

Creation Responds to God

6 September 2026, 1st Sunday of the Season of Creation: Reflection on Revelation 4 and Matthew 8:23-27.

- *Tristan Sullivan-Vaughan*

I have to confess I love the Book of Revelation with all its wild and exciting imagery! I used to find it a bit worrying, partly because of the tendency for people to interpret it in crazy ways that boil down into tales of judgement against the groups of people that the interpreter doesn't like very much. It's vivid enough that without some kind of guide to the metaphors you can easily get lost and end up in all sorts of strange places.

Today's chapter is entitled in the New Revised Standard Version 'The Heavenly Worship'.

In John of Patmos' vision, we are transported to the throne of God and presented with an image of impossible grandeur, peals of thunder, crowned elders and a rainbow that looks like an emerald.

And then we get introduced to the four protagonists of this part of John's vision. On the four sides of God's throne are four living creatures, covered in eyes, John says – which is to say they miss nothing – and they appear to John like a lion, an ox, a human and an eagle... and I would really love to give you some kind of personal anecdote to help ground my preaching, ... but how can anyone give a personal anecdote to relate to this? I just don't have one.

Sometimes God is so far beyond our capacity to understand.

However, I am sure most of you will have seen or heard of these references before in a Christian context. You possibly didn't realise they were from Revelation but I imagine if you think back a bit, you will have seen them around. Maybe used in reference to the four evangelists.

Jerome, one of the Patristic writers mapped these four creatures to the four evangelists. For Jerome and other writers of the period, this was a way of asserting that there were only four God-ordained gospels, despite the existence of others.

Matthew's gospel opens with Jesus's whakapapa, his human ancestors, so he becomes associated with the man.

Mark's gospel opens with the voice of John the Baptist roaring in the wilderness, so he becomes associated with the lion.

Luke's gospel stresses Jesus' sacrifice, so he becomes associated with an animal that, in antiquity, was frequently sacrificed– the ox.

Then there's John, our Patron saint. John's gospel emphasises the divinity of Christ, proclaims that He was the eternal word of God. He becomes the eagle taking flight into heaven.

You might also have heard of these Creatures seated around the throne as representing aspects of Christ. Christ was King of Kings – the Lion.

He was a servant, tireless and willing to sacrifice himself for others – the ox.

He was the Son of Man – that probably doesn't require much explanation.

And, as the Son of God, his glory soared above the earth – the eagle.

But there is another interpretation for these four creatures which I would like to put forward today. The number four, in Revelation is used to symbolise totality, most often of God's creation.

So, another way to look at the four creatures is to say they represent the totality of creation. Each of these creatures represents, to the people of the 1st century, the pinnacle of one aspect of God's creation. The human is reasonably obvious.

Then there is the lion – I still remember, as a child, people saying the lion was the 'king of the jungle', despite the fact I'm pretty sure lions don't live in jungles at all... but in this context the lion is the greatest of the wild animals.

The ox is the greatest domestic animal and the eagle is the greatest of birds.

We could get side tracked and ask questions like ‘where are the fish?’, but I think that’s missing the bigger point here, that there are four protagonists that represent the whole of creation and three of them are not us.

Unceasingly and without pause the four living creatures sing:

“Holy, holy, holy,
the Lord God the Almighty,
who was and is and is to come.”

The whole of creation is giving praise to God. I don’t know if you remember, from Luke’s Gospel that when Jesus enters Jerusalem and the disciples are singing:

“Blessed is the king
who comes in the name of the Lord!
Peace in heaven,
and glory in the highest heaven!”

I don’t know if you remember the Pharisees complain about this and Jesus replies to them, “If these were silent, stones would shout out.”

The whole of creation gives praise to God.

And in our Gospel today, creation answers God. Jesus seems unconcerned by the storm and wind, initially chastising the disciples for their lack of faith. But then he chastises the winds and the sea, as well, and both are calmed.

There is another possible version of this story where Jesus chastises the disciples, they have faith and they ride out the storm together, being amazed that they survived.

But that isn’t the story we get. Instead, creation enters into the story as another character that listens to God and responds to God.

So what does all of this mean?

What does it mean that, in Revelation, three of the four protagonists are not human? What does it mean that Creation responds when Jesus speaks to it?

I would suggest, that at the start of our season of creation, we are being reminded that, while we are a part of God's creation, we are far from the only part of it. Look up into the night sky and you see the stars, burning balls whose light takes hundreds, or thousands of years to reach us. And down here, around us, a planet teeming with abundant life and intricate systems. This is the totality of creation, that we know of, and next to that, we aren't all that big.

Yes, we are a very important part of that creation, but the totality is so far beyond us. And God cares for every part of it. Are not two sparrows sold for a penny? Yet not one of them will fall to the ground apart from your Father.

Not only that, but we have a responsibility for that Creation that starts in Genesis 2 when God puts Adam in the garden to till and keep it. Adam was made the steward of the garden and that mantle of now rests on all of humanity to look after our little garden in space.

So today, at the start to this season of creation, lets give thanks for all that God made and join with the elders and four living creatures in praying:

"You are worthy, our Lord and God,
to receive glory and honour and power,
for you created all things,
and by your will they existed and were created."

And when we have done giving praise, perhaps we can ponder on what we can do to be good stewards of the created world that was left in our care.