In 1896 an unknown man was rooting through odds and ends on a market stall in London when he came across an old notebook. It contained a lot of handwritten prose and a number of poems. He bought it and handed it on to a local Presbyterian minister called Alexander Grosart who ran a small publishing firm and who, on reading through the work, recognized it was by someone writing in the seventeenth century. He had published collections of such writings from poets like John Donne, Richard Crashaw, George Herbert, Andrew Marvell, and Henry Vaughan. In fact, he wondered if this was the work of one of the most intriguing of what became known as the Metaphysical Poets, Henry Vaughan. But Grosart died before he finished any of his researches and so the notebook was once more laid aside, buried in the library of this Victorian minister. The story might have ended there, but for a very Dickensian newsagent and stationer called Bertrand Dobell who decided to expand his business into selling second-hand books. In 1887 he opened his first second-hand bookshop in the Charing Cross Road, and when the estate of Grosart was broken up and sold he bought up the minister’s library. The notebook was once more discovered and piqued Dobell’s antiquarian interests. The style of the writing in the notebook reminded him of a very obscure work published in 1699. The author of that work had already been dead 25 years, but had published one or two earlier pieces when he was alive. His name was Thomas Traherne, and he is now recognized to be one of the most important and distinctive of the Metaphysical poets. Dobell published Traherne’s poetry in 1903.

Traherne’s Christian sensitivities were mystical and contemplative. He wrote about his experiences of God as a child wandering the fields near his home in Herefordshire. From the perspective of adult looking back to his perception of the world as a child he recorded seeing “A Tree set on fire with invisible flame, that illuminateth all the World.” The Tree becomes the Cross and through it he views Christ as the light within creation. “The corn
was orient and immortal wheat, which never should be reaped, nor was ever sown. I thought it had stood from everlasting to everlasting.” And here comes the line that makes me unable to read our first lesson this morning (about God forming Adam and bringing Eve from his dreaming body) without thinking about Traherne: “Certainly Adam in Paradise had not more sweet and curious apprehensions of the world, than I.” Sweetness is a constant theme in Traherne’s poetry and meditations: “The green trees,” he wrote, “when first I saw through one of the gates transported and ravished me, their sweetness and unusual beauty made my heart to leap, and almost mad with ecstasy, they were such strange and wonderful things.”

To be sure these are what Wordsworth would later call “recollections in tranquility” – a child’s view of the world that captures some of the wonder and freshness of creation that our reading about the creation of Adam, Eve and the Garden of Eden evokes. But Traherne understands that though they are perceptions of the past, in them lies something that illuminates our understanding of a future in Christ, who St. Paul calls the second Adam. Through the Cross, the resurrection redeems that past so that, in Traherne’s words:

All [our] Body Shall be purified  
Flesh turn’d to Sense, and Sense be DEIFIED.

Perception itself is transfigured for Traherne in Christ and in that lies our redemption; a redemption inseparable from a redeemed creation – a creation resplendent so that the “works of God in their splendor and glory” are once again made visible. And this Christian understanding fires his imagination such that he too creates by writing. God creates all things, in and through Christ. God sculpts Adam from the clay. But we who are created in the image and likeness of God are to participate in that creativity. We don’t simply manipulate and use created things we create new things – poems and dances, music and scientific theories, cakes, sauces, homes, gardens, arrangements of flowers. We are crafted to be craftsmen and women. And this creativity is divine life in us; the divine life in which we participate. Creation doesn’t stop after day six; its generative potency is given into our hands – for good or for evil, for the fashioning of the beautiful or the devising what will be destructive.

We might now be able to harness the power of the winds and the waves that threatened to capsize the fishing boat in which the disciples labored, fearful, until Christ saved them; but increasingly it is evident how much we have destroyed the created world with
rapacious greed, and slowly that is killing all of us. This week the Nuffield Trust published research findings that indicate that young people between 10-24 are more likely to die of asthma in the UK than in any of the other 14 European countries of the EU. Obesity rates and mental illness among the same section of our population are also higher. One of their conclusions states: “Despite living in the world’s fifth largest economy, young people aged between 20-24 in the UK are experiencing one of the highest rates of severe material deprivation.” Traherne’s perception that “I was entertained like an angel” rings utopian and must seem as enchantingly impossible as wizard classes in a gothic boarding-school where friends are true and, despite monsters and evil threats, everyone is protected and cared for.

But some dreaming is powerful in changing people’s behaviours; more powerful than debates over policy and arguments over cuts. As a child Traherne may not have understood, though as an adult he did: it is the binding of Christ to creation that secures its redemption. As we have it in the reading from Luke’s Gospel: “Who is this that the winds and the waves obey him?” In Christ lies the transfiguration of all things – even bread and wine. Not that the Eucharist is going to improve air quality in the UK, raise people from poverty so that they might eat, sleep and live better, healthier lives. But by faith the power of the Eucharist lies in the regeneration of our behaviours, sensibilities and understandings of the world. It feeds a dreaming, a sacrificial dreaming, for what Traherne understood to be a sense deified. As we consume Christ so we are consumed by Christ; and that changes us – releasing our own power to be creative and do some good, make some good. However small.

Traherne’s poetry and meditations, published as I said only in 1903, were picked up by another figure, a Jewish agnostic, in the early 1920s – the English composer Gerald Finzi. Finzi’s childhood was far from idyllic, but these writings fed his dreams throughout the difficult 1920s and 30s, while war was brewing and while war ensued. Then, in the closing years of World War II, he finished the five movements of his cantata based on Traherne’s writing. It’s entitled: Dies Natalis – The Day of Birth. It captures Adam awakening in Paradise and gives expression to his astonishment and wonder: “so many, many thousand years beneath the dust did I in Chaos lie… from out of dust I rise and out of nothing awake.” Genuine artistic and scientific creativity generates. It gives life. And beyond any goodness and beauty it might give material form to, it inspires hope - which is an inextinguishable dreaming of better things.