

22 September 2012

Giver of Life – Psalm 104.26-32

Sarah Bachelard

Psalm 104 celebrates God as creator of the world and the world as God's creation. The earlier part of the psalm praises God, speaking in wonder and gratitude of all that God has done: You make the winds your messengers and flames of fire your ministers; you fix a limit for the waters; you send springs into the gullies; you cause the grass to grow; you provide for the storks and wild goats, the conies and lions, all the beasts of the forest; you create the moon to mark the seasons and the sun. And so on and so on, till we come to the great shout of praise with which our reading began: 'Lord, how various are your works: in wisdom you have made them all, and the earth is full of your creatures'.

At Benedictus we too are celebrating a Season of Creation, but our context feels more precarious. Where the psalmist confidently proclaims that 'you have set the earth on its foundations, so that it will never be moved', and trusts in the rhythmic cycle of the seasons, the resilience of our world seems in doubt – the earth may be full of creatures, but many are suffering and dying. The waters seem no longer 'fixed' by their limits – the seas are rising, the ice is melting, and dry land suffers from too much or not enough rain.

In this context, what does it mean to understand God as Creator and Sustainer of the world? What difference does it make to the way we engage our ecological crisis to relate to the world as God's 'creation'?

There are two common approaches to this question, each of which strikes me as theologically unsatisfactory. The first understands the act of creation as a singular event in or at the beginning of history. God set things in motion (whether over six days or over a period of millennia), and what we live in is a system that is essentially separate from God, running in accord with its own natural laws. God's 'gift' of creation (if we use that form of words) is a gift that has been wholly handed over – and so although God might function as an explanation for there *being* a world, God is not actively at work within the creation now.

The second approach is almost the opposite of this – God is still at work in the creation, God is actively saving the world and fulfilling its purpose and that means, for example, that we don't really need to worry about climate change because God will intervene to prevent real catastrophe. The gift of creation, on this kind of view, comes as it were with a money-back guarantee. If we human beings stuff it up, then God can always mend it for us (unless, of course, its collapse is part of the strategy for bringing about the end of the world – in which case we don't need to worry anyway, because that too is part of God's plan).

On the first view, God is effectively an absentee landlord and on the second, God is a magician who can just make things right by waving some kind of wand. Although each seeks to express an important theological insight (the first – God's otherness to creation, and creation's freedom; the second – God's sustaining and steadfast love), neither does justice to what has been revealed by the life, death and resurrection of Jesus about the way God works in our world. So what might an alternative picture of the relationship between Creator and creation look like, and how might that make a difference to what we do?

The classical Christian doctrine of creation is that God created the world out of nothing, creation is *ex nihilo*. This was a distinctive view in the late ancient world. In

other accounts of creation, the world is generated from pre-existing matter, divine agency shapes or brings under control something already there. While ideas like this are present in the Scriptures, more and more the Hebrew sense becomes that creation is performed by the free utterance, the word of God alone. This account of creation *ex nihilo* seems to have emerged about the time of Israel's return from exile in Babylon – out of nothing, God called into being a particular community, called it by name, gave it identity. There is no process of change from one thing to another – there is just God's summons into being. Nothing makes God do this except God's own free determination and will. So, writes Rowan Williams, from this experience 'it is a short step to the conclusion that God's relation to the whole world is like this: not a struggle with pre-existing disorder that is then moulded into shape, but a pure summons'.¹

Theologically, this account of creation has some significant implications. For one thing, God does not need the world in order to be God, and yet it is consistent with who God is that God wills there to be something other than God, something that has its own integrity and reality. God gives being to what would not otherwise be. So the very existence of creation teaches us something about the nature of God's being and acting – it speaks simultaneously of God's freedom and God's generosity. And this in turn teaches us something about how we are to regard creation – it is called into life, called to be itself by God's free will, and it is the object of God's generous, summoning and sustaining love.

All this has real ramifications for our picture of how God acts, how God is – and so for how we might expect God to be and act in our current crisis. I want to start 'local', as it were, and then go 'global'. Think, first, of our experience of God in our lives. In prayer we trust (and sometimes we know) that God is present to us – not just as some distant first cause of our existence, but actively – a life-giving, whole-making, sustaining

¹ 'On Being Creatures', *On Christian Theology* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 2000), p.68.

reality. We experience that God's presence, God's Spirit, transforms. But how does God transform us? Not by dropping in some new version of me to replace the wonky parts, not by magic. I am transformed in prayer to the extent that I bring my actual life, with all my blindspots and wounds, all my resistance to being who I am created to be, before God, inviting God's healing and engaging in the slow and painful process of being taught to see differently, to let go destructive habits or patterns of thought, risking losing the only self I know how to be. My healing happens in the flesh, respecting the limits of my creaturely capacity – which necessarily means that it takes time. Or take another example of God's 'action' – if a relationship is damaged in my life, I might pray to be able to forgive or to speak the right words, and I might indeed be conscious of grace, a sense of being 'helped' in my engaged movement towards reconciliation. But, it doesn't just get 'fixed' without me – I don't just wake up one day and find that God has 'done' it.

What I am pointing to here is the paradox of creaturely freedom and divine grace – God's sustaining presence is with us, with the creation, in the service of life, and yet it is not offered in such a way that it dominates or overrides our freedom, our separate being. The doctrine of creation means that God takes the world seriously, its integrity, its otherness, its not being God, its resistance, its freedom to be itself – and that is why the transformation of the world requires incarnation. It requires God's love for the world to be enfleshed, lived out and communicated concretely in the world of creatures.

So what does this mean for understanding how God is with us and with the world in our ecological crisis? What does it suggest about our part in enfleshing God's healing, transforming love? I think that is a profoundly significant question for a contemplative community to be asking. At the least it means that we offer ourselves to be transformed – becoming ourselves conformed to God's life so that we can rejoice as God does in the sheer free existence of what is not us, and so let go of dominating and distorting ways of

being in the world. It means relating to the sheer gift and wonder creation in such a way that others may see it like this, and so be moved to respond differently to its wounds and needs.

Maybe it also means something more than that. Maybe it means identifying with our fellow creatures as Christ did, suffering with them as Christ did, learning such solidarity with the wounded earth and sea and sky and forest that in us and through us creation's cry for healing might be incarnated, and the whole world brought into the healing presence of God's transforming life. So that we might become the prayer: come Holy Spirit, come and renew the face of the earth.