

“WHAT A WILDLY WONDERFUL WORLD, GOD!”

Psalm 104:24 (The Message)

A SERMON ON BIODIVERSITY

This sermon can link to the Bible Study on Biodiversity in this pack.



READINGS

- Psalm 104:1-31 (If you have access to a data projector, use the PowerPoint presentation in this pack along with one or more readers – reading quite slowly. To create atmosphere have some background instrumental music playing (Haydn’s ‘Creation’, Debussy’s ‘The Sunken Cathedral’ or Vivaldi’s ‘Four Seasons - Spring’ would all be appropriate).
- Matthew 6:25-34 if a Gospel is required

1. INTRODUCTION

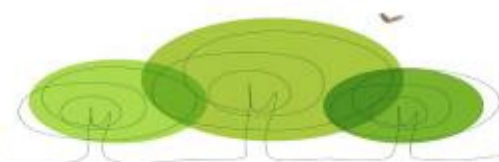
2010 has been declared the International Year of Biodiversity (IYB) by the United Nations. (The website www.biodiversityislife.net has masses of useful information.)

Biodiversity is the variety of life on Earth. It is essential for sustaining the natural living systems or ecosystems that provide us with food, fuel, health, wealth, and other vital services. Humans are part of this biodiversity too and have the power to protect or destroy it. Currently, our activities are destroying biodiversity at alarming rates. These losses are irreversible, impoverish us all and damage the life support systems we rely on. But we can prevent them.

“Biodiversity” is not a biblical term but it is a deeply biblical concept. Scripture repeatedly celebrates the variety, beauty and complexity of creation: from affirming “God saw that it was good” in Genesis 1 through to the book of Revelation where four creatures representing nature’s diversity - birds, humans, wild and domestic animals - worship the risen, enthroned Jesus. Nowhere is biodiversity celebrated more than in Psalm 104. Verse 24 (in ‘The Message’) sums it up by simply stating “What a wildly wonderful world, God!” Let’s turn to look at what we can learn from this Psalm.

2. PERSPECTIVE

The main question Psalm 104 makes us ask is: who is this all for? Everything - trees, birds, mountains, humans, lions and sea monsters, is completely dependent on God, and draws its value from relationship with God. Today’s dominant ideologies: either that biodiversity is a random meaningless valueless process, or that humanity is the



pinnacle of biodiversity and entitled to exploit and mould it as we wish – are seen as deeply flawed. God is the source, sustainer and supreme purpose of life's variety.

Psalms 104 realigns our perspective, encouraging us to put God back at the centre, to enjoy God's world and to worship God alone. There's a sense here of all creation – birds, animals, people – even trees, rivers and the sun and moon living in trustful dependence on God. It's similar to what Jesus says in Matthew 6 - listen to verses 25-31 from the Message version, and as you listen take a moment to consider your own life in the perspective of God's biodiverse creation:

"If you decide for God, living a life of God-worship,
it follows that you don't fuss about what's on the table at mealtimes
or whether the clothes in your closet are in fashion.
There is far more to your life than the food you put in your stomach,
more to your outer appearance than the clothes you hang on your body.
Look at the birds, free and unfettered,
not tied down to a job description,
careless in the care of God.
And you count far more to him than birds.

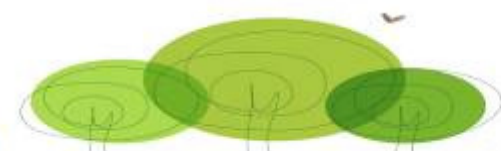
Has anyone by fussing in front of the mirror
ever gotten taller by so much as an inch?
All this time and money wasted on fashion –
do you think it makes that much difference?
Instead of looking at the fashions,
walk out into the fields and look at the wildflowers.
They never primp or shop, but have you ever seen color and design quite like it?
The ten best-dressed men and women in the country look shabby alongside them.

If God gives such attention to the appearance of wildflowers
– most of which are never even seen –
don't you think he'll attend to you, take pride in you, do his best for you?
What I'm trying to do here is to get you to relax,
to not be so preoccupied with getting,
so you can respond to God's giving."

3. POWER

We live in a world obsessed by power. Our media is obsessed with those who exert power: physically as athletes or as 'beautiful people', culturally in the worlds of music and film, economically in the world of business, and in those who wield political power. Power is both idolised and challenged – the media love nothing more than exposing the clay feet of the powerful. In Psalm 104 we see an incredibly powerful God, but revealing a very different sort of power.

God's greatness, splendour, majesty and power are not kept to himself but poured out in the oversight, design and shaping of a huge, complex, and endlessly varied



universe. The beginning and end of Psalm 104 - verses 1-9 and 31-34 depict God's power - the sunshine as God's clothing, the heavens as his tent. All the powers of nature from seas and rivers to erupting volcanoes to the delicacy of grass growing through the soil are expressions of God's power. Yet it is not the power of control – God gives incredible freedom to his creatures. It is rather the power of wisdom. Verse 24 (in the New International Version) reads:

How many are your works, O Lord!
In wisdom you made them all;
the earth is full of your creatures.

