

1. Last week we sat with the image of ‘groaning with labour pains in childbirth’, as a way of understanding the life of the cosmos and our own lives. This week I want to explore another image Paul gives us in his letter to the Romans: ‘the creation waits with eager longing.’

Paul writes (8.19), *‘For the creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the children of God.’* Another translation (JB Philipps) which uses more day to day idioms translates this verse, *‘The whole creation is on tiptoe to see the wonderful sight of the children of God coming into their own.’* The Greek word has a sense of ‘to watch with an outstretched head!’ Its an image of excited, eager hopefulness.

In my early childhood, I remember the first time Dad went away with Mum for an overseas work trip. (He often travelled, but this was the first time he went with her, from memory). Dad was an engineer and originally specialised in water engineering. They went to the annual meeting of the International Commission on Large Dams in Mexico City, after visiting some business opportunities in the USA. Mum often joked (I am sure not the first to do so), ‘That dam conference!’ But we missed Mum and Dad. We were only young! I think my grandma came to look after us.

I remember the day they returned. We were so excited! I think we might have made a banner to welcome them home. We stood at the window waiting for them to arrive, probably ‘on tip toe.’ And they finally did, and we all celebrated. We had waited with such eager expectation!

That is the sense for me as I read this verse from Paul. But we can ask, why does Paul think this? What have the ‘children of God’ got to do with ‘eager expectation of all creation?’ What role does he think the ‘children of God’ might have that the creation is eager to see?

2. To answer that question, I think it helps us to go back to our reading from Genesis.

We heard read an extract from the first creation story in Genesis. It is Day 6, and God says *‘Let us make humankind in our image, according to our likeness; and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the birds of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the wild animals of the earth, and over every creeping thing that creeps upon the earth.’* (1.26)

It’s an incredible picture of our role in creation and has inspired artists and writers through the centuries: the image of God. The ‘imago dei.’ And it has inspired much reflection: what does it mean to be made in the image of God? And I have mentioned before, such reflections can be unhelpful. Does it mean we are wise? (Are we? Really?) Does it mean we have emotions (we are increasingly aware of how other creatures have these in some way too)? Ultimately such reflections become very anthropocentric as we think about our distinctive qualities! It is better, in my view, if we actually use the idea to think about our role.

Ancient rulers (even some modern ones) would put up statues (images) of themselves around their kingdoms and empires. We might think of statues of Caesar across the Roman empire. More recently, we might think of the statues of Saddam Hussein, which was toppled in Baghdad in 2003. Or huge posters of Mao or Stalin or Lenin. What do all these images do? They remind us who is in charge!

That is a scary thought! Does that mean the writer of Genesis understood that humanity was created to remind creation who was in charge? That idea assigns to us humans much power! It’s scary, yes, if you think too hard about how we humans have been. Combined with the idea

of 'having dominion' over the creation – and how we might typically think of 'dominion' – it is doubly scary. And it is a difficult verse to swallow for me.....

The only way I think we can make sense of it is to understand that we are supposed to be giving to creation a *reminder* of God who indeed does rule, as the images of Caesar reminded people around the Roman empire who was in charge. And then you probably see where I am now heading: ***it all depends on our idea of God!***

3. Our gospel passage gives us another glimpse of our idea of God. As Christians, we believe that ultimately, our best idea of God comes from Jesus Christ.

There is so much we can say about who Jesus was and what Jesus is like. Today's passage from Mark reminds us again: Jesus was a great healer! It seems everywhere he went, he healed.

But there is also a troubling tone in the passage too. Jesus almost sounds, frankly, racist in how he tells the Gentile woman of Syrophenician origin (i.e. not a Jew like he was!), after she asks him to heal her daughter, 'it is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs.' He seems to be saying at first reading, 'I'm not here to help you!'

We could spend more time on this. To cut to the point, I think we can assume he was not being racist – after all, he had healed a gentile man of demon possession only 2 chapters previously in this same gospel! The thing to notice is this incident comes straight after the incident we read last week, when Jesus condemned the Pharisees for their insisting on strict Jewish food rules rather than thinking about how they loved others and acted towards people around them. A teaching ploy of rabbis I gather was occasional tongue in cheek challenge/question to draw out their point. So I think we can view this as tongue in cheek exchange with the Syrophenician woman, for the benefit of *teaching those around him that God's love extended beyond the Jews*. That might sound a bit complex. My key point is: Jesus heals, and revealed to the people of his time that God loved beyond and more widely, than their expectations.

And if that is two aspects of acting in the image of God, then that challenges us! Are we agents of healing in the world? Are we constantly revealing an understanding of God's love around us beyond people's expectations?

Paul is saying, 'the creation is still eagerly awaiting us to grow into who we are really called to be!' It is standing on tiptoes! The creation is hoping! Will we respond? Our gospel reveals two aspects of what that response might look like: being agents of healing, and being people who challenge any preconceptions about God only being interested in and loving part of humanity, or part of creation!

4. But a final word on this day when we also remembering Mary, the mother of Jesus.

We revere Mary because she mothered Jesus, and because of her humble acceptance to carry the child – out of wedlock, at risk to her reputation and safety. In doing this she also gives us another perspective of her role as acting in the image of God: she receives, she allows to grow, she nurtures the revelation of God to the world. So in Mary too, we have another angle in to what it means to grow into being image bearers of God.

5. We have covered a lot of ground. If there is one thing to take away today it is this image: the creation waits on tiptoes for the revealing of the children of God. Let us pray that, in a way like Mary, we will be ready to receive and nurture a truer revelation of God to the whole creation. A God who heals. A God whose love goes beyond our expectations.