

What can Creation teach us about our Religious Life?

A reflection on how relationship with Creation can free us to live with hope.

Although I was one of the group who devised this question, my first thought in beginning is that there is already a flaw in our phrasing. ‘Creation’ and ‘Religious Life’ are two separate objects in the sentence, but my brief experience of the ‘religious life’ so far has led me to the belief that the two are intrinsically connected. Care for creation, encounter with God in creation, and living as God wills in relationship to creation are as natural to my life here as the traditions of poverty, obedience and chastity; they seem to me to be cuttings from the same plant. This is the kind of statement which may provoke some natural anxiety in a group of traditional Religious; careless Christian ecotheology has sometimes drawn on animistic, pantheistic or spiritualist ideas at the expense of the deeper riches of our faith. It is easy to become reactive and to draw away from theological and liturgical innovation which responds to the environment out of fear of crossing a line. The word *human* (in English) comes from the latin *humus*, meaning earth, soil; a deeply human approach to God will be quite literally grounded, of the earth. But it will also be *human* in the person of Jesus Christ, whose Incarnation brings us into tangible encounter with the living God. To encounter God in creation as a human must allow both encounter of the intangible God we sense revealed through creation, and the God who chooses to become incarnate as a human. This specificity brings meaning to our physical existence in creation; for most ecotheologians, it entails some degree of specific responsibility on the part of humanity within creation. We are the imprints of the Incarnation. One of the greatest gifts of our lives is when we discover ourselves as holy sleuths, recognising the marks of God’s fingerprints on the world.

One of the greatest pleasures of my day-to-day life here at Tymawr Convent is sharing the delight of encountering God in creation. It would be easy simply to speak about this joy, and I hope that you will take some of our joy in this place away with you. However, as I thought about the life of the Anglican religious communities, and my own experience as a young woman arriving in the religious life, I became aware of a question which is seemingly being spoken by nature itself, which challenges our comfortable language around nature. So today I would like to reflect on how creation is experienced by a generation growing up conscious of the climate crisis, and of how we respond as religious communities to a world whose relationship with nature is characterised by fear.

A few months ago, a letter in the Church Times – the national Anglican newspaper in Britain – caught my eye. The writer explained that she had held a ‘climate grief’ session in her church, where each person had been invited to share their feelings without discussion. It had been generally well received, but she noted that many of the younger people weren’t able to simply voice their emotions; they kept returning to solutions and responses to other people’s contributions. The writer of the letter was clearly dismayed that these young people hadn’t reached the desired conclusion of her exercise, which was a personal experience of catharsis. This letter exemplifies one common approach to creation held by many churches, which centres the emotional response of the participant, urging us to find a comfortable resolution – and, I think, driven by the fear that the horror of the climate crisis might drive us away from God. It is a poor theology that urges us to find peace too quickly – the fridge magnet theology which separates Julian of Norwich’s ‘All shall be well’ from ‘Sin is inevitable’.

As the Cold War shaped my parent's generation, the lives of my generation and those born after me have been distinctively shaped by the anxieties around the changing climate. I'm at the tail-end of the generation known as 'Millennials', born in the 1980s and early 1990s. As a child growing up in Britain around the turn of the century, I knew about the evils of littering and the virtues of recycling. But during my teenage years – which coincided with the explosion of social media, smartphones and digital media – the public narrative around climate change began to shift and filter through into the education system. I grew into the understanding of the connection between environmental degradation and human suffering in my late teen years, but the generation below me are growing up with this knowledge. So for many young people (including those who, we hope, will discern religious vocations) creation is not singing a song of the glory of God, but groaning in pain.

At my Solemn Profession two months ago (or in a few weeks' time, as I write this paper!) I asked for Romans 8. 18-27 as the epistle. In this passage St. Paul wrestles with the complexity of suffering in our earthly lives, speaking of creation 'groaning in labour pains'. Hope, when it comes, is complex. He says: 'Hope that is seen is not hope. For who hopes for what is seen?' It would be easy to suggest that St. Paul might not have described the earth as groaning in labour pains, the pains of new life to come, if he had known about rising sea levels or fossil fuels. In the months before my first profession in 2021, the incompatibility of believing on one hand in the Resurrection and, on the other, that the world is about to boil became a real crisis of faith. I remember weeping in the sacristy ten minutes before the Eucharist, and asking one of my poor sisters – who really just needed to finish setting up the service – if there was any point in making vows if the world might collapse into disaster within decades. In that moment there were no easy answers, but my sister encouraged me to simply 'stay with it', to continue until with St. Paul I might believe in a goodness still to come.

The commonality between monastics and gardeners is this quality of 'staying with'. In both monastic life and in gardening our actions need to be paired with an acceptance of whatever God gives, in both failure and success – and acceptance that one may often look like the other! When I sow a tray of seeds, I try to create the best conditions for them to germinate, but I can't control the outcome. It is an act of trust, one often rewarded with the awe of seeing them rise out of the soil. It requires the gardener to relinquish control, particularly if trying to remain in control means working against the environmental conditions of the habitat around you.

