



# *Christ Church Cathedral*

OXFORD

**22 September 2019: Choral Eucharist**

**The Fourteenth Sunday after Trinity**

**Job 38: 1, 4-14; Philippians 3:4b-16; Luke 16:1-13**

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**‘How should we care for creation?’**

*To Christ our Lord*

I caught this morning morning’s minion, king-  
dom of daylight’s dauphin, dapple-dawn-drawn Falcon, in his riding  
Of the rolling level underneath him steady air, and striding  
High there, how he rung upon the rein of a wimpling wing  
In his ecstasy! then off, off forth on swing,  
As a skate’s heel sweeps smooth on a bow-bend: the hurl and gliding  
Rebuffed the big wind. My heart in hiding  
Stirred for a bird,—the achieve of; the mastery of the thing!

Have you ever seen it? Have you seen what Gerard Manley Hopkins celebrates in the beginning of his poem *The Windhover*? A kestrel soaring on the dawn winds, perched on the air as steadily as a rider on horseback? Perhaps not a kestrel, but if you have ever looked up in Oxford you have almost certainly seen the red kites—another falcon—that circle endlessly over the city. Once they were extinct in this area, but their reintroduction to the Chilterns has been so wildly successful that they are now a common sight. They are so common that if you’ve never seen them wheeling and whirling above the honey coloured stone, chances are that you’ve simply never bothered to look.

I want to try and answer the question, “How should we care for the natural world?” I have three points, all starting with the same letter, and I will draw from the work of Gerard Manley Hopkins, a Jesuit poet who began his study here in Oxford in 1863. Of course, having three points and a poem in a sermon means I’m recapturing my Pentecostal roots in this fabulous space!

## LOOK

My first response to “how should we care for the natural world” is Look! If you have never caught the morning’s minion riding high upon the updrafts, then cast your eyes to the heavens and look around. Take time away from Netflix and Facebook and spend time walking through Shotover park or Port Meadow. Get out of the city and visit the Cotswolds. We will never care for the natural world until we learn to care for the natural world. Nor will we care until we know, personally, the trees and the fields and the animals. Any environmentalism built upon an abstract fear of climate change or a sense of duty is bound to fail. It simply won’t make enough change.

Unless we do begin to look, until we get to know nature, we will never know what we stand to lose, nor what we have already lost. How many of you remember the 1999 film *The Matrix*? It was a good film, but I think it got the primary risk with computers wrong. Our risk is not that the machines will seek to enslave us against our will or that they will have to trick us into a virtual existence. Instead, our risk is that we, willingly, happily, eagerly, will enslave ourselves into a virtual world, being content with pixelated sunsets and being blind to all that is real. It is the Brave New World, not The Matrix, that is the dystopian threat we face. So, look, and learn to love.

## LAMENT

Of course, if you choose to look, to care for, and to love the natural world you will land squarely in #2, lament. Aldo Leopold famously said, “One of the penalties of an ecological education is that one lives alone in a world of wounds.” If you care for the natural world, you will risk signing up for a world of hurt as you see your beloved trashed, poisoned, or “developed”.

92 years before Dr Seuss wrote his environmental story *The Lorax*, with its odd central character who speaks for the trees, Hopkins had his own go at speaking for the trees in the poem, “Binsey Poplars” about a row of trees that were chopped down in the nearby town of Binsey, just across Port Meadow:

My aspens dear, whose airy cages quelled,  
Quelled or quenched in leaves the leaping sun,  
All felled, felled, are all felled;  
Of a fresh and following folded rank  
Not spared, not one  
That dandled a sandalled

Shadow that swam or sank  
On meadow & river & wind-wandering weed-winding bank.

O if we but knew what we do  
When we delve or hew —  
Hack and rack the growing green!  
Since country is so tender  
To touch, her being só slender,  
That, like this sleek and seeing ball  
But a prick will make no eye at all,  
Where we, even where we mean  
To mend her we end her,  
When we hew or delve:

After-comers cannot guess the beauty been.

Ten or twelve, only ten or twelve  
Strokes of havoc unselfe  
The sweet especial scene,  
Rural scene, a rural scene,  
Sweet especial rural scene.

Hopkins warns of the precarious fragility of the natural world.

