



WORSHIPPING  
WITH THE  
WHOLE CREATION

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“Holy, holy, holy  
is the Lord God Almighty,  
who was, and is, and is to come”.

(Revelation 4:8)

#### ‘THE VOICE OF PRAYER IS NEVER SILENT...’:

Some years ago, when my family and I were staying on the beautiful Greek island of Cephalonia, we attended a service at the church in the village where we were staying. It was a fascinating experience. We had never participated in a Greek Orthodox act of Christian worship before. One of its most striking features was that it had no clear beginning and no official end either. People came and went as they pleased, drifting in and out of the church, lighting candles, kissing icons, chanting, listening to the priest or praying quietly.

Most Christians in this country are accustomed to a congregation arriving for the start of a service and departing when it is over, but the expectations of Orthodox Christians are clearly quite different. For them worship is continuous. It is happening the whole time, so the importance of a beginning or an end to their services is considerably diminished. Their aim is, not to participate in a finite event, but to dip themselves momentarily into a boundless ocean of prayer and praise.

J. Ellerton’s famous evening hymn, ‘The day thou gavest...’, echoes their outlook: -

“As o’er each continent and island  
The dawn leads on another day,  
The voice of prayer is never silent,  
Nor dies the strain of praise away.

So be it, Lord, thy throne shall never  
Like earth’s proud empires pass away.  
Thy kingdom stands and grows for ever  
‘Til all thy creatures own thy sway”.

As we explore the relationship between Creation and Worship, the importance of this notion of universal, unending prayer and praise will become increasingly apparent. Worship will hopefully be seen, not just as the continuous activity of humans and angels, but as something in which the whole natural order is ceaselessly engaged.



*The beautiful blue window at Gloucester Cathedral by Tom Denny. The Window depicts the apostle Thomas and the song of creation based on Psalm 148.*

### ‘THE HEAVENS DECLARE THE GLORY OF GOD...’:

The Old Testament contains two main Hebrew words for worship. The first, ‘hishahawáh’, literally means ‘bowing down’. It is used to emphasise our respect for God and our humility in the face of his greatness:

“Come, let us bow down in worship,  
let us kneel before the Lord our Maker”. (Psalm 95:6)

The deepest of all mysteries is the mystery of existence. We may know how things happen and what, within the natural order, makes them happen. But the question we cannot answer is ‘Why is there anything at all?’ Nothing has to exist. We can only conclude that there must be a ‘Source of Being and Life’ as Common Worship calls it, which is quite different from anything we know and which we cannot scientifically observe.

This ‘Source of Being’ is part of what we mean by ‘God’. Everything that exists, from pebbles to people, is a ‘creature’. All owe their existence to God, and so simply by existing they witness to his unique and wonderful reality. As he reflects upon the amazing world of Nature, the author of the Book of Job expresses his awe and wonder at the mystery of life:

“Do you know the laws of the heavens? ... Who has the wisdom to count the clouds? ... Who provides food for the raven when its young cry out to God? ... Who let the wild donkey go free? ... Will the wild ox consent to serve you? ... do you give the horse its strength or clothe its neck with a flowing mane? ... Does the hawk take flight by your wisdom? ... Does the eagle soar at your command?” (From chapters 38-42)

Christians who contemplate the world of Nature frequently find themselves struck by a sense of the holy (See Rudolf Otto’s classic study of the ‘sense of the numinous’ in *The Idea of the Holy*). Their hearts are drawn to a deeper reverence for the God-given life around them and their souls are moved to worship.

### ‘PRAISE THE LORD, ALL HIS WORKS ...’:

Nature can undoubtedly stimulate worship, but what is not so readily acknowledged is the biblical idea that it can, at varying levels, also participate in worship.

We tend to think of worship as a conscious activity in which people deliberately acknowledge the greatness and glory of God. Since the stars, planets, rocks and plants are not conscious beings, we naturally conclude that they are incapable of engaging in something of this kind.

However, there is a second biblical word for ‘worship’, ‘abodáh’, which paves the way to a different understanding of what it might mean to ‘worship’. This word signifies ‘service’. It focuses primarily upon our actions and the continuity between our religious expressions of devotion and the way we behave in our daily lives. The idea behind ‘abodáh’ is that our whole life should be an offering to God – heart, mind and body. St. Paul challenges his readers in the letter to the Romans, for example:

“I urge you, ... in view of God’s mercy, to offer your bodies  
as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God  
– this is your spiritual act of worship”. (Romans 12:1)

The prophet Isaiah criticises temple worshippers for failing to do this, for offering prayers and sacrifices which are at odds with their behaviour in the community:

“Stop bringing meaningless offerings!  
Your incense is detestable to me...  
I cannot bear your evil assemblies...  
Stop doing wrong, learn to do right!  
Seek justice, encourage the oppressed.”  
(Isaiah 1:13,16-17.c.f. Micah 6: 6-8)

Of course the kind of ‘worship’ that St. Paul and Isaiah envisaged, when they spoke about someone’s whole life being ‘an act of worship’, could not have been such that the worshipper thought of God every minute of every day. That would have been impractical. When someone is busy carrying out chores or going about his daily business, he obviously has to concentrate on the matter at hand. At such times his worship becomes, of necessity, unconscious.





