

The creator of the night sky has offered the dignity of partnership

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Pentecost + 19A – Psalm 19 and the Ten Commandments.

A friend once told me that tortoises live the very long lives they do because they don't have personal relationships. This makes me embark on today's Old Testament readings with trepidation, because they're about forming relationships, and caring for relationships – with God and with each other. I want to speak mostly about the special relationship painted by today's Psalmist. So let's go there first; would you please turn back to Psalm 19 in your service booklets?

When we chanted its three short movements together, our prayer ranged very widely. We joined with the heavens in a hymn of wonder at our Maker. We joined in an exquisite love-lyric to the Torah, which means 'God's teaching'; and finally, in vv.11-14, together with the Psalmist we were bold to address God directly. So as we said this Psalm together, we explored the spiritual world of a great Hebrew mystic poet.

As I said, I see three movements – three distinct parts in this Psalm. In vv.1-6, there's the ecstatic hymn to the Creator. Then in vv.7-10 there is the love lyric to the Torah, and finally, there is the Psalmist's witness to their power to shape a human life. While the link between the 2nd and 3rd movements is clear, the poet makes no overt attempt to link the first two movements.

So I wonder if you found the modulation from v.6 to v.7 a little jarring. Take a moment to look at it again. ⁶ *The sun's rising is from the end of the heavens, and its circuit to the*

end of them; and nothing is hidden from its heat. ⁷ The law of the Lord is perfect, reviving the soul; the decrees of the Lord are sure, making wise the simple. We're not alone in finding this change bewildering. Some commentators even talk of two Psalms patched together.

But there *is* a connection; and it's something that any of us can bring to this Psalm – anyone who reads it.

Some see a connection between, on the one hand, the creative power that brought order and beauty to the formless void of the primordial creation ^{Gen 1.2 (vv.1-6)}, and on the other, the gift of the Law which brought order and beauty to life with God and with each other ^(vv.7-10). This connection is beautifully evoked in a sentence which some commentators on Psalm 19 quote from Emmanuel Kant's *Critique of Reason*. 'There are two things that fill my soul with holy reverence and ever-growing wonder – the spectacle of the starry sky that virtually annihilates us as physical beings, and the moral law which raises us to infinite dignity as intelligent agents.'

The place where we find ourselves between the first two movements of this Psalm is the same as the place as Emmanuel Kant found himself. On the one hand, there is the sense of our irrelevance to the workings of the universe. But on the other, there is the infinite dignity accorded us by the fact of God taking care to teach us; each one of us.

Why, when I speak of Torah – God's teaching – do I talk about our dignity?

I get there in this way. There's a mistaken image I carry from my early formation as a Christian is of the Israelites in the wilderness. Having escaped Egypt, they'd been wandering for decades around the Sinai Peninsula getting steadily more depressed, but basically minding their own business when all of a sudden, they got up to Exodus chapter 20 and WHOOMPF!

With a mere ten commandments, God loaded them down with enough legal and ethical baggage to ensure they'd stay guilty for an eternity. That's the image I carried; but it was wrong! The Torah – the Law which God gave the Israelites was a covenant; it was a gift of partnership – of mature relationship – between us and God, and between us and each other.

For the Psalmist, it is this Law, the Torah – for Emmanuel Kant, the moral law – which embodies God's care for us. So for the Psalmist and for Kant, placing the two together – cosmos and Law – it works at a profound level. Because being at the meeting point of those two movements says what it means to be human creatures loved by God, and capable of love.

Wandering in a desert is a powerful reminder of our insignificance – what David Attenborough once called our irrelevance – to the workings of creation.

If you're wandering in a desert, your hold on life seems very tenuous; it hangs from the strap of your water bottle. A guide makes some difference. But how much more does it change things to know that the God of the sun, moon and stars claims you, and seeks a deep and abiding relationship with you. When the people of Israel received the Law at Mount Sinai, they *had* a guide; Moses. But in the giving of the Law, God offered them, and through them, *us*, a promise of deep, abiding loyalty and love; life in all its fulness. Jeremiah would describe this as being written on our hearts. There's only one response to such a gift. So is it so strange to offer a love lyric to the Law?

The last movement ¹¹⁻¹⁴ traces the way this living relationship matures.

^{v.11} When you move into a love relationship, you start by tentatively keeping to 'the right sorts of things to say'.

Then when you're more secure, ^{v.12} you make some small, but still-tentative claims on the relationship.

Then ^{v.13} there's a thorough exploration of the extent of your commitment.

Finally, ^{v.14} all uncertainty dissolves in the wonder of a trusting relationship.

We've entered a mystic's private world of prayer together in this Psalm. It's a world of someone who knows what it feels like to lie beneath the stars of a clear sky, night after night; someone who's journeyed long with the burden of feeling insignificant – no, even irrelevant.

And into that world, the creator of that night sky has offered the dignity of partnership, of adult significance. Now those night skies proclaim the glory of the Creator, who has offered the poet and all creatures intimate relationship. From this point on, we can never see things the same way again. Amen