

Psalm 8: Beauty and Wonder of the Night Sky



Psalm 8 (Mode 3. 3....12 / 4.....271)

The beauty of the night sky
moves the psalmist to a profound sense of awe
at the majesty and power of the Creator.

This in turn leads him to reflect
on his own insignificance
and utter dependence on God.

Why has this mighty God given such dignity
to us human beings,
and why has God entrusted creation to us?

Psalm 8 is quoted in the Letter to the Hebrews 2:6-8.

Lord our God, the whole of creation
tells of your greatness.

‘Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of hosts;
the whole earth is full of his glory’(Isaiah 6:3)

‘If through delight in the beauty of creation
people assumed them to be gods,
let them know how much better than these
is the Lord,
for the author of beauty created them’(Wisdom 13:3).

Saint Augustine

‘But what is my God? I put my question to the earth. It answered, ‘I am not God’, and all things on earth declared the same. I asked the sea and the chasms of the deep and the living things that creep in them, but they answered, ‘We are not your God. Seek what is above us’. I spoke to the winds that blow, and the air and all that lives in it replied, ‘I am not God’, I asked the sky, the sun, the moon, and the stars, and they told me, ‘Neither are we the God whom you seek’.

‘I spoke to all the things that are about me
and I said, ‘Since you are not my God
tell me something about Him’.

Loud and clear they answered, ‘He made us!’

I asked these questions simply
by gazing at these things.

Their answer was their beauty’(Confessions, X.6).

Joseph Mary Plunkett (1887-1916)

‘I see his blood upon the rose
And in the stars the glory of his eyes.
His body gleams amid eternal snows,
His tears fall from the skies.

I see his face in every flower;
The thunder and the singing of the birds
Are but his voice – and carven by his power
Rocks are his written words.

All pathways by his feet are worn,
His strong heart stirs the ever-beating sea,
His crown of thorns is twined with every thorn,
His cross in every tree.’

Gerard Manley Hopkins : God's Grandeur (1877)

The world is charged with the grandeur of God.
It will flame out, like shining from shook foil;
It gathers to a greatness, like the ooze of oil
Crushed. Why do men then now not reckon his rod?
Generations have trod, have trod, have trod;
And all is seared with trade; bleared, smeared with toil;
And wears man's smudge and shares man's smell: the soil
Is bare now, nor can foot feel, being shod.

And for all this, nature is never spent;
There lives the dearest freshness deep down things;
And though the last lights off the black West went
Oh, morning, at the brown brink eastward, springs –
Because the Holy Ghost over the bent
World broods with warm breast and ah! bright wings.

I want to worship you
with the worship of infants and babes at the breast.
They gaze with wonder
at the star-studded heavens.
Their wonder reduces to silence
the enemy and the rebel.

The Psalmist is moved to reflect on the fact that while little children are open to the wonder of what God is doing, there are those who rebel against God. They try to devastate the earth and would want to rise above the firmament and challenge God.

‘I thank you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, because you have hidden these things from the wise and the intelligent and have revealed them to infants’(Matthew 11:25).

‘Unless you change and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven’(Matthew 18:13).

‘God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise; God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong’(1Corinthians 1:27).

When I look at your heavens,
the work of your fingers,
the moon and the stars
that you have set in place,
what are we ['enosh] mortal human beings [ben 'adam]
that you are mindful of us, and care for us?

‘What are human beings, that you make
so much of them, that you set your mind
on them, visit them every morning, test
them every moment?’(Job 7:17-18).

The psalmist longs for the wonder, simplicity and innocence of a child so that he might give expression to his overwhelming desire to praise God for what he calls 'the work of God's fingers'. We think of God's finger in Michelangelo's painting of creation. The intricacy and delicacy of the created world causes him to be caught up in admiration of the artist who is responsible.

But he is troubled and asks himself: Who am I? What does it mean to be a human being? The following verses will reveal that he does not attempt to answer this fundamental question by looking at us and at what we do. Rather he looks at what God has done and is doing for us. We are all too aware of what we do and fail to do. The only way to find out who we really are is to look at our relationships, and primarily at our relationship with God. How God treats us will give us the clue as to who we are. The psalmist is amazed at the way God keeps us in mind and cares for us.

Before meditating with the Psalmist we might reflect on the ways in which we have experienced God keeping us in mind and caring for us. Each of us has special experiences that we treasure because, perhaps into the centre of pain, we knew that God was looking after us. It is by reflecting on these moments that we come to a deep awareness of who we really are as persons treasured by God and precious to him.

It is obvious to the Psalmist that we are not God and should not act as though we are. The psalm begins and ends by acknowledging the sovereignty of God. The psalmist reflects on the wonderful dignity that is ours as human beings. We are made in God's image and likeness in that we, of all creation, can commune with God. Moreover God has placed his creation in our hands to care for it. The Psalmist sees this not as a right but as a gift. It is God who has crowned us with glory and honour.

It is God who has given us our parents and family and community and personal gifts. It is God who has formed our body and soul and heart and who continues to do so, giving each of us that special beauty that is our unique selves.

You have made us a little lower than gods,
You have crowned us with glory and honour.

‘We see Jesus, who for a little while
was made lower than the angels,
now crowned with glory and honour
because of the suffering of death’(Hebrews 2:9).

The psalmist reflects on our place in creation. We have been given the whole of creation to continue the task of bringing order out of chaos and forming the world into a paradise where human beings can live with dignity and where all living things, indeed the whole of the created universe, can be intelligently governed. This is not a right, but a privilege given to us for which we are responsible. Who then are we to have been so honoured and trusted by God?

To us you have entrusted the earth;
you have made us responsible for all you have made:
sheep and oxen,
wild beasts of the plain,
birds of the air,
fish that make their way through the waters.

‘Then God said, Let us make humankind in our image, according to our likeness; and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the birds of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the wild animals of the earth, and over every creeping thing that creeps upon the earth’(Genesis 1:26).

‘By your wisdom you have formed man to have dominion over the creatures you have made, and rule the world in holiness and righteousness’(Wisdom 9:2).

‘God has put all things under the feet of Christ and has made him the head over all things for the church, which is his body, the fullness of him who fills all in all’(Ephesians 1:22-23).

Lord our God,
the whole of creation tells of your greatness.