

Creation and Justice

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Readings: Genesis 1:24-30 and 9:1-11

THE world is charged with the grandeur of God.
It will flame out, like shining from shook foil;
It gathers to a greatness, like the ooze of oil
Crushed. Why do men then now not reck his rod?
Generations have trod, have trod, have trod;
And all is seared with trade; bleared, smeared with toil;
And wears man's smudge and shares man's smell: the soil
Is bare now, nor can foot feel, being shod.

And for all this, nature is never spent;
There lives the dearest freshness deep down things;
And though the last lights off the black West went
Oh, morning, at the brown brink eastward, springs --
Because the Holy Ghost over the bent
World broods with warm breast and with ah! bright wings.

Gerard Manley Hopkins

When the Royal Society in London released the first report from the Millennium Ecosystem Assessment 2005,¹ it painted a dire picture of the effect that humans are having on our planet: 'Human activity is putting such a strain on the natural functions of the earth that the ability of the planet's ecosystems to sustain future generations can no longer be taken for granted'. When this story was reported in *The Age*, it was accompanied by a cartoon of our prime minister considering this claim, expressed by 1,360 scientists, and then commenting to the assembled media: 'I've asked for a second opinion'.

¹ See *New Internationalist* 378, May 2005.

The federal governments of Australia and the US have been notoriously unwilling to consider the fate of the planet. Signing up to the Kyoto Protocol, for example, might actually require some re-thinking about the way we live. But to be fair to hard-working politicians, it is also extremely difficult to find space in the media for a thorough discussion of complex global issues. Apart from straining the brain, detailed argument uses up too many sound bites.

The church, unfortunately, has a similar problem. We are also unlikely to think that spirituality has much to do with straining the brain. If we turn our minds to creation theology at all, it is usually because we worry about the relationship between Genesis 1 and scientific theories of evolution.

Here at Collins Street Baptist we have recently tried to move beyond that narrow concern and to think about the broader implications of creation, working for example with Green Collect and subjecting our church to an environmental audit. In these activities, we reflect a common concern with non-Christian environmentalists, but during the Season of Creation we will be looking more specifically at a theological understanding of these activities. As Christians, why should we care about the Millennium Ecosystem Report? Today, we will explore the connections between creation theology in Genesis and a theological understanding of eco-justice.

Especially in the past, Christians have often downsized creation theology to the key verse which serves human interests: God said ‘subdue the earth’, so let’s get on with it. In the 1960s, it was suggested that a good measure of our environmental crises could

be blamed on this verse about subduing the earth, and you can still find this claim in textbooks being used by undergraduates in Australian universities today.²

As recently as November 2004, there was a meeting here on Collins Street of the so-called Lavoisier Group headed up by Hugh Morgan, president of the Business Council of Australia and former boss of Western Mining.³ At that meeting, the secretary of the Group reaffirmed that he was a “Genesis 1:28 man”. This also seems to have been one of Hugh Morgan’s favourite verses over the years, a man who has long opposed Aboriginal land rights on the grounds that non-Indigenous people are just fulfilling our God-given mandate to subdue the earth.

This apparent mandate has been used to underwrite the dispossession of Indigenous people for the last couple of centuries. For example, a Sydney barrister expressed a characteristic view in *The Colonist* newspaper in 1838, when he argued that Aborigines ‘had no right to the land’ since ‘it belonged to him who first cultivated it’.⁴ It was not until the seventeenth century that philosophers in the West began to argue that no-one actually possessed land until agrarian labour was added to the earth, but that view became such a standard way of looking at things that it was soon considered common sense – the common sense that legitimated the Western version of colonialism. The idea appears, for example, in Kate Grenville’s recent novel *The Secret River*, where a couple of settlers are complaining about the Aborigines who don’t even till the land: “They

² Geoffrey Bolton, *Spoils and Spoilers: Australians make their Environment 1788–1980* (Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 2nd edn 1992), p.11.

