

In Praise of Diversity

Alice Murray is a PhD student at St Marks and a member of the Commission for the Environment. This stirring piece is intended to make us think a little more deeply about the issues of diversity.

“Glory be for dappled things” is the opening line from Gerard Manley Hopkins poem *Pied Beauty*; a moving hymn to the richness and apparent haphazardness of nature. Diversity is endemic in a healthy and flourishing ecosystem, in fact it is a measure of vitality of an ecosystem. Diversity does not arise from the single line process of necessity, where one thing follows another as a necessary consequence, but rather from the branching process of freedom or choice where chance or decision may actuate a different possible outcome each time. This is gloriously demonstrated in the evolutionary process through the double strand helix of DNA that carries the genetic blueprint for sexually reproducing life. Each individual offspring develops from subsets of the DNA from each parent, ensuring that the offspring is genetically distinct for either parent. In non-sexual reproduction, as for example in bacteria, some plants and animals, the process of reproduction is cloning where the offspring have the same genetic identity as the parent. However such forms usually use sexual reproduction to increase genetic diversity when times get tough. The process is a bit more complex than this, however, leading to even further diversity, when mutations and environmental effects are also considered. The fact that nearly all advanced forms of life employ sexual reproduction indicates that this is a highly successful strategy in the evolutionary process. Farmers are aware of the benefits of hybrid vigour and the dangers of narrow inbreeding in their livestock and the need to avoid inbreeding has played a part in the broader evolutionary development of species. In human terms, a wide choice of partners allowing chance to play its part is better than a restricted number of eligible partners where necessity plays a larger part. The evolutionary process, by its nature and by the evidence we see around us, is directed toward the production of diversity and, considering the process as the tool through which God has created life in its abundance, we are led to the conclusion that it is God’s intention for the universe to be a many-varied place, offering diverse habitats for diverse life forms.

Each twig of the evolutionary tree depends on ancestral branches, limbs and trunk and so the severing of one of these will block out the possibility of any future branching and thus close off the possibility of potentially wonderful future life forms. The fact that humanity has evolved out of some seemingly quite unpromising ancestors is solely due to the fortuitous or providential survival of those ancestors and the existence of a potential pathway to our development. Each new branching of the process opens new creative potentials and each curtailment or extinction cuts off future possibilities. The natural system has its checks and balances so that any branch that threatens to get out of balance by overpopulation or ecosystem despoliation becomes liable to controls such as disease, starvation or lethal competition. We humans need to be aware that we are not immune to such natural controls on our fecundity and rapacity and we must think carefully about how we treat the ecosystems that support us. Any extinction of species impoverishes the future and although these happen through natural forces and normal change of climate we should be very wary of precipitating these extinctions by dint of our own exploitive actions. We are arrogant to think that humanity is the be all and end all of creation – we are important to God as God has revealed to us but we are also imperfect and sinful beings as God

has also revealed to us – though we still strive to reach the fullness of the stature of Christ. God’s work in creation is surely greater than one single species in a universe of a quadrillion stars. Perhaps there may be other diverse patterns of life elsewhere in the universe who are also seeking to find their way to God, and humanity in its present form may yet be a staging point on the evolutionary tree.

How do we as humans work with God to foster and protect diversity? Firstly, we must be creative rather than destructive and judge our activities on this basis. Being creative means opening possibilities for further developments and for others to participate in creating. We need to be open to new ideas, relationships and lifestyles and not condemn others on the basis of prejudice. Jesus realised that we are all sinners in one way or another and did not hesitate to engage with ‘disreputable’ people. We should engage rather than condemn or shun others. Secondly, we must tread lightly on the environment and be willing to pay more for eco-friendly services or forego some comforts for the sake of the world. We should not promote monocultures and mass standardisation where the world is exploited primarily for financial gain. Globalisation may be efficient but efficiency leads to necessity and determination, self-reliance leads to choice, freedom and diversity. We are all interdependent as humans, animals and plants in the world ecosystem but we should try to avoid being dependent in a one-way relationship. If we become dependent on others and some disaster befalls us, or those we depend upon, we can end up in serious trouble. If we interact on a cooperative basis rather than exploitation we preserve diversity, help to secure our future and enjoy a richer life.