

Reflection by David Kennedy, written for St Francis' Day, 4 October

One of my favourite hymns is *All creatures of our God and King*. The words are based on a canticle attributed to St Francis of Assisi, 'the Canticle of Brother Sun'. This Canticle draws its inspiration from Psalm 148, where all creation is invited to join with human voices in praising God as Creator. And, of course, the hymn version we know has a splendid tune – *Lasst uns Erfreuen*, a 16th century German melody arranged by the great English composer Ralph Vaughan Williams. Text and music combine to make it one of the grandest English hymns.

I'm sure we all love the hymn version of Francis' canticle. But I have one disappointment with it. If you read the original, St Francis addresses each of the elements:

He calls the Sun, *Brother Sun*. He calls the Moon, *Sister Moon*.

He calls the wind and air, *Brother wind and air*.

He calls the water *Sister water*.

He calls fire, *Brother fire*.

He is, as it were, personifying, these aspects of creation.

And he calls the Earth, *Sister Earth, our Mother*. And that's the only reference the hymn picks up:

*O Mother Earth, who day by day,
unfoldest blessings on our way.*

It's a pity that the hymn version didn't include those familiar titles, *Brother* and *Sister*, because they brilliantly express a close and indeed loving and inter-dependent relationship with the natural world. They refuse to separate human beings from the environment in which we live. Of course, Francis dwells on the *positive* aspects of creation; perhaps creation as God intended it at the beginning.

Francis praises God for the light of the Sun; he describes the Sun as 'fair, radiant, splendid and free'; he even sees the Sun as a type of God himself; in the Sun we see something of God's glory.

He praises God for wind and air, along with breezes, clouds and weather, as a sign that God has given us and all living things the breath of Life.

He praises God for water is praised as something 'useful, lowly, chaste and pure'; he seems to be thinking of brooks and streams that bring refreshment; the purity of water is perhaps an allusion to baptism.

He praises God for fire because it gives light, banishing darkness – he describes fire as 'fair and jolly, strong and bright'.

But two further verses were added. It is said that when Francis heard about a bitter dispute between the local Bishop and the Governor of Assisi, he wrote a new verse, which the hymn renders:

*And all ye men of tender heart,
forgiving others, take your part.
Ye who long pain and sorrow bear,
praise God and on him cast your care. O praise him, alleluia.*

Francis instructed his friars would go into the city and sing this verse – challenging Bishop and Governor to be reconciled so that peace may be restored. This is the subversive power of singing.

Finally, when he was dying, Francis composed another verse, which we know as

*And thou most kind and gentle death,
waiting to hush our final breath,
thou leadest home the child of God,
and Christ our Lord the way hath trod. O praise him, alleluia.*

It is said that in his final hour, he asked one of the Friars to read his favourite Bible passage, St John 13, the story of Jesus washing his disciples' feet, one of the passages that first inspired Francis to leave his life of wealth and privilege and go to serve the poor. As he breathed his final breath, a flock of larks, his favourite birds, gathered around the simple hut where he was lying, and then soared, singing, into the heavens.

