

RELIGION, SCIENCE AND THE ENVIRONMENT 2007: SYMPOSIUM VII

The Arctic: Mirror of Life

RIGHTEOUSNESS

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During this Symposium we have been hearing about the complex web of life on earth, about relationships and stability, and about the impact of human activity on this system. We have also heard about pollutants and contamination, about depletion and extinction, about once fertile places that can no longer support life - the result of that human impact.

Our Symposium asks why: why in the sense of what was wrong with the science, or the technology, or the economics, or the politics; and why in the sense of what was in the minds and hearts of the people who allowed such things to happen, and to go on happening.

It is nearly 50 years since Rachel Carson began to write her book *Silent Spring* (1958-62, published 1963), which had such far reaching effects and alerted the wider public to what was happening. The preface was entitled 'A Fable for Tomorrow', and in it she described the sickness and death caused by pollution in a fictional small town in America. The birds had gone; young animals did not survive; and there were no fish in the rivers. 'No witchcraft' she wrote, 'no enemy action had silenced the rebirth of life in this stricken world; the people had done it to themselves...' She concluded that the imagined tragedy could easily become the stark reality of the future. That was written nearly 50 years ago.

As I listen to talk of the web of life and its destruction, I am struck by the extraordinary similarity between this and the words of the prophets in the Bible. They had an insight we cannot explain into the working of the natural world and the effect of human activity and human choices; and they knew what influenced those choices. This insight is called revelation. The prophets were not scientists in any modern sense of that word, but they knew by revelation what scientists also know now: that the creation is an intricate web of life, and that the action of human beings can destroy it.

The prophets, poets and storytellers of ancient Israel lived in a pre-philosophical culture but they had sophisticated views about the creation and the role of human beings. These were expressed in stories and images, and in patterns of words. The story of Adam and Eve, the forbidden fruit and the talking snake is well known, but the ideas, and the subtle words used to express them, are less clear when they pass into another language and another culture.

The storytellers knew that our attitude to the creation is shaped by the way we speak about it. If we speak only in the language of politics or economics, that will shape our attitude. This is why we listen to many different languages about the environment, and learn from each other about the world views they represent. If we have only a few words to choose from, we limit what we can express and in the end, how we can think. George Orwell, an English writer who died in 1950, wrote a book entitled *1984* about a frightening future world in which thought was controlled by reducing the words available for use. He imagined a time when only one way of thinking was allowed, and the language was altered to make sure that words for other ideas were removed. Other ways of thinking became unintelligible because nobody could understand the words. Some of these words were found in strange old books, but so nobody could think the thoughts because they did not know the words (appendix to *1984*).

The Bible is full of words that describe the creation as a web of life, the role of human beings in guarding and preserving it, and why things went wrong. The story says that Adam - the name just means a human being - was given dominion over the other creatures, and this dominion was first shown when he gave each living creature its name. In other words, Adam decided how people should talk and think about animals. He shaped the way of thinking and thus he ruled them. In the same way, the Bible writers said that God had bound all creation into one system. This was how people talked about it, and thought about it, and so this was how they lived. Human society and all the natural world belonged together. Everything had its place and its boundary. The stars were fixed in their courses, and the LORD had set boundaries for the sea. 'Thus far shall you come and no further' (Job 38.11.31; Psalm 148.6). There were boundaries for light and darkness (Job 26.10), and limits to human life and action (Job 14.5). These bonds of creation formed the great covenant - the word means binding together - and as long as the bonds of the covenant remained in place, people could live in peace and prosperity.

The bonds were called the covenant of peace, or the covenant of life and peace (Numbers 25.12; Malachi 2.5). Peace did not mean simply ‘absence of conflict’. The Hebrew word *shalom* implies far more: rest, balance, harmony and completion - we might nowadays say ‘a sustainable state.’ The story of the creation in the Bible says this was achieved when everything was very good and at rest. There is no mention of maximum production. Resting was an essential part of the system; enough was enough.

The bonds and boundaries maintained everything as the Creator intended it to be, and human beings had to live in such a way that the covenant was not broken. The storyteller said that Adam was put in the Garden of Eden *to serve it and to preserve it* (Genesis 2.15). The English versions say something like ‘to till it and to keep it’ but this does not make clear what Adam had to do: he had to be the Servant and Guardian of the creation, not just a gardener.

The Servants of the LORD had to maintain the covenant of peace. When it was threatened or damaged, they had to do whatever was necessary to restore it. And here we come to the word that forms the title of this talk; **righteousness**, *ts^edaqah*. Righteousness describes both the action needed to restore the broken covenant, and also the result of that action. Righteous people had been restored to their intended place in the creation, and they then had to work to restore other parts of the covenant system. Righteousness meant the activity of making righteous, protecting and maintaining the covenant. Those who had been healed had to become healers.

