

It has been calculated that if everyone in the world were to consume natural resources and generate carbon dioxide at the rate we do in the UK we would need three planets to support us.

The Pope on the 1<sup>st</sup> January this year said:

*Humanity, if it truly desires peace, must be increasingly conscious of the links between natural ecology and human ecology. Experience shows that disregard for the environment always harms human co-existence and vice versa.*

I do not propose to address the technical issues about climate change, its causes, effects or ways of reducing it. Neither am I going to comment on Kyoto and the Stern Report. Climate change is a moral and ethical issue and I subscribe to the three key principles of sustainability, social justice and stewardship. What I want to do is look at the theology of the relationship between human beings and the planet.

### **What is our place in the world?**

Psalm 8 gives us a picture of the hierarchy of creation. Note that we 'sons (and daughters) of Adam' or human beings are higher than the earth and the animals but lower than the heavens and the angels. Note too that everything is bounded by God. 'O Lord, our Sovereign, how majestic is your name in all the earth' (Verse 9). The God we are dealing with here is Trinity, a community of Father, Son and Holy Spirit'. In the first Genesis account God says, 'Let us make Man in our own image' (Gen 1.26). The prologue of John's Gospel introduces us to the idea of *logos*, the Word, who is both God and with God. All things come into existence through him (the *logos*). *Logos* has been identified with male objectivity and rationality. Biblical commentators however tell us that the prologue of John's Gospel was adapted from a pagan hymn in praise of *sophia* or wisdom which is female. Men and women together in partnership constitute true humanity made in the image of God.

God creates us in God's own image because God wants to share God's glory with us. We are called to be partners and co-creators with God in an 'ecological mission'. We are of the earth and from the earth. There is an imaginative interplay between the Hebrew word for 'man', *adam* and the stuff from which we are formed *adamah*, translated 'ground' or 'earth'. Yet God breathes into us and graciously gives us 'dominion'. The word 'dominion' suggests that human beings are God's representatives on earth, much as the Old Testament king, was God's representative for Israel. 'Dominion' has nothing to do with exploitation but rather with leadership in caring. Ours is a representative 'priestly' role for all the inhabitants of the planet. George Herbert writes:

Of all the creatures both in sea and land  
Only to Man thou has made known thy ways  
And put the pen alone into his hand  
And made him secretary of thy praise  
Man is the world's high priest: he doth present  
The sacrifice for all:

### **A symbiotic creation**

Since creation comes out of the mind and heart of a Trinitarian God and is the produce of *logos* and *sophia*, all existence is relational, interconnected and symbiotic. Human beings are made for communion with each other, with the angels, with the earth and with God. In Southern Africa this spirit of interconnectedness is encapsulated in the word *ubuntu*. *Ubuntu* is a concept of respect for the earth and for one another. The land is held to be sacred, belonging to the spirits of the past, and therefore cannot be owned by individuals. You do not kill or steal because it will bring misfortune on your family; instead you show other people kindness, courtesy, hospitality and share what you have. The philosophy is summed up in the sentence 'I am because we are; and since we are, therefore I am.' - so unlike the Western individualism of Descartes who said 'I think, therefore I am'.

This connectedness is found in Hebrew cosmology. The Hebrews believed the earth stood on two pillars: a pillar of justice and a pillar of righteousness (Ps.97.2). If a crack appeared in either due to human violation, the ecological system would become unbalanced (Ps.82). If a serious rupture occurred, then the primal chaotic waters, which in Hebrew mythology were held back by the dome of the heavens and fabric of the earth, would pour in to destroy all life. This is what happened in the flood.

More recently James Lovelock has introduced us to the idea of Gaia. Gaia is the thin spherical shell of land and water between the incandescent interior of the Earth and the upper atmosphere surrounding it. It is a conditioning system which regulates the climate and the chemistry of the planet in order to support life in some form or another. At one level we can think of Gaia as a mechanistic climate control system like the one in your car. Lovelock likens it more to a camel which regulates its own body temperature so that during the day it is comfortable at 40 degrees centigrade and night shifts its temperature down to a more suitable 34 degrees. In his popular book *The revenge of Gaia* he dares to suggest that if we fail to take care of the earth, the earth will surely take care of itself by making us no longer welcome. Our position is priestly but

precarious.

