the lack of correlation between behaviour and lightning strikes dissuades

us moderns that death by lightning is a punishment – though some interpreted the strike on York Minster in 1984 as a mark of divine displeasure at the consecration of David Jenkins there two days before! Like John's Jesus, when asked about the man born blind, "Who sinned, this man or his parents?" the answer is neither.

Yet the sciences are also revealing chains of cause and effect. Some are initially revealed by statistical correlations, such as smoking and lung cancer; others are predictions derived from applying known processes to novel situations, such as the greenhouse effect of carbon dioxide applied to the global meteorological system. Yet, whereas the link between CO₂ emissions and the climate is a matter primarily of the physical sciences, the human behavioural response is a matter for the social sciences. And these reveal to us that it is the patterns of social power and individual self-interest that are the chief obstacles to meaningful mitigation of the growing climate crisis.

So my argument is returning to a moral account of the cause of our collective distress – and the distress of the rest of the natural world. Both the climate and the biodiversity crises are at root our fault, our moral fault. As the Hebrew prophets intuited, calamities follow gross social injustice.

But we are still animals. Our evolutionary equipment seems inadequate for the task before us. Our natural behavioural traits, both at the level of the individual and of social groups, do not lend themselves to restraint or inter-group collaboration. The biologist in me looks upon us as an invasive species that has escaped its natural habitat with its constraints and that is now on an escalating trajectory until we hit the buffers of ecological limits. We cannot get our collective heads around the notion that nature is not just another player that we can bargain with – so, scientists may calculate a maximum sustainable catch of fish, but governments take this as a negotiating position vis a vis the big commercial companies, with collapsing fisheries as a result.

Malthus was not wrong in principle, he just failed to predict the impact of the exploitation of fossil fuels and the advances of the knowledge economy. That error emboldens those who claim there are no boundaries to human expansion. Yet I stand with Sir David Attenborough, "Only a madman or an economist believes in infinite growth in a finite environment." If we are just animals, there is little we can do but await the crash into the buffers and the accompanying four horsemen of the apocalypse: war, famine, plague and death.

This returns us to the conceptual question Ewan has posed for us: is it Humans with/in/versus/and/or Nature? Are we apart from nature or a part of nature? • Of course, we are in nature; we hold no exemption passes. • However, we are a very unique part of it: we are extraordinarily dominant and powerful. • Yet our greatest weakness lies in the control of our behaviour, where the natural tendencies of our animal nature can dominate us. • Even so though, we know at heart that we have some moral agency, some possibility of self-control, some capacity for humility and compassion for each

other, for other creatures and the natural world. How can we strengthen these? Can our attending to nature around us help? Can waiting upon the Spirit within give us the wisdom we need?

I hope the Bible passages I have selected, plus the music and silence of this vigil will help us reflect, be alert to the truth of things, and deepen our vigilance over our place in Nature.

Readings and collects

Reading 1

Gen 2. 4b-9, 15-17

This is part of the second account of creation in Genesis 2 and is well-known. Shockingly to us, it does give priority of origin to man and not woman – nor the animals. However, it does interestingly describe the human task as caring for and serving the garden. These are the suggested translations of Dr Hilary Marlow who points out that the word for ‘serve’ is often used elsewhere to describe the worship of gods in temples. It is, therefore, a hint that humans should approach nature with the humility of a servant, not with the arrogance of a master, or even of a steward.

Eternal God, originator and completer of all that is, you have evolved us humans to hold a contentious role within the natural world, one in which we echo faintly your creativity and power; grant us the wisdom to play our part with the graceful surefootedness of Christ, the true human, through whom we make this prayer.

Reading 2

Job 39. 1-4, 9-18

Here are some verses from the Hebrew Wisdom tradition from the Book of Job, chapter 39, in which God is portrayed as asking Job questions. The purpose of the questions is to remind Job, a representative human, that he knows comparatively little about the natural world. The poem emphasises that nature goes on its own way, irrespective of humans. Often we cannot control it, as the wild ox refuses domestication, and that even what seem to us to be stupid animals can kick dust up into our faces, like the ostrich outpacing the speeding human.

O God, the creator and the ever-strange one; may we rejoice in the natural world which reflects your independence that we may never master, and rejoice in the authority of nature to put us in our place, through Jesus Christ, our Lord.

After the crucifixion of Jesus, John's gospel, chapter 19, describes the fate of his body: it is entombed in a garden. Gardens have symbolic value in Scripture, from the Garden of Eden to the tree and river at the centre of the New Jerusalem in Revelation. They are the location of Jesus's agony and arrest before his death and of his burial and resurrection afterwards. In John, Mary Magdalene confuses the risen Jesus for the gardener – but this is a dramatic irony, because he and his father are the gardener of all creation. Jesus is also the type of all humans, and our burials in flower-rich graveyards, our return to nature in death, is a sign of hope and renewal, echoing the perpetual renewal of nature.

O Lord the Gardener, you reveal your beauty in designed landscapes where nature and culture meet; may we in those places bow before the awful terror of the death around us and rejoice in the healing and restoration that overcomes that loss with unspeakable glory, that of the risen Christ, our Lord.

St Paul, in Romans 8, considers the pain and suffering of the created order, a suffering shared by both human and non-human nature. Some of that suffering is inflicted by humans, of course. Surprisingly he attributes most responsibility for its futility (its in-vain-ness, as Ecclesiastes might term it) to its creator. He goes on, though, to claim that the suffering is not actually in vain, because it is really the pain of giving birth. Jesus as the new Adam, in his resurrection opens the door to a renewed, glorious creation, through which door other humans and the whole of nature pass through behind him.

Almighty and sovereign Lord, you have subjected all things to futility in order that nothing may ultimately be in vain; as we wait with hope for the consummation of your creation, carry our suffering and that of all your creatures on the cross of Christ, and give us glimpses of the transcendent glory of renewed creation, the glory effected by the resurrection of the One through whom we pray.

Closing collect

Lord Jesus, you exhorted your followers to wait and to watch. We have attended this evening on what the Holy Spirit may be saying to us about our place and role in nature. As Lent moves towards our annual recollection of your passion, give us the mindfulness to remain alert to your call, that we may be your obedient servants, playing our parts now in the care of creation while we await its eternal denouement in the age to come. So, as we go from this place, bless us in our Lenten disciplines we pray.

Bidding prayer

Of your goodness, in this vigil, in your thoughts and prayers, please be mindful of the whole created order of the universe, from the farthest galaxy to the smallest virus, from the power of the sun to the vulnerability of a species on the verge of extinction. You might be mindful of its beauty, its majesty, its fragility, its intimacy; that it brings each of us to birth, sustains us in life, and receives us back at our death.

And please be mindful of the troubled relationship of us humans to the world around us, of our dependence on nature, of our inescapable impact on nature, and of our profligate exploitation of nature.

And be mindful of our own human nature, with its complexities and ambivalences, our senses of guilt and shame, our desires and impulses, our culture, knowledge and creativity, and our humility and compassion.

Reflecting on our hopes and fears, you may wish to join in the Lord's Prayer to gather these up into a prayer to the One whose very essence is overflowing being and love.