That is the opening verse of the psalm that was sung a few minutes ago. There is a lovely pattern to this psalm; it starts above the earth, and in successive verses it calls on angels, then on sun and moon and stars, the heavenly realms and rain from heaven to praise God, and then the focus moves down to the earth, where it sends out the clarion call, “Praise the Lord from the earth”, calling on the deep and all the creatures therein, and then storms and mists, hills and trees, wild beasts and cattle, birds of the air, kings and their subjects, then finally we are brought into the crescendo of this symphony of praise:

Young men and women, old and young together:
let them praise the name of the Lord

It was after I had seen that this psalm was part of the lectionary for this Sunday, that I saw an item in the news about May as “Walk in the Woods Month”, promoting the physical and mental health benefits of taking time to shut out the pressures of modern life, and attune instead to the sights and sounds of forests and the creatures in them, and becoming more aware of the rhythms of nature. The idea goes back so to an initiative intended to raise awareness of the importance of forests, but that doesn’t invalidate their point; other groups and individual enthusiasts, of course, chipped in with their own ideas about different ways of spending time letting the beauty of the natural world takes us away from the humdrum limitations of our daily routines. For those who try to live prayerfully, setting aside time to be immersed in such beauties may well open up an additional dimension, and heighten our sense of being drawn into the cosmic symphony of the praise of God which this psalm describes.

St Francis of Assisi is celebrated for his reverence for God’s creation, and he wrote a famous poem called the Canticle of Brother Sun, which may well have been inspired by this psalm: it praises God for all the beauty of nature, starting with Brother Sun, who not
only gives us light, but is also beautiful and radiant with a splendour that reflects God’s majesty. And then it goes on to call upon all creation to praise God, and you’ll notice that St Francis each time uses a slightly curious form of words, when he proclaims that praise of God, our praise of him, is to be offered through our brothers and sisters within the world of nature, because he thinks that it is only through our relationship with the world that we can praise God; “Praise be to Thee, my Lord, through Sister Moon and the stars”; “Praise be to Thee, my Lord, through Brothers Wind and Air and all the weather’s moods, by which thou dost cherish all that thou hast made”; “Praise be to Thee, my Lord, through Sister Water, so useful, humble, precious and pure;” and through Brother Fire, through whom thou dost light the night, and who is beautiful and playful and robust and strong. And the climax is “Praise be to Thee, my Lord, through our sister, Mother Earth herself, who sustains us and governs us, and who delights us with beauty. How very significant that St Francis does not only think of Mother Earth as feeding us, but also as governing us, in other words as having things to teach us about the mutual responsibility that is necessary within family life, and specifically the responsibilities that we must accept as members of the household that is the created order. And the Canticle finishes with St Francis speaking directly to us, and saying to us, to each one of us, You yourselves are part of this – live in harmony with these elemental forces who are your brothers and sisters as contributors to the life of the world:

Praise and bless the Lord,
and give Him thanks
and serve Him with great humility

That mention of our need for humility within the family of creation is very important; just think how sometimes you have perhaps felt a particular sense of smallness when confronted by a glorious landscape, or by some wonder of the natural world, and you’re just brought up short by it, because you have been moved by what you have seen, and have felt a sense of reverence.

It is perhaps no accident that when Pope Francis wanted to issue an Encyclical on human responsibilities for the environment he took this canticle by his namesake Saint Francis as his starting point. An encyclical is a sort of open letter addressed to the world at large, and by tradition they have a Latin title, derived from the opening words in the official Latin version, but this one is called Laudato Si’, which is not Latin at all, but it is a phrase from the old Umbrian dialect in which St Francis wrote his Canticle of Brother Son, and it means “Praise be to Thee”; that is the phrase which is repeated over and over
again in St Francis’s canticle as he lists the ways that our lives are sustained and enriched by all the elements of the natural world which he teaches us to call our brothers and sisters – and that’s the list that I went through a moment ago “Praise be to Thee, my Lord, through Brother Sun, Sister Moon, Brothers Winds and Air, Sister Water, Brother Fire” and so on. And the particular bit that the Pope highlights is Mother Earth: “Praise be to Thee, my Lord, through our Sister, Mother Earth, who sustains and governs us…”

