



More than a feeling
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Year C, Creation 1
Deuteronomy 30:15-20, Luke 14:25-33
7 September 2025

Today marks the first day of our season of creation. While the season of creation is not an official season of the church, we are among an ever-growing number of congregations that spend a number of weeks leading up to the feast of St Francis to reflect on the importance of our environment and the challenges we are facing. This time of reflection reaches its conclusion with our special service where we bless the animals. Dog will bark, cats will hiss, donkeys will bray and some of us will worry about the state of the carpet when all is said and done. But that is all yet to come.

St Francis has in many senses become a very secular saint. He is the patron saint of ecology and the environment. He is also the patron saint of Italy, San Francisco (which bears his name) and tapestry workers. But more than anything he is mostly associated with the care and love of animals, after all he is the saint who preached to the birds.

However, the overall impact Francis had on this world is greatly underestimated. His story is an incredibly rich one, which is why it is a shame that he is sometimes reduced to the caricature of the saint who preached to the birds, which on the face of it seems like a fairly eccentric thing to have done. What we often lose sight of is the way these activities of Francis changed the attitudes of people throughout the world, including us.

I wonder how many people here keep a garden? Who here loves fresh flowers? How many of you enjoy spending time at one of our cities parks? Who here enjoys the feeling of sand between your toes and the smell of the ocean? How many of you appreciate the crunch of frozen grass beneath your feet on a frosty morning?

We are blessed to live in a time and place that allows us to have a very positive attitude towards the environment. We are lucky enough to look at our gardens and to regard them as places of beauty rather than being something that we are dependent upon to provide our next meal.

In recent years there have been a large number of television programs that take people of various skill levels, send them out into a remote part of the world and then film them struggling to survive. It turns out that most modern people like you and me have a pretty rough time in these situations. We are not used to having to find shelter, build fires or locate our own food. Our ancestors would look on us with a strange mixture of wonder and pity I think.

When each day is a struggle to simply survive, the human attitude towards the environment tends to be less positive. Throughout most of our history humanity has tended towards viewing creation as a wild force that was only useful when tamed through human struggle. This negative way of viewing the world has been supported by poor biblical teaching drawn from such texts as the creation stories in the book of Genesis. For example, in one of these stories God tells Adam and Eve that only through difficult labour will they gain their daily bread. The writers of that particular text suggest that creation became humanity's adversary, something to be fought with on a daily basis. This stands in contrast to the depiction of the Garden of Eden that is portrayed as a place where humanity enjoyed a harmonious relationship with our environment.

Sadly, such creation stories have shaped negative attitudes in the western world that see the earth as a resource given by God to humanity to exploit for our own survival. That attitude persists today and is clearly seen in the reluctance of many to reduce emissions, clean up waterways, or to prioritise care of creation over the need to produce greater financial returns.

Lloyd Geering suggests that the voice of St Francis and the Franciscan movement that has given voice to the beauty and fragility of creation has been a very quiet one in Christian history. Geering points out that Francis's view of creation as a place in which we encounter God's presence was an intellectual revolution. To put that more simply, Francis looked at a world that most people regarded as something to be tamed,

and dared to suggest that God can be encountered within every aspect of our environment.

For many of us in this time and place it is Francis's understanding of creation that is our understanding. And yet, as much as we love our parks and beaches, our drinkable water, our snow-capped mountains, we continue to ignore the groans of a world in pain.

The painter Michael Shepherd once showed me his painting of a native New Zealand grasshopper. We have thousands of native insects in New Zealand that are utterly unique in the world. Some of them are only found in very small and very remote areas. Many of these precious creatures will fall into extinction in our lifetime. I can't help but think that if Francis were among us today, he might be telling us about the grasshoppers. They never get the attention that our New Zealand Native birds do, and yet they are in greater trouble.

It is not enough to enjoy the beach, the trees, the flowers and the mountains. Francis taught us that loving creation is to encounter the divine. Love is more than a positive feeling towards something. It also drives us to behave in ways that take into account the needs of that which we love. To love creation is to think deeply about how we live so that we cause as little harm to the environment as possible. So, this season of creation, let us think deeply about how we can actively demonstrate our love for this precious world which is our home. Amen.