

The Blessing of Creation

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When Jesus tells us that to have seen him is to have seen the Father (1), this must mean that the extraordinary generosity which we see set forth in the spectacle of the Passion of Christ, is there at the very heart of God and from the beginning of it all. So Calvary is not a novel demonstration of the extent of God's love dreamt up to meet some particular circumstances. God is like this, through and through. It is in his very nature to offer himself in this terrible costly fashion, and he does so in Jesus that we might see more clearly than ever before that this has always been so - that this is what God is like, and that he has yearned from before the beginning of time to be revealed as such. This is God's hidden purpose, determined beforehand in Christ (2), that us might perceive the extent of this yearning and be fully incorporated into it. In Christ, St Paul tells us, God chose us before the world was founded, to be marked out for loving and to be the recipient of this gift of new life.



And that is to call us back into something far deeper than living a good life here on earth, into something far older than the Church, into something far broader even than the community of all our fellow human beings. For the generosity of God as shown forth in Christ, welcoming us into this relationship of love, with no compulsion and with the prospect of a new and glorious liberty: this is nothing other than the same generosity with which he called us into being at the outset, called you out of nothing other than his own imagination, and for nothing other than to enjoy him for ever. God had us in mind, from before the foundation of the world, not just to remake you in Christ, but to make us good and for perfection from

the start. And the Spirit of God which claimed us as members of the community of the redeemed in our baptism, this is none other than the same Spirit which, brooding on the face of the waters at the start of time, shaped and invigorated you as part of God's original desire, as it moved, back and forth, back and forth, telling of the extent of his yearning that we and all that there is might come into being. On this costly generosity, and on nothing else, do we - and all that there is - depend for our very existence.

In the act of creation, God forgoes his monopoly on being and yields up supremacy over what he has made. In Christian language, we can speak of *kenosis* (3), a kind of self-emptying of power, to convey the liberty which we and all of creation have from control or direction by God. From medieval Judaism, we have the more robust notion of *zimzum* where God, as



it were, breathes in, making space for some thing that has being but which is other than himself (4). For the most striking feature of all that there is in nature and beyond into the cosmos, is the sheer gratuitous character of it all, its incomprehensible extent and breathtaking diversity, that not only has it come into being, we say in the Christian tradition, out of nothing, but that it is "for nothing." The Creation is therefore, in a very real sense, 'play', in the sense in which Wisdom plays in the Book of Proverbs: "I made play in this world of dust, with the Sons of Adam for my play-fellows" (5). The great whale, Leviathan sports in the deep (6) because that is what whales do. Richard Dawkins tells us that genes are selfish (7), but as Christian we say that that is the

consequence of the freedom they have, of having been created by God *ex libertate*, under no constraint.

As to ourselves, humankind, we can say that part of what makes us different from all other living creatures is that we appear to be the sole product of the evolutionary process that is moved to proclaim that nature as apprehended by science is in some sense a creation, that is, is dependent upon the love of God and exists at some cost to God. For me, making this discovery real is expressed partly through our articulating the thankfulness of the whole of nature for its existence. In the fable of St. Francis' sermon to the birds, what impresses most is not his ability to charm these creatures but his charge that they should sing in gratitude for their existence (8). Nature, of course, is far from silent but in the cacophony of frogs in the rain forest dawn, or among the curious clicks, whistles and rhapsodies of the humpback whale, should we not hear a note of celebration? If not, perhaps we have taken too seriously the rubric in modern Anglican worship (9) that, when singing the canticle *Benedicite omnia opera*, O all ye works of the Lord, bless ye the Lord..., 'verses 4-17 may be omitted': that is sun, moon, rain, winds, falling snows, lightnings, all plants on the earth, whales, fish, birds and beasts may be excused the charge to celebrate, leaving us with me, you, priests and angels. To this impoverished little glee club, I suggest, we can trace some of the deficiencies in how the Church comprehends the character of our dependency on the natural world and miss the opportunity to learn to sing in harmony with it and excuse ourselves of the responsibility to give voice to its celebration.

At one level, our own charge is about the ethics of environmental concern, our responsibility for something on which we ultimately depend. This means that we should work out the practicalities of survival and development, through conviction and campaign, policy and legislative instrument towards what we hope is morally defensible and capable of being sustained. That



process may often be nourished by religious conviction - indeed the Judaeo-Christian tradition of which we are a part calls this concern for the environment stewardship (or dominion in the days when exploitation of the environment seemed less malign than now) and sees it expressed in the first Creation story as part of God's gift of being to humankind. (10). This ability to negotiate and express our concern for all else that is, is one of the qualities which distinguishes us from other creatures; and clearly one test of our religious experience is how effectively we remind this as ethical behaviour.

