

A Theology of Creation
Churches Together in Cumbria Environment Group
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Where do we begin when we try to work out our responsibility for the care of the Earth? There are many who begin with humankind and the effect that our activity has upon all that surrounds us, both living and non-living: on the depletion of resources, the erosion of soils, the destruction of species, and the pollution of air, land and sea, with the consequent changes to our climate. Christianity, in common with other faiths, does not begin with ourselves. The writer of Psalm 24 pointed us in the right direction: “To the Lord belong the earth and everything in it, the world and all its inhabitants”.

We begin with God, acknowledging him as Creator of all, “in the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth” (*Gen 1:1*) reaffirmed many years later in “heavens and earth were created by God’s word” (*2 Peter 3:5*). If we begin here, our view of the world will be God centred and God must be creation centred or ‘ecocentric’. What we need to do is to work out a three way relationship – between God, creation and humankind. A number of models have been used, all having a scriptural basis. We will set them out here: each has its strength and its weakness in helping us to work out our responsibility towards creation.

Dominion

The first narrative in Genesis brings creation to its culmination in the creation of humanity with two commands “be fruitful and multiply, fill the earth and subdue it”; and “have dominion *or* rule” (*Gen 1:28*). In that humankind is “made in the image of God” (*Gen 1:27*) then the way we have ‘dominion’ or ‘rule’ must reflect the same care for creation that God himself manifests in which not even a sparrow falls to the ground without his knowledge (*Matt 10:29*). To ‘rule’ cannot mean ‘dominate’ or ‘exploit’, for humankind’s responsibility to the earth is to till it and look after it” (*Gen 2:15*). Furthermore, when a king was set aside to rule among the people of Israel, he was to use his power to establish justice and the welfare of all he governed: “God endow the king with your own justice, his royal person with your righteousness, that he may govern your people rightly and deal justly with your oppressed ones. May the hills and mountains provide your people with prosperity in righteousness” (*Psalms 72:1-3*). So with power goes responsibility.

Steward

If you ‘take care’ of something, especially if you begin by admitting that what is put in your charge is not primarily your own, then you are a steward. The concept of stewardship has been widely accepted as a helpful analogy to describe the relationship between humankind and the rest of creation. In older times it was not uncommon for an overseas landlord to place his trust in stewards to look after his estate and manage the land for him (*see Isa 5:1-7 and Matt 25:14-30*). The way the people of Israel were to look after the land was on the basis that “the earth is the Lord’s” (*Ps 24:1*) and this was worked out in some detail in Leviticus: because the ultimate ownership was not humanity’s but the Lord’s. In the year of jubilee land had to be returned to its original lessees (*Lev 25:13ff*).

This model of the steward is often used by those with environmental concern and even by Government: “The starting point ...is the ethical imperative of stewardship which must underlie all environmental policies.” (*This Common Inheritance, p 10*) A good steward acts as a faithful deputy sustaining creation and preserving it for future generations. Being a steward

involves accountability: we are answerable to God for the way we manage his world during our time here.

This model of our understanding of our responsibility has its limitations. A steward will manage an estate, caring for its best interests so as to obtain the best returns from it while, to use the modern phrase, ensuring that it is managed sustainably, so that the next generation will inherit it in good working order. But they will manage it *as they think best*. It becomes an object for them to manipulate. Do we know or do what is always best? At worst, humankind is at the centre with the rest of creation at our disposal. At best nothing we do can be done without acknowledging our responsibility before God, the owner, for the rest of creation.

Co-Creator

A commentary on the narrative in Genesis 1 comes in Psalm 8, where in an atmosphere of wonder the writer acknowledges that God has made humankind “ruler over the works of your hands; you put everything under their feet” (vs6), reiterating the command of Genesis 1:28, but this time he gives a reason: because “you have made them a little lower than God” (vs5). So we stand alongside God in his creative activity and have the same responsibility towards it.

