

Do you remember Jesus' short story of the Pearl of Great Price? There's something about it that reminds me of our readings and our current Season of Creationtide. A man who knows all about pearls, a pearl merchant, finds a Guinness Record Breaking pearl, the biggest, most lustrous, most beautiful, most valuable pearl in the world. He knows exactly what it's worth, and he can't believe it's come his way. But the *seller* knows its value too. The seller isn't going to let this stupendous pearl go for less than it's worth. The pearl merchant sells every other pearl he owns, every other item he owns, sells his horse, sells his house, sells his clothes, sells it all! Then he buys the pearl of great price and knows he's made the deal of a lifetime.

Jesus says, that's what the kingdom of God is like.

Well, I don't know about you, but I don't actually want to get rid of everything I own, all my material and financial security, for anything, however valuable.

Then again, that does seem like what Jesus said in the gospel reading: he speaks, fortunately with a good dose of story-telling exaggeration, about cutting off the parts of ourselves which cause us, or cause others, to sin. Once again he speaks about the kingdom of God, and getting rid of the sin which can keep us from entering it.

The kingdom of God is what Paul is talking about, in his letter to the Romans. I don't know if you've noticed, but every Sunday in Creationtide we're having the same reading, which gives us a chance to dive deep into the swirling ideas Paul sets out in chapter 8. He's talking about this event which the whole of creation is waiting for. He's talking about present suffering and future glory. He's saying creation is in slavery right now, and that it's going to be set free, just as humans are, in this coming Kingdom of God.

Paul isn't telling us that this is all soul and spirit stuff, forget your sordid human bodies. He doesn't make a separation between the physical world he's living in, and the spiritual world he also inhabits through his relationship with Jesus. He doesn't make a separation between the body and the soul, because there isn't one. He's a flesh and blood Jewish man, writing to flesh and blood inhabitants of the largest city in the empire, and as he talks to them about the Kingdom of God, he sees it as completely natural that God's Kingdom includes all of Creation, it includes natural bodies, animal bodies, insect bodies, bird bodies, and human bodies, as well as spirits and souls.

He says something interesting about himself and these Roman believers. He says: 'we have the first fruits of the Spirit'. That's what this year's design for Creationtide represents.

It's worth checking what first fruits are, because I'm always slightly vague about terms like that. We have one harvest festival, we'll be celebrating next week, but the Jewish year includes several harvest festivals. The first Jewish harvest festival is around the point when spring turns into summer, when the very first produce is harvested. This is the first fruit, and it's the promise of the full harvest to come. It's offered to God, with thanksgiving and celebration, because it's been given by God.

So, when Paul says we believers are the first fruits of the Spirit, he means we are the promise of something even better to come. The new life we have in Christ, filled and fuelled by his Spirit, is just the beginning. It's the gift of God which shows that his plans are working out, that the slow and steady work of setting creation free is under way. So when you feel God at work in your life,

when you see God at work in the people around you, these are the first stirrings of spring, with the promise of more 'glory to be revealed to us'.

Last week Geoff preached about how we pray, with hope, for this full redemption of creation. We can certainly see the way creation is 'enslaved', as Paul put it. Paul wrote about creation's enslavement to decay, and I assume he was speaking about how everything, and everybody, ages and dies, in the natural way of things. He could certainly see examples of pollution and human corruption of creation in his time. But there's no doubt we see more examples of human action causing decay in nature, than Paul and the early Christians did.

Paul states that this decay is not God's final plan for creation. No matter how natural it seems to us, who've lived with nothing else, it's not God's plan that the cycle of death and decay should go on for ever. That's odd. I really cannot envisage God's alternative. Fortunately, God doesn't ask me to. What he asks me, and you, to do, Paul says, is to hope, to wait with patience, and to suffer in the pains of labour with the rest of creation. Hmm, does that sound attractive to you? We're back to Jesus' words about giving up everything to gain something even better, about cutting out parts of our lives to focus on the better future.

But that's the thing about Paul's choice of the words 'labour pains'. My mum, who was ill for many years before her death, told me of a pain she'd experienced which was 'like giving birth, but so much worse because you know there's nothing good at the end of it'. Birth may be an awful pain, but it is producing a whole new person, a new, wonderful member of your family. It has to be the most productive pain there is.

