



Progressive Christianity Study Series

Study Number 005

**Reading God in BOTH books:
the little book of the Bible
AND the bigger book of Creation.**

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God has written two books:
the little book of the Bible and the
bigger book of Creation.
Read God in both.



The above idea has been suggested over the centuries by different people.

Another version is attributed to Meister Eckhart (1260-1327):

Apprehend God in all things.
Every single creature is full of God
and is a book about God.
If I spent enough time with the tiniest creatures -
even a caterpillar -
I would never have to prepare a sermon.
So full of God is every creature.

While we generally think of the Bible in terms of the Christian Bible, the first five books also make up the Torah of the Hebrew Bible.

When overseas I was interested to see the sign “Bibliothèque” on some buildings and at first assumed they were selling Bibles. But no. Rather it is a French word which can mean library, bookcase or bookshelf. If we look at the Bible as a library rather than one book, it opens up a whole new way of reading and understanding it. The Bible contains a collection of books of various genres: myth, history, visions, poetry, songs and letters, parts of which were, for a long time, oral tradition before being written at different times by a variety of authors, with different purposes in mind. It becomes in effect a ‘bookshelf’ from which we can select a variety of writings in order to help us:

- explore the journey of creation;
- plumb the depths of our connectedness with all of creation;
- try to comprehend the mystery of life;
- seek inspiration, hope, guidance in our daily lives;
- to ask the question of who is the Creator and how we can live in relationship with the Sacred/ God/ Holy One?
- and more....

While many of us read the ‘little’ Bible regularly, this paper is aimed at exploring how we can read the bigger book of Creation.

In the western world, we are so reliant on science and technology which, important as they are, tend to steer us away from the spiritual connections we can find in nature. I recall a conversation in which I suggested that many people find a sense of the sacred in nature. This was firmly denounced with the comment: “That is animism!” The inference was that my

suggestion was quite scandalous, and that to connect spiritually with creation was to worship it.

A simple definition of *animism* is that objects, places and creatures all possess a distinct spiritual essence. Could it be that in considering and exploring the notion that God has written the '*bigger book of creation*' we might indeed find it to be a spiritual experience and that, rather than worshipping creation, we are instead brought to a place of reverence and gratitude for the Creator.

Reading a book is something most of us can do but, if we also regard Creation as a book or collection of books, how do we go about 'reading' it/them? Before the Bible became available in written form, even before the stories were put together and handed down through the generations in oral form, Creation was the book from which the early inhabitants of our planet *read*. It is important to note that first nations people from around the world had, and continue to have, a way of reading Creation. And they seem to know and understand far more than we could imagine.

We can learn much from the wisdom of indigenous peoples who have lived in deep relationship with Creation from time immemorial. We would do well to listen to and learn from them.

FIRST REFLECTION

In the late 1800's a statement about the environment, attributed to Chief Seattle and presented to the American Congress demonstrates a very different relationship and understanding of connection with nature and the ability to 'read God in creation'. Some excerpts:

How can you buy and sell the sky? The warmth of the land?

The idea is strange to us.

We do not own the freshness of the air and the sparkle of the water.

How can you buy them?

Every shining needle, every sand shore, every mist in the dark woods,
every clearing, and humming insect is holy
in the memory and experience of my people.

The sap which courses through the trees carries memories...

All things are connected,
whatever befalls the earth, befalls the sons of the earth.

Man didn't weave the web of life;
he is merely a strand in it.

Whatever he does to the web, he does to himself...

One thing we know which the white man may one day discover,
our God is the same God.

You may think now that you own Him, as you wish to own our land;

but you cannot.
He is the God of man, and His compassion is equal
to the red man and the white.

This earth is precious to Him,
to harm the earth is to heap contempt on it's Creator.
The whites too shall pass; perhaps sooner than other tribes.

Continue to contaminate your bed,
and one day you'll suffocate in your own waste.

But in your perishing you will shine brightly,
fired by the strength of the God who brought you to this land,
and for some special purpose gave you dominion over this land
and over the red man...