We are co-workers with God (*1 Cor 3:9, 2 Cor 6:1*), and part of the redemptive work charged to us is the redemption not only of humankind, but the whole of creation (*Rom 8:18-24*). The phrasing of Ps 8:5 could be translated as ‘regent’ or ‘viceroy’, and a regent is someone who stands in the place of the sovereign, exercising power but expected to render real service on behalf of their sovereign, and acting justly. We are God’s representative summoned to maintain and enforce God’s claim to dominion over the earth. But what do we take to ourselves when we say that we act in the place of God? How do we exercise the power we gain through technological progress, even able to create new forms of life?

Covenant Relationship.

Another approach is to recognise that God responds to humankind’s inherent disobedience by making a covenant. A covenant between a conqueror and those defeated in battle had inevitable consequences: if the conditions were met, then there was blessing; if not, there was retribution. God is seen as making a covenant with his people. Obedience is to be rewarded by rain and fruitfulness (*Lev 26:4*); disobedience by famine and a land that will not produce crops (*Lev 26:18-20*). All this is set against the background of the covenant God made with Noah, which significantly was not just with Noah, but with ‘every living creature’, and to underline the point the phrase is repeated (*Gen 9:10, 12, 15, 16, 17*). We are to recognise that we are only one member of the community of Earth, and when one member acts wrongly, all suffer. There is an inevitable interaction between humankind and the earth: if we exploit its resources and destroy its creatures for our own selfish gain, then it will no longer be able to support and sustain us. Even pollution and desertification are seen as the result of humankind’s breaking the covenant with God that requires us to ‘till the earth and care for it’ (*see Isa:24:1-6*).

Priest

If we appreciate that we are not so much set above the rest of creation but we are part of it, a failure to reverence and honour our natural environment is also a failure to reverence and honour God and give him thanks. Everything that lives is holy: all that God made is good. The Celtic and Orthodox traditions take up this theme as did the teachings of St. Francis. Because everything is part of God’s creation, God identifies with it and is *in* everything and everything is *in* God. One way in which humankind is different from the rest of creation is that we are able to respond to the goodness of God and give him thanks. It is in thanksgiving that we

become more fully human, that which we were intended to be, made in the image of God who was able to see that creation was good and was able to bless it.

So in giving thanks to God for all his creation, which he has given us to enjoy and use, to care for and to nurture, in gratitude we also offer it back to him, and we remember that we are part of that creation, and in so doing we are also offering ourselves up to him along with the rest of creation awaiting a full redemption. In this sense we are all *priests* before God.

If that is true, then we must realise that what each generation offers up to God is not the same, for the world is changing. The Lake District and Cumbria's scenery of today is not the original. It has been formed by humankind's activity in building houses and churches, felling and planting trees, in enclosing fields, through herding sheep on the fellsides and in quarrying rocks. Other human inheritance comes from mining the earth, damming the waters, disposing of waste and polluting the seas and shores. The Lake District National Park lands are now stewarded to high principles of conservation and sustainability. Elsewhere, outside the National Park boundaries, such standards have not always been and are not always observed. Through the work of our hands the world is changing: sometimes for the better, sometimes not.

Once we are aware of that we also realise that what we offer back to God is what we have achieved together: our thanksgiving is social and corporate. We offer up what we already *share*. Unless we can share the world, unless we can learn more how we have a mutual responsibility for it, we shall destroy the world and ourselves in it.

We shall misuse this concept of our being priests if it leads us to a sense of superiority over all that surrounds us. The Psalms are full of examples of where all creatures, animate and inanimate, worship God (*e.g. Ps 148*) and they worship God together. Creation worships God just by being itself, existing for God's glory. Nature does not *need* us to voice its praise: we stand alongside the rest of creation in giving praise, a creation in which every single component has inherent worth and value.

Conclusion

Here then are five different ways in which we can work out the relationship between God, ourselves, and the rest of creation. Is one better than another? When struggling with our concern for the environment and relating it to our Christian understanding, sometimes one would appear more relevant than another. It may be best to see these as complementary attempts at working out our understanding of God's purpose for all his creation.

We are part of God's creation, for that we give thanks and recognise our responsibility.

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