

We read the scripture at the beginning of our service, and we read the whole chapter – it's not often we read 35 verses, a whole chapter but we did so at the beginning of the service, at the beginning of our time together in worship. So I'm not going to read it to you again, but we are going to refer back to it. So if you have bibles – and you may be like me I have an actual Bible here, but it's also so useful these days to have a mobile phone and I've got a Bible App on my phone, and it's so quick to be able to flick through and find the verses I want; so whether you're flicking with your finger or whether you're flicking through the pages of the actual Bible in paper form, let's look together at psalm 104. Psalm 104.

I wonder whether, as we look at this passage, we're thinking of God's provision – God has made provision for us in all things. I wonder whether anyone can tell me the significance of this picture. This picture was publicised this week does: anyone know how the picture was taken? How was the picture taken anyone? By a new telescope – it's a telescope called “The James Webb Space Telescope”.

We've had a previous space telescope but this one's better: this one allows us to see pictures of our universe and the stars that created the lights that we can see represented in this picture here, some of those stars emitted that lights 14 billion years ago – that is within a few hundred million years of the beginning of the universe, of the Big Bang. And I just find that astonishing: that we can see pictures now that take us, relatively speaking, close to that big bang, the beginning of our universe.

We've spoken about this before. I believe that (as we're going to find out in a few moments as we look at the scripture) God is at the heart of the created order. But I believe God used evolution and the scientific processes that we know about: how stars start, how they are formed, how they develop, and how stars die, and how the rest of the Universe all functions according to those scientific processes; I believe that is God's way of bringing our universe into being. So for me I do not believe there needs to be a contradiction between a biblical understanding and a scientific understanding of how the universe came into being.

Let's look at these words: The Lord sustains creation.

In Hebrews 1:1-3 the writer of Hebrews (whom we don't know – we don't know the name of this writer but he or she) says [Reads Hebrews 3:1-3 “In the past...his powerful word.”]. You see, science seeks to understand “the how” of the origins of our world, of our universe: how did it come about?

What were the processes that brought the heavens that we can see in our skies (that we saw in that picture a moment or two ago)? What were the processes that brought that about? How did it happen? When did it happen? But it cannot answer the why. It cannot answer questions about purpose, about intention.

Now the Bible never claims to be a book about the scientific history of all things. We look at this psalm, psalm 104: look at the poetic language in this psalm – it made me smile when I was reading it, it says things like [Reads Psalms 104:2-3a “The Lord wraps himself...on their Waters”] and I thought to myself: “I wonder what the upper chambers are, I'm not quite sure what an upper chamber is in this context.” This is poetic language. This is the language of an imagination that

has broken out into worship of God and thanks for all that the psalmist sees around him. But it's not a scientific understanding of the way that the world and the universe came about.

The focus of the Bible is not on “the How and the When”, its focus is on “the Why and the Who”.

God brought this earth about to bring glory to himself for us to be able to enjoy and find great satisfaction in; and he did it because he loves us, because we are his creation and he wants to bless us with every good thing. So the Lord sustains creation as we told in Hebrews Chapter 1.

“The Lord sustains creation”. I don't about you, but when I go for a walk in beautiful places, as I hope to do next week when we're down in Devon. We have some of our favourite beaches down on the south coast of Devon. We quite regularly stay in a friend's house in a little town called Kingsbridge, and if you know Kingsbridge, it's a Harbour Town so the harbour comes right into the town. And then you got some beautiful beaches along the south coast of Devon, and I love to go walking along them; you'll just find little caves hidden as you walking along (the cliffs are particularly high, thankfully) but you'll find little caves, little nooks and crannies, where you can find, I don't know, you can just enjoy the beauty of God's creation, and you can acknowledge that God sustains all things.

When I was preparing this message on Friday I was just asking the Lord for some inspiration about this scripture and on Instagram I get daily words of meditation from a Christian thinker who has passed away now, but his name is Henri Nouwen. And I received these words just as I was preparing this message:

“Nature is ever ready for us to hear and see the great story of the Creators love for us.”

Nature is ever ready for us to hear and see the great story of the Creators love for us. The beauty of what we see around us is a reminder of God's love and God's care for us, it nurtures our soul, it makes us feel connected to the world around us. Nature is a gift to us in our lives. We are hard-wired to find joy and pleasure in the natural world around us.

