

11 September 2021

## **A Home For All? (James 2. 1-10)**

© Sarah Bachelard

The theme suggested for this year's ecumenical celebration of the Season of Creation is *'A Home for All? Renewing the Oikos of God'*. It's a theme inviting us to reflect on what it means truly to share the life of earth. Just as the recipients of the Letter of James were urged to share life together, even with those they'd deemed of lesser social standing, so we are urged to recognise all others – human and non-human – as belonging equally with us to the created order, members of the household of God. To see the world as a home for all and not just for our group, our species, our 'favourites' (cf. James 2.1).

Last week, we began our reflections on this theme by focusing on the notion of 'home'. I suggested that what makes something a home (rather than simply a place to stay) is, first of all, that when I'm at home, I don't have to ask permission to be there. I belong in my home 'by right'. And second, 'home' signifies a relational connection to place. My home expresses something of who I am – it's filled with gifts, memories and connections with significant times, people and places. My home relates me to myself and my story, as well as to others with whom my story is intertwined.

If this is what we mean by 'home', then to conceive of the world itself as 'home', implies that it too expresses meaning beyond its bare material properties; it's not just a neutral environment, but reflects or communicates the nature of its maker and the stories of all who dwell here. If this is so, then truly to be 'at home' in the world involves being able to recognise these deeper meanings, and to realise more fully our relatedness with those who have gone before us here and share it with us now. There are stories from many cultures and traditions that express something of this intuition. In tonight's reflection, I want to consider its theological

underpinnings from a Christian perspective. This leads into some deepish water, but let's see how we go!

The persistent insight of the Scriptural tradition that the source of everything is itself alive. What we call 'God' is not life-less, not closed in on itself and static. God is living and generative. And this aliveness and generativity shows up not just in what God does, but in who God is, in what you might call the being or the inner life of God. It is impossible, writes Rowan Williams, 'to think of the divine simply as a One beyond relation or reciprocity'.<sup>1</sup>

In the Hebrew scriptures, this internal reciprocity or relationality of divine life is expressed in the Wisdom literature. Divine Wisdom is said to 'emanate' from God like a breath; she is personified 'as God's active and glorious presence (Sirach 24, Wisdom 7)'. She is said to come into being before creation and to be with God in the creative process, as in Proverbs 8. On this account, says Williams, the unity of divine life is not sheer identity or sameness, but a kind of differentiation in unity; 'non-dual non-identity' is the term he uses!<sup>2</sup>

In slightly plainer language, the image is that of a God who speaks or breathes. God's Word or Breath expresses God perfectly (it is God) and yet is also differentiated from God. A limited analogy is the way in which our thoughts issue from and express who we are, and yet we can be in relation to our own thoughts. And the relationship of our intelligence to its own content generates more thought, more engagement – there is, as 14<sup>th</sup> century Greek theologian Gregory of Palamas noted 'conscious mutual involvement, an eternal flow of life between the two terms'.<sup>3</sup>

In early Christian thought, these notions of the relation of the divine Word or Wisdom to its source were taken up to elaborate the meaning of Christ. Jesus is said to be this Word or *Logos*, this eternal self-expression of God made flesh. He comes from and perfectly reveals or 'testifies' to his Source, the Father; and he returns to

---

<sup>1</sup> Rowan Williams, *Looking East in Winter* (London: Bloomsbury Continuum, 2021), p.79.

<sup>2</sup> Williams, *Looking East in Winter*, pp.79-80.

<sup>3</sup> Williams, *Looking East in Winter*, pp.36-37.

the Source in a dynamic of continuous mutual involvement which is the 'life', the 'spirit' or the 'love' between them. Thus evolves the understanding of God as Trinity, as self-expressing, self-giving being turned always beyond static identity, towards an otherness, a difference, that is eternally one in love and always bringing forth more life.

It's this sense of the essential generativity of divine life that underlies a Christian theology of creation. God is being-in-relation; God is such as to be self-differentiated, wanting more life to be. And God not only expresses this 'within' the divine life (so to speak), but the overflow of this generative goodness and love creates the finite world. So there's an ecstatic dimension to this vision of what underlies the world's being – let there be light, let there be sky and sea, let there be earth and let the earth itself be given the capacity to bring forth more life, more forms, more self-differentiating generation.

