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God Speaks To Us In Bird And Song *by Trevor Millar*

A REFLECTION ON AN ASPECT OF SACRED SCRIPTURE

The title is the first line of a well known hymn – number 127 in the Songs for Worship – and the complete first verse goes as follows:

God speaks to us in bird and song
in winds that blow the clouds along
above the din of toil and wrong
a melody of love.

The Lord is the source of all love and all truth and we need to open ourselves to both. We do this as a community when we receive together His Holy Supper; His truth represented by wine and His love by the bread. At the moment of reception we can truly feel part of the universal Body of Christ.

A body of course has many parts. In particular the head, heart and hands. As individuals we may be

drawn naturally to the expression of one more than others; we may see ourselves primarily as a thinker (head); a feeler (heart) or a doer (hands). We can offer our service to the church and the world in any of these ways, but all of them are of value to the Lord.

It is often thought that Sacred Scripture is something written in a Holy Book. However the written word only goes back a few thousand years. Prior to this, and in a few isolated tribal societies up to today, oral traditions prevailed. Many cultures had a strong connection with the land and sensed its indwelling spirit. They felt God speaking to them through the natural world.

In AC2722(5) Swedenborg wrote “ ----The most ancient people, who lived before the Flood, saw in every single thing – in mountains, hills plains and valleys, in gardens, groves, forests, rivers and waters, in fields and crops, in trees of every kind, also in living creatures of every kind, and in the heavenly bodies giving light – something that was a representative and a meaningful sign of the Lord’s Kingdom -----”. It was because of later generations’ tendency to idolatry, the worship of things in themselves rather than as pointers to the Divine, that a written revelation or Word became necessary.

The new college module, D2: Sacred Scripture for the New Era, which I must highly recommend, looks at the nature and working of divine revelation across Christianity and other religions – and also how we can encounter the sacred personally. Here I shall continue to focus on the natural world.

As a Franciscan I am moved by the following descriptions of creatures as reflections of God by Bonaventure in his book “the soul’s journey into God” nearly 800 years ago. He uses the illustration of a stained glass window. I am quoting from the introduction to this work by Ewert Cousins.

“Just as you see that a ray of light entering through a window is coloured in different ways according to the different colours of the various parts, so the divine ray shines forth in each and every creature in different ways and in different properties.” He says further that “creatures are shadows, echoes and pictures of that first most powerful, most wise and most perfect Principle ---- They are vestiges, representations, spectacles proposed to us and signs divinely given so that we can see God”

In the built up urban world where most of us live in Britain today, it is easy to lose touch with nature. Not all of us have gardens. Some city children could be forgiven for believing that milk comes from Tesco, never having seen a cow. Yet most towns do still have trees, and they are worth looking at. Bradford born artist David Hockney exhibited a magnificent series of paintings at Salt’s Mill in Saltaire showing the same group of trees at different times of year. It was enthralling to see.

Here is an excerpt from “the Language of Trees” by Margaret Dickens TSSF

“They are rooted in God’s created earth,
Their pointed tops lift up to heaven,
Help us Lord of All Creation, to listen
And to hear Your Voice in all of your Creation.”

A recent study found that trees in a forest can communicate with each other by means of their root systems. Are we as aware of others around us? Can humans work together for the common good like bees and some other insects? This question is not purely academic; world problems of poverty, modern slavery and climate change need international cooperation to resolve.

I remember a news report many years ago that a child had discovered that there were no longer any frogs in his village. Surprising and actually true. On a global scale there has been a great loss of biodiversity, with the apparent extinction of many species of plants, insects and animals due to changes in farming methods, deforestation etc. If every creature represents an idea in the mind of God, can we afford these continuing losses? Are words, phrases being expunged from the Word as expressed in creation?

Naturalist David Attenborough has said “ People must feel that the natural world is important and valuable, and beautiful and wonderful, and an amazement and a pleasure.”

In these dark times it is important to feel assured of God’s love for our earth and for all its creatures. Therese of Lisieux, a nineteenth century Carmelite nun, wrote “Just as the sun shines on all the trees and flowers as if each were the only one on earth, so does God care for all souls in a special manner.”

The late Rev John Presland once said following an intense training session with worship leaders that after so long “in Egypt” - as the New church describe the pursuit of knowledge (head work) it was necessary to go out into the natural world. He would walk his dog after long periods of “ head work” After writing this I shall follow his wise advice and sit in the sunshine in my walled garden – actually a back yard filled with plants.

When did you last recharge your batteries outside? When did God last speak to you in bird and song? Make time for yourself, today if you can.

Trevor Millar TSSF