My experience as an ecologist tells me that the management of nature, the exploitation of resources, the simplification of ecosystems - destroying species here, short-cutting processes there, let alone turning nature into some sort of 'experience' or entertainment - this is always done at a certain cost, though the accounts may not be settled for some time. Only now, for example, in the BSE and CJD crisis are we starting to pay the price for feeding animal waste to herbivores. And, of course, for many of us (not all) our generosity towards the natural world is tempered by an awareness that we would opt to protect our own kind, even if this meant eliminating the malarial mosquito or smallpox virus with all their own peculiar beauty and efficiency. Our sharing of the planet with the rest of nature, then, has to involve a lot of negotiation and barter, striking deals and fixing trade-offs with our fellow creatures and the physical frame of land, water and air which we seek to occupy with them. Engaging with nature in these places where wonder and need collide, where I both describe as a scientist and yet need to consume, I find a dirty and exhausting task, yet it has turned out for me to be a religious experience: through it, I have discovered what I can only describe as a divine concern for both nature and me together.



However, as an ecologist, I find it hard to accept a simple understanding of the notion that nature is 'condemned to futility'. Of course, I am familiar with the fleeting existence of the adult mayfly, released from its watery time as a nymph one summer's evening and, mating and egg-laying over to ensure the continuance of another generation, usually dead by dawn. Pointless? Unable to attain its purpose? In bondage to decay? Well, not pointless to mayflies, I guess, nor to the dragonflies, swallows, bats and fish which snatch a meal from the expiring adults, nor the algae and plant debris which the nymphs themselves recycle in the water's bed. 'Ecology' is the name for the study of such systems (from *oikos*, the Greek for household), complex interlocking networks of mutual

dependencies which bind living creatures, together with their physico-chemical frame of rock, soil, water and the shifts of climate, into working ecosystems. This gives a context and functionality to organisms which in isolation seem to us without purpose or meaning and intrigues us with its revelations of hierarchies of organisation and the long, tortuous tracks of cycling gases, nutrients, water, atoms, electrons and energy between the component parts.

I commend to you Primo Levi's story of a carbon atom from his book *The Periodic Table* - how, after hundreds of millions of years trapped in limestone, it is released by the roasting of the rock in a lime-kiln, out into the atmosphere, in and out with a falcon's breath, into a vine leaf where, captured in a sugar molecule by photosynthesis, it travels to the ripening grape, through wine into a drinker's liver and out through his out-of-breathlessness in a horse chase, into a moth, from *its* decaying chitinous case into soil, grass, cow, milk and so into the author's brain itself which "at this instant, issuing out of a labyrinthine tangle of yeses and nos, makes my hand run along a certain path on the paper, mark it with these volutes that are signs: a double snap up and down, between two levels of energy, guides this hand of mine to impress on the paper this dot, here, this one." (11). And, when you have such i's to dot and t's to cross in your own lives, I urge you to call to mind these tracks of relationship and inter-dependencies. On the mayfly's back, *human* life is lived, our own households ordered, cultures built and religious experience had. Indeed, if it is part of our experience that God himself is active and imminent in this world, I find it difficult myself to understand how he can be exempt from such dependencies or such cost. If he is somehow its originator, it is hard to see him as impassive bystander.

For, in these relationships, you see us tangled with some things which human feeling and, more particularly, religious sensibilities have found it hard to bear. Jackals, for example, part of the wild dog group, live in woodland and savannah through Africa and east to India. They have a very stable family life with unusually durable partnerships between male and female, the males strictly monogamous, the close-knit packs - including helpers who are not parents - sharing food and care for the young. Such scenes, for which we would probably coin the word 'touching' are further commended by the service the jackals provide to the ecosystems where they live by consuming waste carrion. Yet to see the co-operative hunting of jackals where, working together, they pursue and bring down young gazelles and then tear them apart alive, is not for the squeamish. We could agree with St. Augustine, one of the earliest Christian thinkers to reflect on this question, that it would be ridiculous to condemn the succumbing of the weak to the strong in nature, the decay of animals and plants, because such mutability has "a beauty of its own kind, finding its place among the constituent parts of this world" (12).

For me, as an ecologist, the implications of all this are worked out partly through the process of naming. Much of my own scientific work is descriptive, concerned with cataloguing the diversity of vegetation types in Britain and elsewhere in Europe by analysing data on the frequency of their

constituent species and trying to understand their relationships to those characteristics of climate, soil and human impacts which determine their composition, distribution and ultimately their survival. This task has a



profound religious resonance for me that is illuminated by that moment

in the second Creation story when God parades the beasts before man 'to see what he would call them, and whatever man called each living creature, that was its name' (13). Here we see the process of the naming of creation pictured as part of a direct and innocent converse between

God and man.