It's important to say that nothing in this vision is incompatible with a scientific account of how the world begins or evolves. The doctrine of creation is not an explanation for the world; it's a way of imagining the relationship *between* the world and its ultimate source. It says simply that 'the entire situation of the universe ... exists ... because of God's reality being, as it were, turned away from God to generate what is not God'.<sup>4</sup> How this happens is another matter. All that theology says, according to Williams, is that 'God creates a diverse world ... a world that is realized as an immeasurable plurality of particular reflections of and participations in the single eternal Logos'.<sup>5</sup>

Well, say we entertain this story about the foundational rhythm of reality – born of ecstatic love? What are its implications? One concerns the possibility of discerning in the life of the world something of its origins in this self-expressive, self-giving Word and life of God. 'The heavens are telling the glory of God; and the firmament proclaims his handiwork' says the psalmist (Ps. 19. 1-2). To perceive the

---

<sup>4</sup> Rowan Williams, *On Christian Theology* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 2000), p.68.

<sup>5</sup> Williams, *Looking East in Winter*, p.49.

eternal Word sounding in the particulars of finite life calls, as I said last week, for attunement with its resonance. And a reason we may come to take seriously this vision of things is because of the way our prayer may draw us to participate in it and know it 'from the inside'. More of this (I hope) next week. Again though, let me say this in no way pits a contemplative regard against a scientific one. Scientific inquiry, poetic, embodied, contemplative responsiveness – all are ways in which a respectful, other-directed intelligence may encounter the fullness of what is there to be received.

A second implication of this account of the world's origin in God's giving life concerns our relationship to the whole. If we really take seriously that the manifold variety and diversity of the world is an expression of God's self, God's will that life should be, then the thought that human greed and selfishness might extinguish whole species or that we may refuse to share earth's life with our fellow creatures appears as a terrible sacrilege. Who do we think we are?

Yet, there's complexity here. Because there are times where our human 'interests' seem gravely in conflict with the interests of other parts of the created order. They cannot readily be harmonised in an ideal of abundant and mutual flourishing for all. From my desire to eliminate the rats that colonised our ceiling recently, to our public health hopes of extinguishing the corona virus, to our use of land for agriculture and our disturbance of the earth to build and extract resources for all manner of things ... is it possible or even desirable for humankind really to relate to this world as 'a home for all'? As a place where everything that exists is equally entitled to be here and live its life undisturbed by us?

Well, it's not an easy question. I find helpful the words of Wendell Berry – poet, farmer, environmentalist. He wrote: 'To live, we must daily break the body and shed the blood of Creation. When we do this knowingly, lovingly, skillfully, reverently, it is a sacrament. When we do it ignorantly, greedily, clumsily, destructively, it is a desecration. In such desecration, we condemn ourselves to

spiritual and moral loneliness, and others to want'.<sup>6</sup> What I appreciate in this is the realism about what our human life costs and may mean for other creatures. And yet precisely because of this, there's also a deep sense of our responsibility to be mindful about *how* we take what we need, *how* we secure our lives against threat.

Just because there's always and necessarily an impact from our being here, doesn't mean we can ramp this up without regard to our effect on the whole – as if our unreconstructed desires for convenience or voracious consumption can justify pretty much any use or abuse of our fellow creatures, human and non-human. And I think what Berry says – that a sacrilegious or desecrating way of being towards the world condemns us to 'spiritual and moral loneliness' – is true. It's the sacrilegious spirit that separates us from the interconnected life of the whole. To the extent that we are unheeding of the place and meaning of other life, we render *ourselves* less and less at home here. Which leads, not just to the destruction of other life, but to the profound attenuation of our own.

All this suggests, that renewing the 'household' of God, relating to this world as 'a home for all' will mean not only 'fixing' the environmental problems we face, but awakening to our sharing in creaturely life. The Letter of James was written to a congregation inclined to refuse awareness of mutual belonging even to human others; but we may apply it also, I think, to our relationship with the other-than-human world: 'You do well if you really fulfil the royal law according to the scripture, "You shall love your neighbour as yourself". But if you show partiality, you commit sin and are convicted by the law as transgressors'. And to this theme, we turn next week.

---

<sup>6</sup> Wendell Berry, *The Art of the Commonplace: The Agrarian Essays* (Berkeley, CA: Counterpoint Press, 2003).