

OPENING ADDRESS FOR 'SUSTAINABLE SHOWCASE FOR THE FUTURE' IN THE
GOROKAN PARISH

By Bishop Graeme Rutherford

On Boxing Day, 1966, the historian Lynn White addressed the American Association for the Advancement of Science on '*The Historical Roots of our Ecological Crisis*'. Lynn White laid the blame for the destruction of our environment squarely at the feet of Christianity. He argued: '*By destroying pagan animism Christianity made it possible to exploit nature in a mood of indifference to the feelings of the natural objects ... Christianity bears a burden of guilt because our science and technology are deeply infused with the orthodox Christian arrogance to nature*'.

More recently, Richard Dawkins, Peter Singer, John Passmore and others, have followed the lead given by Lynn White and joined in chanting the mantra '*Religion, is the enemy*'. Indeed some of them go further and join White in saying that when it comes to the environment, '*the Christian church has always been (and still is) part of the problem rather than part of the solution*'.

Fortunately, White's argument is now widely recognized as being seriously flawed. His accusation that Christianity is essentially arrogant in its approach to creation rests on a faulty interpretation of Genesis 1:28 in which he interprets the Hebrew word *rada*, '*dominion*' in terms of arrogant and aggressive '*domination*'.

But the word '*dominion*' in Genesis 1, implies nothing of the sort. Humanity as the partner of God is to be a '*steward*' of creation, rather than the '*lord*' of creation. Moreover, the ongoing biblical context makes it plain that the early Jewish readers of Genesis didn't see their role in

terms of aggressive domination. Quite the contrary, there are regulations in the early books of the Pentateuch about giving the land a *jubilee rest* so as to recover from productivity. Such legislation was designed to care for the earth not to exploit it. White's interpretation simply cannot be sustained. To put it simply: *dominion* is to be understood in terms of *'responsible care'*.

I believe that the Church's involvement in environmental ethics is not just a matter of jumping on a *fashionable bandwagon* but arises from deep within our biblical tradition.

Doubtless there are many 'bad' Christians who fail to appreciate what their tradition demands of them, or who prefer to overlook the implicit ecological dimensions of their faith. That is, however, a *criticism of individual Christians*, not of the *fundamental vision of Christianity itself*. The critics I have mentioned do not appear to show any real awareness of the wealth of biblical teaching which must push any sincere towards environmental sensitivity and care.

The Bible makes the bold claim that the earth belongs to God because God made it. *'The earth is the Lord's and all that is in it, the world, and those that live in it'*. (Ps. 24)

At the very least this reminds us that *if the earth is God's, it is not ours*. Wherever we go, we are walking on God's property. There is *nowhere we can step off his property* into some autonomous sphere of our own private ownership. There is *not an inch of the planet* that does not belong to God. We do not own this planet, even if our behaviour tends to boast that we think we do. No, God is the earth's landlord and we are God's

tenants. As in any landlord-tenant relationship, God holds us accountable to himself for how we treat his property.

There are at least 5 dimensions to this strong affirmation of divine ownership of the earth that reach back to the beginning, into the present and forward to the future. Each has important implications for environmental care. Let me spell them out:

1. The goodness of creation

That the creation is good is one of the most emphatic points of Genesis 1, in view of its repetition. Seven times in Genesis chapter 1, God declares his work to be ‘good’ or ‘very good’. Two things may be noted as sub-points of the goodness of creation:

a. A good creation can only be the work of a good God

This sets the Old Testament account of creation in contrast to other Near Eastern accounts where powers and gods of the natural world are portrayed in various degrees of malice.

For instance, the Babylonian account of creation, known as *Enuma Elish*, recounts fighting and discord amongst the gods. Tiamat, the female mother god of chaotic darkness, declares war against all the gods. The gods in fear choose a young warrior god, Marduk, to lead them against their own mother. Marduk slays Tiamat and cuts her in half. From one half of her body he makes the earth and out of the other half, the heavens.

Seen against the background of this Babylonian account of creation it can be seen that Genesis 1 is rightly seen, not as *myth* but as *anti-myth*. In

Genesis, creation is fundamentally and in origin good, as the work of a *single good God*.

And part of the meaning of the goodness of creation in the Bible is that it testifies to the God who made it, reflecting something of his good character. Creation, it has been well said, has a *'message character'* about it.

The wisdom of the creator can be seen in the ordering of the world, in much the same way as the ingenuity of an architect can be seen in the design of a great building. Nature is emblazoned with the glory of God. *'The heavens are telling the glory of God; and the firmament proclaims his handiwork'* (Ps 19:1). Nature bears an eloquent, if silent, witness to God's wisdom, just as a great building bears witness to the genius of its designer.

