

I was asked to lead this service and talk about **Responsibility**, and interestingly enough it tallied very closely with a course that we did at college in the last term which was “The Doctrine of Creation and Environmental Ethics”, and I was tasked to do an oral presentation which was one of the common criticisms of western theology is that it has directly contributed to the ecological disasters that we're experiencing: the global warming, the acid rain and exploitation of the natural world. And we were asked to give a presentation offering a critical account of an African doctrine of creation in the hope that it could advance a biblical theological ethic of environmental responsibility for our contemporary world. So the presentation I put together revolved around three themes: the first is “Problematic concepts of creation” (which I subtitled “Reality”), the second is “The danger of anthropocentrism” (or an over focus on humankind as the centre of creation, and I subtitled that “Reciprocity”), and the third is “The challenge we're facing of sustainability” (and that I subtitled “Responsibility”). Taken together, the three key themes hopefully will bring us to a clear point of departure for future environmental practice.

So, just a reminder. Western Christian theology has been accused of advocating a view of human dominion which is responsible for widespread environmental devastation. The doctrine of dominion, or human stewardship, which is found in Genesis is in grave need of reinterpretation if Christianity is to once again evoke a beneficial influence on the state of the planet. A key question for our consideration is this: “How can an account concerning the origins of the world help to promote the welfare of humanity and so uphold the integrity of creation?”

Creation Myths attempt to answer this question in various ways. Myths themselves give imaginative expression in narrative form to what is sensed or experienced as reality. Doctrines of creation attempt to explain the beginning of things, whether by the will of some transcendent being, whether by its emanation from some other creative energy, or via random forces. A Creation Myth is therefore both a philosophical and theological elaboration of the primal myth of creation within a particular community or culture. And these myths have enormous power to shape the minds of those within their sphere of influence.

African understandings of the world are predominantly life-centred. In the Malawian view (which I chose to focus on) all life originates in the divine “Moyo”; and that same Moyo permeates all life. “Ubuntu” describes the bondedness of all life between God, humanity, and nature, and “Umunthu” describes the absolute fullness which is derived from experiencing life within that bondedness, and especially as it relates to human satisfaction. This world-view is absolutely contrary to the mercantilist (or capitalist) and utilitarian perspective which prevails in the West, which views the earth and its inhabitants as commodities to be co-opted and consumed solely for the benefit of the wealthy and noble classes. To the shame of the Western church, this mode of thought arose in large part due to an understanding of salvation which is entirely anthropocentric – entirely human centred – and which overlooks any cosmic dimension. Instead, it was taught that humanity will one day be removed from the ecological creation (which is doomed to perdition by sin) and will be raptured into heaven. It is sad to say that this doctrine is scarcely indicated in Scripture. It is therefore vital to explore the impact that such wildly varying interpretations of reality have on human environmental ethics.

[Section 1: Reality] The word “theory” comes from the Greek  $\Theta\eta\rho\iota\alpha$  (theoria) meaning “a way of seeing” or “an act of beholding”. A theory describes a particular interpretation of reality which

connects our imagination with our experiences via an underlying structure of meaning, and which enables us to consolidate the things which we sense with things which are unseen. Christian theology conceptualises existence in such a way that it coheres with a reality which is beyond human comprehension. Now, the truth behind any such theory depends upon evidence which indicates whether the doctrine is accurate. This accuracy is determinate not only upon how successfully it enlightens our existence, but also upon the consequences of its outworking in our behaviour.

The Bible states that there are only two world-views: the secular (or worldly, non-religious) which asserts the cosmos as the sum total of reality, and then there's the theological (or the biblical) which asserts that creation is founded upon the sovereign actions of a pre-eminent, transcendent deity or deities. The Hebrew Scriptures testify to a theological reality which is dependent upon a personal, Triune (three part) Spirit, from whom the creation precedes and on whom the creation depends. The act of creation, and creation itself, are God's self-witness and the revelation of his person, and this revelation has specific implications for our creaturely reality. Human assent to this witness is essential to the revelation. Unfortunately the scriptures report that the way humanity exercises its freedom is antagonistic to non-human life as well as towards God.

This antagonistic attitude has threefold consequences: first, Hubris (or pride), the pride of humankind in our self-elevation into the sphere of the divine (we make ourselves like God - it's the Genesis story); second, the Concupiscence (or greed) of humankind in our desire to draw the whole of reality into ourselves, to make ourselves the centre of reality; and third, that in our essential self-realisation we lose our essential unity with the ground of our being in the world - with the world itself and the creator who made it. This is the Genesis story in Chapter 3 of the book of Genesis.

