

Sermon 17 November 2024 The Beauty and Mystery of God

Romans 1:18-20 John 5:24-29

Two weeks ago, I spoke about new beginnings in the context of the raising of Lazarus. At the moment we are very much in the season of new beginnings.....because it is Springtime. I love this time of the year. We see God's creation bursting forth in all its glory. For the past two months fruit trees have been covered in blossom and now you can see small fruits beginning to form on the branches. My first tomatoes have made an appearance. Roses are in bloom, as are a myriad of other flowers, and over the next few weeks it is only going to get better. Down on the farm, lambs are frolicking in the sunshine, blissfully unaware of what the future holds for them – pride of place on our dinner table! It is certainly a lovely time of the year, but before we continue with the exploration of God's creation, let's just reflect for a moment on our Gospel reading.

This is another instance of Jesus making a claim to be the Messiah. He is the Son of God: '*...the dead will hear my voice – the voice of the Son of God.*' I want to focus for a moment on one aspect of this claim. Jesus refers to the dead (*'the dead will hear my voice'*). I think it can be said that Jesus is using the word *dead* in two senses.

Firstly, he is using it literally. He is referring to resurrection and the fact that we will, hopefully, experience Jesus in the afterlife. Why do I say hopefully? Because there is an element of judgment here: '*Those who have done good will rise to experience eternal life, and those who have continued in evil will rise to experience judgment.*' We alluded to this last week, and I quoted 2 Corinthians 5:10: '*For we must all stand before Christ to be judged. We will each receive whatever we deserve for the good or evil we have done in this earthly body.*' So here Jesus is referring to those of us (I use the inclusive pronoun in hope!) who enter heaven when the time comes and we will hear his voice.

Secondly, I believe he is using the word *dead* to refer to those who are spiritually dead. What does it mean to be spiritually dead? Quite simply, to be oblivious to the presence of God, to not even think about the possibility of God, to be blind to the existence of God despite some quite convincing evidence. And this is where creation comes in. I could spend quite some time pointing to what I believe is a wide range of factors which point to the veracity of God's existence, but for now I would like to focus on creation, because I believe that is as good a factor as any.

I will begin by having a close look at this small dahlia. To most of us, this is just a plant, albeit a beautiful plant, and we admire its beauty. But there is far more than just beauty to admire. It is actually a model of incredible design and functioning, beginning with a dry, extremely unattractive tuber. Then through a combination of temperature, light, carbon dioxide and water, this thing of beauty arrives. The design of the plant is quite intricate. Minute veins carry water to all parts of the plant in order to nourish it. Everything has a function. Surely there has to be a hand in this.

George Washington Carver, American scientist, said, '*I love to think of nature as an unlimited broadcasting station, through which God speaks to us every hour, if we will only tune in.*' As I said a couple of weeks ago, if we are not open to God, if we are not tuned into God, then we won't experience him.

And then we have the bee, itself a fascinating creation of design and function, but as well, by working in harmony with its environment, not only makes a vital contribution to nature but also provides us with essential food and healing properties.

On one flight from the hive to collect pollen a bee will visit between 50 and 100 flowers. A bee will visit about four million flowers to produce 1 kg of honey. You can see where the expression 'busy as a bee' comes from. A bee will actually live for only about 6 weeks, but what an industrious 6 weeks! Another interesting little fact – bees can detect nectar up to two kilometres away. They use their antennae to smell.

Bees are marvellous in the way they work together. For example, when a bee discovers where a source of nectar is, it will come back to the hive and perform a wobble dance, which serves to indicate where the nectar is. The angle of the body in relation to the sun and the hive shows the direction and the extent of the wobble indicates the distance.

As the bee fetches the nectar, the pollen from the plant is picked up by its legs, which are, of course, especially designed to do just this, and then the pollen is deposited on to the ovaries of the next plant it visits and so fertilises the seed. Pollination takes place. Without it, we wouldn't have much of our food. Talk about the harmony of nature and life. Surely there has to be a guiding hand behind all this.

There is so much to marvel at in this world of ours. From the physical beauty and the beauty of design and harmony, we then look at the vastness, the scale of our universe and it takes your breath away. It is almost impossible to comprehend. Let me give you an example.

On the night of February 23rd 1987, an astronomer in Chile observed with his naked eye the explosion of a distant supernova, a blast so powerful that it released as much energy in one second as our sun will release in 10 billion years. That in itself is difficult to get one's head around, to put it mildly. But that's not all. Did that event truly occur on February 23rd 1987? Only from the perspective of our planet. In actual fact, the supernova exploded 170,000 years prior, but the light generated by that explosion, travelling almost 9 trillion kilometres a year, took 170,000 years to reach our galaxy. It defies all comprehension.

Surely there has to be something or someone far greater than us, far beyond our comprehension, behind all this. We really have to stop, look around and think. I believe if we open our minds and our eyes, we can see God all around us. Author Rick Warren, wrote, *'Every time you step outside, you can see God's hand in every part of creation.'* Paul emphasises this in our first reading: *'From the time the world was created, people have seen the earth and the sky and all that God made. They can clearly see his invisible qualities – his eternal power and divine nature. So they have no excuse whatsoever for not knowing God.'* Romans 1:20. I love that last verse – *'So they have no excuse whatsoever for not knowing God.'* I guess that sums up the point of what I have been trying to say over these past few minutes.

I want to finish by making this point. As I said before, I believe there are a variety of indicators that point towards the existence and reality of God. The beauty and intricacy of creation is but one of them. However, I also believe that it is a primary one. I leave you with the words of theologian Brian McLaren, *'God's creation is not a mere backdrop; it's an active participant in our faith story.'*