

Collect, Readings and Reflection for 08 February 2026, 2nd Sunday before Lent

Collect (*the Church's prayer for today*):

Almighty God,
you have created the heavens and the earth
and made us in your own image:
teach us to discern your hand in all your works
and your likeness in all your children;
through Jesus Christ your Son our Lord,
who with you and the Holy Spirit reigns supreme over all things, now and for ever.
Amen.

Readings: Romans 8:18-25; Matthew 6:25-end

Today's reflection is by Reader Cal Bailey.

I wonder if you love the Attenborough nature programmes? Nature is so diverse, so beautiful and so *precarious*. I think of the daffodils emerging through the grass and leaves on the stretch of ring road above the Miller & Carter near our house where Leeds council planted them years ago to line our route with shimmering yellow over the next few weeks every year. This week their heads have been swelling and the very beginning of the flower is visible.

What I've realized recently is that our lives are much the same – diverse, beautiful and precarious. And what's interesting about our Romans reading is that Paul describes both nature and us as groaning with the challenges of life – he puts nature and us in the same boat, whereas I have normally thought of nature as separate from human life. In our gospel, Jesus says to us “Don't worry about your life..... Look at the birds. And a bit later: “Consider the lilies – they do not labour... Yet even Solomon in all his glory was not arrayed like one of these” (Mt 6:25-9). Look at the birds; look at the lilies.

Let's walk with William Wordsworth for a moment, 'wandering lonely as a cloud', as he sees 'a crowd, a host, of golden daffodils... Fluttering and dancing in the breeze.' He wants to tell us that these are a picture of all creation by describing them as 'Continuous as the stars that shine And twinkle on the milky way.' But the important thing is that they are having their own celebration, independently of him: 'Ten thousand saw I at a glance, Tossing their heads in sprightly dance.' There's a whole chorus of created joy going on: 'The waves beside them danced; but they Out-did the sparkling waves in glee.' Wordsworth tells us he paused little at the time, yet says the sight has changed him for good, for in later moments of solitude, they flash back in his inner eye: 'And then my heart with pleasure fills, And dances with the daffodils.'

Our relationship to nature is two fold. There's part of us that needs nature and consumes it, without much attention. We need heat in winter, and the gas that is piped to our homes is the product of the death of animals and plants many thousands of years ago – but we think little of that when we turn on our heating, or cook on our stove.

We need to eat, and we urban dwellers think little of what the farmers do to ensure that our supermarket is well stocked.

But there is another side to our relationship with nature. Sometimes, we go on holiday, say to a warm beach somewhere, and bask in sunshine, swim in the sea, or enjoy coastal walks where we talk of the beauty of the shimmering sea, and sit, watching it splash against the rocks, and take photos. It's at these moments when we often do *look* at the birds and flowers. For a few weeks every year, if we're lucky, our relationship with creation is transformed as we enjoy nature, instead of consuming it.

And just as most of the time, we consume nature, our worries consume us. No wonder Paul talks about both creation and us groaning!

In recent years, the consuming character of human behaviour has become a problem we call Climate Change. Most people believe that our collective greenhouse gases are changing our planet's climate and threatening plant life, wildlife and human life in multiple ways. As a result there is more attention on the two aspects of our relationship with nature. There is an effort in some places to reduce our consumptive behaviour and we here have a plan to reduce or replace gas heating in this church – though I recognize it's sometimes hard to believe there is any! And there is increased focus on the enjoyment and benefits we derive from the diversity and presence of nature around us. I guess there are many people here who contributed recently to the Royal Society for the Protection of Bird's annual bird count.

I've been trying to taking the challenge of climate change seriously for some twenty years now, since I realized that our family business had contributed seriously and blithely to it in the UK. Despite all the talk about the dangers we are creating for our planet, I've learned that the risk isn't to our planet. Our planet will survive whatever temperature we get to. The danger is to us. It's to human life. And the danger is also to some of the species of plants and animals and birds we may, or may not, enjoy and value.

I've learned too, from a piece of farmland near here where the farmer stopped using pesticide and deliberately diversified the habitat three years ago, how quickly nature recovers when we desist from aggressive destruction. We now see there regular flocks of curlew and lapwing; every owl species normally resident in the UK has come back there; and eight species of birds of prey are regularly seen.

If we are to survive well, maybe we need to learn to live, not in dominion over nature, as though we are above it, and it is there simply to serve us; instead, don't we need to live in interdependence, between nature and humanity, as though we are in need of each other? We need nature for food; we need its materials for our homes. But must we live so hard and so fast, must we need so much of nature, that we forget that it needs us to live less aggressively so that it may simply live? Paul says that creation needs to be free – did he mean, in part, free of us?

What is God's view of the groaning of both nature and humanity? What do our passages have to say about that, apart from recognizing our groans and inviting us to 'Look at the birds and the lilies'? They have much to say.

Firstly, there is hope. Both passages talk about it in different ways. Paul talks about the redemption of both creation and us as a promise; and Jesus assures that seeking his kingdom will result in us receiving *all good things* as well. These promises ask us to trust God, and to focus on his priorities above ours as the solution to our worries. This isn't easy for us, it but does make intuitive sense if God is creator.

Secondly, though it isn't explicit in these passages – it is elsewhere – I wonder whether God's plan isn't for us to enjoy living in greater interdependence on each other? Jesus established the church as a body for learning together, for worship together,... and for mutual support. Yet we still live very independently of each other. *We value our space!* We could take that support a whole lot further if we chose to.

Thirdly we have talked about our learning to enjoy nature, instead of consuming it at speed as we journey through life. This learning reflects God's enjoyment, both of nature and of us. Creation may be being consumed and changed by our behaviour, but it is vastly bigger than we need – in size, in diversity, in abundance of every sort. Why? The only possible answer is that God must enjoy it, for some reason I can't fathom. When we look at Jesus, we see God *in* the nature he made, eating its products, and enjoying its life immensely. How hard is it to believe that God cares both for nature and for us, because he created both, redeems both, and is present *with* both?

Let me close with a true story about Bishop Quayle, an American man who cared deeply about his churches, his staff, his work and sat up night after night sleeplessly worrying about them all.

One night as he sat worrying, he says he heard God's voice as clearly as if it came from someone sitting in the room. "Quayle", said the voice "you go to bed. I'll sit up for the rest of the night."

If God wants us to look at the birds, perhaps it's because they don't worry excessively but simply live the life in front of them, however precarious it seems. That's like us enjoying the daffodils. Life is as much about depth as about length. Maybe the birds have learned the lesson of not passing through so fast, not driving so hard, or worrying so much, that they miss the delights of the journey. God made us and knows us and promises life in all its fullness. The only people who can take it away are we ourselves.

Amen.

