

# As we care for the most vulnerable, we reflect the image and likeness of God.

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Pentecost + 14 – Season of Creation 1 – Rom 12: 9-21

We do an unusual thing in church each Sunday. We delve into ancient writings, and in them, seek wisdom and truth to inform our choices and values some millennia later. In this Season of Creation, how might we expect to find wisdom in them for this Anthropocene age? Could the ancients ever have imagined what we might be consciously doing to life on Earth in our time, and what would they say if they did?

Since June this year, we've been listening every week to the voice of one such ancient writer – Paul. We've been studying his letter to the Christians in Rome. So I wonder, could Paul have imagined what we are doing to Earth now? Paul took the natural world very seriously. In Rom 1.18-20, he said our blindness to creation's message about God meant we've ignored God's character; that we've suppressed the truth about God. In Rom 1.20, he wrote, *Ever since the creation of the world, God's eternal power and his divine nature, invisible though they are, have been understood and seen through the things God has made. So we are without excuse.*

For Paul, creation reveals God's power and character. Could he have imagined the sort of things we're doing to creation today? He may have. Paul knew the Hebrew Scriptures backwards, and there's an awful story in Judges 9.45 where the would-be king of Shechem, Abimelech, put down a revolt. He killed the city's inhabitants, demolished the buildings and then sowed its fields with salt (using it as a sort of a proto-agent-orange) to ensure they could never rise against him again.

Salting the fields of defeated enemies was not unknown in the ancient world. There are legends of the Romans having done this to Carthage. I wonder if Paul knew these stories, and if they lie behind his words about the ungodliness and wickedness of people who'd suppress the truth <sup>Rom 1:18</sup>; who'd ignore Earth's role in sustaining all life; who'd ignore the way Earth reveals God's power and character. If they'd salt the ground, what else might such people do to control their environment?

These stories of utter erasure of rivals are not alien to us these days. The expression *cancel-culture* is becoming more common to describe people who utterly write off the humanity of people they disagree with. This polarising force is a terrible curse. God calls us to offer an alternative to these divisive, artificial tribal distinctions.

In face of a scorched-earth, cancel-culture ethos, God's people are called to embody a relational biosphere that mirrors creation's life-sustaining balance and diversity. Paul calls us to embody a life-giving interplay of compassion, justice, mutual love and respect. Instead of social Darwinism for which competition is natural, and where the powerful salt the fields of the vulnerable, Jesus calls us to be salt and light; to embody and share the savour and vision of God's Kingdom life.

This is Paul's purpose in the passage we read from Rom 12 today. Some scholars see Rom 12.9-21 as a loose collection of moral exhortations. I think it's much better than that. Paul's just been speaking about us all being parts of one body, each with different gifts; each with our part to play. <sup>12.4-8</sup> Now, he lists *a series of qualities that ought [to] attend the interplay of gifts in Christian community life.* <sup>Byrne 375</sup>

*Interplay* to me is an organic, ecological word. We use the word organic to describe natural co-operation; the interplay of parts of a body or an eco-system. It has a lot to do with

the character that God has implanted in each of us, and particularly in the relationships which bind us together. Why do I say that? Because when Paul begins this passage with *Let love be genuine*, he uses a special word for love; *agape*.

Up until this point in the letter, the word *agape* has only referred to the love that comes from God. Suddenly now, Paul says this is the type of love that comes from us believers. So all the qualities that follow – which are to proceed from this love of ours – are to be like those of God. They are life-giving qualities; <sup>13</sup> *Contribute to the needs of the saints; extend hospitality to strangers. They are relationship building qualities; Bless ... and do not curse ... Live in harmony ... Do not repay anyone evil for evil ... so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all.*

Our love is to mirror God's love. And how do we know what God's love looks like? Remember what Paul said in chapter 1, <sup>1.20</sup> *God's eternal power and his divine nature, invisible though they are, have been understood and seen through the things God has made.*

In this Season of Creation, we look to the things God has made. We explore ecological spirituality. So let me share a story in which I find profound resonances with the wisdom we've heard today from Paul's letter to the Romans.

Peter Wohlleben, in his book *The Hidden Life of Trees* <sup>p.</sup>  
<sup>17</sup> described his early duty as a forester to thin out young trees in the forest by ringbarking some of them. The idea was that this would let more light through and help the rest of the trees. But the trees knew better; their interplay as a mutually supportive community works better. Thinning out would let in more heat and wind, and disrupt the moist, cool climate at the forest floor. So through their interwoven root system, the surrounding trees shared with the ringbarked trees some of the sugar that their own leaves had photosynthesised.

Amazingly, this has kept the ringbarked trees alive for decades.

Paul's message is very like the one Wohlleben learned from the trees. God's power and character – love and compassion – are revealed in our weakness. And our care for our most vulnerable reveals the extent to which we have let our character as Christians, and as a community, reflect the image and likeness of God. Amen.