St Paul's Cathedral, London, is one of the greatest works of the architect Sir Christopher Wren (1631 – 1723). The original Cathedral was destroyed during the Great Fire of London (1666), and had to be rebuilt. The task of designing the new building was entrusted to Wren. The spectacular new edifice was finally completed in 1710, and remains one of the most famous landmarks of London. There is no memorial to Wren in that cathedral. In its place, there is an inscription over its north door: *'If you are looking for a memorial, look around you'*. The genius and wisdom of the architect can be seen in what he built. In the same way, the wisdom of God can be discerned within the creation, which is a witness to the power and wisdom of its good creator. Creation is the work of a good God.

b. Creation is intrinsically good

In the creation narratives, the affirmation “*It is good*” was *not* made by Adam and Eve but by God himself. So the goodness of creation (which includes its beauty) is theologically and chronologically prior to human observation. It is something that God saw and affirmed before humanity was around to see it. So the goodness of creation is not merely a human reflexive response to a pleasant view on a sunny day.

The earth has an intrinsic value – it is valued by God, who is the source of all value. It is not enough merely to say that the earth is valuable to us. The earth does not derive its value from us but from its Creator.

Accordingly, it has been said, ‘*we need to be careful to locate an ecological dimension of mission not primarily in the need-supplying value of the earth to us, but in the glory-giving value of the earth to God.*’

The Bible is careful to avoid the arrogant human assumption that the earth exists solely for our use and enjoyment. So Psalm 104 celebrates not only what the earth provides for humanity but all that God has provided within it for all other creatures who also owe their existence, survival and enjoyment of life to God’s bountiful Spirit. Walter Harrelson makes this comment about Psalm 104: ‘*God has interest in badgers and wild goats and storks **for their own sakes**. He has interest in trees and mountains and rock-cairns that simply serve non-human purposes. ... Ships doing commerce on the high seas are doing significant work, but so also is Leviathan (the sea monster), trailing behind the ships, blowing and cavorting*’.

The *intrinsic value* of creation came home to me last week when I was having my early morning swim in the Merewether sea baths. Before I

dived in, I looked around to see if there were any other fools in the water at that early hour and I couldn't see a single soul – but I looked out towards the horizon and my eyes caught an amazing scene similar to that which psalm 104 describes – 50 or more dolphins '*blowing and cavorting, jumping and playing*' in the waves not far from the shore. As I tried to psyche myself up to take the plunge, I said to myself, '*Come on old boy, dive in. There might not be any other human fools but you're in good company.*'

Human beings glorify the Creator in uniquely human ways, as befits our unique status as the one creature that has been made in the image of God. We praise God with rationality as well as emotion, with language, art, music and craft.

But all the rest of creation praises God too, just by being itself as God made it,¹ like those '*blowing and cavorting*' dolphins! As the closing psalm in the psalter (Ps 150) puts it: '*Let everything that has breathe, praise the Lord*'!

Creation is good, not simply for utilitarian purposes, but intrinsically good in itself.

2. Creation is the overflow of Trinitarian joy

The psalmists go into overdrive when they contemplate the extravagant generosity of God in creation. God doesn't appear to know when to stop! Rivers are full; wagon tracks overflow with richness; hills are girded with joy; valleys are decked with grain. Listen to Psalm 65: '*You crown the*

¹ Richard Bauckham, *The New Testament teaching on the environment: A response to Ernest Lucas in Transformation*, 1999, p.101

year with your bounty; your wagon tracks overflow with richness. The pastures and the wilderness overflow, the hills gird themselves with joy, the meadows clothe themselves with flocks, the valleys deck themselves with grain, they shout and sing together for joy' (Psalm 65:11-13)

The sixteenth century Spanish mystic, John of the Cross, develops this perspective of creation as the ***overflow*** of divine joy by anchoring it in the doctrine of the Trinity.

If we know anything at all about John of the Cross it is usually the fact that he wrote about falling into a dark hole in our prayer life, what he called ***'the dark night of the soul'***. But there is another side to John of the Cross's writings found in what are called his Ballads or Romances, a sequence of little poems. Ballads were rustic popular songs, with easy rhymes and rhythm - somewhat akin to negro spirituals.

