



Radio 4 Sunday Worship

Hearing the Voices of Creation

During three days in early November, leaders from many world faiths, hosted by the Duke of Edinburgh and attended by the Secretary General of the United Nations, gathered at Windsor Castle to announce their own commitments to long term environmental action.

Recorded at the Alliance of Religions and Conservation Celebration and led by Martin Palmer and Sally Magnusson with Bishop Richard Chartres

Producer Stephen Shipley

Recorded 3 November 2009 1400-1600
Broadcast 15 November 2009 0810-0850

Radio 4 Opening Announcement: BBC Radio 4. Now it's time for Sunday Worship which this morning comes from the Waterloo Chamber in Windsor Castle. It was recorded during the recent Celebration of the Alliance of Religions and Conservation and it's led by Sally Magnusson and the Alliance's Secretary General, Martin Palmer.

Music: The Creation of Music (Sheshbesh: Arab Jewish Ensemble)

Martin:

Welcome to 'Hearing the Voices of Creation.' The words and music you are going to hear this morning come from the Celebration of Faiths Protecting the Living Planet held at Windsor Castle earlier this month. At this Celebration some 20 Christian traditions from the Church of England through the American Evangelicals to the Armenian Orthodox Church came to Windsor Castle as the guests of HRH The Duke of Edinburgh and HE The Secretary General of the United Nations. Side by side with faiths such as the Daoists of China, the Shinto of Japan, the Muslim world and the Jewish world, each faith tradition set out its long term plans to change the way we live and work in order to restore our relationship with nature.

At the start of Interfaith Week and with just a couple of weeks to go before the Copenhagen climate change summit, we can already say with the UN

Secretary General that the best news on the environment at the moment is what the faiths have agreed to do world wide.

UN Secretary General:

Excellencies and distinguished delegates, the worlds of faith communities are among the oldest and most enduring institutions. We are here today to listen, to share and celebrate your long term plans to tackle climate change. The word 'celebrate' is important to highlight. Through your commitment we see how the worlds of faith groups and the religious communities are responding to the need for urgent climate action. You can inspire people to change. As we look and as we take the final steps on our journey to Copenhagen in December, that inspiration is critical. We have the know-how, we have resources, but only largely lacking is the political will. You can challenge your political leaders through your wisdom, through your power, through your followers. Together let us walk a more sustainable path, one that respects our planet and provides a safer, healthier, more equitable future for all of us. Thank you very much for your commitment and your leadership. Thank you.

Martin:

This Celebration was hosted by HRH The Duke of Edinburgh who over 20 years ago pioneered the idea of faiths becoming a major force in the world of conservation.

HRH The Duke of Edinburgh:

In 1981 I was invited to become President of the World Wildlife Fund – or the Worldwide Fund for Nature as it is now. And one of the main aims of the WWF was to get the message across to the public that the natural environment - and all the wild plants and animals that depend upon it - was being seriously damaged by human activities. It then struck me that since many of the major faiths believed in the special creation of the world they ought to have a special concern for its health and vitality. It also occurred to me that the faiths could reach communities which the WWF could never hope to influence. The result was that it was decided to form a loose association of the religious bodies to be described as the Alliance of Religions and Conservation. This meeting today sees the culmination of the work of ARC and, as you will hear, all the member faiths have responded magnificently to the challenge and today they will each announce their plans for the care and protection of those parts of the natural environment for which they have special responsibility.

Martin:

The faiths that came to Windsor brought real promises and plans. And there was prayer and there was science and there was politics. But most of all there was real hope, expressed as much through music and prayer as through papers and presentations.

We have brought from the vast array of offerings from the faiths, a flavour of this Celebration. And central to this was to be reminded by readings and songs from the faiths, that we are but a part of nature and that we have to understand our place within that. So we travel from the wonder of Creation

and the joy of all aspects of creation in their Lord and Creator, through the Crisis which we as human beings have wrought upon the earth and its species, to the hoped for restoration of the true balance between us, God and the rest of creation. Our prayers of repentance come from two significant environmental leaders - Pastor Tri Robinson of the Vineyard Fellowship, an Evangelical from the USA and Dr Sam Kobia of the World Council of Churches, a Kenyan Methodist.

Prayers of penitence (Pastor Tri Robinson and Dr Sam Kobia):

Lord, we have gathered together at this time to share a common concern and common passion for the future of your creation that you have called us to be stewards over. Today, we acknowledge the words spoken by the Apostle Paul in Romans 1 when he stated that we are without excuse from knowing the truth about God because You, Lord, have revealed yourself through all that you have created: *“For ever since the world was created, people have seen the earth and sky. Through everything God made, they can clearly see His invisible qualities—His eternal power and divine nature”*.

Father, on this day we confess and repent of not only missing our responsibility in this matter, but we confess that in our selfish, self-centred short-sightedness we have overused, misused and even abused the very things that you called us to be stewards over – the very things that were intended to illuminate Your invisible qualities, eternal power and divine nature. Amen.