And I think this is illustrated by the psalmist's language throughout this psalm, but I particularly just want to pick out verse 10 and the verses following it. In verse 10 of psalm 104 it says [Reads Psalm 104:10-16 “He makes springs...his upper chambers...”] (the upper chambers again there) [“...the Earth is satisfied...sustains his heart.”]. And it goes on like that, talking about all those things. And I love that couple of verses there, where talks about we have various things that are mentioned.

So the Lord sustains not only the earth, not only the whole creation, the Lord sustains humankind. And yet we do find we have a world in which we have these awful stories of famine, of water shortages, of all sorts of conflict that are bringing about situations where people are not sustained in their lives. And we have to reflect on that. We're going to do so for a moment of two now.

Verses 27 and 28 of our reading say that God's intention for the world around us is that we care for and nurture it, and if we do so it will provide abundance for all humanity. Verses 27 and 28 say: all of these all – these all look to you – all these creatures, all these people look to you to give them their food at the proper time; when you give it to them they gather it up, when you open your hand they are satisfied with good things.

There is enough in our world for everyone to have what they need. Sadly (I think Jane was saying earlier on) about the way that things, the way that wealth, and the way the good things of our world are distributed is very unequal, and some of us have so much when others have so little.

But that is part of our human choices: the choices of our government, governments around the world, but also our own personal choices, and, perhaps, you like me seek to do what I can to be generous to those who have less than I do.

But God's intention, his intention with the created order, is that everyone should be able to live and flourish.

In verses 14 and 15 (that I read a moment or two ago) I love the way that it takes us through; verse 14 talks about the grass for the cattle, plants for man and woman (I think it's a generic term we're using there) to cultivate bringing forth food from the earth, then it says about wine that gladdens the heart of people (certainly does) and then it says oil to make his face shine – and I thought that's the only reference I've ever come across to the use of oil, particularly olive oil, as a way of looking after your skin.

Now, I as a white man, I wasn't brought up putting oil on my face and body, but when I got married, I discovered that within a Caribbean culture, and within other cultures in Britain and around the world, creaming of your body is a way of looking after your skin. And I've discovered – actually, one of my kids said to me: “Dad if you want to keep skin that looks good as you grow older, you're going to need to look after it if you don't want to look like a wrinkled walnut.” And I thought to myself, “Well, I've got to listen to my kids, because we each can learn from each other,” and so I don't cream my whole body, but this face doesn't look as young as this on its own (it gets a bit of help because I'm trying to look after...you only get one face and I want to try and look after the one I've got for as long as possible).

But here we have biblical support for the idea of looking after our bodies, making sure that we use the bounty that is given to us, in creation, to bring blessing to ourselves, to look after our bodies – even, even cosmetics: who would have thought cosmetics would be supported in scripture, but here we're told that you can use the bounty of the world to be able to even look after your skin.

Our human is to go beyond stewardship; our human desire is so often to subdue. So we move beyond doing what we can to the earth that is sustainable. Industrial farming tends to push what can be achieved within the soil to an extreme that is too far. Like with the seas: so often we overfish so that actually we are in danger of undermining the possibility of any of us being able to enjoy the bounty the seas bring to us.

So we have to learn, as the scripture tells us, to be stewards of what we have, rather than seeking to subdue it, and use it, and overuse it, so that actually becomes depleted. And if ever there was a challenge that we are being told, now is the time for us, as the human race, to recognise we have one world – we must look after it, if it is going to sustain our living, and the living of all creatures on earth.

So the Lord sustains creation, the Lord sustains humankind, the Lord sustains me and you. There's a lovely personal element in this psalm we look at here: God's intention is that we learn to live in harmony with the earth, with the world. We will not live in a state of anxiety if we look after our world, but rather, if we live out his Kingdom values, which are responsible guardianship for our world: sharing the good that we have with others, seeking to achieve fair and just trade across our world. You'll remember that there was a big campaign a few years ago that the chocolate, that we so love in Britain and many other Western countries, was being produced by people who were not receiving a fair wage for the work they were doing to produce something that is so delicious and tasty, and so now most chocolate is “fairly traded”. In other words the people that grow the cocoa beans, and the people that prepare the cocoa beans, to be able to produce the chocolate so

love are paid a fair wage for the work that they do to provide chocolate and other things for us: bananas, coffee, all sorts. There's been a real growth in this area of fair trade: people being paid a fair wage for the work they do.