They are all about the romance between the triune God and creation. They are about God's will to share divine joy. The Father and the Son delighting in one another. In a kind of rhapsody the Father asks how this joy might be increased and hits on the idea of creation as an object of delight for the Son. The whole purpose of creation is so that joy may be shared. Creation is the ***overflow of the irrepressible divine energy of the Trinity, a microcosm of generosity.***

The Father wants his creatures, to enjoy the Son; the Son wants his followers to relish the Father. It is as if creation were the fruit of an ***excess of unselfishness.***

To become aware of creation in this Trinitarian way, is to be stirred up in gratitude. I often say, *'It makes everything at least twice as good as it is without gratitude. Good in itself. It is doubly good when we receive it as the gift of God's bountiful love'*. Our prayer becomes, *'Lord, you have given so much to me, give me one more thing, a grateful heart'*.

1. Creation is good – the work of a good God; intrinsically good in itself;
2. Creation is the overflow of divine joy.

3. The creation is sacred but not divine

The creation is God's, not God. Some religions, including some forms of paganism which have enjoyed a fashionable revival in recent years, argue that nature is divine. Christians adopt a significantly different approach. Nothing in creation is in itself divine. This rules out nature polytheism, which was prevalent in the cultural and religious environment of Israel. Many in the Ancient Near East believed that the *sun* and *moon* were gods, and were fearful of them. They had to be worshipped in the right way; if they were not, they might withhold their light and plunge the world into darkness.

By contrast the Bible teaches that we need to draw a line between the *creator* and the *creation*. Everything on our side of the line – including ourselves – is God's creation, not something which is itself divine. There is no place in Christianity for the worship of nature. God alone is to be worshipped. The Bible certainly teaches respect and care for the nonhuman creation, but it resists and reverses the human tendency to divinize or personalize the natural order.

It is important to distinguish between *personalizing* and *personifying* nature. The OT frequently personifies nature as a rhetorical device, a figure of speech, for greater effect.

'The sea looked and fled; Jordan turned back. The mountains skipped like rams, the hills like lambs. Why is it, O sea, that you flee? O Jordan, that you turn back? O mountains, that you skip like rams? O hills, like lambs?'

(Psalm 114:3-6)

This is all a vivid, poetic way of speaking. Such literary usage, however, is not ascribing real personhood or personal capacities to nature. We must not deny that there is an incredible capacity for renewal, recovery and adaptation built into the earth. But all these interrelated systems have been planned and are sustained by God not some self-sustaining force such as *Gaia* (Mother Earth). That is why I prefer to encourage people to speak of '*creation*' rather than '*nature*'. The word '*creation*' embodies our conviction that the world is Gods. The word '*nature*' can sometimes convey the impression of a self-sustaining force.

However, there is a fundamental difference between treating creation as sacred and treating it as divine (just as there is a categorical difference between speaking of the sanctity of human life and regarding a human being as divine). The sacredness or sanctity of creation speaks of its *essential relatedness to God*, not of it being divine in and of itself.

This clearly has practical implications for us. If the earth has a sanctity derived from its relation to the Creator, then our treatment of the earth will be a reflex and measure of our own relationship with the creator. To

love God means to value what God values. Conversely, to contribute to or collude in the abuse, pollution and destruction of the natural order is to trample on the goodness of God reflected in creation. It is to devalue what God values. As someone has said, *'It is impossible to say you love Rembrandt while you trash his paintings.'*

1. the goodness of creation

2. creation as the overflow of divine joy

3. the sacredness, but not divinity, of creation

4. The present sustaining of Creation

So often when we talk about a Creator and creation our minds go back to an original moment when everything began – that vastly remote instant of creation's first appearing. But in the Bible, 'creation' is primarily the ongoing divine conservation of things. The biblical writers celebrate God's present animating and energizing work in creation. Everything created is continuously receiving its being from God. As the old hymn 'Immortal, Invisible, God only wise' so clearly states it: *'To all life thou givest, to both great and small, in all life thou livest, the true life of all'*.

God himself depends on nothing outside Godself, but is self-sustaining. God, by definition, is something of which there is only one. God is the uncreated source of all created being. All created things are limited one way and another, and sooner or later run out of steam, or decay, but not God! God is like the burning bush that Moses encountered in the wilderness, constantly using energy yet remaining just as energetic and potent as before. God is at every point self-sustaining.

The 17th century group of theologians known as the *deists* presented a picture of God as a mighty mechanic, who, having made the world, sat

back and watched it go without becoming involved in it in any way. Having established the world in the beginning, God left it to its built-in devices.