They restored and maintained the covenant by their attitude and their actions. The word ‘righteousness’ often occurs with the word ‘justice’. The Hebrew word here implies choice; what the restorer judges is the right thing to do. Maintaining the covenant was a matter of right choices. The storyteller knew that Adam had been made as the image of God, and so he had to reflect the righteousness and justice of the Creator. [I shall continue to use the customary English translations for these fundamental covenant words] That is why Moses commanded the people of Israel: ‘You shall be holy as the LORD your God is holy’ (Leviticus 19.2).

The people prayed to the LORD that their king would have these qualities: ‘Give the king thy justice and thy righteousness...’ they prayed, because then the creation would flourish, and there would be justice in human society. ‘In his days righteousness shall flourish and there shall be abundant peace’ (Psalm 72.2,

7). When the people of Israel rejoiced in the glory of the creation, they sang: 'The LORD is King... righteousness and justice are the foundation of his throne.' (Psalm 97). Peace, righteousness and justice were all part of the covenant that maintained the creation.

Martin Luther, in his great commentary on Genesis, said that righteousness had been part of Adam's original nature, part of what it meant for the human being to be created in the image of God, but his original righteousness had been lost through sin. In other words, because the human pair had chosen to eat from the forbidden tree, they had broken their intended relationship with God and so had lost their ability to maintain the bonds of the covenant. The two trees in Eden represented two ways of having knowledge about the creation: the permitted tree gave them Wisdom, a way of knowing that joined all things together, and so maintained the covenant. The forbidden tree represented the opposite: knowledge that could be used for good or evil, to maintain the covenant or destroy it. And when destruction was a possibility, it soon became a reality. Adam had lost that part of the image of God that enabled him to hold all things together. When the image was restored in Jesus, St Paul could say: 'In Him all things hold together' (Colossians 1. 17), meaning that the bonds of the covenant were being restored. When Adam and Eve lost this capacity to uphold the covenant, the implication is that the world began to fragment. They had to live in a world of thorns and thistles, dust, pain and death.

Isaiah was called to be a prophet in the 8th century BCE, and he had a vision of the LORD enthroned, and of his glory throughout the creation. He realised that he lived among people who were speaking falsely: 'A people of unclean lips'. We do not know any details. Isaiah learned from his vision that the people who spoke falsely would be punished by losing their ability to perceive the true state of affairs. They would hear, but not hear; see, but not see; learn but not understand; and so not turn around [or be restored] and be healed. 'How long' asked the prophet, 'will this state last?' 'Until cities lie waste without inhabitant, and houses without men, and the land is utterly desolate' (Isaiah 6.9-11).

To change what we see we have to change how we see it. We have to change how we think about it, and how we use our knowledge and skills and the power they give..

Isaiah also looked to the future when the Spirit would be poured out from heaven, and human society and the whole creation would be restored. All the animals would live in peace (Isaiah 11.1-9). Kings and princes would rule with justice and righteousness, and the creation would flourish. Right actions in the desert places would bring fruitful fields, and this would bring peace. 'Justice will dwell in the wilderness and righteousness in the fruitful field, and the effect of righteousness will be peace...' (Isaiah 32. 15-17). 'Doing righteousness' did not just affect human society; it included the whole creation.

Isaiah knew only too well what happened when the covenant was broken through human actions. He had a vision of the whole creation - heaven and earth - mourning and growing weak because of what the people of the earth had done.

The earth lies polluted under its inhabitants,
for they have broken the laws,
gone beyond the boundaries,
broken the covenant with eternity.
Therefore a curse devours the earth,
its people suffer for their guilt (Isaiah 24.5-6).

A polluted earth. This has a curiously contemporary sound to it, and yet this Hebrew word [chanaph] means 'without God' or 'with false gods'. What Isaiah saw in his vision was a land whose people had new gods and new laws. The prophet Jeremiah said the land had been polluted with false gods (Jeremiah 3.2), and when there were false gods and different laws, the creation was distorted and the earth was left desolate (Isaiah 24.1).

Distortion is another significant word. In the Bible it is often translated 'iniquity', and associated with false gods. Martin Luther described the fallen human state as 'curved in upon itself'; he knew that iniquity meant distortion. The second of the ten commandments forbids the worship of idols, because the 'iniquity' will affect the third and fourth generation. A false god at the centre of the system distorts everything for future generations. 'Visiting the iniquity of the fathers upon the children unto the third and fourth generation' (Exodus 20. 5) is how the Bible puts it, but decoded, it bears upon one of our major concerns: what will contemporary values and attitudes towards the creation leave for future generations? What will the new gods leave for the future?

There are many pictures like this in the Bible. When the prophets spoke of the earth staggering under the weight of human sin (Isaiah 24.20), of mountains shaking (Jeremiah 4.24), of stars falling from the sky like fruit from a fig tree (Revelation 6.13), they were seeing how the creation would be when it was no longer restrained and protected by the covenant. There would be an eerie silence, because all the birds had gone (Jeremiah 4.25), the image that inspired Rachel Carson to call her book *Silent Spring*. Scholars call these terrifying visions ‘apocalypses’ which means ‘revelations’.