Lord God, Creator and Sustainer: we know you to be the Lord of All. Yet we have behaved as if we and we only were the reason for life on earth. We have treated the natural world as simply a resource for our needs. We have brought countless other species to extinction by our selfishness. We have changed the atmosphere, poisoned the waters and degraded the soil. We now come before you as penitents, only too aware of our foolishness and pride. We ask your forgiveness and we pray for your strength as we move beyond greed and pride to the light of love which you showed us in your Son Jesus Christ. Amen.

Sally: All Creation praises God.

The Psalms of the Hebrew Bible are poems and hymns of praise to God as Creator and as Defender. In Jewish thought life is the deliberate work of God as Creator and to God all aspects of Creation return praise and glory. Psalm 148 sees the whole panoply of God’s creation rising to praise God and that humanity has a place within this. At the heart of this song is the refrain: “Let them all praise the name of the Lord”

Music: Psalm 148 (New Psalmist Baptist Choir)

Bugle and conch sounds

Sally:

The crisis: all is no longer well with nature. Creation has been attacked and is in peril and we are in the main perpetrators of this. In every tradition, there comes the moment when something goes wrong and the balance, the network of relationships is disrupted. The common thread of all these traditions is that human beings have to accept that into the mix of life we have brought destruction, strain and peril. We must now take responsibility for and seek to amend, for unless we do, we may unravel the threads of life and destroy that which has been created, loved and nurtured for untold billions of years.

Martin: The Conference of the Birds is an allegorical, moving poem, written by the Persian poet Attar in the 12th century, tells the story of a group of birds who set out to find their Lord and master. Their journey, narrated originally in Persian, takes them through struggle and pain, through fear and disillusionment, towards a final goal of wisdom. It is a story of the soul's search for God and truth. These sections portray the endeavours and suffering that accompanies the journey for all life not just human beings, or even just birds. One clear, simple message of the poem is: to achieve what is worthwhile, we have to strive and overcome the obstacles placed before us and around us.

Reading in Persian and English (Narguess Farzad and Matt Addis preceded by dramatic drumming):

The hoopoe paused, and when the group had heard
His discourse, trembling fear filled every bird.
They saw the bow of this great enterprise
Could not be drawn by weakness, sloth or lies,
And some were so cast down that then and there
They turned aside and perished in despair.
With fear and apprehension in each heart
The remnant rose up ready to depart.
They travelled on for years; a lifetime passed
Before the longed-for goal was reached at last.
What happened as they flew I cannot say,
But if you journey on that narrow Way,
Then you will act as they once did and know
The miseries they had to undergo.

If someone asks, what is your present state?
Is drunkenness of sober sense your fate?
And do you flourish now or fade away?
The pilgrim will confess: "I cannot say;
I have no certain knowledge anymore;
I doubt my doubt, doubt itself is unsure;
I love, but who is it for whom I sigh?
Not faithful, not yet heathen; who am I?"

Martin:

Bishop Richard Chartres who has special responsibility for environmental issues in the Church of England reflects on our place in creation.

Reflection (Bishop Richard Chartres):

Transforming faith and hope spring from relationships, from being encountered and addressed by someone beyond and deeper than ourselves. False religion is when we project our own ideas or moods and deify them. The Bible by contrast is full of encounters, annunciations, communications from what is beyond and deeper than ourselves. Adam, where are you? Abraham, leave your household gods and set out on your journey. Moses, addressed from the bush that burned but is not consumed is told the ground on which you stand is holy ground. Then when the rumour of God was very faint, the call was made to the boy Samuel and in the words of the divine messenger, Mary was greeted: 'Hail Mary, full of grace.' For Christians the supreme example of a call from a love that is infinitely deeper and beyond us is in the cross of Jesus Christ. We see his self sacrificing love at the heart of the universe and it is reflected in the glory and in the distresses of the earth. And it is love and a common care for the earth which has drawn us together.

In our own day we have been given a vivid account of the cosmic drama in which we are all involved. And that account comes from contemporary science. We seem to be involved in a five act drama. In a series of irreversible transformations the history of the universe has unfolded from its beginnings about 13.7 billion years ago. Act 1 is the galactic story. Act 2 is the formation of our planet Earth just far enough away from our sun to avoid frying and not too far so that it becomes a sterile rock. Act 3 is the birth of life on earth - with Act 4 concerned with the story of homo sapiens as we emerged some 160,000 years ago from Africa to colonise the globe. This evolutionary story has a material and the physical aspect but also it has a psycho-spiritual aspect. We are, as the Bible and Darwin both agree, we are as human beings creatures of the dust – in fact star dust. We are participants in a web of life. Humans are the universe reflecting on and celebrating life in conscious self awareness. Act 5 of our five act drama is just beginning and it will decide whether humanity is just the dead end in the unfolding story of life or whether, as we who are gathered here believe passionately, promise will predominate and peril will be surmounted.