### **Paradise lost**

There is a rabbinic comment that when God finished creating God showed Adam all the glories of nature. 'Behold the beauty of this world', God said. 'I am handing it over to you. Be careful that you do not damage it, for if you do, there will be no one left to mend it.' The traditional doctrine of the fall runs like this. Humankind – male and female (Adam), in eating from the tree of knowledge, changed the dynamics of their relationship with the planet. They ceased to be priests of creation in their desire to 'become like one of us' – that is like God and the angels. They are driven from paradise. Everything goes pear-shaped. The partnership between male and female is fractured and dissolves into patriarchy. A 'blame culture' is created as Adam accuses Eve who in turn blames the serpent. The partnership of equals between women and men becomes distorted. Like the earth, women are henceforth subdued, exploited and raped. Woman becomes the symbolic terrain on which the struggle for resources is acted out. The pilgrimage to end the subjection and exploitation of women, the liberation of the female within men and women and the healing of the planet are all part of the same agenda.

The disturbed balance between humanity and the earth is further violated in the story of Cain and Abel. We now find ourselves in a world of inequalities. Why does God act so unfairly in choosing Abel's gift and not Cain's? If you do some background work you will discover the Hebrew word for Cain means "bring forth". Cain, the firstborn son, inherited a land which brought forth plentifully. The Hebrew for Abel means 'nothing' or 'vapour'. These brothers did not start equal. Cain had everything; Abel had nothing and was forced to become a wandering nomad. When they brought their gifts God took Abel's side. This provoked explosive anger in Cain who became a dangerous animal and attacked and killed his brother. Blood now stains the earth so that Cain is driven from the land to become a fugitive. The French anthropologist Rene Girard argues that violence had its beginning in Cain. Cain was not only the first murderer; he founded cities to hide in and launched a culture of destruction. This thread of murder and violence keeps imitating itself polluting the earth. It is still with us.

Psalm 8 places the 'sons of Adam' below the 'elohim' a reference to divine beings or angels. Pollution affects these 'sons of divine beings' who lust after the 'daughters of Adam'. The spiritual boundary between the heavenly and earthly orders is now violated producing human divinities, the Nephilim (Gen.6). God looks upon the earth and is overcome with grief (Gen. 6.6) as the pillars of the earth, justice and righteousness, crack and the primal tsunami waters of chaos

pour in.

### **Apocalypse then and now**

In a life-boat operation God saves a remnant giving humanity. However there is pessimism now. The first act of creation is full of God's sabbatical celebration. In this second act we see God's resignation. Humanity will not change. It is God who changes. God yields to the realization that man's mind is twisted. The divine charge in this post-diluvian era has a bitter double meaning and becomes a 'de-creation' story reversing the very aims God had in mind. 'Fear and dread of you shall rest on every animal of the earth, on every bird of the air...every moving thing that lives shall be food for you' (Gen.9.2f). This 'fear and dread' extends beyond the animals to the realms of human affairs. Noah becomes blind drunk. There is a sexual component here as in the Eden story, except now it is sordid not beautiful. In a drunken paralytic state he lies exposing himself and when his youngest son, Ham, covers him he is cursed by his father. Not only has humanity been driven from Paradise, humanity continues the process of killing and abusing the produce of the earth so much so that we may eventually be driven from the planet.

Since 9/11 apocalyptic storm clouds have rolled over the horizons of the rich West. Duncan Forester, reflecting on that event in his book 'Apocalypse Now', notices how 'Apocalyptic theology' now resonates with events. We have entered a new age of violence. Humanity is re-living the story of Adam and Eve, Cane and Abel, the Nephilim, the drugged condition of Noah. The four horseman of the apocalypse are galloping across our planet leaving trails of destruction in their wake. The white horse of imperialism - some would say American globalisation; the fiery red horse of military invasion and terrorist atrocity; the black horse of plague famine and natural disaster and finally the pale horse of death - death from the carbon emissions which blot out the sun.