So Paul tells us we're going through this painful process with creation, because something wonderful is going to come of it. Creation is going through suffering, and we're suffering with it, but a better future than we can imagine is coming.

Nowadays all humans are having to choose how to respond to the sufferings of this present time. Many have no choice but to try and survive, and that's the same for animals and plants which are directly affected. We lost two old oak trees from our garden in France, which couldn't cope in the increasingly dry soil. What was once happening somewhere on the other side of the world, is now happening in our gardens. But however distressing it is for us now, we can sadly be certain that for someone else, elsewhere now, or here in the future.

No wonder we can become numb to the whole situation! No wonder we veer from recycling to carbon offsetting to signing a petition to taking a cheap flight to trying to act like nothing is happening. These are all standard human reactions. Another human reaction is to become hopeless. Yet another is to become so fired up with action for the planet that the cause becomes a battle ground between the activists and the rest of the world.

But here we are, with first fruits of God's future glory, and in his Spirit we are the promise of the reunion of humans with creation. I said there's no division between the body and the soul, between the material and the spiritual, but our world has made a division. In Christ, the division is being healed, and that's why as Christians we have a unique offering of hopeful, prayer-fuelled action, to bring to the Climate Crisis.

What do I mean, Christians have something unique to offer?

As Christians, we know how to confess our sins. Let's confess our sins, individual and systemic, against God's creation.

As Christians, we know how to receive God's forgiveness. Let's receive his forgiveness, and go out to work, to his praise and glory, for the creation he has made.

As Christians, God sends his Holy Spirit to live in us, so that we grow in love, and groan in prayer with creation. Let's be open to the work of his Spirit, in connecting us to his Creation.

As Christians, we know that our prayers are heard. Let's pray for the news stories, and the campaigns, we see, instead of becoming hopelessly numbed.

As Christians, we know that our daily life makes a difference. Let's live with creation in mind, taking every small step, even though it's sacrificial, to reduce our impact on the environment.

As Christians, we know that God gave us minds to learn. Let's learn together what is really needed, and what really makes a difference, let's support researchers and scientists, at this time of crisis.

As Christians, we know that our collective witness can change the world. Let's witness together in collective action, and collective campaigning, to change minds in government and in business.

As Christians, we wait in eager longing with the whole of creation, for the freedom which is coming. Let's bring that prayer-filled hope and action to the Climate anxiety, anger and suffering which groan in our world today.

These are not just words to warm our hearts as we sit in church, they're the unique gift Christ wants to offer to the world through his church, at a time of Climate Crisis. We are called to prayerful hope in action, and I'm going to finish this sermon with just a sample of the prayerful, hopeful actions we can take.

I asked our Environmental Officer Marie. She suggested the main areas where we can act with hope in Luxembourg are in the areas of food, buildings and transportation. None of these areas require us to change everything, all at once. Taking one small step, then another. Don't worry about what you can't do, just make one change. Marie suggests having one more vegetarian meal per week, than you currently do. Taking one less flight a year, than has been your habit. Using the bus or train for one journey more per week. Contacting the *Klima-Agence* about electric vehicles or solar panels, or joining an environmental organisation. This year's Creationtide material also encourages us to look at the Fossil Fuels Non-Proliferation Treaty. There's a link in this week's e-news.

Start with the next small step of hope, and trust God for your next steps.

So, to go back to our Pearl of Great Price, the Kingdom of God, God's Kingdom is the hope we have for our own future, for the future of creation. This is a hope which may cost us, materially, physically, but Jesus promises it is worth it. We can't doubt there's some bodily suffering involved, because we see how Jesus died on the cross to bring it about. But amid *our* suffering, *because* of Christ's suffering, God places his Holy Spirit in us, so we are the first harvest of that new, healed, liberated future for creation. We're living, breathing, walking, talking, praying, acting, loving first fruits of a reunited Creation.

Let's bow our heads and begin a moment of reflection with a short prayer:

Jesus, fill each of us with your Holy Spirit, so that we may overflow with your hopeful action.
Lead us neither into despair nor fearful action, but give us your love for your whole creation, and
show us this week one new loving action we can take up, to pray and act with Creation.