In crises such as this, they looked for the Righteous One to appear and restore the covenant (Isaiah 24.16). Isaiah described the Servant, the Righteous One who would make many righteous and bear away their iniquities (Isaiah 53.11). Making righteous meant removing the effects of distortion, enabling more people to become restorers. St Peter described Jesus as the Righteous One, the Author of Life (Acts 3.14-15); and Jesus himself taught his disciples not to worry about their material needs: ‘Seek first the Kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things shall be yours as well.’ (Matthew 6.33). When righteousness was restored to the creation, the needs of human beings would be met. Without righteousness, everything was destined to distortion and decay.

The prophets and teachers of Israel knew that the covenant of peace could easily be replaced by another system, and this can be detected in the sound of the Hebrew words. The creation could be very different, because there could be a counter-covenant. The good and the bad could seem very similar. This is a very sophisticated literary form, like echoes in the Hebrew text, but it is important for our theme, so I will give examples of how this works for the covenant terms we have used so far: serve and preserve, which was the role of Adam; and justice, righteousness and peace, the characteristics of the covenant.

The word for Servant is like the word for destroyer [‘abad / ’abad]

The word for preserve is like the another word for destroy [shamar/ shamad]

The word for peace is like the word for retribution [shalom/shillem].

The word for justice is like the word for bloodshed [mishpat/ mishpach]

The word for righteousness is like the word for a cry of despair [ts^edaqah/ ts^e‘aqah]

Isaiah used this wordplay. The LORD, he said, had expected to find justice and righteousness among his own people and instead he had found bloodshed and a cry of despair (Isaiah 5.7). St John, in his vision of the judgement, contrasted

the servants of the LORD and the destroyers of the earth. The Hebrew wordplay was lost in the Greek text of the Book of Revelation, but St John still used the patterns of the ancient Hebrew prophets (Revelation 11.18), and so the first Christians must have known and used them.

The prophets saw both possibilities: Servants preserving the creation with justice leading to righteousness and so maintaining the covenant of that brought life and peace; or destroyers destroying the creation with bloodshed leading to cries of despair, maintaining the counter covenant that brought, in the end, retribution.

St Paul spoke about the covenant and the counter-covenant. In his great Letter to the Romans, he set out the meaning of the Gospel, explaining how it was possible to be made righteous - to have the relationship with God restored. Then he worked out the implication of this, when people had been restored to the state that Adam had lost. 'Since we have been made righteous by faith', he wrote, 'we have peace with God'. Righteousness and peace immediately indicate a covenant context.

The Spirit had been poured out, said St Paul, an allusion to Pentecost but also to the prophecy of Isaiah, that the coming of the Spirit would bring justice, righteousness and peace to the creation. Those who received the Spirit, he said, had become children of God, made righteous, and therefore [if we follow covenant thought] they had in their turn to make other situations righteous. The restored had to restore. The healed had to heal.

St Paul immediately applied this to the healing of the creation, *ktisis*. Creation, he said, had been waiting for the children of God to appear, so that it could be set free from its bondage to decay. The creation had been bound in the counter-covenant, destined only for destruction, but now it could hope for the freedom of the glory of the children of God (Romans 8. 14-23).

Martin Luther, in his lectures on the Letter to the Romans, understood this passage in a narrower way. He understood the word *ktisis* to mean a human being, and so it was the individual person who would be set free from bondage to decay and obtain the glorious liberty of the children of God. Since he put such great emphasis on the salvation of the individual, it is understandable that he interpreted the word in this way. This is where the process of righteousness

has to start - with the individual person - but the bigger picture included the whole creation.

The earliest Christian interpretations understood the word *ktisis* to mean the whole creation, and contemporary New Testament scholars agree that, given the context, this is the most likely meaning here. The children of God have to release the whole creation from its bondage to decay. St Irenaeus, writing at the end of the 2nd century, said that the creation would be restored to its original condition, and be ruled by the righteous. When it had been renewed and set free from bondage to decay, the creation would produce huge crops, and all the animals would live at peace with each other (Against Heresies 5.32-33).

During this Symposium we are thinking about the complex web of life on earth and about the impact of human activity. We are hearing about death and destruction, the result of how our vast accumulated knowledge has been used. The familiar story in the Bible says that the human attitude to knowledge was cause of the problem, and that when the human beings are restored to righteousness, a very different world becomes possible.

John Milton, *Paradise Lost* 5.535 ff.

Raphael [whose name means 'the healing of God] to Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden.

Myself and all th' Angelic host that stand
In sight of God enthroned, our happy state
Hold, as you yours, while our obedience holds;
On other surety none; freely we serve,
Because wee freely love, as in our will
To love or not; in this we stand or fall.