

Some years ago I went with Tear Fund to Honduras. I lived for a week in the heart of La Mosquitia Rain Forest. It's one of the few remaining forests left in Central America which has lost 80% of its trees in the last 50 years. I spent two days in a dugout canoe on the Patuca River and lived in a forest village near Wampusirpi feasting on a diet of beans for breakfast, beans for lunch and beans for tea – and with all the anticipated health benefits and consequences!

Early one morning I rose with the sun, showered under a bucket and went down to the river to pray surrounded by all the animals on the small homestead. My Bible seemed to open of its own accord at Psalm 104 and different verses leapt off the page.

“Bless the Lord o my soul...you set the earth on its foundations...you made springs gush forth...giving drink to every wild animal...you caused grass to grow for the cattle and plants for people to use...trees of the Lord are watered abundantly...in them the birds nest...these all look to you to give them food in due season...you renew the face of the earth.”

It was as if the Psalm had been written to describe my morning fellowship.

In that moment I sensed God's providence and also the unity of all Creation. Here was a sense of harmony with the animal world - all of us dependent on the bounty of God.

Then just two weeks ago I was at the 'Reconciling a Wounded Planet Conference' in Coventry Cathedral listening to Professor Richard Baukham expounding Colossians 1 and those two prepositions 'Through' and 'For'. 'All things have come into being through and for Christ.' It shows how Christ is at the centre of all things and all of Creation. Never has so much theology been condensed in two such small prepositions.

Up until that moment I happily praised God for his creation. But in a moment similar to my epiphany in Honduras I suddenly realised that we are called to praise God not FOR but WITH Creation.

You have probably made this discovery long ago! But it strikes me that it is fundamental to our witness to the Church and to the World that our vocation is to praise God WITH Creation.

Indeed to praise God FOR Creation encourages the idea that we the human family somehow stand apart from the natural world. Yes, we are called to have dominion and to exercise god-like responsibility but we do so as a part of nature, not apart from it. The former path leads to blessing; the latter to the blighting of creation.

When the Pope on his sensational visit to the United States of America spoke about 'Our Common Home' that picture conjured up for me not just the solidarity of all human nations but the fellowship of all God's creatures. Earth our common home for both animal and human.

Recently Princess Michael of Kent said at the Henley Literature Festival. "I'm a great animal lover and involved in a lot of conservation, but animals don't have rights" and added, "You only have rights if you pay your taxes. You earn your rights."

She was rebuffed by Elisa Allen of Peta who retorted, "Her daft assessment would mean that children and certain classes of human beings are also not entitled to rights."

But the issue of rights, I think, overlooks the more fundamental point which is about our common worth. And, this is rooted in our common creatureliness.

George Herbert opens his wonderful poem 'Providence' by calling Man 'the world's high Priest', but ends it by declaring:

"All things that are, though they have sev'ral ways,

Yet in their being join with one advise

To honour thee: and so I give thee praise ..."

In other words, it is through our 'being' as creatures that we, both animals and humans, honour and praise the Creator. And therein lies our worth. Our worth lies in our common creatureliness.

That fellowship of all God's creatures is reinforced and signposted by Isaiah the prophet when he gives us an image of the new world, the new kingdom which is coming. The wolf and the lamb, the leopard and the kid, the lion and the calf, the cow and the bear – old nature's mutual foes will be harnessed in friendship - and all being led by a little child!

It is this supernatural picture of a renewed natural world that is fulfilled and reinforced by the Nativity of Jesus.

How often have you wondered about the sign that was given to the Shepherds by the angels as they went in search of the Christ Child? 'You will find a child wrapped in swaddling clothes'. What sort of a clue was that? You would surely expect every baby to wrap up. No! That wasn't the sign! The clue was the animal feeding trough! 'You will find him lying in a manger.' For who would put a new born babe in a trough for domestic animals? A risky and dangerous thing to do! 'You will find the child in a manger, the place where the animals feed.' That was surely the sign!

And this was the signal that the new world to come would be characterised by a very different relationship between humanity and the animal kingdom. Therefore all that we do now with the animal world should reflect the values of God's coming Kingdom.

Our common calling is to praise our Creator WITH all creation. The cradling of the Provider of Providence in a manger was also a symbol that he is the One who feeds all creatures both animal and human and so echoes the song of Psalm 104 that 'all creatures look to God to give them food in due season'

Furthermore, this holy feeding trough is to be found in Bethlehem, a word meaning 'House of Bread', thus magnifying the symbol that God is the Provider of food for all his creatures.

But the holiness of this trough, this manger, is magnified even further by yet another dimension. The Body of Christ is taken from his mother's breast and then laid to rest in the manger for others to come and adore him. The manger becomes the altar, the meeting point between God and his creatures. The Body of Christ is elevated there for all to come and worship; and to feed on him by faith and with thanksgiving.

That which was designed and made to feed the animals is sanctified as it cradles the One 'through whom and for whom all things have come into being'. The manger an altar.

So as you come this morning to receive the sacrament at the steps of the altar remember with thanksgiving that the first altar was a manger.

Can there be any greater sign than this that the creative and redemptive work of God in Christ embraces all creatureliness both animal and human? Amen.

The Right Reverend James Jones