*'Praise the Lord from the earth, you great sea creatures and all ocean depths'  
- Psalm 148:7*

The word, 'abodáh', shifts the emphasis away from a person's awareness of God and onto his practical behaviour, and this paves the way to a broader understanding of worship. It points towards the notion that whatever exists and behaves in harmony with God's Will, proclaims, consciously or unconsciously, the 'worth-ship' of its Creator. Such a notion, of course, is firmly rooted in the Bible. The psalms, for example, speak in a number of places of Nature (unconsciously) praising God:

Praise the Lord, all his works  
everywhere in his dominion". (Psalm 103:22)

The writer of Psalm 148 calls upon the whole of Creation, both earthly and heavenly, to worship the Lord: -

Praise the Lord from the heavens, ...  
praise him, all his angels,  
praise him, all his heavenly hosts.  
Praise him, sun and moon,  
praise him, all you shining stars.  
Praise him, you highest heavens, ...  
praise the Lord from the earth,  
you great sea creatures and all ocean depths,  
lightning and hail, snow and clouds,  
stormy winds that do his bidding,  
you mountains and all hills,  
fruit trees and all cedars,  
wild animals and all cattle,  
small creatures and flying birds,  
kings of the earth and all nations,  
you princes and all rulers on earth,  
young men and maidens,  
old men and children.  
Let them praise the name of the Lord".

Psalm 19 views the entire universe as proclaiming God's greatness: -

“The heavens declare the glory of God;  
the skies proclaim the work of his hands.  
Day after day they pour forth speech;  
night after night they proclaim knowledge.  
There is no speech or language  
where their voice is not heard.  
Their voice goes out into all the earth,  
their words to the ends of the world”. (Psalm 19:1-4)

This idea of worship being expressed universally within Nature is taken up in chapters 4 and 5 of the Book of Revelation. Here St. John describes a vision of heaven full of strange, dreamlike symbolism. Around God's throne there are 24 elders, dressed in white and wearing crowns. These may refer to the twenty-four star-gods of the Babylonian pantheon or the twenty-four divisions of Levitical priests (1 Chronicles 24:7-18), but more probably they represent the 12 patriarchs of ancient Israel and the 12 apostles of the Church. The old and the new 'People of God' are all together worshipping in God's presence. It is what one would expect. But what is more surprising is the fact that 'four living creatures' are described by John as being 'in the centre around the throne': -

“In the centre, around the throne, were four living creatures, and they were covered in eyes, in front and behind. The first living creature was like a lion, the second was like an ox, the third had a face like a man, the fourth was like a flying eagle. Each of the four living creatures had six wings and was covered with eyes all around, even under his wings. Day and night they never stopped saying:

‘Holy, holy, holy  
is the Lord God Almighty,  
who was, and is, and is to come.’” (Revelation 4:6b-8)

Whatever commentators may say about the historical background to this vision, all are generally agreed that the worship of these creatures signifies here the universal praise of God's Creation. The 'lion' is supreme among the wild beasts; the 'ox' is the most important of the domestic animals; the 'man' represents the human race; and the 'eagle' is the noblest of the birds. John conveys the vast number of animals and birds through the eyes, which cover the 'living creatures'. All of them are continuously praising their Creator. 'They never stop saying: holy, holy, holy...'



*'Praise the Lord from the heavens; Praise him in the heights above..' Psalm 148:1*

## ‘WORTHY IS THE LAMB ...’:

Nature is portrayed here as revelling in its God-given existence and expressing the glory of the Creator in doing so. The complete vision in the Book of Revelation, however, takes us further. We are not what we are meant to be. We are in need of ‘redemption’, rescue from our false selves; and, as we are beginning to realise, our environment and all living organisms desperately need us to be rescued – redeemed in this way. That we should live by our Lord’s gospel of love is their only hope, at least in this life, as well as ours.

In chapter 5 the ‘living creatures’ not only worship God as their Creator; they also praise him as their Redeemer. God’s coming to save ‘the human race’, through the sacrificial life and death of the ‘Lamb’, is a cause for rejoicing amongst all living things: -

“And when ...(the Lamb) had taken ... (the scroll), the four living creatures and the twenty-four elders fell down before the lamb ... And they sang a new song:  
‘You are worthy to take the scroll and to open its seals, because you were slain, and with your blood you purchased men for God...’”.