When our community first arrived at Tymawr in 1923, the land surrounding the house was bought with two particular hopes. One was to safeguard the privacy of the sisters, allowing them to maintain a strict pattern of silence. The other was to allow the community to live as self-sufficiently as possible. For decades the sisters grew potatoes and kept cows, chickens and pigs. We even made our own cheese! But as the community grew smaller and frailer, and the laws surrounding pasteurisation became difficult to implement on a small scale, it became necessary to scale back the farm work. This was a huge sadness to many of the older sisters – a failure to live up to a vital part of the original charism. After renting the land to a local farmer for several years, the community made the bold decision to transform it into a wildlife side in partnership with the Gwent Wildlife Trust. It was a bold decision as it meant a loss of the rental income, but in the years since the site has transformed from predominately agricultural land to a rich tapestry of different habitats. Seed from our first wildflower meadow is cut every year and used to seed

new wildlife meadows on other sites. It is deeply beautiful, and all the more beautiful because the gift of this site is no longer just a gift to the sisters, but a small contribution to the flourishing of the natural world. So an experience which has included times of loss and vulnerability has become a gift.

Real intimacy with nature is as complex as intimacy with its Creator. It resists our desire to simplify the narrative. It is tempting to tell you a story about our transformation into a monastic wildlife reserve that only praises 'successes', only speaks of God's presence in this land in terms of praise and thanksgiving. It would also be tempting to speak about the successive losses we all live, and our grief for the world. Neither is untrue, but when we isolate these narratives we risk either looking at our monastic lives myopically, and being absorbed in self-satisfaction, or being overwhelmed by hopelessness. When we live attentively to the natural world, it becomes harder to separate the two: listening to birdsong, for instance, I am aware of both the inherent, joyful, God-given song of the blackbird and of the silence where once a larger and more diverse choir of birds sang.

If we are to live well with this complexity it is critical that we engage with the theological questions that nature asks of us. One Anglican ecotheologian who has been helpful in my own exploration is Christopher Southgate, whose writing explores evolutionary theodicy. In his eyes, the world is *both* good and 'groaning'. There is a fundamental goodness within creation which is part of its sacramental character. However for Southgate, creation doesn't begin as thing of perfection which can only be marred by human mistakes, but is instead something dynamic, being drawn ever onwards towards God. His scheme looks towards eschatological fulfilment for all creation, a heaven where all things may reach fulfilment – whether that be life destroyed by human sin or simply the loss and wastage inherent in nature. This is a picture of a world struggling towards goodness; a world which focuses on our growth into the image of Christ rather than our fall away from it. As a sister of a community dedicated to the Sacred Cross, it seems apt to mention how many ecotheologians write specifically about the Cross at the centre of creation. The environmental ethicist Holmes Royston III, for example, writes about the 'cruciform' nature of creation, where all of the suffering of creation is embodied by Christ in the cross. So looking at the Cross has changed how I view creation, but creation also reflects back the Cross. When we see Christ in the heart of creation, then creation can no longer be a measure of the space between us and God. Even as the world travels towards God, it moves in the intimate company of the incarnate Christ.

Forgive me for how small a window this is onto Christian ecotheology, which is a broader and more exciting field than I can summarise. Returning to the scared young nun who couldn't imagine a future for this world, I understand now that one of the reasons for my fear was the overwhelming sense of human power; the human propensity for evil felt overwhelming. But when we perceive creation as sacramental, even the most desperate situations can become places where God is fully present to us.

When someone asks you a question, it is necessary to listen deeply to them before responding. I believe that creation itself is asking us a question. It asks us to respond to the suffering of all creation, the imprint of the Cross marked across it. *Where is Christ being crucified today?* But it is also asking *Who made me? And was I made for joy?* The treasure of the religious life is a calling to live with paradoxes. To make vows is to be bound in order to be free: to die in

order to live. So our lived response to creation's questioning must hold both grief and hope together, without pitting them against each other. It is a call to resist the world's measures of success – to act with love regardless of the outcome, to be disturbed by suffering without giving in to cynicism, and to recognise that even when life is diminished and broken it is still valuable, holy, and a source of joy.

Over these few days we hope to share some of the ways in which, as a community, we are attempting to live with creation and to learn from it, and do so we'll talk a lot about our actions – installing renewable energy sources, planting trees, changing our diets. If I could share this with my younger self, trapped in fear, she might have worried about whether it would make a difference; can six nuns in rural Wales really change anything? Even if we recycle really, really well? We might not change anything. But I am convinced that we have to try. Not because we're afraid; but because we might just see the face of God.

Sr. Joanna Ruth SSC, May 2025