

Proverbs 8. 22-31

LAUDATO SI – paragraphs 80 & 81

Letter to the Hebrews: 1. 1-3

Verbs tell us what's going on: what happened in the past, what is happening now, what is going to happen. I created. I am creating. I will create. Most of our translations of the Bible render the first verse of the our Bibles, the first verse of the book of Genesis: In the beginning when God created the heavens and the earth, NRSV. Past tense. The King James Version, authorised to be read in churches for centuries, renders the first words of our scriptures: In the beginning God created the heaven and the earth. Again, past tense.

But a helpful translation of the first five books of the Hebrew scriptures entitled: The Five Books of Moses renders it like this: At the beginning of God's creating of the heavens and the earth, when the earth was wild and waste, darkness over the face of ocean rushing spirit of god hovering over the face of the waters. At the beginning of God's creating ...

Language shapes how we perceive our world. Language gives away how we believe the world works. In the beginning when God created the heavens and the earth; past event. At the beginning of God's creating of the heavens and the earth; not quite so clear. Is it done with, this creating? Has God done with us? Is creation completed or might it be ongoing, still in process? And if it's still ongoing, who are we? What does it mean to be in the world?

We are children of the Enlightenment, that philosophical movement which emerged about three centuries ago when scientists and philosophers began to think about the world, posit theories about the world which did not launch off from scripture, but which developed theories about the nature of the world, the cosmos, theories which arose from human observation. People began to use their reason. You will recall the scandal that Galileo Galilei and Nicolas Copernicus unleashed when they suggested that, indeed, the earth revolved around the sun. That the earth was not the centre of the universe. Their work began a scientific revolution which uncoupled thought from scripture. People began to use their reason.

One of the schools of thought which began to emerge out of the Enlightenment was thinking about God. Independently of scripture. A kind of developing of theories about God, conjured in the human mind. A kind of test-tube deity. One of the schools of theological thought which emerged at this time was what is called Deism. The Church proclaims God as Trinity, holy three and holy one – revealed to humanity as father, son and spirit. And people of faith have through millennia gained a picture of the nature of this triune God through the pages of scripture, what God is like, what God is not like and through their own journey of faith.

But Deism? Deism is something else. The theologian Alistair McGrath describes the God of Deism in this way: *God created the world in a rational and ordered manner, which reflected God's own rational nature, The order of the world is open to human investigation. On being discovered, the ordering demonstrates the wisdom of God. The laws of nature have been set in place by God; it merely remained for a brilliant human being to discover them.* Of course, that brilliant human being would without a doubt have to be an English gentleman, I expect.

This idea about God really had no basis in scripture but was a theory about God and God's creating of the world. Past event. This Deism gave rise to the notion of the clockmaker God. A kind of old man time God who wound up the world, set it going and left the world to its own devices. McGrath writes: *having set the system in motion, and establishing the principles which govern that motion, there is nothing left for God to do. The world is to be seen as a large scale watch, which is completely autonomous and self-sufficient. No further action by God is necessary.*

The inevitable outcome of this theory is that tThe world is ours to do with it what we will. There is no ongoing relationship of God to the world. When you couple this notion with biblical mandate of Genesis chapter 1 to the man and woman created in the divine image we have a somewhat toxic mix: 'Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it; and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the air and over every living thing that moves upon the earth.' The implication of this absentee God is: humanity is free to what it will with the world.

Without a doubt the scientific and technological advances which have arisen since the time of Isaac Newton in the late 1600s have been astounding. Last week I quoted world population figures: 2 billion in the mid-1920s; 8 billion in our own time; four times the number in just 100 years. And we have managed to, in the main, feed and house and protect and sustain so much human life. Because we are on a trajectory of progress. We are taking those laws of nature and harnessing them and ordering human life. Brilliant minds driving human progress. But it is now, as though there are no brakes on this progress machine. Our self-understanding is now a kind of machine hurtling out of control. And we are about the cross the threshold of what may be an irreversible catastrophe.

The trouble with Deist thought and the notion of a clockmaker God is that we have forgotten our creatureliness; we have forgotten the ways in which we are intimately bound up with the life of the earth and so deeply depend; we have forgotten our sister, mother earth and that we have arisen from her life and return to her again: from dust you came; to dust you shall return.

Alistair McGrath makes the helpful distinction between reason and rationality. I spoke a few weeks ago about the place of reason in the Wesleyan Quadrilateral: the four elements John Wesley encourages us to use as we pass along the way: Scripture, Tradition, Reason and Experience.

McGrath suggests reason is the basic human faculty of thinking based on argument and evidence. Reason is theologically neutral and poses no threat to faith – unless it is regarded as the only source of knowledge about God. It then, McGrath says, reason then become rationalism, which is an exclusive relying on human reason alone – and a refusal to allow any weight to anything else – denying scripture, tradition, experience. A kind of dead thinking. A reasoning which rather than giving life, expanding the world, closes it down into a kind of rational wasteland. Without spirit. An utterly disenchanted world. A world simply comprising lifeless matter, objects, resources for our use and exploitation. We are reaping the harvest of this rationalism which has reduced the creation to dead matter.

In contrast, one of the great environmental prophets of our time Thomas Berry said that the world is a community of living subjects, rather than a collection of objects. Berry, a Catholic priest and cultural historian, looked deeply into the way we were living and the impact of that both on the life of the planet but also on the human soul. A world that is a collection of objects is a disenchanted world; a de-spirited world.

David Tacey, writes of the need for re-enchantment, a recapturing of the spirit of the world, a regaining of a sense that the world is filled with the grandeur of God. David suggests that the environmental crisis is not just a moral or economic issue but a spiritual one – at its foundation one about how we experience ourselves in the world, about our own lack of a binding relationship to all of which we are inextricably connected to. He suggests our rationality about the world points to a lack of human love, an inability to extend love and concern to that which lies beyond our own immediate self-interest. Indeed this is the way the climate crisis is being presented to us is as though the objects which make up the earth's systems are as it were conspiring against and our expectation that we should be able to continue our progress; unimpeded. As we are the problem; it is we who need to undergo a metanoia, a repentance and discover a kinship with all that is. We need to rediscover that the creation is not some kind of divine bedside clock, set going by the maker, but a creation which is ongoing, of which we are co-workers, co-creators, co-conspirators, brothers and sisters with all that is, children of mother earth.

Pope Francis writes: The Spirit of God has filled the universe with possibilities and therefore, from the very heart of things, something new can always emerge: "Nature is nothing other than a certain kind of art, namely God's art, impressed upon things, whereby those things are moved to a determinate end.

David Tacey writes that the great error of Western society – and we are its spawn – has been the privatisation of the soul, so that the only spirituality we are able to now imagine is a dialogue between ourselves and our individual conscience. And so, our response to the climate crisis is reduced to a cumulation of individual acts to fix the problem. But the world is not a problem to be solved, rather a creation to be loved. Francis writes: *Our capacity to reason, to develop arguments, to be inventive, to interpret reality and to create art, along with other not yet discovered capacities, are signs of a uniqueness which transcends the spheres of physics and biology. The sheer novelty involved in the emergence of a personal being within a material universe presupposes a direct action of God and a particular call to life and to relationship on the part of a "Thou" who addresses himself to another "thou".*

Again, we come to language. Language which expresses something of how we perceive ourselves and the other in the world. All of us divine subjects. May that same wisdom which was there at creation, delighting in the work of God bring order out of our chaos and realign us with the heart and mind and word of God.

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