

THE RAINBOW COVENANT

Those of you who have visited the Sistine chapel will see over the altar Michelangelo's terrifying picture of the last judgment and above on the ceiling nine great panels depict the Genesis story from the creator God to the drunkenness of Noah. It was a moment of illumination when I learnt that Michelangelo Bonerotti 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 fall downwards but of recapitulation; of fall-upwards. The Roman Catholic theologian Anne Primavesi wrote a book with the title from Apocalypse to Genesis. Christianity usually looks back to the day of creation and onward to the day of Judgment. She reverses the direction. Apocalypse is now, the future can be Genesis. Certainly the four horsemen of the apocalypse gallop across the 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.

Apocalypse now

Since 9/11 storm clouds have rolled over the horizons of the rich West. The Bible prelude to the flood tells how God looked at the earth and was overcome with grief (Gen. 6.6). The words 'the earth was corrupt in God's sight and full of violence' (v.11) now toll like a funeral bell. We have entered a new age of violence. Philip Jenkins in his chilling book The Next Christendom, suggests that the very expansion of Christianity and Islam across countries and within countries will precipitate more fanatical religious conflicts, creating more ecological disasters. The ever growing depletion of natural resources will certainly fuel such conflicts. You cannot dissociate ecological issues, as the Prime Minister seeks to do, from the war in Iraq. Jenkins presents us with a bleak future as Muslims and Christians blunder into new conflicts, and he asks us to imagine what it would be like to live in the world of the thirteenth century where soldiers instead of carrying swords and shields are armed with nuclear warheads and anthrax. Jonathan Sacks somberly comments:

The tensions that September 11 exposed have not diminished. The Middle East is at boiling point. Europe has been simmering with religious and ethnic conflict. There has been violence in India, Pakistan, Kashmir. It would be hard to identify any factor that has made prospects for peace anywhere brighter now than they were a year ago. Is there a key to conflict resolution? Is there anything that has power to generate hope in regions of despair?

Where does this violence come from? 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, violence and the rape of our planet now runs through the story of humanity, for violence imitates itself and pollutes the earth.

The warbow and the rainbow

Noah saw the rainbow sign above the desolate landscape knew that something was being revealed in 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 heart of God. God risks himself for the sake of the world. The pain of all things is written on the heart of God so much so that he 'comes down' (Gen.11.5) into his violent creation and embraces us. The cross existed in the heart of God before it was planted on Golgotha's hill.

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 comes ecological life. It turns seeds into flowers, darkness into light. In the storm clouds, 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. All humanity will some day be freed from abnegation and self-love.

Noah's 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).

Partnership in God and with God is expressed in the Bible through covenant. A covenant is a contractual arrangement whereby two or more partners bind themselves to each other for their mutual benefit. A covenant is embracing, open ended. It is not a utilitarian legal contract. Through covenant we are called to be partners and co-creators with God, giving birth, renewing and protecting his world with its amazing diversity of life-forms. Human existence is about being in a covenant relationship with God for the world.

God promises in this covenant to both preserve and save all the inhabitants of the planet from the 'watery chaos of destruction'. The rainbow is a sign that all are included as partners in God's redemptive activity since covenant is embedded in the very act of creation with which the Bible begins.

So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them. God blessed them and said to them, 'Be fruitful and increase in number; fill the earth and subdue it' (Gen.1.27-28).

Made in God's image, all women and men become partners with God in an 'ecological mission'. Carol Meyers points to the imaginative interplay between the Hebrew word for 'man', adam (which is both male and female), and the stuff from which humankind is formed adamah, usually translated 'ground' or 'earth'. It is the fusion of earth and breath which creates all life. It has been suggested that if Adam is the founding father of gardening then Noah is surely the founding father of wildlife conservation (Gen.9.12).

The entire cosmos, so the Hebrews believed, stood on two pillars: a pillar of justice and a pillar of righteousness (Ps.97.2). If a crack appeared in either, 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 (Gen.7.11). God now seeks to restore justice and righteousness to the ecosystem and instructs us to assist him in this priestly task. The Church's mission is ecological and symbiotic. That is, we as God's co-creators must learn how to relate to each other and to our environment so that the subject-object categories which we currently use to analyze, assess and judge, are transcended by relational categories. This is what one might expect if we are truly made in the image of the God who is Trinity.

Separation and integration

The philosophical separation of 'subject' and 'object', 'us' and 'them', the material and the spiritual, the real and the ideal following on from the Enlightenment, has had a profound effect on the way in which Western science has understood the natural physical world. Our culture and even our understanding of Christianity has is saturated with materialism, abstraction and individualism. Although scientific and technological progress is obviously beneficial for humankind there are negative consequences both socially and environmentally. We may have gained personal independence but have lost our sense of mutual inter-dependence. The physical earth and even our bodies have become 'objects' rather than sacramental vehicles of divine spirit and life. We value 'things' more than people.

Unlike those of us who drive around in air-conditioned cars, the poor of Asia and Africa habitually go barefoot and expose their bodies to the sun and rain. They therefore have a much more integrated understanding of themselves as physical and spiritual beings. They are constantly in touch with the plants, animal, the earth, mountains, air, water, wind and fire. They feel a relationship with creation which we, as city dwellers in Britain have largely lost but still instinctively long for. It is therefore the poor and the marginalized, rather than the rich who recognize the importance of inter-connectedness?

