

Called to be Priests of Creation, In Light and Shadow

Pitt Street Uniting Church, Sunday 4 September 2022

A Reflection by Rev Dr Josephine Inkpin

Creation 1C

Genesis 1: 1-19; Contemporary Reading: For Light by John O'Donohue
(from *To Bless the Space Between Us: A Book of Blessings*)

The video of this reflection can be viewed on You Tube at <https://pittstreetuniting.org.au/spirit/reflections/> The version below is not a transcript, but the script from which the reflector spoke, so there may be some changes of wording.

One of the puzzles Christians have sometimes set themselves is to work out what light is being referred to in the first few verses of the Bible. For, apart from modern light forms, we are so used to thinking of light from the sun and moon, which, in the Genesis account, are only created later. Various possibilities have therefore been suggested by the great theologians. Some (such as Ephrem of Syria) have thus suggested the light was a pillar of fire, or (like Basil of Caesarea) that the essence of the sun without its actual substance, or even that the light came for the angels (in the case of Augustine of Hippo).

However, in so far as we might respond, I think I would go with the Orthodox Church's understanding of '*the uncreated light*' of God in Godself. For, when we come to the first chapter of Genesis, we are speaking here of divine mystery, depth, purpose and ultimate meaning, not literal or even limited symbolic explanation of Creation. Rather, like our contemporary reading today, the nature of Genesis chapter 1 is poetic and prayerful, seeking to lead us into sacredness. For above all, such texts are designed to renew our sense of wonder and participation in divine creation and our role as priests of God's Creation.

Priests of God's Creation: is that a key element in how we understand our calling as followers of Jesus? Too often, I think, priesthood has been restricted to human activities alone, where it has not extended beyond churchy life. Even the biblical phrase '*the priesthood of all believers*' is also not entirely helpful, as it tends today to emphasise human, churchy, affirmations and activity rather than a sharing in the holy creativity of God, which is so much greater, deeper and wider than human, and certainly churchy, life. That, at least, is the full priestly calling of humanity which is embodied in our two readings today.

One of my favourite definitions of a priest is '*one who handles holy things*'. Of course, this relates to the central elements of bread and wine we share this morning, as well as baptismal water and holy oils, and other features associated with ordained ministry. However, it applies much more broadly to the many holy things which a priest handles in their life and ministry: not least to the holy human things of celebration, suffering and transformation encountered in daily sharing in the lives of others. In that way, each of us are assuredly also priests to one another when we share the holy things which are at the heart of our lives and journeying together.

Each of us, like a priest in worship, can help to share our holy human things: to name them, celebrate or lament them, and offer them up, thus participating in God's continuing work of creativity, reconciliation and renewing of life. That, for me, is at the heart of the sacrament of communion we share today. For the sacrament of communion is a holy and visible symbol of that divine priestly work in which we are each called to share in every moment of our lives. How far, however, do we see ourselves as priests of Creation as a whole?

As we begin our Sunday worship in the Season of Creation, it is very good to be reminded of our calling to be priests of Creation as foundational to our lives and ministry. For the Season of Creation is not just an opportunity to talk about ecological concerns and to act upon them. Instead, this Season also invites into a deeper awareness and participation in the creativity of God in Godself.

This is the point of Genesis chapter 1. It is not, and never was, intended as an accurate scientific description of the creation of the universe. Nor is it set, at the very beginning of the Bible, as a set of moral instructions for Earth care, even though it includes a command to care for the Earth. It is also certainly not a once and for all series of actions, which we are simply to preserve.

No, its original, and abiding, purpose is to declare the sacred presence of God in all of Creation and to invite us to celebrate and continue, sharing in it, as priests of creation, and co-creators with God.

Can we see Genesis chapter 1 as a hymn, or a great litany, in which we are invited to share? Its liturgical shape and origins are certainly obvious if we have eyes to see. Indeed, not for nothing is Genesis chapter 1 part of what scholars have called *the Priestly narratives* in the Hebrew Scriptures. It is almost certainly later than many other parts of the Hebrew Scriptures and it seeks to place those other variegated sections into a unifying and vivifying whole. In doing so, it sits with other creation orientated scriptures, like later Isaiah, which emerged out of Israel's exile and restoration, and which speak of the God of the whole universe, in all their extraordinary diversity, rather than simply of the history and culture of a particular people.

Stylistically, it is also pretty obvious it has its place within worship, rather than education or moral instruction as such. Just look at the way in which Genesis 1 is divided into segments which conclude with repeated refrains "*And God saw it was good. And there was evening and morning*" each day. Is this not a great prayer, of praise and thanksgiving, declaring God's creative works? Can we imagine each section recited by a priest, or cantor, in the temple, with the refrains recited by choir, or congregation, in response?

If so, we can see that what we share today in our worship, particularly in our communion, is very much the same. Indeed, a key element of what we do today is to stand in that eternal offering of praise and thanksgiving for creation: an eternal offering not just from human beings either, but through the songs of birds and the cries of animals, and every living part of Creation.

Too often in recent centuries the sacrament of communion has been limited to its human components. They are also very real, not least the depth of fellowship in communion which our Reformed traditions affirm strongly and rightly. However, the sacrament of communion is in my view, a door to the sacred in all that is visible and invisible; in all that was, is and will be; and in the unfolding work of creation, of creativity, in which all creatures are called to take their part.

