

A sermon preached by Kerry Enright at Knox Church Dunedin New Zealand on 11 September 2016 for Flora and Fauna Sunday. The reading is Jeremiah 4:11, 12, 22-28.

Last Sunday Doug Gay spoke from Jeremiah of how, at times, God seems to stand against us, to reshape us. Today we hear Jeremiah's words again, refining and reshaping us.

²³I looked on the earth, and lo, it was waste and void; and to the heavens, and they had no light. ²⁴I looked on the mountains, and lo, they were quaking, and all the hills moved to and fro. ²⁵I looked, and lo, there was no one at all, and all the birds of the air had fled. ²⁶I looked, and lo, the fruitful land was a desert, and all its cities were laid in ruins before the LORD, before his fierce anger. ²⁷For thus says the LORD: The whole land shall be a desolation;

Some of these images describe what I have seen. In a part of Zimbabwe where once rain fell and vegetation was more abundant "lo, the fruitful land as a desert". In South Sudan, the city of Malakal, following fighting "the cities were laid in ruins before the Lord". In the Philippines, gullies destabilised by mining slipping away, smothering villages, "the mountains ... and they were quaking, and all the hills moved to and fro". Places where pollution leaves a red glow over the city, "the heavens had no light". And places from which "all the birds of the air have fled".

On this Sunday for flora and fauna, these words describe our predicament.

A recent report tells how the earth has lost one tenth of its area of wilderness since 1993, equivalent in size to half of Australia.

Wilderness is crucial because it supplies fresh water, food, medicine and reduces extreme weather.

But since 1993 the Amazon has lost 30 per cent of intact landscapes.

Since 1993 Central Africa has lost 14 per cent of its forests.

And once we lose wilderness areas, we lose them forever. As one scientist said – " ... humans are putting their fingerprints everywhere and we're losing that reference point for nature."

Wilderness is just one dimension of the devastation of our world.

In his encyclical about creation, *Laudato Si*, Pope Francis calls us to empathy with the earth. I want to quote from *Laudato Si*, to help connect the words of Jeremiah with our situation.

“If we approach nature and the environment without ... openness to awe and wonder, if we no longer speak the language of fraternity and beauty in our relationship with the world, our attitude will be that of masters, consumers, ruthless exploiters, unable to set limits on their immediate needs. ... Rather than a problem to be solved, the world is a joyful mystery to be contemplated with gladness and praise.

“We are called:

- To treat our common home like a sister with whom we share our life and a beautiful mother who opens her arms to embrace us,
- To remember that our very bodies are made up of [Earth’s] elements, we breathe her air and we receive life and refreshment from her waters,
- To feel intimately united with all that exists [so that] sobriety and care will well up spontaneously,
- To honour the intimate relationship between the poor and the fragility of the planet, the conviction that everything in the world is connected.

“A sober look at our world shows that the degree of human intervention, often in the service of business interests and consumerism, is actually making our earth less rich and beautiful, ever more limited and grey, even as technological advances and consumer goods continue to abound limitlessly.

“Because all creatures are connected, each must be cherished with love and respect, for all of us as living creatures are dependent on one another.

“People may well have a growing ecological sensitivity but it has not succeeded in changing their harmful habits of consumption.

“Economic powers continue to justify the current global system where priority tends to be given to speculation and the pursuit of financial gain, which fail to take the context into account, let alone the effects on human dignity and the natural environment ... environmental deterioration and human and ethical degradation are closely linked.

“This is the way human beings contrive to feed their self-destructive vices: trying not to see them, trying not to acknowledge them, delaying the important decisions and pretending that nothing will happen.

“An authentic humanity, calling for a new synthesis, seems to dwell in the midst of our technological culture, almost unnoticed, like a mist seeping gently beneath a closed door

“We should not think that political efforts or the force of law will be sufficient to prevent actions which affect the environment because, when the culture itself is corrupt and objective truth and universally valid principles are no longer upheld, then laws can only be seen as arbitrary impositions or obstacles to be avoided.

“Joined to the incarnate Son, present in the Eucharist, the whole cosmos gives thanks to God. Indeed the Eucharist is itself an act of cosmic love ... the Eucharist is also a source of light and motivation for our concerns for the environment, directing us to be stewards of all creation.

“Christian spirituality incorporates the value of relaxation and festivity. ... the day of rest, centered on the Eucharist, sheds its light on the whole week, and motivates us to greater concern for nature and the poor.”

In our reading in Jeremiah, after the words of lament, there is a surprising change:

“Yet I will not make a full end. ²⁸ Because of this the earth shall mourn, and the heavens above grow black; for I have spoken, I have purposed; I have not relented nor will I turn back.”

“Yet I will not make a full end.”

This word of hope is tied to the earth’s capacity to mourn and the heavens to look black.

The word of hope is tied to the capacity of heaven and earth to speak to us and for us to see and hear.

The word of hope is tied to our capacity to feel ourselves connected to this earth, to feel enough to notice, to hear Jeremiah, to hear God, to feel with the earth.

The word of hope, and it flows through the gospel today, is God's power to touch us deeply, to turn us around, to turn us back to God, to the earth, to each other.

This is the word of hope, that in this meal we celebrate that in Christ we are united with God, with this earth, with each other, and this union matters, it has material significance and material consequences. In Communion supremely, God matters, in bread and wine, in earth and care. I finish with a prayer from *Laudato Si*.

“Triune Lord, wondrous community of infinite love, teach us to contemplate you in the beauty of the universe, for all things speak of you. Awaken our praise and thankfulness for every being that you have made. Give us the grace to feel profoundly joined to everything that is. God of love, show us our place in this world as channels of your love for all the creatures of this earth, for not one of them is forgotten in your sight. Enlighten those who possess power and money that they may avoid the sin of indifference, that they may love the common good, advance the weak, and care for this world in which we live. The poor and the earth are crying out. O Lord, seize us with your power and light, help us to protect all life, to prepare for a better future, for the coming of your Kingdom of justice, peace, love and beauty. Praise be to you! Amen.”

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**Knox Church**  
449 George Street  
Dunedin  
New Zealand  
Ph. (03) 477 0229  
[www.knoxchurch.net](http://www.knoxchurch.net)

Kerry Enright: 027 467 5542, [minister@knoxchurch.net](mailto:minister@knoxchurch.net)