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The Speech of Creation

When asked how she had made such an exquisite arrangement of flowers for the altar, a member of our Altar Guild explained, "You just listen to what the flowers are saying, and do what they tell you."

What a profoundly true statement! It brought to mind a host of associations that have to do with the revelation of beauty, the meaning of creation, and our place in it.

In the first chapter of his Epistle to the Romans, St. Paul points to the knowledge of God that human beings derive from their relation to nature. "For the invisible things of Him from the creation of the world are clearly seen, being understood by the things that are made..."

From flowers, or from any creature, one may learn of the Creator. An objectivity exists which confronts us, the being of which has been contemplated in a disciplined way for two and a half millennia, including but certainly not beginning with modern science.

But beyond sheer objectivity, the Psalmist claims that creation speaks. "The heavens declare the glory of God; and the firmament showeth his handiwork." Nature presents herself as an intelligible creature, and even more than this as a beauty that evokes a response.

It will not do to doubt skeptically the integrity of this beauty with examples of imperfection, or the destructive instance of a storm or a drought, or the violence of the chase - "nature red in tooth and claw."

Every presentation of beauty reveals itself; it is self-evident. Actual privation or deformity or lack or suffering intrudes finally only to demonstrate the glory of its potential perfection.

Indeed, sometimes, in moments of our present existence, one cannot imagine anything more perfect. Only the life of the heavenly Jerusalem and its new creation can offer this perfection free from mere momentary existence, forever without decay and corruption, and eternally secure.

This is where the human being enters. Our inspired member of the Altar Guild understood that we have a relation to nature's intelligible beauty: "Do what they tell you." Indeed, creation reaches out to find in human beings a completion of itself.

The Biblical image of this completion comes first of all in the place of Adam whose vocation is to name the creatures. Nature reaches out to be named, to be held in a form of thought and therefore to be known in the way of human knowing.

But then, nature also tells us what to do. Her intelligible purpose falls within our dominion, the exercise of which we do well or ill.

The efforts of our Altar Guild are invariably gorgeous and show an appropriate and talented use of the garden. We should hope and intend that a responsible dominion in other more substantial ways of conservation and the stewardship of God's good earth would be our habit as well.

For it is a heinous fact that through greedy consumption and arrogant neglect of our natural resources, mankind has proven without a doubt that in this respect of our dominion we have committed grievous sins.

Too much of this world has been spoiled and polluted. Some of this has been a mistake; most of it has been willful. We have not listened. We have betrayed a basic responsibility of what it means to be a human being.

And there is a consequence. If global warming is a reality, we are about to reap what we have sown. Stripped mountain tops, barren rivers, and shrouded cities are already our cultivated harvests. What this says about the place of human beings in creation is therefore of true theological and moral significance.

The great Irish theologian of the ninth century, John Scotus Eriugena, conceived of man as that nature that is both created and creates. Man, he thought, takes the forms of creation given Him by God, and through thinking and sensing, places these within the grasping hands of creation's desire. In this way human nature participates in nature's creation, and shares the imaginative activity of the beauty of creation. Sin, therefore, is the obstruction of this imaginative act and the abortion of its idea.

St. Paul, again in Romans, envisages the restoration of creation from its privation, suffering, and corruption. The return of all things to the place of integral beauty is through the redeemed human soul. "For the earnest expectation of the creature waiteth for the manifestation of the sons of God...Because the creature itself also shall be delivered from the bondage of corruption into the glorious liberty of the children of God."

Creation depends still upon human nature. Through the mediation of glorified humanity, the realm of the new creation finds its rightful place in the knowledge and love of eternal memory. There the name and the dominion are perfectly conceived and rightly enjoyed. Creation shall speak and we will listen well, and we will do what the new earth tells us to do, to glorify God in the pleasure that is His for His creation.

The Rev. Dr. Michael L. Carreker

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