BENEDICTUS
contemplative church

29 September 2018

Kinship (Genesis 1: 26-31)
Season of Creation 5 (Pentecost XIX)
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In our celebration of the Season of Creation this year at Benedictus, we've been focusing particularly on the *doctrine* of creation – the Christian understanding that the world exists in response to the divine Word or summons and reflects God's wholeness and mercy. This is a doctrine, a way of seeing things, that's come significantly under fire over the past two centuries on a number of grounds. There's the scientific challenge. How is the biblical story of creation to be taken seriously in the light of contemporary cosmology and evolutionary theory? There's the existentialist challenge. How do you reconcile faith in a coherent, meaningful, harmonious universe with the reality of contingency and random suffering? And there's the challenge of disenchanted modernity. After all, what does it mean to claim that the seemingly impersonal existence of such things as rocks, waterfalls and stars is an expression of generative, reconciling love? Over the past weeks we've grappled with each of these questions. Tonight, we come to one last challenge to contemporary reception of the Christian doctrine of creation – the ecological challenge.

This issue was first raised over fifty years ago, when the mediaeval historian Lynn White published a paper called 'The Historical Roots of our Ecologic Crisis'. White argued that the doctrine of creation is significantly to blame for the modern West's alienation from the natural world and so for our ecological woes. The key problem, as he saw it, is that although according to the Genesis story 'man's body is made of clay, he is not simply part of nature: he is made in God's image'. The consequence of this myth, White claimed, is that: 'Especially in its Western form, Christianity is the most

anthropocentric religion the world has seen'. Its insistence that 'man' shares 'in great measure, God's transcendence of nature' means that 'Christianity, in absolute contrast to ancient paganism and Asia's religions … not only established a dualism of man and nature but also insisted that it is God's will that man exploit nature for his proper ends'.[1] On this account, the very doctrine of creation and its placing of humankind at the pinnacle of the created order has licensed such disregard for the natural world that we may ultimately destroy it and ourselves along with it. Wouldn't that be a terrible irony? The doctrine of creation leading to the destruction of creation.

Well, it's a weighty charge and, on the question of exploitation, it's undoubtedly true that Christian theology in the early modern period is a major contributor to the Western idea that 'the fate of nature is to be bossed around' by what Rowan Williams calls 'a detached sovereign will'.[2] It's also true that recent attempts to retrieve or soften the biblical injunction that humanity should have 'have dominion over every living thing' aren't entirely convincing. Apparently the Hebrew word for 'having dominion' doesn't mean something nice and cuddly like stewardship or tending, but something relatively harsher – like subjugate. Hebrew scholar Robert Alter comments that the word used is not even the usual one for 'rule' but connotes 'an absolute or even fierce exercise of mastery'.[3] It's not looking good!

Yet at the same time, there are strands in our tradition that clearly tend in a different direction. 'The earth is the Lord's and the fullness thereof', writes the Psalmist. In the Genesis story, all created things, not just human beings, are summoned into life by the Word of God; all things have their own independent relationship with God. This suggests the natural world is *not* just there for our benefit and use. On this understanding, which is particularly developed by the Eastern Orthodox tradition,

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[1] Lynn White Jr, 'The Historical Roots of our Ecologic Crisis', *Science* (Volume 155, Number 3767), 10 March 1967, p.1205.
[2] Rowan Williams, 'Changing the Myths We Live By' in *Faith in the Public Square* (London: Bloomsbury, 2012), p.176.
[3] Robert Alter, *Genesis: Translation and Commentary* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1996), p.5.

what's distinctive about humanity is not that we're licensed to consume or dominate the world at will, but that we're the creatures given 'language in which to speak of God's gift and to celebrate it'. 'Humanity, in the Genesis story, names the animals' and this suggests that 'the calling of the human person is to name the world aright', by attending to its deepest reality. Some Orthodox writers thus speak of the human vocation as a priestly one – to bless, celebrate and consciously give back the world to God in praise and thanksgiving.[4]

