

of each newborn child, of each huddled refugee, of each one of us. Amid the apparent randomness of life we are not forgotten. And when we are lost and 'at sea, we will be 'searched for' (verse 5).

'Search and rescue' boats put to sea because of the divine impulse. But this Psalm speaks of far more than rescue. The babe at the breast and the refugee in the boat, and every one of us, are, the psalmist continues, to be crowned 'with glory and honour.'

Every human life is sacred. That's what this Psalm insists upon. What does that mean for our European policy on asylum seekers?

We are to be 'honoured', and given our purpose, to have 'dominion' – a problematic word – over the works of his hands. To exercise stewardship, and to care for this precious earth and all its rich diversity of life.

The Psalm ends with the same cry of wonder and adoration as it began.

However we may believe or imagine it arose, this poetic meditation on the creation story of Genesis was shaped by the Hebrew tradition into a great paean of praise. The result was that a foundation truth of our civilization was immortalized in song. It is a praise that has gone on sounding at the heart of the Jewish and Christian traditions ever since.

What questions does this remarkable Psalm raise in your mind?

As you go out into your day, allow this phrase to echo in you as you notice and gaze upon the miracle of Life in your world in all its myriad forms:

O Lord our governor, how glorious is your name in all the world!

Psalm 104

Wonder and protest

- 1 Bless the Lord, O my soul.
O Lord my God, how excellent is your greatness!
- 2 You are clothed with majesty and honour,
wrapped in light as in a garment.
- 3 You spread out the heavens like a curtain
and lay the beams of your dwelling place in the waters above.
- 4 You make the clouds your chariot
and ride on the wings of the wind.
- 5 You make the winds your messengers
and flames of fire your servants.
- 6 You laid the foundations of the earth,
that it never should move at any time.

- 7 You covered it with the deep like a garment;
the waters stood high above the hills.
- 8 At your rebuke they fled;
at the voice of your thunder they hastened away.
- 9 They rose up to the hills and flowed down to the valleys
beneath,
to the place which you had appointed for them.
- 10 You have set them their bounds that they should not pass,
nor turn again to cover the earth.
- 11 You send the springs into the brooks,
which run among the hills.
- 12 They give drink to every beast of the field,
and the wild asses quench their thirst.
- 13 Beside them the birds of the air make their nests
and sing among the branches.
- 14 You water the hills from your dwelling on high;
the earth is filled with the fruit of your works.
- 15 You make grass to grow for the cattle
and plants to meet our needs,

- 16 Bringing forth food from the earth
and wine to gladden our hearts,
- 17 Oil to give us a cheerful countenance
and bread to strengthen our hearts.
- 18 The trees of the Lord are full of sap,
the cedars of Lebanon which he planted,
- 19 In which the birds build their nests,
while the fir trees are a dwelling for the stork.
- 20 The mountains are a refuge for the wild goats
and the stony cliffs for the conies.
- 21 You appointed the moon to mark the seasons,
and the sun knows the time for its setting.
- 22 You make darkness that it may be night,
in which all the beasts of the forest creep forth.
- 23 The lions roar for their prey
and seek their food from God.
- 24 The sun rises and they are gone
to lay themselves down in their dens.
- 25 People go forth to their work
and to their labour until the evening.

- 26 O Lord, how manifold are your works!
In wisdom you have made them all;
the earth is full of your creatures.
- 27 There is the sea, spread far and wide,
and there move creatures beyond number, both small and great.
- 28 There go the ships, and there is that Leviathan
which you have made to play in the deep.
- 29 All of these look to you
to give them their food in due season.
- 30 When you give it them, they gather it;
you open your hand and they are filled with good.
- 31 When you hide your face they are troubled;
when you take away their breath,
they die and return again to the dust.
- 32 When you send forth your spirit, they are created,
and you renew the face of the earth.
- 33 May the glory of the Lord endure for ever;
may the Lord rejoice in his works;
- 34 He looks on the earth and it trembles;
he touches the mountains and they smoke.

- 35 I will sing to the Lord as long as I live;
I will make music to my God while I have my being.
- 36 So shall my song please him
while I rejoice in the Lord.
- 37 Let sinners be consumed out of the earth
and the wicked be no more.
Bless the Lord, O my soul.
Alleluia.

Reflection

As we move further into the twenty-first century, it is becoming ever more starkly evident that the greatest crisis that humanity has ever faced is upon us: the environmental crisis.

As this increasingly overshadows all our lives, those who seek inspiration from the Bible may ask, what hope can these ancient texts offer, coming as they do from a radically different world that knew nothing of our fears of environmental catastrophe? In this context Psalm 104 is profoundly worth pondering.

