

Clergy Conference Eucharist: The Abbey, Thursday 1 September 2022

I sit on the back veranda on one of the old wooden pews from St Barnabas' Chapel at The Abbey, and look out on a glorious late winter's afternoon in Sale. The birds sing, the flowers bud, the bees Hoover, pets snooze in the gentle sunshine, grass stands up straight and tall. God is in God's heaven, and all is right with the world.

Except we know that it's not. I open up Pope Francis' encyclical *Laudato Si* – whose title echoes the start of his namesake's canticle, 'Praise be to you, my Lord, through our sister, Mother earth' . . . We will sing it as an offertory hymn presently.¹

This sister [the Holy Father writes] now cries out to us because of the harm we have inflicted on 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 evident in the soil, in the water, in the air and in all forms of life. This is why the earth herself, burdened and laid waste, is among the most abandoned and maltreated of our poor; she "groans in travail" (*Rom 8:22*). We have forgotten that we ourselves are dust of the earth (cf. *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.²

The Season of Creation is upon us; it begins this very day – 1 September – and concludes with our celebration of St Francis' Day on 4 October, when we will again be together on retreat in the beautiful surrounds of Pallotti College. And where better to celebrate the start of this season than at The Abbey, this centre for spirituality, hospitality, and the environment.

This ecumenical initiative began with Patriarch Dimitros declaring 1 September as a day of Prayer for Creation for Orthodox Christians. The World Council of Churches extended that day into a five week season, and in 2015 Pope Francis included it in the Roman Catholic calendar. Each year the season takes on a new theme, this year's featuring the burning bush motif and the invitation to 'Listen to the voice of creation'.

If you've not had a look at the diocesan website lately, I encourage you to do that – for all sorts of reasons – but especially as you'll find some information about three activities taking place over the next fortnight: a video collage project; the Abbey Feast back here in ten days promoting sustainable food production (and I'm sure our Lord was mindful of sustainable fishing practices in today's gospel reading!)³ and the climate action webinar on 14 September. Please promote and support these projects in your parishes and ministry centres.

You'll be aware of the recent Synod motion, echoing the General Synod, that puts climate action front and centre in the Diocese for the life of our 40th Synod. The ACTinG group (Acting for Climate Change Together in Gippsland) is relying on the leadership of our clergy in carrying this forward.

Not that it will be a 'hard sell'. The survey ACTinG conducted at Synod reveals that of the 80 respondents, yourself among them perhaps, 73% are extremely concerned about climate change, 75% believe that redemption of creation is part of the gospel of Christ, and 72% that climate action is integral to the Church's mission. Again, you can see the full results on the website and in this month's *TGA*.

And if in the spirit of listening to the voice of creation we were to survey our pets ahead of their annual blessing, I wonder what they would say to us about all this?

¹ 'All creatures of our God and King', *Together in Song* 100

² *Laudato Si*, 2

³ Luke 5:1-11

Pope Francis again:

Just as happens when we fall in love with someone, whenever he would gaze at the sun, the moon or the smallest of animals, [St Francis] burst into song, drawing all other creatures into his praise. He communed with all creation, even preaching to the flowers, inviting them “to praise the Lord, just as if they were endowed with reason”. His response to the world around him was so much more than intellectual appreciation or economic calculus, for to him each and every creature was a sister united to him by bonds of affection . . . What is more, Saint Francis, faithful to Scripture, invites us to see nature as a magnificent book in which God speaks to us and grants us a glimpse of his infinite beauty and goodness.⁴

From over the back fence the sound of children playing catches the breeze; younger than Rachel and Nicholas, but not by so much that they won't have to deal with the legacy of my generation.

Like the blessed Trinity itself, our world is a web of relationships wherein everything is connected, and nothing exists of or for itself. We experience this profound truth in the Eucharist, where a sacramental worldview zeroes in on bread and wine and open hands, and our Lord comes to us not from above creation but from within it, that – like Francis – we may find him in this world, in each other, and in all creatures.⁵

Celebrated on the altar of the world whenever it is celebrated in a country church or a grand cathedral, or an Abbey Chapel, the Eucharist joins heaven and earth, offering up the whole created order in adoration of the one from whom it came. What shall our offering be, and that of our children, and grandchildren?

Having served as a stretcher-bearer in WWI, Jesuit priest Teilhard de Chardin wrote an essay in 1923 called *The Mass on the World*. He was in the Ordos desert at the time, on a scientific expedition, and had access to neither bread nor wine nor altar. So he makes the whole world his altar, and for an as offertory he brings the labours and the sufferings of creation, saying:

All the things in the world to which this day will bring increase; all those that will diminish; all those too that will die: all of them, Lord, I try to gather into my arms, so as to hold them out to you in offering. This is the material of my sacrifice; the only material you desire. Over every living thing which is to spring up, to grow, to flower, to ripen during this day say again the words: This is my Body. And over every death-force which waits in readiness to corrode, to wither, to cut down, speak again your commanding words which express the supreme mystery of faith: This is my Blood.⁶

Now a mower strikes up; a vain attempt at human mastery over the life-force in the pre-spring grass. The sun dips, the wind chills; indoors beckon. Yet I am no less dust of the earth in there than out here; no less elemental, no more sovereign than subject; but simply ha adam, an earthling, a creature among creatures, baptised into stewardship of our common home, for which 'Laudato Si, mi Signore'.

+Richard, Gippsland

⁴ *Laudato Si*, 11-12

⁵ See *Laudato Si*, 233-240

⁶ As cited by Denis Edwards, 'Celebrating Eucharist in a Time of Climate Change', *Pacifica* 19.1 (Feb 2006), 1-15 and here at 6-7