One thing we know our God is the same God.
This earth is precious to Him.
Even the white man cannot be exempt from the
common destiny.
We may be brothers after all. We shall see.

*Take some time to ponder the Chief's Seattle's words. How
do they resonate with you?*



SECOND REFLECTION

Australia's First Nation people understand how to connect deeply with creation. Brooke Prentiss is a Waka Waka woman and Aboriginal Christian Leader. She shares some of her story:

I have grown up in Redcliffe, Queensland, once known as Kau'in Kau'in Peninsula on the lands and waters of the Gubbi Gubbi peoples.

Each morning I walk along the seashore and watch the sunrise. I see pelicans glide onto the water's surface, see fish jump into the air from the sea, and the green sea turtle raise its head above the water. I listen to rainbow lorikeets partying in the bottlebrush flowers, hear the Australian Pied Oystercatcher as they forage through the rocks, and hear magpies warble good morning. I pay attention to the words spoken by the waves gently crashing on the shore, the splashes on the rocks, the gentle breeze through the sheoaks and gum trees.



I listen deeply. I've always known that one listens with their whole body - ears, eyes, heart, mind and spirit. This is the ancient Aboriginal practice of 'dadirri' - a word from the Ngan'gikurunggur and Ngen'giwumirri languages.

Mirriam-Rose Ungunmerr-Baumann, Australian of the Year in 2021, of the Ngangiwumirr language group says:

This is the gift that Australia is thirsting for. When I experience dadirri, I'm whole again. I can find my peace in this silent awareness; she cannot teach dadirri - it must be experienced. It comes as a deep, inner listening and quiet, still awareness. You have to be open to it. And start by slowing down. Stopping to 'smell a rose'. That's not good enough! You've got to be open in your spirit. Not stopping to smell a rose, then rushing off to work. And open, too, to the equally deep truths of dadirri: that every life matters; that we belong to one another; that we live in oneness with the universe."

Dadirri is also used as a prayer, a prayer in the sense of you just feeling the presence of the Great Creator. Aboriginal peoples have lived for thousands of years with Nature's quietness. My people today, recognise and experience in this quietness, the great Life-Giving Spirit, the Father of us all.



Uncle Graham Mundine once said:

Genesis 1 is the greatest Aboriginal Dreaming story ever told. Our dreaming stories are thousands of years of law and living, from the Creator, passed from one generation to the next. The dreaming teaches us about the Creator, how to care for creation, and how to live in right relationship with one another. The dreaming still has much to teach us, Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal today.

For us, there is no separation between human and non-human. We have lived sustainably using only what God provided, never taking too much, and never taking anything to scarcity or extinction.

As Aboriginal peoples we hear our land screaming, weeping, and crying out. Come alongside us, learn from God's appointed caretakers, and together let's act and protect God's wondrous creation in this land we now call Australia, in God's beautiful Earth.

We can learn much from seeking to look through a first nation's lens at the natural world around us, but it does require slowing down and taking time to simply be.

The practice of 'Dadirri' might indeed open a way of worship and bring a sense of calmness, healing and peace.

THIRD REFLECTION

St Francis of Assisi, in his 'Canticle of Creation', personalizes and connects the elements of the natural world with his faith in God.

O Most High, all-powerful, good Lord God,
to you belong praise, glory,
honour and all blessing.

Be praised, my Lord, for all your creation
and especially for our Brother Sun,
who brings us the day and the light;
he is strong and shines magnificently.

O Lord, we think of you when we look at him.
Be praised, my Lord, for Sister Moon, and for the stars
which you have set shining and lovely in the heavens.

Be praised, my Lord,
for our Brothers Wind and Air and every kind of weather
by which you, Lord, uphold life in all your creatures.

Be praised, my Lord, for Sister Water,
who is very useful to us,
and humble and precious and pure.

Be praised, my Lord, for Brother Fire,
through whom you give us light in the darkness:
he is bright and lively and strong.

