

## October 8

On Sunday I preached briefly—it was St. Francis Day and our congregation included several dogs and cats. My homily focused on how the Episcopal Church, and other Christian communities who embrace the spiritual perspective of mainstream Christianity, hold a view of the natural world that is different in important ways from the views of other people.

Let me note at the outset that I am not speaking about other religions. Only certain bodies of Christians and non-religious folk.

We do not have a reductionist view of the natural world. That is, we do not content ourselves with the view that nature is “out there” and we are somehow apart from it or at the apex of it. Or that we may regard the natural world as simply there to be used as we see fit.

We do not have a romantic view of the natural order. Life is hard. The natural world changes continually, and adaptive responses by plants, animals, etc., keep creation moving. I do not say “developing”, because even that term carries the weight of an implied “onward and upward” we should be careful not to interject.

Nor do we anthropomorphize: animals are not us in other outfits. All lovely videos and heart-throbbing stories we all love to the contrary notwithstanding, we are as different from animals as they are from us.

We do not subscribe to the modern heresy largely offered in American evangelical circles (especially in the last half century) called “dominion theology”. This view includes the idea that when God gave Adam dominion over the earth, God meant that the natural world was ours to exploit. Therefore, the green movement, ecological concerns, global warming, and so on, are either off-point or irrelevant: some dominionists holding the view that God would not allow the world to be deeply damaged by us; other taking the line that exploiting the world (not to mention people) is our duty and advances the coming of the kingdom. In either case, we can do as we will.

The difference between these opposing views are stark and the stakes are high, as we can see around us. Whichever of the foregoing ideas a person holds, they

share the broad view that the earth is ours to use as we will, to exploit as we can, and absolutely to subdue.

The Episcopal Church, and the other mainstream bodies of historic Christianity, take a very different line, though there are differing emphases here and there. Principally, this view is summed up in Ps. 24:1—"The earth is the Lord's and the fulness thereof; the earth and all who dwell therein". The fundamental claim is that we answer to God for how we behave with the creation. In the teaching of Jesus, our lives are not meant to be occupied solely, or even principally, with mundane concerns, but we are to seek the kingdom first, and that approach will inform our relationship with God's world and one another. Again, life is hard and requires us to adapt and change within a dynamic creation, but we are part of and within the cosmos.

What I describe here as the long-time mainstream position may perhaps be best expressed in this prayer from St Basil of Caesarea in the 4th century, CE:

" O God, enlarge within us the sense of fellowship with all living things, our brothers (and sisters) the animals, to whom Thou gavest the earth as their home in common with us. We remember with shame that we have exercised the high dominion of Man with ruthless cruelty, so that the voice of the earth, which should have gone up to Thee in song, has been a groan of travail. May we realize that they live not for us alone, but for themselves, and for Thee, and that they love the sweetness of life." (taken from resources provided by the Episcopal diocese of Olympia)