

**Easter 6, 2014 - Lew and Bampton**

**Acts 17:22 - 31**

*‘Nature, Mr Allnutt, is what we are put into this world to rise above’* - so says Rose Sayer, the British missionary played by Katherine Hepburn, to the hard-bitten skipper, Charlie Allnutt, played by Humphrey Bogart, in the 1951 film, *The African Queen*.

And nature is the focus for this Sunday in Eastertide - a Sunday which has long been known as Rogation Sunday - from the Latin word *Rogare*, meaning to ask. It is a day of prayer for the world in which we live, and indeed for the particular *corner* of the world in which we live, as old customs like beating the parish bounds on this day are meant to signify: *this is our home, this is where we belong*.

A day of prayer for the earth, on whose bounty we depend, and whose careful, respectful maintenance has been laid by God on the shoulders of this one species whom he has made ‘in his image and likeness’ - us.

On the one hand we are a species, as the book of Genesis reminds us, ‘made of the dust of the earth’ - deeply united with every other living thing on the planet. *Of* the earth, part of nature, yet on the other hand, as Rose Sayer correctly avows, we are called to ‘rise above’ nature, and carry out the task assigned to us by the

**Creator who breathed life into this dust: to ‘have dominion over the earth and all that is in it’ - a task which *Homo sapiens* - wise man, as we have perhaps rather unwisely named ourselves - a task which humankind has frequently not carried out very well at all.**

**At times we have thought that ‘having dominion’ meant being able to do exactly as we please - the world is our plaything - the life of plants and animals is there to be exploited solely for human benefit - no other consideration matters.**

**And so, over the centuries, we have wiped out a significant number of species because we have taken no thought that their survival matters to anyone - we have slaughtered indiscriminately, fished until there is nothing left to fish, dredged sensitive areas of the sea bed and turned richly diverse coral reef communities into under-sea deserts, deforested vast regions without considering what harm that does to levels of biodiversity on the planet. It’s a sorry tale that needs no retelling here.**

**But that is not the Christian (or indeed the Jewish) understanding of the task God has committed to us. For, first of all, this *dominion* he gives us is given to those made in his image and likeness; it’s a dominion, therefore, that needs to reflect the way in which God himself deals with his own creation.**

**And, second, it's a dominion that we exercise *together with* God. He hasn't gone away and left us in charge to do as we like while he gets on with more important matters.**

**As the 14th century English mystic, Julian of Norwich, saw it in one of her 'revelations of divine Love', God holds the entire universe, as it were, in the palm of his hand, loving it, cherishing it, nurturing and sustaining it - this fragile little thing 'no bigger than a hazel-nut' - this fragile little thing which is 'all that there is'.**

**And the insight which this vision gave her was that the universe - 'all that there is', including us who are an inseparable part of nature - the universe exists and continues to exist because God loves it. As Jesus reminds us, God knows the number of hairs on our head, and not a sparrow dies without God marking that death.**

**His dominion over creation, then, is that of a lover, the lover who is also the artist, for whom every little bit of his work of art has its place and significance.**

**You've only got to lift up your eyes and look around you for a few seconds on a May day when the world is bursting with life and pulsating with Spring vigour to realise that God loves diversity - why so many species of insect -so many kinds of flies or beetles, wasps and bees? Why the overwhelming varieties of colour, shape,**

scent and pattern of flowers and trees, of fungi or of the tiny plankton that float and move in the waters of the sea and feed the great whales? Nature is diverse, complex, linked at every level; and so, caring for nature, our environment, our home, requires the sensitivity and wisdom which we can only begin to possess if we work closely with our Maker, who delights in every atom he has called into being.

And the natural world, as Paul suggested to the worldly-wise Athenians, in our extract from Acts 17, is a starting point for all human understanding of God. Even the pagan philosophers and poets, he said, know that there is a Creator *'in whom we live and move and have our being'*. And that natural sense of the mystery and wonder of life leads all men to question and, ultimately, to worship - to worship even when the God they worship remains 'unknown' or barely understood.

The playwright, Dennis Potter - who was not a conventional Christian believer himself - once said in his blunt way that *'anyone who claims to be totally uninterested in any sort of spiritual response to the ache of life is little more than a narrow-headed thug'*. Narrow-headed thugs there have always been in some abundance, but serious Athenians, like thoughtful and engaged people in all times and ages, know that the wonder and diversity of life - and the sheer fact that there is a world at all, and a human mind capable of investigating it - point to depths

**and heights and riches far beyond our human understanding.**

**Nature and reflection upon nature, and worship of the Unknown God who lies behind and beneath nature, will take us so far - will give us common ground to stand with our fellow men and women of all faiths on this Rogation Sunday as together we pray for guidance and blessing on, and forgiveness for, our often awkward and blundering stewardship of the world God shares so generously with us.**

**But as we do so, we can also turn to the words of Jesus, who reveals more of God than ever nature can - the God who has created out of love; the God who longs for us to know and love him in return - not vaguely, not as some powerful force or spirit of nature, but as our Father who gives us his very life, his Holy Spirit, to be our guide and strength, and who leads us along the way of selfless love that is the way of the cross, to a life that is even more diverse and abundant than the one we celebrate today.**

*Lord of all life, in whom we live and move and have our being, hear us as we pray for this world which you have charged us to care for in your name; and enable us to share with our neighbour the gospel of your love which you have revealed in Jesus Christ who is your creative Word and the Ruler of all. To the glory of your name. Amen.*