³ <http://www.theage.com.au/articles/2004/11/26/1101219743320.html>

⁴ R. Windeyer in *The Colonist* 27th October, 1838.

never done nothing”, one character bursts out. “See them breaking their back to dig it up and that?”.⁵

If you do go looking for the theme of agrarian labour in the biblical creation narratives, it turns up in the second creation story, and not in Genesis 1 at all. The second story begins in Gen. 2:4 where we return to the time *before* plants and humans were made. The second story inverts the human-centred perspective of Genesis 1 by saying that ‘there was no human to work the land’. Not only does this form of words place the needs of the land before those of the human, there seems to be a deliberate irony in the Hebrew text since the word for ‘work’ (*abad*) is otherwise most commonly translated as ‘serve’, in the sense of ‘work for’. A more pointed translation would be: ‘there was no human to serve the land’. The same vocabulary is used in Gen. 2:15 where it says that ‘Yahweh Elohim took the human and put him in the Garden of Eden to serve it and to protect it’, effectively reversing the vocation to rule and to subdue the earth in Genesis 1:28.⁶

The irony is heightened in Genesis 2:7 where the human is created out of the earth: ‘And Yahweh Elohim formed the human (*adam*) from the dust of the land (*adamah*) and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life’. It’s not just that there is a wordplay here between *adam* and *adamah*, but the narrative quite specifically says the human is derived from soil. Both humans and animals are made from the earth (2:7, 19), and in this sense, we all belong to the same lineage system – the ‘generations of the earth’

⁵ Kate Grenville, *The Secret River* (Melbourne: Text, 2005), p.168.

⁶ See Mark G. Brett, ‘Earthing the Human in Genesis 1-3’ in N. Habel and S. Wurst (eds), *The Earth Story in Genesis* (Sheffield: Sheffield University Press, 2000), pp.73-86.

(2:4) – or ‘earth community’. From dust we come, and to the dust we will return, as Gen. 3:19 puts it.

Why on earth, you may well be asking, would the Bible have two creation stories, side by side, with quite contrary perspectives on the relationship between humans and the rest of creation? The first point to make is that they are not as contradictory as they appear. Even in the context of Genesis 1, humans and animals were to be vegetarian in vs.29-30, and this expectation must qualify any idea of ‘subduing the earth’ that might be implied in v.28. The vegetarian ideal is relinquished only after the flood, but there the command to Noah is shortened: ‘be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth’, God says in Gen. 9:1. Notice that the licence to ‘subdue’ the earth is not repeated.⁷

We also need to note that this shortened form of the command – to ‘be fruitful and multiply’ – was already addressed to the sea monsters, birds and animals in Genesis 1:22 and 24. We must therefore infer that if these other creatures are to fulfill their vocation from God, then the humans will need to give them some space. Part of the human vocation is to *allow* the other species to ‘be fruitful and multiply’. There is never any suggestion in the Bible that human dominion might lead to the *extinction* of other species; on the contrary, there are a number of prophetic texts that see the death of other animals as evidence of human wrongdoing. And certainly Noah is commanded to save every species on earth, not just the species that would be most useful for human agriculture.

After the flood, Genesis recognizes that non-human creatures will be killed for food, but it is *also* recognized that humans have an evil streak – mentioned in Genesis 8:21 – so it becomes necessary for God to state the conditions for *restraining*, rather than

⁷ See Anne Gardner, ‘Ecojustice: A Study of Genesis 6.11-13’ in N. Habel and S. Wurst (eds), *The Earth Story in Genesis*, pp.117-29.

enabling, violence. Humans may now eat animals, but only on condition that their blood is drained (9:3-6) – probably as a reminder that this was not the original ideal.⁸ Blood is here the symbol of both human and animal life, and it has to be treated with absolute respect. The text states that humans and animals share the same blood which gives ‘life’, *nephesh* in Genesis 9:4, a word which is elsewhere often translated as ‘soul’.

Blood, however, is not the only symbol of life that we humans share with animals. We also share a ‘spirit’ that generates life. As we saw in Genesis 2, the man is created from the dust of the ground and the ‘spirit of life’. The species who go into the ark with Noah are referred to as ‘all flesh in which there was the breath (*ruach*) of life’ (Gen. 7:15, cf. 6:17). In the larger context of Genesis, animals are therefore seen as sharing in the same spirit (*ruach*) that human beings are given. This perspective is actually much closer to traditional Aboriginal spirituality than it is to modernist Christianity.