But for the biblical writers, were God to withdraw power, even for a moment, the *cosmos* would fall back into *chaos*. The marvel is not just the natural world exists and that it is upheld by the hand of God in the present, but that it should exist with such variety and beauty.

1. the goodness of creation
2. the overflow of Trinitarian joy
3. the sacredness (not divinity) of creation
4. the moment by moment sustenance of creation.

5. God's redemption of the whole creation

You cannot drive a car by looking only in the review mirror. You have to look ahead to your destination. Likewise, the Bible teaches us to value the earth, not only because of '*where it came from*' (or rather *who* it came from) but also because of its ultimate destiny. The Christian vision of the future takes the form of the renewal and transformation of creation. As the apostle Paul writes in Romans chapter 8, the day will come when '*creation itself will be set free from its bondage to decay*' and achieve the glorious freedom for which it was created. We need, in other words, an eschatological as well as a creational foundation to our ecological ethics and mission.

This contrasts with the vision of the future which Richard Dawkins offers in his writings. It is a vision of the universe which irreversibly decays: '*We know*' says Dawkins, *from the second law of thermodynamics that all complexity, all life, all laughter, all sorrow, is hell-bent on levelling itself*

*out into cold nothingness in the end. They – and we – can never be more than temporary, local buckings of the great universal slide into the abyss of uniformity*². Dawkins vision is a vision of *cosmic pessimism*.

By contrast, the Christian vision is of the ultimate renewal and transformation of nature. One of the richest and exquisite places in the OT to find precisely such a vision is the book of Isaiah: *‘The wolf shall live with the lamb, the leopard shall lie down with the kid, the calf and the lion and the fatling together, and a little child shall lead them. The cow and the bear shall graze, their young shall lie down together; and the lion shall eat straw like the ox. The nursing child shall play over the hole of the asp, and the weaned child shall put its hand on the adder’s den. They will not hurt or destroy on all my holy mountain; for the earth will be full of the knowledge of the Lord as the waters cover the sea’*. (Isa 11:6-9). Here and in other places, the biblical writers are struggling to write about something which transcends history and therefore requires the language of symbol and imagery. The imagery should be taken *seriously* but not *literally*. Isaiah’s picture language speaks of the wolf and the lamb; the lion and the calf; the bear and the cow; all living together with no serious collateral damage. The baby plays around the hole of a snake. What is being described in this messianic ecology is *totally new and wholly unprecedented*. This inspiring vision portrays God’s new creation as a place that will be joyful, free from grief and tears, life-fulfilling, with guaranteed work satisfaction, free from the curses of frustrated labour, and environmentally safe!

This biblical hope adds an important dimension to our ecological ethics. It is not just a matter of looking back to the initial creation but of looking

² quoted by Alister McGrath, in **The Re-enchantment of Nature**, Hodder & Stoughton, 2002, p.49

forward to the new creation. This means that our motivation has a double force – *a kind of push-pull effect*. There is a goal in sight. Granted it lies only in the power of God ultimately to achieve it, but, as is the case with other aspects of biblical eschatology, what we hope for from God affects how we are to live now and what our own objectives should be.

We can seek approximations to the Kingdom of God in the here and now. Christian hope neither attempts what can only come from God nor neglects what is humanly possible. Sustained by the hope of everything from God, it attempts what is possible within the limits of each present. It does not overreach itself in striving for a post-historical goal. It does what it can for its own sake, here and now, redeemed and fulfilled, in God's new creation of all things. We do the little we can, knowing that God can make much more of it than we ever thought possible. We think globally, while acting locally.

Conclusion:

There can be no doubt that Christianity possesses and is distinguished by a set of beliefs that affirm the importance of respecting, tending and preserving the natural order. They apply to the original creation; to the ongoing upholding of creation and the future redemption of creation:

1. The goodness of God's initial creation
2. The overflow of divine joy in creation
3. The sanctity (but not divinity) of creation
4. The ongoing sustaining of creation
5. The final redemption of creation

I began with the criticism that Lynn White and others have levelled against Christians. I think they are wrong and speak in ignorance of the Bible's teaching. Having said that, I must acknowledge that some Christians do need a wake-up call when it comes to environmental thinking and acting. One child psychologist now speaks of "***Nature Deficit Order***" to designate our children's inability to 'read' or attend to or understand the natural world, not least because they spend less and less time playing in or exploring it.

I hope we do not suffer from '***Nature Deficit Order***'. Care for God's creation is core Christian business, deeply embedded in the Christian Scriptures. May we rediscover the doctrine of creation, and exult in both its *insights* and its *implications*.