The earth shall be utterly laid waste and utterly despoiled;  
for the Lord has spoken this word.

The earth dries up and withers...

The earth lies polluted under its inhabitants;  
for they have transgressed laws,  
violated statutes, broken the everlasting covenant.

Therefore a curse devours the earth and its inhabitants suffer for their guilt. (Isaiah 14.3f)

### **From apocalypse to Genesis**

Those of you who have visited the Sistine chapel will see two visions of the future. Over the altar is Michelangelo's terrifying apocalyptic picture of the last judgment. Above on the ceiling are nine great panels depicting the Genesis story from the creator God to the drunkenness of Noah. It was a moment of illumination when I learnt that Michelangelo Bonerotti did not begin by painting God and then moving on through the stages of creation to the deluge. He started with Noah's drunkenness and worked backwards. His was not a story of a fall downwards but of a fall upwards into God.

Matthew Fox gives us the paradigm of 'Original Blessing' to set alongside of the doctrine of fall. The God of covenant is a God of blessing. Human beings are sinful and violent but flashes of our original innocence can break out and surprise us. The original image of God in us has not been entirely obliterated. Sometimes original blessing and innocence can blossom and flourish when God touches a life. We have to think of Francesco Bernadone.

Let everything you have made be a song of praise to you,  
Above all, His Excellency the Sun (our brother);  
Through him you flood our days with light.

Some eco-feminist theories attempt to recover relational thinking by taking us back to a lost paradise of matriarchy. *Sophia* was the primal depth or womb from which creation was drawn to be shaped by *logos*. Does *sophia* have priority over *logos* or vice-versa?

Joy Cowley reflects:

Suppose we're not fallen people at all  
But people on the way up;  
Not caterpillars that once were butterflies,  
But actually the other way round.

Clare Amos suggests the Eden story is not so much about 'fall' as about education. Can Genesis 3 be read as an allegory of the maturing of human beings? Isn't our quest for knowledge and our gradual desire to make own decisions characteristic of the way human children gradually find autonomy and independence from their parents? Adam and Eve gain knowledge through 'eating the apple' while the serpent, as in Indian culture becomes the one who enables wisdom. Humankind needs to grow up and come of age, freed from dependence on a parental divinity. Of course there are consequences for as we grow and mature we learn of our mortality. This shadow dimension however gets woven into the process of human growth and evolution.

## **A number of futures**

We therefore have a number of futures. There is first the very pessimistic one of the four horsemen pouring out destruction and death. Michelangelo Bonerotti's is the climax of this. It is a hopeful picture for evangelical Christians because they will be lifted out before the final holocaust. George Bush and some US politicians seem determined to push the world in this direction.

Second there is the determinist view of Thomas Hardy who sees nature as blind yet having a life purpose of its own which uses and by-passes human beings.

Let me enjoy the earth no less  
Because the all-enacting might  
That fashioned forth its loveliness  
Had other aims than my delight.  
And some day hence, towards Paradise  
And all its blest – if such there be –  
I will lift glad, afar off eyes,  
Though it contain no place for me.

Third there is the future offered by Lovelock, not unlike Hardy's. He argues that human beings have become a planetary disease so Gaia will destroy us like an invading infection. This is less deterministic since it implies we may still be able to alter this outcome. But is Lovelock claiming too much for Gaia? Gaia is certainly a complex organic system; a 'what' but he also regards Gaia as a 'who'. In giving it the conscious *logos* purpose of setting conditions for life, he turns Gaia into a Goddess.

Fourth there is the optimistic caterpillar to butterfly picture of human beings on the way up of the survival of original blessing. Does this mean that the planet is but a staging post on the way? The fact that exploitation keeps reappearing in different forms throughout history suggests that this may be an optimistic dream without reality.