The question for us is shall we develop the wisdom to channel the power we have acquired from the scientific knowledge and discoveries of the twentieth century? As the poet T.S.Eliot said, where indeed is the wisdom we have lost in knowledge; where is the knowledge we have lost in information?

It is especially good to be involved in an initiative which builds unity between the faiths of the world, between all people of good will, the many secular organisations involved in this work, as we look together in the same direction at a common challenge to every human being involved on this planet.

At the end of the Divine Comedy, Dante, the great Christian poet of the west, describes his vision of the divine reality: It is all the scattered leaves of the universe bound by love in one volume.'

We have been given a glimpse here of the work to which we are called.

Sally: The Story of the Tree

One of the most striking Christian poems is a seventh century Anglo-Saxon poem – the Dream of the Rood. The tree on which Christ was crucified describes what it feels like to be cut down in the forest, torn from your natural setting and then slashed into the shape of a pole ready to be the stake upon which a man is to be cruelly put to death. In this remarkable Christian work, now adapted as a spiritual, the suffering of the tree and of Jesus himself reflect the wider pain and suffering that humanity causes to its own kind and to all creation. This is why the song says ‘All Creation wept.’

Music: The Story of the Tree (New Psalmist Baptist Choir):

Sally:

Many feel overwhelmed by the scale of our abuse of nature. But every faith teaches that it is possible to overcome such despair, that we can also hope, and that, yes, we can rebuild broken lives, broken relationships, even broken environments. That is why we have called this a Celebration. In the plans and commitments of the major faiths to protect a living planet, grounded in faith and developed in partnership with all of good intent, we see how we can begin to restore the balance. We can see a way forward, through shared hope of a better future.

Martin:

Our prayers for restoration of our relationship with nature are once again led by Dr Sam Kobia and Pastor Tri Robinson.

Prayers of restoration (Dr Sam Kobia, WCC, and Pastor Tri Robinson, Vineyard Fellowship)

All that you have created tells us of love overwhelming; of a Father who cares for us and knows us by name. In your Son you showed us that love is costly but that hope and life can overcome all tribulations. To this world you sent your Holy Spirit with tongues of fire and enthusiasm for a better world. May we now live this hope, bring life to the world; we whom the Spirit lights bring light to all creation. We hope because of you and we trust because we know that you so love this world, you sent your Son, that all life might have life and fullness of life. Amen.

Heavenly Father, as your people, it is our heart and intention to recapture your mandate to care for your creation. We ask for your grace and empowerment not only to join in greater unity as your people, but to become effective voices throughout the world heralding the urgency for solutions to environmental crises we now face. Lord, we recognize our need for your miraculous intervention that our time here might become more than informational meetings of well meaning intentions; but rather that you would

give us one heart and one mind and the faith to believe that you might use us for real and lasting change. In Jesus name. Amen.

Martin:

In the late 15th century, a visionary arose in India called Guru Nanak. From his search for the God who lies beyond our definitions of Him and our religious dogmas arose the teachings which came to form Sikhism. One day Guru Nanak was asked to offer incense and candles before a shrine. He refused to do so and in response sang this hymn. In it he asks why we as mere human beings, should even try to make offerings to God, when nature itself, through the sun and moon and stars, offer lamps, the mountains and trees offer incense and the flowers offer themselves before the shrine of God. Once again, these words are there to remind us of our place within a greater grandeur and asks from us humility.

Chant: The Offering of All Nature

Martin:

The need to restore our relationship with nature, to see in all life around us a family of creation, is common to many religions. In words which find echoes in so many faiths here today we finally hear The Canticle of the Creatures written in the early 13th century by St Francis. Today we have made commitments which could help to bring back our sense of being part of this Family of Nature. Through this it may be that we can recover this sense of being part of Creation, of celebrating what we have been given and what powers and skills we have, and so we can together Restore the Lost Balance.

Music: All creatures of our God and King (New Psalmist Baptist Choir)

Radio 4 Closing Announcement: Sunday Worship this morning was recorded at the recent Celebration of the Alliance of Religions and Conservation held at Windsor Castle. It was led by Sally Magnusson and Martin Palmer with the New Psalmist Baptist choir. The address was given by Bishop Richard Chartres and the producer was Stephen Shipley.

Next week, Sunday Worship comes from

Radio 4 Trail:

At the beginning of the month, leaders from many world faiths, hosted by the Duke of Edinburgh and attended by the Secretary General of the United Nations, gathered at Windsor Castle to announce their own commitments to long term environmental action. Sunday Worship [today] was recorded at that Celebration. It's a reflection on our place in God's creation and our relationship with nature. 'Hearing the Voices of Creation' is [this morning's] Sunday Worship at ten past eight here on BBC Radio 4.