This is the fuller meaning of the bread and wine we share today. For those elements are not simply reminders of Jesus' last supper long ago. They are living symbols of how God is present in the things of Creation – not just in bread and wine, or human bodies and blood, but in animals, birds, insects, plants and in everything about us. As we celebrate the sacrament of communion, we therefore celebrate all of those things as 'holy things', just as priests in the temple did long ago. For we give praise and thanksgiving for the work of creation and re-creation throughout time and space, in the universe and beyond, in the presence of God, here as before, now as in the time to come.

Understanding ourselves as 'priests of creation', is but one of the spiritual gifts of the ecumenical nature of the Season of Creation. For all our Christian traditions need to learn from one another, and others, if we are to find deep spiritual resources in the midst of the ecological crises of our time. Those of us in Reformed spaces do well therefore to enrich our own understandings of God in Creation with other insights. From the Catholic tradition, from Teilhard de Chardin onwards, we might therefore be renewed by fresh explorations, into the Cosmic Christ. From mainstream Anglicanism, not least its poets, we might share in being co-creators, in what George Herbert called 'the temple' of the universe in which God moves in love and glory.

And, above all, from the Orthodox Christian traditions, we might learn, in John Zizioulas' words, what it is to be a 'priest of creation' rather than a proprietor of the world (to use the title of his essay in the Orthodox Christian book *Toward an Ecology of Transfiguration*). For, as another contemporary Orthodox priest puts it, 'all of our life – our pursuits, our vocation, our relationships and, yes, our creativity' are offered up in our communion, or eucharistic liturgy, just as all of Creation was offered in the temple long ago, as Genesis 1 reminds us. Therefore:

Let us imagine the priest carrying not only the bread and wine but all of the tools of the creative process... (and) remember that The Divine Liturgy teaches and reminds us that all of life is to be offered up to God in thanksgiving. The bread and wine are the culmination and embodiment of all of our creative endeavours and the fullest expression of our creative tools. Is this not what our liturgy teaches us – how to bring the Life given back to us as food back into the world? This is what St. Maria Skobstova calls the "eternal offering of the divine liturgy beyond the Church walls" (Therefore, in Paul Evdokimov's words) the creative and faithful "priest of creation" is one "who makes of one's life a liturgy, a prayer, a doxology, to make of it a sacrament of perpetual communion." ⁱ

Living our lives as a liturgy of creation, or creativity – as a sacrament of perpetual communion with God and all God's creations – what a calling that is! To approach communion this way, and to live it, is as such Orthodox understand it, to live as an artist of divine creativity, irrespective of our beliefs or faith allegiance.

Recently I was blessed in that regard in experiencing the current exhibition entitled *Where Shadows Meet* at the Casula Powerhouse. Using a range of art forms, this has brought together a number of contemporary Sydney-based artists to explore the interplay of light, shadow and darkness. For, as our readings today articulate in words, creation and creativity involve us, like God, in embracing the physical and metaphorical spaces in which light and darkness are intertwined and in which they are forever moving and re-creating.

In seeking further understanding on the lines of our two readings today, it seems to me that we might thus profitably look to artists, as contemporary 'priests of creation'.

Let me in closing therefore, briefly share two approaches of such artists. The first is that of the Chinese-Australian multimedia artist Tianli Zu, who, in her work *Shadow Gives Birth* explores the interface of art, science and music. I have provided one still photo of her work on the front of the electronic copy of our liturgy today. ⁱⁱ

Tianli is particularly interested in shadow, not as elements to be shunned, or driven out, but as parts of the dynamism of creativity. For me, this resonates with what lies behind and within both Genesis chapter 1 and John O'Donohue's beautiful prayer-poem *For Light*. For if we are to grow as true priests of creation, then like God we need to own all aspects of existence, both light and darkness, and learn to dance, as joyous and kindly shadows, in the uncreated light of God, which is also the dark womb from which all life and love springs.

A second complementary approach is traced by the Barkindji artist Maddison. Like Tianli, Maddison also explores the conjunction of darkness and light, and the shifting shadows of our created and creative existence. One of her artworks thus involves a series of coloured figures, including mirrors, which reflect light in different ways as they turn - rather as human beings, as 'priests of creation', catch the light and live out of the dark womb of sacred life, as we respond to the call of God and join in the dance of healing and renewal.

Those mirrors, catching and reflecting light and shadows, Maddison has called *The Spirits are Restless*, perhaps similar to how the Spirit of God is restless both in response to ecological degradation and also in continually bringing new life to birth. As Maddison comments, from her Aboriginal culture, which for so many tens of thousands of years has nurtured the priests of creation in this land:

*Our mother land
She is waking
She is tired
She is resting
She is restless
She is lifegiver*

These female warrior spirits call our ancestors and they let them know that we are still fighting and caring for our land and our culture.

So may we too, with the faith and prayers of those who have gone before us, rejoice in God's continuing creativity, and make our own offerings of praise and thanksgiving, love and care.

In the name of Cosmic Christ, the sacred ever creative centre at the heart of Creation,
Amen.

ⁱ <https://holycrossoca.org/newslet/1106.html>

ⁱⁱ See further <https://tianlizu.com/>