This response can also be seen today in the denial of much of humanity to the actuality of the ecological crisis - it's too big for us to comprehend, so what do we do? Turn away from it, we deny it - it's denial. This is perhaps best exemplified in something called the "Self-Simulation Hypothesis" (I don't know if you've heard of it) which asserts that individual humans not only define but also invent their own reality. The theory has been popularly expressed in such movies as "The Matrix" and "Inception" - we're living in a reality which is entirely constructed within our mind and nothing is actually real; this is quite widely believed these days. It's noteworthy that this retreat into self-simulation is consonant with the Biblical notion of "exile" in which those who have abandoned the truth of creation lose all sense of faith and hope. And the restitution of these qualities is therefore essential, and is utterly reliant upon a reconnection with the revealed character of God, and with our rightful place in God's created order, not ours, and with the relationship of humanity to all other forms of life. Focussing upon an African world-view can greatly assist us in this endeavour.

As previously stated, the Malawian concept of Moyo sets out a theory of life as proceeding from a divine source, which source also manifests itself in biological existence, thereby binding together human life not only with divine life but also with all natural life. This roots human existence in something mysterious and transcendent, while also solidifying the bonds of human existence to nature; rendering it impossible to pronounce humanity as being alienated from God, or to pronounce nature as something disconnected either from us or from the plan of redemption that God has set in motion for his creation. The mysterious and mythical quality of this world-view has great potential for restoring a reality in which humanity values not only itself but all life on earth.

Now, while it is helpful to discuss the origin of life in terms that could be described as "mythic", it

would be unhelpful to do so were there no basis for the foundations of the myth of Moyo in truth. As Christians we understand “truth” to be a person rather than a concept, and therefore the foundations of any myth we construct must centre around the person of Jesus Christ. A scripture that Pastor Steve read this morning: the Word gave life to everything and that life was the light of humankind, that life is in everything.

As the writer Andrew Gabriel puts it: “In Jesus Christ are revealed the ‘secrets of creation’, that salvation and creation belong together.” It’s “In Jesus Christ one learns that God became human and thus God is not alone, and also that there truly is a reality distinct from God.” It is the historical fact of the incarnation which provides the faith required to access the hope and the love through whom these are graciously provided. The scriptural narrative about Christ provides and establishes for us a myth sufficient to convey the truths of the one who is the giver of life. So perhaps then, rather than exchanging our talk of the biblical Creator for tales of Moyo we could rather utilise those beneficial aspects of the concept of Moyo in the ways that we speak about Christ, for certainly he is already the basis for the concept of Moyo – he preceded it – and it would not be right for us to bypass the primary cause for the sake of a secondary interpretation.

But Moyo is useful to us in how we talk about Christ. What’s more, the truth of the Christian God as one being in three persons is of particular relevance as we move into the next section, which is Reciprocity.

[Section 2: Reciprocity] [We OK so far? <NO!> {laughter} <English!> Thank you Alf] In summarising the New Testament truth that through the Holy Spirit believers have been taken into the life of God through Jesus Christ, Robert Jenson asserts that: “To be a creature must be to be involved in some way in the mutual life of the three persons. We are...among the three.” This relationality of God is a fundamental aspect of the life of God, and is vitally important because it establishes the fact that fellowship and inter-relationality are inherent to who he is and also for those whom he creates. Richard Bauckham, another writer, describes the situation in this way – he says: “the ecological crisis is a crisis in the human relationship to nature”; and this crisis is best described as one of “exploitative dominion”. He looks to the internal life of God to provide “a pattern for the life of his creation as an intricate community of reciprocal relationships”. The implication for humanity is that in just the same way as we have been adopted into the mutual life of the Trinity, we ought also to understand ourselves as part of a mutually interdependent ecology of creation. The question is how to apply such a doctrine in an individualistic and consumerist Western culture.

I’ll give you an example of this – this is not part of the talk but I read something yesterday about crocodile farming. Do you know what the price of a French fashion designer handbag made out of crocodile skin is? £400,000 they go for! So crocodiles have been farmed, and crocodile farms are horrible disgusting places. You’ll have a space less than the size of a football pitch which is plastic lined and in which there’s a couple of pools which are both the bath and themselves toilet of the crocodiles, and you have up to about 100 crocodiles in that space. The thing about this situation is it’s filthy and it’s creating an environment in which pathogens can exist and be born out of, which are likely to produce another pandemic. And that’s the way we treat our creation. If we adopt an African world-view we might not get away with thinking that these things are actually acceptable.