So if we look closely at the Israelite symbols of life, especially blood and spirit, there is no sharp distinction between the species. Genesis 9 is therefore able to present a framework for mutual responsibility that includes us all, and beyond that, God makes a covenant with ‘every living creature’, and with ‘all flesh’ (vs. 8-17). There is just *one* covenant in Genesis 9, summarized as an eternal covenant with ‘the earth’. It is this covenant which provides the foundation of eco-justice in Christian faith. While at times we may make use of the many other concepts of justice circulating in public debate, it is this covenant which provides the starting point – the motivation – for ecological faith and practice.

⁸ Umberto Cassuto, *Commentary on the Book of Genesis. Vol. 1 From Adam to Noah, Genesis 1–6.8* (Jerusalem: Magnes, [1944] 1961), pp.58-59.

Having understood that our solidarity with all creatures is founded on this first covenant, we *also* need to reflect on the implications of this being a covenant of divine restraint. God promises not to devastate the world again, not to intervene in the workings of creation, even when the scale of violence on the earth would *warrant* intervention. Creation is now ordered by a covenant of divine self-limitation.⁹ God establishes the laws and relative independence of nature, rather than intervene randomly or capriciously, as we see in creation myths from ancient Mesopotamia.

The ordering of creation is made even more explicit in the Book of Job, where God speaks out of a whirlwind in chs.38-41 to ask – in a series of rhetorical questions – whether mere mortals could establish the statutes and laws of creation (Job 38:12,33); to ask whether even the uniquely righteous Job has a grasp on the workings of justice in creation (Job 40:8). Job 41 then provides a kind of hymn to a sea-monster, which no human could hope to subdue (v.9), making clear that there are definite limits to any human dominion over creation.

But now we run up against a problem. If God has covenanted with the earth not to bring judgement against the created order, despite the scale of violence, and the human powers to care for the earth are *also* limited, how are we to understand the persistence of evil in the world? And what kind of redemption is possible?

Christian faith has a number of answers to this question, but here I just want to focus on the answers embodied in the Eucharist – what Baptists usually call “Communion”. All the ancient Eucharistic liturgies began with thanksgiving for creation,

⁹ See John Polkinghorne (ed.), *The Work of Love: Creation as Kenosis* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2001).

a tradition derived from the Jewish Passover. When we lift up the bread, this is a lifting up to God of the whole creation – in offering and thanksgiving. When we share the wine, and remember the vulnerable Christ, we join in Communion with the whole of the vulnerable earth community – whose blood we share.

As we celebrate the resurrected Christ, we join in the unity of the Holy Spirit, who over the “bent world broods with warm breast and bright wings”, as Hopkins put it. In Communion we participate, here and now, in the redemption of the earth. We are sharing in the source of all life, the Spirit (the *ruach*), who both creates and redeems all of creation. The Communion shapes our spiritual imagination to see the unity of creation in Christ, “gathering up all things in him”, as Ephesians 1 puts it, “all things in heaven and things on earth”.

If we are really embedded in this narrative, then as one theologian has recently put it, “wilfully pumping more and more carbon dioxide into the atmosphere, with all its known effects on the living systems of our planet, cannot but be seen as a denial of Christ”. It is a denial of what we celebrate when we take part in Communion.¹⁰

As we turn now to join in this Eucharistic memorial and celebration, let us see this as the story which shapes other stories which are no less sacramental. Stories of solidarity and hospitality to all creatures who share Noah’s covenant, as well as cosmic redemption in Christ. Next Sunday we will look at the extraordinary discipleship of St Francis of Assisi, who embodied this theology in all of his life, but the last word today comes from pope John Paul II’s final encyclical on the Eucharist:

¹⁰ Dennis Edwards, ‘Celebrating Eucharist in a Time of Global Climate Change’ *Pacifica* 1/19 (2006), p.13.

The varied celebrations of the Eucharist have given me a powerful experience of its universal, so to speak, cosmic character. Yes cosmic. Because even when it is celebrated on the humble altar of a country church, the Eucharist is always in some way celebrated *on the altar of the world*. It unites heaven and earth. It embraces and permeates all of creation.