But there are gender issues at work here. In the first Genesis account Adam is both male and female. God who is beyond gender replicates a relational gender category in persons. In addition within the creation story we recognize hierarchy. We in the rich West now find the idea of hierarchy politically distasteful. The problem however is not with hierarchy but with exploitation. Hierarchy in the opening chapters of Genesis quickly dissolves into patriarchy. Women becomes less than men. Woman, like the earth, can be subdued and raped. They become the symbolic terrain on which the struggle for resources is acted out. Planet earth like woman herself is a living relational organism. The pilgrimage to end the 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 Bible's insistence that all existence is relational provides a radical critique of economic globalization which assumes humanity to be made up of separate competing autonomous individuals. The competitive struggle to maximize returns for the few spells ruin for the many. This leads Peter Heslam in the book Globalization and the Good to argue for a new kind of global capitalism in which the fortunes of human and social capital take priority over the maximization of financial returns.

Noah's ecological calling

'Operation Noah' is to be launched at Coventry Cathedral on 9th October 2004. I do not have details but understand it to be calling people in Britain to adopt a climate covenant

committing us to petition the government to lead in international negotiations and inviting us to take action personally to reduce greenhouse gas emissions. Others I hope today will give us more details, I want to stay with the theology.

When God established his covenant with Noah and gave the missionary instruction, ‘Go forth from the ark...Bring forth with you every living thing that is with you’(Gen.8.16). This is followed by a command to work with the Creator in renewing of the face of the earth:

Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth (Gen.9.1).

You shall not eat flesh with its life...Whoever sheds the blood of man, by man shall his blood be shed; for God made man in his own image Gen.9.4-6).

The first mandate (Gen.9.1) transports us back to the beginning of Genesis and argues for a re-population of the earth. Growth is implicit in the mandates given to Adam and Noah. Without growth there is stagnation and death. Whilst this mandate is biological and geographical, it does by no means exclude the social and religious dimensions of being human in community. It raises the issue of how we live together on an increasingly crowded planet.

Yet God places limits on growth. In the second mandate (Gen.9.4-6) there is a prohibition against taking life. The growth of a nation, faith or system is considered legitimate, under this universal covenant, only in as far as it respects the life of other nations, faiths or systems and in addition, exercises a respectful stewardship of the planet and all its inhabitants. This has implications for dialogue, development and justice since justice, more than ever before, must be justice for the planet as well as for humanity.

These two mandates belong together for there can be no genuine growth without respect for one another and no adequate understanding of development if thereby we deny self-determination to others. The second mandate puts limits on the first by suggesting that it is not God’s purpose that any one people should grow geographically and economically at the expense of another. God wants to give salvation, in the form of ‘living space’, to all people. But it is not unlimited space but space constrained by the shape and disappearing resources of the planet.

Rainbow nations

In Southern Africa the spirit of these mandates is encapsulated in the concept of ubuntu. Community rather than individualism lies at the heart of this idea which is holistic and symbiotic excluding all Western disconnectedness. Ubuntu is a rich ‘soul’ 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 Kenyan born theologian John Mbiti sums up this idea:

Only in terms of other people does the individual become conscious of his own being, his duties, his privileges and responsibilities towards himself and towards other people...The individual can only say ‘I am because we are; and since we are, therefore I am.’

This way of thinking about things reminds us as Desmond Tutu explains that ‘When I dehumanize you I inexorably dehumanize myself.’

In other parts of the world this same ideas is expressed in the idea of hospitality. In 1987 when visiting Sri Lanka I was offered hospitality by two teenage lads in a village on the edge of an ecological wilderness. Like many young people, they had little money and no prospects. The drift into delinquency was easy. Many joined terrorist bands to become boy soldiers in Sri Lanka’s brutal civil war. These two had recently built a hut for themselves because they had fallen out with their parents. Neither were Christians. The visit of a lone white Englishman was a novelty in this dangerous place. Hospitality was offered; I did not feel I could refuse.

We sat on the ground in the small mud hut. There was no furniture, only boxes, rolled up blankets and a transistor radio without batteries. It was dark outside, the only sounds were noises from the forest and the ceaseless barking of dogs. My journal continues:

The three of us sit on the hard floor while Chandrasa cooks rice and fish on a gas burner. The oil lamp fills the space with acrid smoke; at least it keeps the mosquitoes away. It is hot, sweaty and stuffy. There is only one plate. Chandrasa and Piyatilika watch me while I eat. There is pride on their faces. We are not able to speak one another’s language. Piyatilika knows one English word; ‘happy’. He uses it again and again as a question. I shake my head in that strange Asian style which indicates ‘yes’. They smile back. When I asked them they nod even more enthusiastically. It was only later that I discovered that they had not eaten that day but had given all their food to me.

Harvest festival

We are in the season of Harvest Festivals, which amongst other things is a liturgical exercise in ‘greening our churches’. In rural areas it is a tradition (something like fox hunting?) evoking and promoting a sense of community which is fast disappearing. In suburban Churches it enacts, for urban people, a nostalgic myth of a rural ideal. It can become a flower festival with a collection for some the third world. In the inner cities all the products of a harvest festival are bought from the local shop or supermarket and often reflect the multi-cultural make up of the congregation. It is strange that we all belt out to the tops of our voices, ‘We plough the field and scatter’ when nearly all of us have never done so. We should instead be singing Fred Pratt Green’s admirable hymn ‘God in his love has lent us this planet’ The final verse admirably sums up the task before us..

Earth is the Lord’s: it is ours to enjoy it,
Ours, as his stewards, to farm and defend.
From its pollution, misuse and destruction,
Good Lord, delivers us, world without end!