

Mere mortals: A sermon for Creation Sunday



Sorry this TFTD is a little late! By popular request, I've typed up the sermon I preached for Creation Sunday yesterday evening.

Bible readings: Genesis 2.4-end // Psalm 8 // Hebrews 2.5-10

What are human beings, that you are mindful of them?
Mere mortals, that you care for them?
You have made them a little lower than God:
you crown them with glory and honour,
putting all things in subjection under their feet.
Psalm 8

*'Twould ring the bells of heaven the wildest peal for years,
If parson lost his senses, and people came to theirs,
And he and they together knelt down and said their prayers
For tamed and shabby tigers, and dancing dogs and bears,
And wretched, blind pit ponies, and little hunted hares.
[Ralph Hodgson]*

Something extraordinary happened last week in the corridors of power. IT might have passed you by — I only spotted it by chance because it was picked up in a *Guardian* leader.^[1] It was the publication of a 600-page report on the value of Nature, about the importance of biodiversity and all that stuff. What's extraordinary is that it was published not by the department responsible for "Environment, Food and Rural Affairs" but by the Treasury — Rishi Sunak in person.

We've got used to "the environment" as a problem we need to do something about. But usually it's pretty low down on the political to-do list — way below "sorting out the pandemic" and "getting the economy back on track". (And I suspect the same is true in our personal lives.)

But something's changed. This was not "Winterwatch" but a report by a Cambridge economist, pointing out that "our economies, livelihoods and wellbeing all depend on our most precious asset: Nature." Nature — and the damage we've been doing to it — needs to be front and centre of policymaking, not just left to Chris Packham and that nice Mr. Attenborough.

Did you watch David Attenborough's latest BBC series, *A Perfect Planet*? (If you didn't, don't miss it!) It was the usual mix of stunning photography and amazing Wow! moments — just what we've come to expect. The basic premiss was to look at the apparently chaotic forces that have shaped our planet and its atmosphere — volcanic eruptions, ocean currents, weather patterns, the sun's heat — and show how they have created between them the perfect environment for life in all its diversity.

But the real punch came in the final episode, which looked at the most powerful of all these natural forces — mere mortals. It was about human activity, the ordinary stuff that you and I do, the collective result of a million consumer choices. It showed dramatically how all this is having such an enormous impact on our planet's fragile ecosystems that they are close to collapse. From floods to wildfires to coronavirus, it's our activities that are slowly but surely (and increasingly quickly) undoing all the work that has gone into making our "Perfect Planet".

Scary stuff!

And in that context, our Bible passages for Creation Sunday make uncomfortable reading. From Genesis to Psalm 8 to Hebrews, one word leaps off the page: subjection or dominion. *What is humanity, that you are mindful of them*, asks the psalmist: *mere mortals, that you care for them? You have made them a little lower than God: you have put everything in subjection under their feet* — the birds of the air, the fish of the sea, domestic beasts and wild animals — humanity controls their destiny.

It takes us back to the very first chapter of Genesis, where God says, *Let us make humankind in our image, and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the birds of the air, and over all the wild animals of the earth, and over every creeping thing that creeps upon the earth* (Genesis 1.26).

What does this mean? We might see it as a recognition of a plain fact of nature itself. Like it or not, that puny, hairless biped *homo sapiens* has emerged as earth's prime predator. We may not be as big as the dinosaurs — but we are the only species capable of causing so much damage to every other species on earth.

That's certainly something the author of Genesis couldn't possibly have imagined. In the time of the Bible, the forces of nature must have seemed far too big and powerful for humanity to control. It was all you could do to break the soil in your little bit of stony ground to grow enough to feed your family. It's only really in the 17th century that we begin to see the beginnings of the great modern projects of science and technology that have slowly tipped the balance and allowed humans to achieve total domination and control over the natural world.

But is that what God intended? Is that kind of destructive domination what the idea of "dominion" is meant to convey?

Theologians have been busy going back to the Bible and re-reading it in the light of the ecological crisis. Does the Bible offer us any resources for constructing a healthier and more sustainable relationship with the natural world? One of them is my friend Richard Bauckham, who wrote a book called *The Bible and Ecology* back in 2010. (Worth studying!).

He suggests that one place to start is by re-reading the creation story — or rather, the two creation stories. If we read Genesis 1 in the light of Genesis 2, we begin to get a rather more nuanced picture of humanity's relationship with the created order.

Genesis 2 stresses human solidarity with the rest of creation. *Adam* is the Hebrew word for a human being, or for humanity in general — and it's very like the Hebrew word for dust or soil, *adamah*. So v.7 effectively says, "God formed the human being (*adam*) from the dust of the soil (*adamah*)". It's not the same word, but it's a deliberate word-play which we remember on Ash Wednesday: "Dust thou art, and to dust thou shalt return". "God made *humans* out of *humus*," we might say — or "We share common ground with the earth because we are common ground." Human life is earthy — embedded in the physical world and dependent on it.

