

24th Dec 2021

Midnight Communion

On Christmas Eve 1968, fifty three years ago today, the US spaceship Apollo 8 was orbiting the moon and looking back to the earth. One of the most famous ever photos was taken from space, and became known as 'Earth Rise'

Bill Anders, one of the crew, described the beauty and the fragility of the earth as a *delicate orb, like a Christmas tree ornament*.

The view from space showed him, and everyone who saw it, that earth is physically insignificant within the universe, certainly not the centre of it, and yet, it is HOME- a place with a deep attraction,

entrancingly, captivatively beautiful, and the place which sustains human life.

Indeed, during this year's restrictions and lockdowns, many of us have rediscovered our connection to our natural home and its positive impact on our wellbeing.

But, this year we have also become more aware than ever of the fragility of the earth, which is being destroyed by humanity, the very people who were created to care for it, and to live in peace and harmony within it.

In the decades since 'Earth Rise' was taken, the ice caps have melted more quickly than we ever dreamed possible, dozens of species have become extinct and extraordinary disasters have become so regular that we are barely shocked by 'another' typhoon hitting the Philippines.

All this makes the message of Christ's coming even more urgent.

Our beautiful planet was created by God to sustain an abundance of life, with rich variety, wonder, colour and *glory*.

Earth reflects its creator,
and has the capacity to move us who live here
to tears, joy, laughter and awe,
simply because of how God made it.

As the Bible puts it,

God saw all that he had made and it was GOOD.

God didn't only create the world:

land, seas, mountains, deserts, and their wildlife,
from a majestic eagle to a basking whale, a striding elephant
to a tiptoeing mouse, a leaping frog to a slumbering lion...

God *also* made human beings to enjoy and care for his world
and made them not a robots but as his children, with the capacity to choose, and to
love.

Our Creator took the risk to entrust the earth to us, and took the risk that we'd
ignore God and go our own way, destroying the beautiful earth as we went...

However. our Creator loves the earth too much to abandon us to our poor choices
and selfish destructiveness.

The extent of his love is demonstrated on this night, when his only Son was born on
earth, to rescue us and creation, to be our Saviour. This was God's salvation plan,
to restore broken and selfish humanity through total identification with us, through
becoming human and coming down, to earth from heaven, the One who is God and
Lord of all.

Our tiny insignificant planet and all who live on it are infinitely precious because *we
are loved by God.*

I wonder how you are, this Christmas?

I wonder if you know you are an infinitely precious individual on the beautiful ,
fragile earth, and matter more to God than you can ever understand?

I wonder if you hear the whispers of eternity in your soul, and if, perhaps especially
at this season, you feel as if earth and heaven are not so far apart?

Bill Anders described the earth from Apollo 8 as a Christmas tree decoration... and I
want to show you one of my favourite decorations, which I found at a Christmas Fair
on a bric a brac stall in a small East Durham village soe years ago, discarded and too
dull perhaps to be kept alongside the shiny baubles and twinkling lights...

It is a star (hold up) made of olive wood the local wood of Israel, used for many
purposes.

A combination, if you like, of the **heavenly**

- a star, like the bright star which shone to announce Christ's birth,
and the **earthly** - common wood used to make everyday objects,
from tables to feeding troughs, from chairs to cross beams.

When I first found this discarded star at that Christmas Fair, I knew I would speak about it on such a night as this.... For Jesus, who flung stars into space at creation, came to earth and lay, a helpless infant in a wooden trough, a manger.

Jesus, whose light shines on in the darkness, for all time, hung on a wooden cross, faced and defeated the darkness, and gave his life to save and redeem the world.

I end where I began, with those astronauts on Christmas Eve 1968, and the message they sent back to earth. They chose to read the opening verses of the Bible.

In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth...and God said, let there be light, and there was light.

And God saw all that he had made and it was good.

St John, the disciple who stood by the wooden cross and watched Jesus die, then went to Jesus' empty tomb three days later, 'saw and believed', this same John opens his gospel with words which echo those opening verses of the book of Genesis.

Words which Sue read just a few moments ago...

In the beginning was the word, and the word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God... All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. What has come into being was life, and the life was the light of all people.

The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it.

This Christmas night may we grasp again the wonder of Christ's coming to earth, the wonder of God's love for the tiny insignificant planet earth, so infinitely precious to him.

May we respond in love and worship, as we come to receive afresh the tokens of Jesus' love and life.

For the bread and wine, those everyday elements, feed us with infinite truth and eternal love.

And may we find hope for the future in Jesus Christ, who came first as a baby in the manger and will come again as King, when his Kingdom comes, on earth as in heaven.

As Frank Borman, the mission commander of Apollo 8 put it,
'God bless you', God bless all of you on the good earth.

Amen.