First, the Psalm begins and ends with praise to the One who has brought this extraordinary creation into being, ordering its rhythms and setting its boundaries. 'Bless the Lord, O my soul,' the exclamation that begins and ends the poem reminds us that ultimately the question of hope hangs on how we view the earth. Is it an object to be rapaciously exploited for our own ends? Or is

it, with all its rich bio-diversity and interdependent ecosystems, a fragile and precious gift to be marvelled over, treasured and given thanks for?

In her remarkable book *This Changes Everything: Capitalism vs. the Climate*,¹ Naomi Klein argues that, since the industrial revolution, it has been the workings of free market capitalism, which has been so exploitative, that has brought the world close to ecological catastrophe.

In contrast the psalmist sees the earth as a precious gift, giving its bounty to meet human needs, and never an object to be exploited. Always the Giver is to be blessed and worshipped.

In verses 2 to 11 there is a glimpse into the psalmist's ancient cosmology which focuses mainly on the ordering of water above and beneath the earth. These ancient understandings may seem quaint to modern ears, but he knows what matters – then and even more now. The warming of the earth brought about by climate change means that droughts will be more prolonged and frequent, and so global conflicts over water are likely to follow. Wars over water will be a first manifestation of the chaos that could come. This Psalm treasures water. It 'runs among the hills; it gives drink to the animals, it nourishes the trees where the birds sing, it provides grass for the cattle and plants for humans.

And so we are taken into a great celebration of life, with the sacramental elements of bread, wine and oil taking centre stage. But the poem is not just about, or even principally about, humans. What makes this Psalm contemporary is that human beings are seen as part of, and not separate from, the life of the birds and the animals and the sea-creatures. So, like a film clip

from the series *Life on Earth*, the psalmist celebrates the trees, particularly the cedars of Lebanon – full of sap – in which the birds are building their nests. He delights in the fir trees where the storks are assembling their huge 'dwellings'. His lens then pans across the mountains and cliffs where the wild goats find refuge and the conies live. And then as he ponders these different and very particular habitats with their distinctive boundaries providing ecological niches for these different creatures, his mind moves to reflect on the boundaries of the seasons marked by the moon, and the way different creatures respond to the day and the night and the coming and going of the light. It is almost as though he has brought with him his infra-red camera to shoot images in the dark, for we see the beasts of the forest 'creeping forth', and hear the lions in their hunger 'roaring for their prey'. Then as dawn breaks and the sun rises these creatures of the night disappear to find refuge from the heat, and people go forth from their homes to their labour until the evening, when again the night creatures will emerge. And so the harmonious cycle and rhythm of creaturely activity *which includes humankind* continues, with each knowing the boundaries and the times that God has set for them.

The sense of balance and orderliness, and the natural boundaries and limits that are part of the divine order, leads to another outpouring of praise in the middle of the Psalm. 'O Lord how manifold are your works', he exclaims, 'the earth is full of your creatures.' The psalmist sees all this and is full of wonder. 'This is what humans are for: not to exploit and rape the earth, but to share in its interdependent life, and see it with wonder and

praise – for no other creature can stand back and see it all in its diverse richness.

It is a tragic paradox that just as we humans, really for the first time in our history are beginning to see and appreciate the extraordinarily rich bio-diversity of our world (think of the many remarkable television series about the natural world in the last few decades), is the very time when it is most under threat. We are seeing it for the first time, just as it is disappearing.

In her book *The Sixth Extinction*, Elizabeth Kolbert shows, with meticulous research and detail how humans have, ever since we appeared on the earth something like two hundred thousand years ago, grossly overstepped boundaries and have 'succeeded extravagantly at the expense of other species.'² There have been five mass extinctions in the planet's history. We are now in the middle of the sixth. And it is caused by us. 'Welcome to the Anthropocene' (the new geological epoch in which the planet is being changed by humanity) is the ironic heading of one of her chapters.

Psalm 104 is a prayer to return to regularly. Let it inspire you as this crisis deepens and the whole global community is forced, now and over the years ahead, to face the massive challenge of the future of the earth. The Psalm sounds many notes, particularly the blessing and adoration of God for the gift of life in all its awesome variety, and the sense that the different forms of life have their own place, and there are boundaries and limits.

But above all it is a Psalm of *wonder*, a wonder which overwhelms the psalmist in the final verses (35 and 36) and leads him to want to sing and make music to God as long as he lives.

But then curiously in the very last verse, before his final word of praise, we find him praying that 'sinners be consumed out of the earth and the wicked be no more'. At first sight this seems out of place. But it is appropriate. It is as though the psalmist's wonder and praise has fired his prophetic indignation against those attitudes and motives – there in all of us – that threaten to destroy this priceless gift.

Let this Psalm feed in you a sense of wonder at God's extraordinary creation. How can that sense of wonder be nurtured?

And let this Psalm fuel your protest. How might that be expressed?