In the African world-view rituals are performed throughout the individual’s life so that they can be made aware – and be continuously reminded – of their immersion in the inter-relationality of the cosmos. This grounding serves to embed the self, the individual within the cosmic community. The word used to describe this communal bondedness is “Ubuntu”. It’s variously defined as: “an

ethic of interdependence”, or “an essential interconnection”; and its ethic of reciprocal mutuality is perhaps best summarised in the phrase: “I am because you are” - I cannot be separated from you and you cannot be separated from me, our existence is bound together.

A possible critique of Ubuntu is that with its aim as being Umunthu – or the fullness of human satisfaction – it divers into anthropocentrism (a little bit). This ethic can also be considered biocentric but it's also true that the new humanity created in Christ is intended to fulfil a more theocentric ecological ethic in outworking God’s redemptive purposes for his creation, even where that may involve personal hardship or suffering (with is not consonant with the Umuntu which is human satisfaction). We will explore this a little bit in the final section; but for now there are some important issues to address concerning the concept of the “image of God”.

The question for a Christian eco-theology is whether Ubuntu is comparable with New Testament unity in Christ through the Holy Spirit, or whether it's still possible to describe the outpouring of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost as having established a “new humanity”, or a new human condition; both before God, and with one another. Unless we consider this “newness” as being a recovery of the image and likeness of God then the “new humanity” cannot be seen as the evolution of Ubuntu. If viewed positively, and with Ubuntu reflecting the best possible human society apart from the reception of the indwelling Spirit of God, then that surely now increases the expectation of what should be possible for the “new humanity” which has been established “in Christ”.

I'll say that one more time. So Ubuntu is something which precedes the “new humanity” which was established “in Christ” - it's an ancient form of looking at the world. So if we're saying that the “new humanity” established “in Christ” is simply recovery of Ubuntu then it's not something which is “new” and it doesn't bring us into an increased sense of responsibility for what we ought to be doing, and how we ought to be living in the world. More is expected of us now we've been brought into the Godhead.

To reflect God’s image on the earth means to represent God as his “manifestation on earth.” God appeared as his perfect image in Christ: so to become the image of God means to “imitate Christ”, and “to rule, reconcile and redeem through his image.” “God’s relation to creation – revealed in the life and ministry of Jesus – must become the norm for human relationships with nature,” and “this is nowhere more fully revealed than at the cross.”

Nevertheless, this image of God revealed at the cross must not to remain affixed there: it has to assign itself within us as a faith-based motivator for every aspect of our Christian life, especially with respect to the creation. Leonardo Boff cites this as being together in solidarity: “...of a life lived in one and the same cosmos”; “...the same biological processes.”; “...in the same human history of successes and failures.” All of which comes together as a love for neighbour founded upon: “...the possibility of a reciprocal salvation.”

This Christian love which is described as ἀγάπη (agape) in the bible is expressed in terms such as reconciliation and communion; it's a spiritual connection to the God who is love and who desires us to manifest this love in our lives and in our communities; it's a love which is multi-dimensional and which has the capacity to extend goodness, righteousness and justice into an ecological context; and it's a love which demands that we act responsively and responsibly towards our neighbours, even to our own personal sacrifice. And it's this Responsibility which we explore in the last section (and this is the last section, I promise).

[Section 3: Responsibility] Responding to the accusations against Christian theology as having abused the biblical mandate to take dominion, a writer called David Field acknowledges the

problematic and inadequate usage of the term “stewardship” in light of the challenges facing the contemporary world. He instead advances the concept of “stewards of shalom” (which is a Hebrew word which means “wholeness”, “fullness” and “beauty”, “truth”, “peace”). He says this has a genuine “potential for the development of an adequate environmental ethic” because it emphasises human dignity but also responsibility, yet it's more modest in the assessment of our role. “Human dominion” he states “...means not domination but responsible, caring – even self-sacrificial – stewardship of the earth.” This kind of Christian eco-theological praxis must entail such things as: “Concrete opportunities to be readily connected with creation,” “making just food choices”, “practices in the home that are coherent with ecological commitment,” and seeing “the way we travel as a moral issue,” and also making every effort to “change our consumer lifestyle” into one that is “environmentally-attentive.” But even this, as practical as it sounds (and it's good), still comes up short of what's necessary in order for humanity to be restored to its representative role for God on the earth.