### **What about God?**

We have quoted one of the grim texts from the prophet Isaiah. Here is one of his hopeful passages.

The wilderness and the dry land shall be glad  
the desert shall rejoice and blossom;  
like the crocus.

Then the eyes of the blind will be opened and the ears of the deaf unstopped.

For waters shall break forth in the wilderness and streams in the desert. (Isaiah 35)

He argues that disaster came because the people of God made a covenant with death (Isaiah 28.15). God nevertheless remembers his covenant and like a woman in childbirth will deliver a new creation.

For the mountains may depart

And the hills be removed,

But my steadfast love shall not depart from you,

And my covenant of peace shall not be removed,

Says the Lord, who has compassion on you (Isaiah 54.10)

Isaiah's ground for hope is God's covenant with Noah though it is more of a promise than a covenant.

When I bring the clouds over the earth and the bow is seen in the clouds, I will remember my covenant which is between me and you and every living creature of all flesh; and the waters shall never again become a flood to destroy all flesh (Gen.9.14-15).

Noah seeing a rainbow sign above the desolate landscape had a glimpse into the heart of God. The Hebrew word *qesheth*, 'bow of war', occurs many times in the Old Testament but it is used only here and in Ezekiel 1, 28 to describe the 'rainbow'. This sign suggests that God will never again loose his bow against the world and reduce it to chaos. But the war bow now points upwards, as it were, into the being of God. God risks himself for the sake of the planet. The pain of all things has been written in the mind of God. The cross of Christ existed in the heart of God long before it was planted on Golgotha's hill. A cosmic covenant has been forged by God in Christ who is 'the image of the unseen God and the firstborn of all creation'. Jesus Christ is the new Adam and we like him have to pass through death to enter life.

George Matheson (1842-1906) best remembered for his evocative hymn 'O love that wilt not let me go', was a parish minister whose blindness drove him at times to near despair. His experience of loneliness and suffering forced him with the inner eyes of faith to meditate upon the sufferings of Christ and the sacrificial power of the cross. In his blindness he came to see that Christ slain from the foundation of the world was the central animating principle of the universe. From water and blood of Christ comes ecological life. It turns seeds into flowers, darkness into light. In the storm clouds of wind and rain, the rainbow glories of grace are displayed. There is an evolutionary process at work in the ecological mechanisms of the world fed by sacrifice and

death producing a 'fall upwards'. Unlike the mournful message of Thomas Hardy, Matheson believed the universe to be impregnated with hope.

He is only reiterating the eschatological hope of Paul who speaks of the planet groaning in labour pains waiting to be set free. We, as God's partners in and with creation, are also waiting for our own redemption and transformation. The implication is that the planet is bound to us as we are to the planet because both are held together in the arms of God.

I have had a life-long dream of going whale watching. This became possible when Christine and I visited New Zealand in the autumn. When I saw my first sperm whale surface, lying there basking, breathing, spurting jets of water and air, I was awestruck. We had been waiting for so long and had almost reconciled ourselves to pointless journey far out beyond the continental shelf bordering Kaikoura on the East coast. I had not realised how long a whale lies on the surface, so vulnerable and exposed. I found tears running down my face as we drew closer to this wonderful creature. These are our distant cousins from the deep who care for their young, talk with each other and may somehow enshrine within themselves the self consciousness of the planet. Do they reflect the divine image more than we human beings who hunt and kill them to extinction? For some ten minutes it lay their breathing before heaving its great body over to plunge into the depth, waving us a fond farewell with its great fluke.

It was one of those special illuminating moments when profound interaction takes place. I knew then that we not only live in the planet but that the planet lives in us. It is not that God is in all things but that all things are in God. It is not only the planet which is changing, but we too are being changed as we are being brought to the liminal edge of a New Pentecost. Although shaped from the earth and a little less than angels in Christ we have the potential to become true priests and partners with the planet. 'Beloved, we are God's children now; what we will be has not yet been revealed. What we do know is this: when he is revealed, we will be like him, for we will see him as he is.' (1 John 3.2f).