You see there's no wonder that at the very end of this psalm in verse 35, the psalmist finishes with a plea for God to bring an end to sin and wickedness. At the very end of the psalm – this is a psalm of praise and yet it finishes with these words where the psalmist says “May sinners vanish from the earth and the wickedness be no more.”, because, actually, if this world is to sustain us, we have to recognise there is wickedness, there is sin. And so often it's not simply individuals – yes individuals sin – but sin is also structural. It is built into the system, and we have to challenge the way the system works. It's not enough to simply say if we pick off individuals who do wrong things, you pick off, say take an obvious example, pick off President Putin because he is undoubtedly an evil man, will the system change? Not necessarily. It may do to a degree but actually the way that things are structured in our world has to be changed as well. And the Bible picks up on his idea of sin not simply being individuals, but being the way that the world functions, in so many ways

So the Lord sustains me and you. We have this lovely picture that when Jesus speaks in the New Testament and says “Look at the sparrows.” Look at those birds that he talks about that you can buy half a dozen for a penny (or whatever the equivalent was). They were so numerous that individually they hardly worth anything, and yet Jesus says “God knows every one of them,” and then says “Are you not much more valuable than a sparrow?”

We are reminded that we are the apple of God's eye; the psalmist says “You are the apple of God's eye.” One of my favourite preachers from years ago was a guy called Tony Campolo, and he used to say “You know, God is like your grandma or your granddad: if he gets together with the angels, he just wants to get his picture album out and say 'look at my kids, look at how lovely they are.'”

One of the lovely things with my mother-in-law, Cynthia who many will know has Alzheimer's, is that she has photo albums all that have pictures of us all in, and when we're there, she grabs us by the face and just sort of loves us, but when we're not there she goes to the pictures and she rubs our faces because she loves us so much, and that hasn't changed even though she's so ill – she still loves us. That's God – God has the photo album and he rubs our faces because he loves us, he loves us with a passion that is so deep.

The Lord is my provision.

Jesus said: do not worry saying what shall we eat, or what shall we drink, or what shall we wear, for the pagans run after all these things, and your heavenly Father knows that you need them; but seek first his Kingdom and his righteousness, and then all these other things will be given to you. Seek the heart of God. Seek his heart and the other stuff, that will just take its right place. But what we need is the heart of God, his passion, his love, his perspective, his values, and when we have those things, the other things will fit into the right place in our lives.

The Lord is my provision; he is your provision.

This picture here is a representation of Abraham with Isaac, and it remind me that the Lord provides not only for physical needs, but also for our emotional and spiritual needs as well. In Genesis 22 where Abraham takes Isaac to be sacrificed, because the Lord has said “Take your son, your only son, and sacrifice him.” Imagine how Abraham must have felt: “What take the one thing that I love more than anything else in this world, and sacrifice it?” And yet Abraham was

obedient.

And when they reach the place of sacrifice, Isaac sees the wood, the knife, the fire, and asks "Where is the lamb?" His Father replies "God himself will provide the lamb." And that, of course, is an Old Testament reference pointing forward to Jesus, the Lamb of God, who came to take away the sins of the world. And the ram that Abraham and Isaac find in the thicket – that symbol of the ram points us to Jesus, the Father's once and for all sacrifice. The Lord is my provision.

The Lord *is* my provision. He gave his life for us. He gave his life, having lived a life that gave us a pattern of how to live. Not to hate your enemies, but rather to seek to love your enemies. To forgive not to hate. And then gave his life for us.

In the Old Testament we have many names for God, and one of them is "Jehovah Jireh" (יְהוָה יִרְאֶה) the Lord provides.

Jesus said I am the bread of life, everyone who looks to the Son and believes (now for me believing is about acting on it, not simply saying: yes Jesus is my Saviour, but living in the reality, and acting on that belief – that is true belief that we act on it) shall have eternal life, and I will raise them up on the last day. (In John Chapter 6 Jesus says those words.)

There is provision for all our needs through Jesus, and that is why we give such wholehearted thanks to God in Christ in psalms like, because he offers us his provision for all our needs.

Let's pray together.

Dear Lord God, we have raised our hearts in worship as we have sung, as we have spoken out your word, as we have listened to your word, and as we have reflected upon it, and as we have shared communion. Recognising that we are your body. We are re-membered, brought together as your body. We are only whole when we are connected to each other. Lord God, I pray that as we leave this place we will reflect on the fact that you are all we need. As we seek to respond to your Spirit's call, to live for you, in our daily lives. We bring all these things to you Lord, and pray them in your name. Amen