Of course, as a scientist, I know only too well how incomplete and partial my data are and how easily I can manipulate what information I have to make a picture that is all too clear in its delineation of the character and relationships in the natural world - an understanding which then speaks less of *it* than of *me*. And, of course, I will go on seeing darkly, as in a mirror. But is it really too fanciful to see what I do on naming as somehow recognising the gift of identity and freedom in those things which are the object of my study, making room for them in my intellectual world, surrendering supremacy over them and trying to see them as God intends them to be seen. For me this is a religious experience, articulating what St. Paul called the "eager longing" or *apokaradokia* (14) of the natural world, what I would call its yearning to be recognised as creation. In naming, by divine invitation, humankind makes its own struggle to sense and signify the world part of God's creative purpose, 'looking always towards a word: trading the limits of speech for the unsaid presence' (15).



We could conceive of such an activity as akin to pronouncing a *berakah* or blessing over the elements of nature - that is, declaring them to be in a state of dependency upon the love of God and yet revealing his gift of the freedom of existence. As an Anglican priest, such language of blessing is very persuasive because, fresh from my fieldwork, the

computer screen or lecture hall, I find myself at the altar, taking in the same hands that name and celebrate nature there, “these thy creatures of bread and wine” (16) and setting *them* in a framework of signification and blessing. To me, they speak of God's passionate engagement with all he has made,



that through the flesh and blood of creation he makes himself known and on him, too, the costliness of creation may be seen to have left its mark.

In such blessing, we discover something of our own identity and purpose, and come to bear a little of what R.S. Thomas calls ‘the wound of knowledge’ (17). For me, this opens up a seamless continuity between what I have come to know about nature and what has been revealed to me, in my experience, about my own condition and the frailty of human love. This sets our own predicament in a breathtaking perspective like that of the closing chapters of the Book of Job, where God responds to Job's incomprehension at his own condition by conjuring up the whirling

planets, winds being born and the terrible beauty of the hippopotamus. This is where our woes, as well as our rejoicings, belong. We are at home in nature and from its costly fabric spring our own extraordinary gifts to conceive of it in science and in art. Nature is the place where we discover that we are ourselves loved and known. It is riven with its own yearning to be recognised as creation – an answering call to the desire which God has for all he has made to comprehend its dependence on him.

References

- (1) John 14,8-17.
- (2) Ephesians 1,3-14.
- (3) Philippians 2, 5-11.
- (4) See, for example, Jurgen Moltmann, (1985), *God in Creation*, London: SCM Press.
- (5) Proverbs 8,30-31, in the Knox translation.
- (6) Psalm 104,26.
- (7) Richard Dawkins (1989). *The Selfish Gene.*, second edition. Oxford: Oxford University Press and (1991) *The Blind Watchmaker*, second edition. London: Penguin.
- (8) *The Little Flowers of Saint Francis*, tr H.E. Manning (1915). Edinburgh: Turnbull & Spears.
- (9) *The Alternative Service Book 1980*. Cambridge, Colchester & London: Cambridge University Press, William Clowes & SPCK.
- (10) Genesis 1, 28-29. See also John Pasmore (1976), *Man's Responsibility for Nature*. London: Duckworth.
- (11) Primo Levi (1985). *The Periodic Table*. London: Michael Joseph.
- (12) Augustine of Hippo, tr Henry Bettenson (1972). *City of God*, XII. 4 & 5. London: Pelican Books.
- (13) Genesis 2, 19-20.
- (14) Romans 8, 19.
- (15) From ‘Taxonomy’, John Burnside (2002) in *The Light Trap*. London: Cape Poetry
- (16) *Book of Common Prayer*, prayer of consecration from the Holy Communion.
- (17) In ‘Roger Bacon’ from R.S. Thomas (1978), *Frequencies*. London: Macmillan.

Pictures

Tapestry of the Crucifixion from the Chateau de Langeais, France (16th century); Mosaic of Creation from Monreale Cathedral, Palermo, Sicily (12th century); St Francis preaching to the birds by Taddeo di Bartolo (14th century); Christ in the Wilderness: the Scorpion by Stanley Spencer (1939); *The naming of the creatures* in a mosaic from St Mark's, Venice (13th century); *The Hands'* a prayer card from the Community of the Resurrection, Mirfield; The Lord answering Job out of the whirlwind by William Blake.

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