What's more, and despite the language of 'subduing the earth', the scriptural imagination can manifest a rich understanding that the fate of the world and the fate of humankind are bound closely together. The story of Noah's ark, for example, is 'about how the saving of the human future is inseparable from securing a future for all living things'.[5] Israel's legal codes were explicit about the need for rest and recreation for animals and the land itself. And in God's debate with the prophet Jonah, the concern God expresses for the city of Nineveh is not only for its human inhabitants but also its many animals (Jonah 4: 11). In the light of all this, it seems a little unjust to characterise the scriptural doctrine of creation as solely to blame for our culture's tendency to exploit and misuse the natural world.

And yet, what does seem underdeveloped, at least in much Christian sensibility, is the felt experience of being part of the earth – the felt experience of what might be called kinship with creation. There does seem a strong tendency to anthropocentrism in Christian practice and thought. This is where many who care deeply for the life and flourishing of the world are drawn to indigenous spiritualities which seem so much more conscious of our human embeddedness in and dependence on the web of life. And it raises the question of whether it's to these indigenous traditions we must look if we really want to transform our relationship with the world around us? Or, could it be that

[4] Williams, 'Changing the Myths We Live By', p.178.
[5] Rowan Williams, 'Climate Crisis: Fashioning a Christian Response' in *Faith in the Public Square*, p.197.

(perhaps with our consciousness raised by these other traditions) we may learn see aspects of our own tradition afresh?

Let's have another look at our text. 'So God created humankind in his image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them' (Gen. 1: 27). According to White, the Western tendency has been to focus on our being 'in image of God' – and so to see ourselves separate from, even above nature. But what seems striking to me in this passage is that, more than any other part of the world, human beings are described as having been created. In fact, three times the text makes this point: God 'created humankind', in the image of God he 'created them', 'male and female he created them'. In other words, in the creation story, no other aspect of life is characterised so insistently as having been created. Furthermore, the very word 'adam' that designates this human creature is linked to the word 'adamah' meaning ground or earth. Human beings are constituted by the substance of the world.

And it's as if the text is going out its way to remind us human beings that we're not the source of our own lives. We're earthlings, continuous with the life of the world and utterly dependent for our being on the initiative and goodness of God. Whatever security and self-importance we might derive from our distinctive nature as self-conscious, rational, linguistic beings, the truth to which the doctrine of creation returns us is that we're as provisional and fragile as any other element in the web of earthly life. Any transcendence on offer is given through our relationship to God – it's never our possession, our substance.

In the West, the saint who most fully lived out this radical awareness of his own creatureliness was Francis of Assisi – whose feast day is celebrated this coming week. His practice of poverty and humility was his 'yes' to the creaturely condition of absolute dependence on God and the givenness of the world. And what seems most significant is that it was this acceptance of himself as a creature – naked, poor and of the earth – that

enabled him to recognise the rest of creation as his kin. It gave him the joy of knowing that he belonged to what poet Mary Oliver called ‘the family of things’, liberated to praise God with and on behalf of his ‘Brother Son, Sister Moon, his Mother Earth and Brothers Wind and Air’.

Lynn White is right to say that awareness of our kinship with the natural world and our shared creaturehood has been muted in our Western Christian tradition, and that this has contributed to our culture’s profoundly destructive impact on creation. But the resources for a reawakening are there. And so, in the words of poet John O’Donohue:

> Let us ask forgiveness of the earth
> For all our sins against her.
> For our violence and poisonings
> Of her beauty.
>
> Let us remember within us
> The ancient clay,
> Holding the memory of seasons,
> The passion of the wind,
> The fluency of water,
> The warmth of fire,
> The quiver-touch of the sun
> And shadowed sureness of the moon.
>
> That we may awaken,
> To live to the full
> The dream of earth
> Who chose us to emerge
> And incarnate its hidden night
> In mind, spirit and light.[6]

[6] From ‘In Praise of Earth’, *The Four Elements: Reflections on Nature* (London: Transworld Ireland, 2010), pp.xxxiv-xxxv.