Be praised, my Lord,
for Sister Earth, our Mother,
who nourishes us and sustains us,
bringing forth fruits and vegetables of many kinds
and flowers of many colours.

Be praised, my Lord,
for those who forgive for love of you;
and for those who bear sickness and weakness
in peace and patience
- you will grant them a crown.

Be praised, my Lord, for our Sister Death,
whom we must all face.

I praise and bless you, Lord,
and I give thanks to you, and I will serve you in all humility.

You might like to write your own 'Canticle of Creation' after spending time in nature.



FOURTH REFLECTION

Julian of Norwich (1342-1416) had a vision in which she sees a tiny hazelnut as expressing all of created existence:

And in this he showed me a little thing, the quantity of a hazel nut, lying in the palm of my hand, as it seemed. And it was as round as any ball. I looked upon it with the eye of my understanding, and thought, 'What may this be?' And it was answered generally thus, 'It is all that is made.' I marveled how it might last, for I thought it might suddenly have fallen to nothing for littleness. And I was answered in my understanding: It lasts and ever shall, for God loves it. And so have all things their beginning by the love of God.

In this little thing I saw three properties. The first is that God made it. The second that God loves it. And the third, that God keeps it.

Julian of Norwich, Revelations of Divine Love

For Julian of Norwich, even something as seemingly insignificant as a hazelnut was a thing of wonder and revelation. What small or big things have caused you to stop, take time to notice, reflect and ponder?

How might your discoveries make a difference to your relationship with the Creator God?

In reflection, you might be able to recall moments when you were filled with awe by a spectacular sunrise or sunset, some stunning scenery that took your breath away, the wonderful colours of autumn leaves, simply watching birds splashing in a bird bath, or rock formations in the rugged outback.

When my husband and I were walking across the north of England in 1999, we came across a newborn calf, struggling to stand on its wobbly legs. We watched for quite a while as the mother waited patiently, nudging her baby from time to time to encourage it. A natural event but also a sacred experience.

Having climbed Croag Patrick, Ireland's holy mountain, we were disappointed to be surrounded by thick fog. All that effort for nothing! But no. Within minutes the fog rolled away and we were rewarded with a 360-degree panoramic view of the sea and countryside that just took our breath away. Awe-inspiring!

While exploring the north of Western Australia, we travelled out to Windjarra Gorge, about 120 kms inland from Derby. There were a lot of people wandering about, gazing up at the vertical cliffs, grey in the shade and bright orange where the sun reached, fresh-water crocodiles lazing on the rocks beside the stream. It was absolutely beautiful, with an almost tangible feeling of peace. In this huge place, even with so many tourists, hardly anyone spoke. It was as though we all knew we were in a holy place. It was a place where one didn't need to try to have any deep thoughts or profound insights, but to simply be present.

Needless to say, we don't have to travel overseas or faraway places to have these experiences. By simply being alert and open to the natural world around us every day, we never know what surprises and blessings we might receive.

FIFTH REFLECTION

Needless to say, the Book of Creation isn't written on pages to be placed back on a shelf, nor is it an eBook to be tucked into a pocket at will or deleted. Rather it is all around us every day, a living presence ranging from the heavens more immense than we can measure to the tiniest amoeba. The creation book is not static but constantly evolving, transforming, being written anew from day to day, age to age. In different parts of the world, people will have different 'chapters' of the creation book to read. For instance people living on Pacific islands will be very aware of the rising sea levels, whereas those in desert regions will be desperately looking for ways to find enough water to survive.

As we find within the little book of the Bible, so too in the big book of Creation, not all of it is palatable or pleasant to read. How might we interpret natural disasters such as earthquakes triggering tsunamis, volcanos spewing lava and obliterating countryside and settlements, tornadoes and cyclones leaving a trail of devastation, droughts, floods. Or we might consider the animal kingdom where, with the survival of the fittest, things can be quite brutal, with animals even turning against their own kind. It isn't all idyllic and perfect. Obviously over the aeons, vast changes have taken place, some of them through the evolution of time while many others have come about because of our human failure to live in balance and harmony with the natural world.