(Revelation 5:8-9)

The living creatures rejoice in the Lamb, because they share in the salvation which he has brought. He has not simply come to redeem human souls and human communities. He has come, as the letter to the Colossians reminds us:

“to reconcile ... all things, whether things on earth or things in heaven, by making peace through his blood shed on the cross”.  
(Colossians 1:20)

Andrew Linzey, in his book, *After Noah* (Ch.4), draws the attention of his readers to the familiar nativity scene on our Christmas cards, the baby Jesus lying in a manger with the adoring ox and ass looking on. No animals are mentioned in the New Testament accounts as being present at Jesus’ birth and the image probably derives from an eighth or ninth century work, the Gospel of pseudo-Matthew. However, the oral tradition upon which it draws could be much older, and whatever its historical basis, it shows what the early Christians expected. This is the important point: -

“There was an ass and an ox at Christ’s birth”, writes Linzey, “ because Scripture led them to think they would, or should, be there: that Christ’s birth fulfilled the expectation that Scripture appeared to endorse”.

Cosmic redemption is a notion which we, in our anthropocentric, atomistic culture, can find hard to grasp. But it is deeply rooted within the traditions of the Bible and the Early Church. In the Old Testament, for example, Israel’s cultic celebration of the kingship of Yahweh and his righteous rule is associated with the whole of Creation giving thanks for God’s saving work: -

Let the heavens rejoice, let the earth be glad;  
let the sea resound, and all that is in it;

let the fields be jubilant, and everything in them.  
Then all the trees of the forest will sing for joy;  
they will sing before the Lord, for he comes,  
he comes to judge the earth”. (Psalm 96:11ff)

“Let the rivers clap their hands,  
let the mountains sing together for joy;  
let them sing before the Lord,  
for he comes to judge the earth.  
He will judge the world in righteousness  
and the people with equity”. (Psalm 98:8-9; c.f. Psalm 65:13 )

The ‘four living creatures’ pictured in the Book of Revelation sing a song of redemption. John calls it a ‘new song’ and he does so for a reason. There are two words for ‘new’ in the original Greek. The first, ‘neos’, signifies something, which is new at a certain point in time. If you asked, for example, for a new packet of Cornflakes, you would use, in the normal course of events, the word ‘neos’. The packet would simply be one more in a long line of identical products, ‘another’ packet. But if you requested a packet of ‘new improved Cornflakes’, you would seek something qualitatively new – different to what had gone before – and here the word ‘kainos’ would be appropriate. When the psalmists praised God with a ‘new’ song, they did so in the sense of ‘kainos’. God had saved or helped his People and they were rejoicing in the new quality of life he had brought to them: -

“Sing to the Lord a new song;  
sing to the Lord all the earth”. (Psalm 96:1. C.f. Psalm 98:1)

The song of the living creatures in the Book of Revelation is ‘new’, because God is inaugurating a new quality of existence. Everything will be affected (c.f. Romans 8:18ff). John describes the end result as a ‘new’ heaven and a ‘new’ earth (Revelation 21:1). Men and women, who have been ‘purchased ... for God’ through the death of the Lamb, will enter into, and participate in, the just and loving rule of God. They will be made to be, says John:

“...a kingdom and priests to serve our God,  
and they will reign on the earth”. (Revelation 5:10)

The whole of Creation rejoices at this prospect, because it means an end to their exploitation by a tyrannical, fallen humanity, and the start of a divine rule, characterised by ‘the Lamb’, the sacrificial, self-giving Servant-King.

## CONCLUSIONS:

Christians are called to work and pray for God’s coming Kingdom. As they do so, the ceaseless, universal worship of Creation is important to them for at least three reasons: -

- Creatures and plants express in different ways their Creator’s beauty, power and goodness. Watching them, learning about them, and communing with them after the pattern of St. Francis (cf his famous Canticle of the Sun) can act as a springboard to prayer and worship. They can lift our hearts and minds to the One who brought them into being.
- Awareness of the unending, universal worship of Creation can broaden our vision of God’s purposes and open us up to the possibility of a cosmic redemption, in which the whole Creation is brought into harmony with the Will and Purpose of God.
- At a practical level it helps us to recognise the interconnectedness between our inner prayer life, our outward behaviour, and the wider community and environment in which we live. Everything must be brought into unity with God’s Will, and as human beings made in the image of God we have a key role to play in enabling this to happen. Worship is not an isolated, individualistic activity. It is part of a much wider movement incorporating the entire universe. As we pray and worship in the power of the Spirit, we join in the Spirit’s ‘groaning’ activity throughout the cosmos (Romans 8: 22ff) and are caught up into the prayer and worship of Creation:

'All things cry out to you  
those which speak,  
and those which cannot speak,  
all things honour you  
those which think,  
and those which cannot think.  
For there is one longing, one groaning,  
that all things have for you ...

All things pray to you that comprehend  
your plan and offer you a silent hymn.  
In you, the One, all things abide,  
and all things endlessly run to you  
who are the end of all.

(St. Gregory Nazianzen, 'Hymn to God',  
quoted from 'Compassion for Animals',  
ed. By Andrew Linzey and Tom Regan, SPCK 1988)

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