

SEPTEMBER 1, 2024

TWENTY-SECOND SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME

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A plate with a single fruit in the centre. A peach. A pear. An orange. As I read and prayed the texts offered to us by the liturgy this Sunday, this was the first image that came to me. An image that is both powerful and full of symbolism, but also so simple and familiar.

At my in-laws' house, throughout the seasons, we find from time to time a small plate with a single piece of fruit on the kitchen table where we usually have family meals. When this piece of fruit stands out in the middle of the table, we all know what it is. The children immediately show joy and excitement. It's the first fruits.

Indeed in the yard surrounding the house there are many fruit trees. Each first fruit of the season always deserves a celebration, and a special welcome. It is placed in the centre of the table and awaits a moment when the family is gathered to be tasted and savored together. It's up to the children - usually the youngest in the family - to taste the firstfruit, but everyone ends up trying a small piece. Having grown up in an urban setting, I'm always amazed by this moment of sharing and thanksgiving for what the Creator and Creation offer us, in a renewed form, every season.

The Sunday we are celebrating now coincides happily this year with the World Day of Prayer for Creation and the beginning of the Season of Creation. In fact, the Season of Creation begins each year on 1 September and ends on 4 October, with the Solemnity of Saint Francis of Assisi, the patron saint of ecology loved by so many Christian denominations. This time invites us to renew our relationship with our Creator and all of creation through a journey of conversion, celebration and individual and collective commitment. This is a time when we join our sisters and brothers of other Christian denominations in prayer and action for our common home, in a time that is also ecumenical in nature.

This year's theme for the Season of Creation is 'To Hope and Act with Creation' and the theological reflection is based on St. Paul's letter to the Romans (Rom 8:19-25), which portrays the Earth as a Mother groaning in childbirth (Rom 8:22). Indeed, the times we live in show that we are not relating to the Earth as a gift from our Creator, but rather as a resource to be used. The groaning of the earth denounces the suffering that Creation and so many people are going through as a result of overexploitation and climate change. And yet there is hope and expectation for a better future, as the same biblical text reveals, and the graphic symbol of the Season of Creation captures so beautifully by referring to the "first fruits of hope."

The Letter of Saint James from this Sunday's liturgy also takes up this idea of first fruits, which has so much power and symbolism in the Bible, from the Old Testament to the letters addressed to the first Christian communities. Throughout the history of the Hebrew people, firstfruits have always occupied a special place, being dedicated to God.

Saint James goes even further in this reading when he writes: "He willed to give us birth by the word of truth that we may be a kind of firstfruits of his creatures" (Jas 1:18). Each and every one of us, each and every person, is the Creator's beloved firstfruits.

If one possible reading of this phrase takes us back to the responsibility that falls on us, as humanity and those primarily responsible for caring for our common home, I like to look at this expression of 'first fruits of his creatures' as a reminder that all creation comes from God ('All good giving and every perfect gift is from above, Jas 1:17) and that we are brothers and sisters in Creation, as St Francis of Assisi eloquently makes us realise in the Canticle of the Creatures.

To be a firstfruits is also to welcome the word of God into our lives and into our hearts: "Humbly welcome the word that has been planted in you" (Jas 1:21). In this Sunday's Gospel, Jesus once again calls for a conversion of heart. Clinging to precepts, rules or practices without a conversion of heart is often a dangerous and sterile path, as Jesus points out in this Gospel when speaking to the pharisees and scribes and addressing the crowd.

In fact, we need an ongoing ecological conversion of our hearts that allows us to care for each other and for our common home. What concrete steps can I take to deepen my ecological conversion? Spend more time contemplating nature? Let my heart suffer with those impacted by climate change? Change my lifestyle and consumption habits? Denounce structural sins against creation?

The apostle James also leaves us with a very concrete challenge when he tells us "Be doers of the word and not hearers only, deluding yourselves." (Jas 1:21). Let's not be fooled by the feeling of being overwhelmed, by thinking that what we do is worthless, or that we are alone. We are invited to 'Hope and act with Creation'. Hope, in the biblical context, doesn't mean to stand still and quiet, but rather groaning, crying and actively striving for new life. Just as in childbirth, we go through a period of intense pain, but new life springs forth. It's not enough for us to be listeners!

In Hebrew, the word for first fruits is 'bikkurim,' the literal translation of which is 'promise that comes.' We are first fruits, we are the coming promise of a greater promise and hope. Only when we work together and are united with God and Creation can the first fruits of hope be born.

As my children approached the first fruits on my in-laws table with eagerness, let us also begin this Season of Creation with joy!

Note: This text draws from the Season of Creation 2024 resources.

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Source: *Catholic Women Preach* <https://www.catholicwomenpreach.org/>