In a world that is obsessed by a narrow definition of power as control, perhaps we can learn from the way God's power is expressed in biodiversity - creatively expressing his character in endless variety, and rejoicing in the relationships between his creatures.

4. PRESENCE

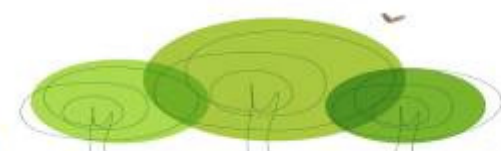
Today many people struggle to hear God's voice. In the busyness and disappointments of life, and in the babble of conflicting voices where can we discern God's presence? Psalm 104 (along with many other Psalms) suggests that the first place to start is not in Church, nor even in the pages of the Bible, but in nature.

The Christian environmental charity A Rocha has often found that when people see Christians actively involved in caring for creation, it frequently triggers a deep response. There are many, many people who dimly discern something of God's presence in creation but who would never go near a church. However when Christians link creation to Christ, the penny starts to drop. According to Psalm 104, when we see a beautiful sunset, or a snowdrop pushing up through the wintry soil, or a tiny bird that has just migrated thousands of miles from Africa to England – you are glimpsing something of God's creating, sustaining, transforming work in creation. This isn't only for non-Christians. It's tragic that most churches only worship indoors and sometimes even work hard to keep God's creation outside – battling against bats in the belfry or pigeons in the pulpit when just perhaps God might be seeking to say something to us through his creation!!

God is not remote from us, but active in sending the Holy Spirit and renewing the face of the earth (as verse 30 puts it), providing for all of life including humanity. The vision in this Psalm is profoundly relational – creation living in sustainable balance because of God's creating, caring, sending and rejoicing. We need to recover that sense of God's transforming presence in all creation – naming it when we sense it, and seeking to encourage nature to flourish so that all can discern God's presence.

5. PRIORITIES

God's overarching priority for this biodiverse world is not for human beings to take everything over and destroy the variety of life on earth. Psalm 104 is clear that



creation is not for us, its primary purpose is God's own pleasure: "May the glory of the Lord endure forever; may the Lord rejoice in his works" (vs.31). Within this, God's main priority in Psalm 104 is to create the conditions for all creation's flourishing. He does this by designing the architecture of the earth – its foundations and boundaries (verses 2-9), and then by providing life's essentials – water, food and shelter (verses 10-21).

This is a very long way from how our culture understands its priorities. The very words 'our environment' suggest it's all about us – it's our world to serve our purposes, either in a selfish sense or perhaps – if we're really altruistic – so that all human life can flourish. Psalm 104 rebukes us for this attitude – for making 'man the measure of all things'. We are a very small part of the whole – God's purposes in nature are way beyond our understanding, and today we need to recover a sense of God's priorities – that our overarching aim should be to worship God through seeking the flourishing of the whole creation, not just our little bit of it.

6. PLACE

And that brings us finally to our place in God's world. In Psalm 104 humanity is seen as part of a biodiverse world, not separate from it. We are amongst the 'creatures' the earth is full of in verses 11-24. Our welfare and that of other species are tightly bound together. Verses 33-34 state:

I will sing to the Lord all my life;
I will sing praise to my God as long as I live.
May my meditation be pleasing to him,
as I rejoice in the Lord.

Our primary role as human beings is to worship God as we stand in awe at God's wisdom expressed in creation's amazing diversity. Our secondary role – as other passages such as Psalm 8 and Genesis 1.26-28 make clear - is to enable creation to worship God too.

Today God is calling us to know our place in two senses. Firstly to get a sense of God's perspective and priorities in terms of how humanity fits in to God's ecology – to regain a sense of proportion and a proper humility. Secondly God is calling us to know our place in a literal earthy sense – to get to know the place we live – to listen to the birds and to look at the flowers, to delight in biodiversity and to delight in the God who reveals himself through it, and to know that our well-being and that of all creation hang together in God's wildly wonderful world.



If you wish, the sermon could be concluded by joining together in the following responsive prayer:

The Light of Christ has come into the world
To shine on all creation.
The Light of Christ has come
To shame the shadows and dispel the darkness.

The Light of Christ has come into the world
To shine on all creation.
The Light of Christ has come
To bring life to all that has been held back.

The Light of Christ has come into the world
To shine on all creation.
The Light of Christ has come
To release the captives and set creation free.

The Light of Christ has come into the world
To shine on all creation
The Light of Christ has come
To shine in our hearts, our homes, our lifestyles.

The Light of Christ has come into the world
To shine on all creation.
The light of Christ has come
To call us to live for the life of the world.

The Light of Christ has come into the world
To shine on all creation.
The Light of Christ has come
To show us the way and lead us in hope.

Let us praise the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ
The light of Christ has shone in our hearts.
We commit ourselves to live in the light of God's future,
And to seek God's peace for all creation. Amen.