Genesis 2 also stresses the human imperative of caring for the soil. Adam is a gardener: he is appointed to “till the soil and care for it” (v.15). To keep the soil, literally — to avoid exhausting it, which is just what modern farming methods have been doing on an industrial scale. Adam — humanity — needs the soil to provide fruit and vegetables (Adam is a vegetarian). He has the right to make a living from the soil — but he also has a duty to nurture it, to work out what it needs to flourish.

Then Adam is called to name the other animals (vv.19-20). Bauckham argues that this doesn't mean domination and control — it means recognising them as fellow-creatures into whom God has breathed the breath of life. Naming the animals means seeing their value in and for themselves — like a poet or a naturalist. It means recognising their independent value for God, their creator and ours. It means encountering them as a reality in their own right, not just as an appendage to our world (remember David Attenborough's iconic encounter with the gorillas?). It means recognising that the animals have a place in the world which we do not control, a world we can enjoy precisely because they and we share the same Creator.

And then, as we read on through Genesis, the foundation myths of the Fall and the Flood remind us that we live in a fallen world. We don't live in the Garden of Eden. Like opening Pandora's box, tasting the tree of knowledge is dangerous for humankind — it comes with a cost. Tilling the soil becomes more and more laborious; the earth becomes more and more full of violence. Not everything in the world as we see it is the way God intended it to be.

But the Bible also holds out the promise of redemption. Yesterday Robin was talking about Christ's work of reconciliation: It's OK. God's got this. God has reconciled all things to himself through Jesus Christ. And that work of reconciliation extends to the whole created order (look at Romans 8.19-22).

So that little passage from Hebrews takes Paul's idea of Christ as the "firstborn of all creation" and develops it an extraordinary way. Quoting from Psalm 8, Hebrews asks, What is humanity? What has Adam done to be given such frightening power, such enormous responsibility for the natural order? And (we might add), why have they made such a mess of it? Who is the Psalm really about?

Hebrews' answer, in effect, is: suppose the first Adam made a muck of it: what if the Psalm is really talking about Jesus, the "son of man (adam)"? What if it's not just about the first Adam but about (as Paul would say) the second Adam (Romans 5.17-18), sharing the earthiness of humanity, and giving the idea of dominion a whole new meaning? The second Adam, the Son of Man, who shares our flesh and blood, "dust and ashes" just like us — maybe showing us a different kind of dominion that involves not domination and destruction but entering into a community of suffering?

Let me finish with a story — and a plea. James Rebanks is a Cumbrian farmer who writes books on the side, and I was given one of them for Christmas.^[2] When he was growing up, his Grandad farmed a hill farm in the traditional way, leaving space for nature, while his Dad worked a farm in the Eden valley, seduced by science and forced by the cheap food policies of successive post-war governments into more and more intensive and destructive farming practices.

The story that sticks in my head is where he describes going out with his Grandad on the tractor as a boy, rolling the field. Suddenly his Grandad stopped the tractor and strode across into the middle of the field, took off his cap, and scooped something up into it. He came back, carefully shielding a clutch of curlew's eggs. When the rolling was finished, he put the eggs back, and 10 minutes later the mother was back, sitting on her eggs in the dusty seedbed, where she successfully reared them in time to fly before the crop was harvested. That's what curlews have done for millennia, co-existing with the human need to till the land. Only in the last few decades have pesticides and intensive farming driven them off the land. (When did you last hear a curlew? Like the skylark, they've disappeared in my lifetime — in the last few years — from the Bowstones above Lyme

Park.)

Rebanks' book (which I recommend) is a plea for a sustainable farming style that allows nature to survive and even thrive in our heavily farmed landscape. He's a farmer — he knows we can't turn the clock back. If we just abandon the farmland and leave the wild to take over, we'll be abandoning our responsibilities. Precisely because "humans are the top predator, [we] can either provide that function in an enlightened nature-mimicking way, or species like deer and wild boar will wreak ecological havoc" (p.201). This seems to me to be precisely what the Bible means by "dominion" — though Rebanks doesn't use that language.

So this is his plea: "We need to put farming [and gardening!] and nature back together again, not drive them further apart. We *can* work the land and still have healthy soil, rivers, wetlands, woodland and scrub. We *can* have fields full of wild flowers and grasses, swarming with insects, butterflies and birds. We just have to want this enough to legislate for it and to pay for it." Which is why I'm exceedingly glad that the Treasury sponsored that report on the economic value of nature!

I'd like to close with a prayer that Liz Horrocks shared with us yesterday morning.

Whatever befalls the earth befalls the children of the earth.

Every part of the earth is sacred.

The air is precious, for all of us share the same breath.

Every part of the earth is sacred.

This we know, the earth does not belong to us: we belong to the earth.

Every part of the earth is sacred.

This we know, all things are connected; like the blood that unites a family.

Every part of the earth is sacred.

Our God is the same God, whose compassion is the same for all.

Every part of the earth is sacred.

We did not weave the web of life: we are merely a strand in it.

Every part of the earth is sacred.

Whatever we do to the web of life, we do to ourselves.

Every part of the earth is sacred,

Because it is all the gift of the one Creator.

God bless, Loveday

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