The Pope then broadens his focus out from the earth as our mother to embrace the earth as our common home, and he actually gave this open letter the subtitle On Care for our Common Home. So in the opening section he develops St Francis’s description of the earth as our Sister by setting out our responsibilities for her:

This sister now cries out to us because of the harm we have inflicted on her by our irresponsible use and abuse of the goods with which God has endowed her. We have come to see ourselves as her lords and masters, entitled to plunder her at will. The violence present in our hearts, wounded by sin, is also reflected in the symptoms of sickness that are evident in the soil, in the water, in the air and in all forms of life… We have forgotten that we ourselves are dust of the earth, as we are told in the Bible (Gen 2:7); our very bodies are made up of her elements, we breathe her air and we receive life and refreshment from her waters.

It is four years ago next Saturday that the Pope published this encyclical, and it is sobering to think how much more urgent warnings about the degradation of our environment from scientists, relief charities, environmental groups and governments have become over those four years. Sir David Attenborough’s television documentary Climate Change – the Facts, which went out last month, shocked, and even distressed many people; if you missed it, it is still available on iPlayer if you have access to the internet, and if you haven’t got time for the whole programme, the BBC website has a four-minute clip with dramatic video images summarising the main facts. Only last week the Guardian changed its editorial guidelines to direct columnists to heighten the impact of what they write on environmental issues by, for instance, using the phrase “climate crisis” instead of the more neutral term “climate change”. Just this year nations, particularly in the Pacific region, which have a significant proportion of their territory as low-lying land or islands, have more urgently than previously sounded the alarm about the proportion of their land, and therefore of their populations’ livelihoods, that will be lost to rising sea levels. We’ve also had fresh reports about threats to human life from polluted water or
major water shortages. Plastic pollution is another issue: it has come as a shock to many people to hear how recent research has discovered that even in the most remote parts of the oceans fish and other sea creatures have ingested serious quantities of plastic debris. Just yesterday our newspapers had sobering analysis of how pollution from the atmosphere in this country gets into every organ of our bodies, in some areas to an extent that is seriously damaging to health, especially the health of young children.

People in this country and world-wide can be reluctant to contemplate the major changes in our habits and expectations that will be necessary if we are significantly to reduce these threats. Pope Francis’s letter *Laudato Si*’ came out in 2015, and it was around that time that the two largest political parties in this country were openly wrestling with their fears of voter resistance to policies designed to increase our use of renewable energy sources, and reduce our dependence on fossil fuels, because of the costs that such policies would incur. It is possible to debate the relative merits of different ways of sharing such costs by taxes or other measures, but it is getting increasingly difficult to deny that governments and individuals need to make that transition happen one way or another.

I know that there will be some people here who are still to be persuaded of the urgency of the issue; to those folk I say that I don’t set myself up as judge over you, but do please keep giving serious thought to the ongoing public discussion of these issues. To those who are already persuaded that this is something we have to grapple with urgently at a national and international level, I say, “So, what are you going to do about it, in your own life-style choices and in what you say when talking to those with whom you live and work and to those who want to represent you politically?” It is increasingly clear that concern for God’s creation can no longer be regarded as just a hobby option for enthusiasts, but it must be an integral part of our Christian discipleship. And we have to work it out in the decisions we make in our daily lives, what we buy, what we throw away, and how we dispose of it; what we eat, how we travel, and where we take our holidays. You might wonder how much difference you can make by modifying your own choices; but of course, if many people make similar changes the cumulative effect can be very significant. All these things affect the future of our planet, and what we leave to our children and grandchildren.

This morning’s psalm was our starting point for these reflections, so let me finish with the last verse of the last psalm in the whole Book of Psalms, “Let everything that hath breath praise the Lord!” (Ps 150.6). Many of you will know that psalm and that verse in the glorious setting by Stanford which we often hear on special occasions. But we have
no moral or spiritual right to enjoy the spiritual uplift of Choir and Organ, sometimes with the added thrill of brass instruments, if we are not seriously committed to improving our environment to the point when every creature that hath breath can be free from the fear of being asphyxiated by pollution and by the effects of global warming.

Let everything that hath breath praise the Lord! Amen.

2 Encyclical letter Laudato si’ of the Holy Father Francis. 1st ed. 2015, available on Vatican Web Site