

## **Address by Nigel Guthrie for 28th August 2022 at St Michael's Church**

I began last week by referring to the rather depleted River Loire that we had seen on our holiday. But it's another river that got me thinking this week, the Whanganui River (apologies if my pronunciation is off!) in New Zealand. Back in 2017 a long running dispute with the local Māori people was resolved. They take their name and their strength and spirit from the river and believe, in general, that their ancestors live on in the natural world and that their lives, and the life of the river are intertwined.

So, after many years of campaigning the river was recognised in 2017 as a legal person, not a human person, of course, but a person whose rights and welfare are protected in law. Other natural features in New Zealand and in other countries like Bangladesh and India, have also been designated in a similar way. This may seem rather strange to us - although perhaps it's not all that different from designating Dartmoor as a National Park, bringing with it restrictions on planning and development. The recognition of the legal identity of these natural features is not without its problems. If something is a legal person it has rights and responsibilities which can be enforced. So, if a river floods it could be held responsible for the damage to property or even the death of people. And in India the legal designation of two rivers has been revoked for just such reasons.

Even apart from Māori beliefs about their ancestors living on, it isn't hard to understand why there is a strong desire to see rivers respected and protected – to be given their rights - as they are so vitally life-giving. There is a tendency for them to be exploited for such understandable reasons as irrigation and hydro-electric power generation. But there is also a tendency for them to become convenient disposal channels for human and industrial waste to the point where they become lifeless and sterile channels rather than living ecosystems. It has taken decades to bring the Thames back from being classified as biologically dead in the late 1950s. It still has problems with pollution but now seals, porpoises and sea horses as well as good variety of fish inhabit the river.

In today's gospel reading Jesus is at a sabbath day meal and is noticing how people take their seats. Most people like to take the place of honour, presumably nearest the host. But Jesus says why not start at the bottom, in the lowest place and then your host can invite you to take a higher seat? For all those who exalt themselves

will be humbled and those who humble themselves will be exalted. It sounds very much like Mary's words in the Magnificat, 'he has put down the mighty from their seat, and has exalted the humble and meek.'

This revolutionary teaching effects our whole relationship with the world. It shows us that all those who are despised or oppressed will be lifted up by God, if not in this world, then at least in heaven. This is why Carl Jung, the influential psychologist, was so enthusiastic about the doctrine of the Assumption of Mary; for him it represented the ideal of female being lifted to the heavenly realm. By seating Mary, theologically speaking, alongside the persons of the Holy Trinity she could be seen and understood as a channel of God's grace – not the source of grace, it is true, but nonetheless one chosen by God - a humble handmaid exalted to the highest heaven. Indeed, Jung rejoiced that it was a sign of progress in the Roman Catholic Church towards the recognition of women's equality and rights in a world where, in 1950, those rights were still so widely absent.

I was reminded about this teaching about Mary by the death of Bishop Kallistos Ware who was teaching patristics at Oxford when I was doing my degree there. As an orthodox Bishop he expressed very beautifully the significance of the presence of Mary in heaven representing the feminine within the council of heaven. In the Orthodox tradition Mary is known as 'Theotokos' God-bearer, the highest calling any human can have. Her example beckons us to be God-bearers in our own way not least by recognizing the importance of humility in relation to others.

Jesus' teaching refers directly to other people; and if we get anywhere near acting with genuine humility towards others in our lives we will be doing well! But it seems to me that this teaching also has a vital message for us in our relation to the natural world, its creatures, plants and natural resources, like rivers. In his encyclical Pope Francis begins with the Canticle of Saint Francis "Praise be to you my Lord, through our Sister, Mother Earth, who sustains and governs us, and who produces various fruit with coloured flowers and herbs." The earth is described in a personal way that is not wholly different from the personal relationship that the Māori feel with their river. He then quotes Pope Paul VI who wrote in 1971 "Due to an ill-considered exploitation of nature humanity runs the risk of destroying it and becoming in turn a victim of this degradation".

Those words certainly sound ominously true today and challenge us to push the boundaries of our humility to recognise the God-given value of every aspect of this world and to reassess our relationship with the animals, trees and natural resources which have been given to us with such bounty by God's hand. We need to work away from exercising our dominion and work towards finding a communion which will be life-giving to us all.