It may seem odd, in these days of political turmoil and human agony to worry about the trees. Why should we care for the natural world, when there are such pressing human needs? I found Pope Francis' encyclical, *Laudato Si'* particularly helpful in trying to respond to this question. Francis outlines what he calls "the intimate relationship between the poor and the fragility of the planet, the conviction that everything in the world is connected." You cannot disengage the suffering of those who walk across landscapes seeking a new home from the bombed out or drought-ridden landscape they fled in the first place. You cannot lament the suffering of those living lives of subsistence apart from the depletion of natural reserves of agricultural and oceanic sources of livelihood due to the poisoning of land and sea. "Everything is connected." So lamenting for the trees is one part of lamenting the human tragedy that surrounds us.

But lament is hard, and usually we'd rather avoid it. Lament involves a long hard look at our own complicity in the structures and systems that propagate environmental and social damage. Lament has an implicit call for repentance, and who wants to hear that? But lament is necessary to the process of change. Without real care, without a robust love for the natural

world and for people, and without a grounding in the reality of lament, I don't think anyone would have the perseverance to speak into the urgent clamour of human power dynamics, or to work for the change of violent human practices.

## LISTEN

My third point this morning is "listen." Beyond the shout of politics, and the greed of our market economies, and even the cry of the poor, there is another voice, a sustaining voice that undergirds and sustains our efforts. It would be easy to dwell on the negative, to capitalise on disaster, but both Hopkins and Scripture bring to mind another dynamic: the hope present in the ongoing work of God. Psalm 19 reads:

The heavens declare the glory of God,  
the skies proclaim God's work.  
Day after day they pour forth speech;  
night after night they reveal knowledge.  
They have no speech, they use no words;  
no sound is heard from them.  
Yet their voice goes out into all the earth,  
their words to the ends of the world.

There is more than one note being played in the orchestra of the natural world. In our efforts to care for the natural world, it is helpful to be reminded that we are not alone. The natural world itself declares the work of One who cared for the natural world long before humans were even a twinkle in the eye of the Australopithecus, and who will continue to care for the world long after we are gone. We hear a little of that voice in the passage we heard from Job, where God asks "Where were you when I laid the earth's foundations?" We didn't create this world, and we are not alone in caring for it.

Of course, the voice of nature attesting to this divine care is subtle. We are told that it has no speech, no words and no sound. Yet the voice is universally speaking, though gently. You will not hear unless you take the time to listen, and thus they are so unlike the fire alarms of human voices that usher us out onto the street with their urgent calls to action.

Psalm 19, if we follow it on, starts with this reflection on the heavens, then moves into a reflection on another source of that divine voice: "The law of the Lord is perfect, refreshing the soul..." The psalm juxtaposes the declaration of the heavens which have no words with the written words of Scripture, which being written, cannot be heard without human interpreters. Finally, the psalm ends with that prayer that preachers so often use, at the

beginning of a sermon “May these words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be pleasing in your sight, Lord, my rock and my redeemer.” Like Pope Francis’s encyclical, the psalm interweaves the voices of the natural world, the words of people, and the word of God. Listening to any one will illuminate each of the others.

## CONCLUSION

Look, lament, and listen.

Perhaps you are still waiting for something else? Were you waiting for me to start telling you to change your light bulbs, turn down the heat, and stop buying things wrapped in plastic? Then, listen also to St Paul when he speaks to the Philippians. In 3:16 he writes: “Only let us live up to what we have already attained.” My guess is that you already have all the *information* you need. You know to cut down on meat and air travel, you know to reduce, and reuse, and recycle. You know about cutting holes in your fences for hedgehogs and not wasting power and not eating strawberries all the year round. So I won’t regale you with a list of environmental moralisms. We don’t need information, we need motivation, we need repentance, we need to be faithful even with the little we have.

So I will end with one more poem of Hopkins’ that, I think, summarises all that could be said about the sense of hope, that this is not an inevitable or impossible task, and that, above our efforts are those of Another whose work—when we care for the natural world—we join:

The world is charged with the grandeur of God.

It will flame out, like shining from shook foil;

It gathers to a greatness, like the ooze of oil

Crushed. Why do men then now not reckon his rod?

Generations have trod, have trod, have trod;

And all is seared with trade; bleared, smeared with toil;

And wears man's smudge and shares man's smell: the soil

Is bare now, nor can foot feel, being shod.

And for all this, nature is never spent;

There lives the dearest freshness deep down things;

And though the last lights off the black West went

Oh, morning, at the brown brink eastward, springs —

Because the Holy Ghost over the bent

World broods with warm breast and with ah! bright wings.

Amen.