How do we find the Sacred Presence in all of this imperfection?

What might we need to hear and learn from the Creator?

Not only are we looking at the environment, land, sea, skies, flora, fauna, the heavens as composing creation, but so too humanity is written into this book. And, in our reading, we

can see how we have made and continue to make huge mistakes, from ignorance, short-sightedness, selfishness and greed. So what could our response be to this huge dilemma? To throw our hands in the air and say it is all too hard is tempting but not helpful. How might we work together to find ways of bringing hope and new life into our world? For a start, we need to be prepared to move out of our comfort zones and allow our priorities and values to be challenged. We need to learn, understand, think, live and act with a far bigger world view than our limited perspectives tend to afford.

Of course, reading is more than just making sense of letters, numbers, sentences etc. Reading can involve not only using our eyes but all of our senses, sight, sound, touch, smell and taste. To 'read the book of Creation' we need to use our senses. It does mean we need to be alert and take notice of even the smallest details. It takes time. How might we do this?

Sadly, to a greater or lesser degree, we have largely lost the gift of connecting with creation in a deep, meaningful way. However, if we can intentionally factor into our lifestyle time in the outdoors, it will help to redress the imbalance. It might be time spent strolling around the garden, going on a walk through a park, a reserve or the bush. Or trying to find a spot on a verandah or balcony outside, to be as close to nature as possible.

SIXTH REFLECTION

The following exercise might be helpful and can be shared with children as well. Spend some time focussing on one sense at a time, maybe for a start about 5 minutes each as you sit or walk.

Concentrate on all you can see with a eye to detail, taking in the individual colours, shapes, patterns as well as the overall panorama.

Switch to listening and absorb the sounds as you take in the outside world, the song of birds, the wind rustling the leaves, the lapping of the waves...

Next let the touch of your fingers do the reading as you feel the bark of a tree, the leaves, pat an animal, the grass, water...

Now for the sense of smell. There could be a mixture of aromas, the scent of flowers, and eucalypts, the wafting of smoke, the earthy smell of freshly turned soil...

And finally, if you are game, you might like to do a taste test. A safe start could be to taste some herbs or nibble a blade of grass.

At the end of this 'sensing' time, you might like to journal your thoughts, discoveries, or maybe a prayer...

Try to make a practice of reading the natural world around you? What might it be saying?

Have you sensed the Presence of the Sacred as you opened yourself to the mysteries of Nature?

What are the words the Creator is speaking into your heart?

As we listen to and read carefully of the natural world around us, we will also be alerted to the cries of an earth that is wounded, of air and water polluted, icecaps melting, deserts encroaching, animals and plants on the verge of extinction or already past the point of no return, islands perilously close to disappearing under rising sea levels, rising temperatures and fires causing devastation.... Of the whole of creation crying out in pain!

What are we going to do with this knowledge gained by reading the big Book of Creation?
Ignore it and take refuge in denial?

Seek to become more aware?

Work together to change our wasteful ways?

Encourage others to join in the move towards more sustainable lifestyles?

Look at how we might change our priorities, so that instead of subduing or dominating the earth we learn to live in harmony with all of God's Creation?

SEVENTH REFLECTION

How might your faith in the Creator be challenged, deepened or changed by your reading of the Book of Creation?

○ God, your fertile earth is slowly being stripped of its riches,
open our eyes to see.

○ God, your living waters are slowly being choked with chemicals,
open our eyes to see.

○ God, your clean air is slowly being filled with pollutants,
open our eyes to see.

○ God, your creatures are slowly dying and your people are
suffering; open our eyes to see.

God our maker, so move us by the wonder of your creation,
that we repent and care more deeply.

So move us to grieve the loss of life,
that we learn to walk with gentle footfall upon your world.



APPENDIX: Some possible topics (or choose one of your own creation!)