So reasserting the African perspective acknowledges that humanity, while having the potential to do good, also has the capacity to destroy, and thus the biblical concept of dominion (which has been corrupted) is in urgent need of revision in light of humanity's designation as being born in the image of God. Being made in his image doesn't imply a quality but rather a particular function. And this function involves being “ethically shaped in conformity with God to act in a manner for which God serves as the prototype (ecologist).” This function can be defined as having “a priestly role towards creation”, and this role endows humanity with an authoritative comprehension of the moral principles which dictate how people ought to act, as well as the associated responsibility to inform the ecological community of how humans ought to live.

In agreement with this but in contrast to the Malawian principle of Umunthu (the fullness of human satisfaction), John Chryssavgis, who's an Eastern Orthodox theologian, suggests an environmental ethic that is equally priestly, but which is indicative of the sacrificial love of Christ. He suggests a relationship for the creation that views it as having sacramental qualities, and which inspires an attitude of worship – not worship of the creation but worship of God. Rather than consuming, he recommends fasting. “To fast,” he says, “is not to give up but to give.” “To fast is to love...to move away from what I want to what the world needs.” For John Chryssavgis, this preference for service over selfishness – for moderation over repression – has supreme value with regard to our relationship with the world, because to take a frugal approach is to engage in a human covenant with creation which facilitates continual spiritual advancement with our relation to the Creator.

The writings of a guy called Christopher Vena similarly look to a Christian eco-theology that moves beyond stewardship entirely, to what he describes as an “agapeic environmental ethic” - that agape love is that self-sacrificial love). Having an environmental ethic which is self-sacrificial he celebrates the uniqueness of humanity, and in particular Christian humanity, proclaiming that: “Responding to the ecological crisis requires...a transformation in the pattern of human being in the world.” He observes that: “Christianity teaches that love is the prescriptive pattern of human behaviour.” Therefore those who would claim that it is possible to love sufficiently without reference to God, he says: “A loving relationality is only facilitated by an intensification of our relationality with God.” A loving relationality: having loving relationships with other people, with God and with the world is only facilitated by an intensification of our relationship with God. (We're nearly done.)

He expands on this theory by explaining that the adoption of an agapeic environmental ethic leads

to the establishment of an “agapeic community” - that's what the church is supposed to be, that's what we are supposed to be. An agapeic community in whose relational framework responsibility and participation are key dimensions required to manifest God's agape love. As this kind of community is built, and as the members adopt new behaviours to exemplify this vision, they “embody new ways of being” and they begin to implement God's strategy. Awareness of the need for sustainability and sufficiency drive and demand “a culture of responsiveness”. Once a communal culture like this based upon the love of God is shaping the values that inform the decision-making processes, a new ethic of relationality starts to both inspire and encourage social and ecological change. And in this way - rather than approaching the crisis at a level which overwhelms - the agapeic community spawns a culture which is responsive rather than reactionary. Its ongoing influence increases by converting the attitudes of those with whom it comes into contact. Even though this might only be the first step in addressing the ecological crisis, the possibility for positive change once the kingdom of God is advancing through acts of ecological love has the potential to instil a change which is not only unstoppable but also eternal.

(And this is my last point)

[Conclusion] The only sufficient eco-theology is one which enables us to comprehend our God, ourselves and all life in such a way that we are unable to view ourselves as anything other than in solidarity with God and with the rest of creation. The more we embrace our interconnectedness with God - facilitated by the incarnation and continuous via the Holy Spirit who indwells up - the more we will cherish and contribute to our interrelatedness with our fellow humans and non-humans alike. By evoking the character of God - as revealed in Jesus - in our interaction with the world, both globally and locally, we manifest his sovereign rule; a rule which is loving and compassionate, and which is prepared to sacrifice self-interest for the interests of others, for the sake of others. In this way we participate in the purposes of God for cosmic transfiguration, for eschatological completion, for bringing things to the fullness of time, to the end point when Jesus comes again, and for the renewal of creation; not us being raptured out of it but us being part of a renewed creation - exactly how God intended it to be. Maybe, just maybe, if we do these things, the damage done to our ecology will not prove to be irreversible after all.

Amen