

## THE STEWARDSHIP OF CREATION

### THE THEME

CES has chosen for its theme this year 2011 the theme of stewardship, specifically of creation. Not so very long ago most Christians in Australia who heard that word stewardship would have thought of money or at least a campaign to raise it. If we had read some theology and ethics we might have recognised a debate about economics and Christian ethics that was conducted in the 80s and 90s of the last century. In Christianity the image was in the West mostly associated with money.

But this year we want to reflect on stewardship in relation to the created order, an order we believe is under stress. It is a powerful biblical metaphor that suggests we are not owners but managers, servants (not a welcome idea) of goods and an order that are not ours. The rendering of effective, productive and creative stewardship of goods and resources (represented by money) is best illustrated in the parables of Jesus in Luke 12.41-48 and 19.11-27. The first addresses the abuse of power through the abuse and coercion of others and the greedy, narcissistic and opportunistic consumption of another's goods. The second urges wisdom as well as creativity in the use of resources and reviles fear and timidity.

The metaphor suggests that God not humans is the principal locus of consciousness and moral purpose in the universe. Furthermore, traditionally Christians have valued the material ordering of creation because in the incarnation they perceived that the original creative principle through which God created the universe -the divine Word- became flesh and dwelt among us. The natural order is God's possession and our role is to lovingly tend it.

If we have chosen well we trust that this will open up new discussion as well as link our deliberations to ecumenical and theological debates from the past and into the future, because none of this is entirely new. A little historical research reveals that the 1962 publication of Rachel Carson's *The Silent Spring* in the USA which attacked the misuse of chemicals in agriculture was probably the starting place for much of the modern debate. She was regarded as hysterical but most chemicals she criticised have now been banned.

A decade later in 1972 the *Ecologist* published a *Blueprint for Survival* which among other things recommended the reduction of the population of Britain from 53 million to 30 million. The population debate had begun. The other publication was the Club of Rome report, *The limits of Growth*. Many further reports were to follow that severely modified the original but the original made the impact. Whatever its value it raised doubts and scepticism about interpreting expert opinion that have remained to this day. The reason was it was not expert enough.

Now we have reports and research aplenty. But still scepticism dogs the scientific and technical enterprise. The legacy of the Club of Rome lives on.

The expression of an extreme view in 1967 by Lynn White attacking the Judaeo-Christian attitude to nature asserting it to be the most anthropocentric religion the world had seen stirred the theological pot by sharpening reflection on our understanding of the tradition. That attack proved creative and forced Christian theologians, Christian ethicists and the ecumenical movement to explore other ways of understanding the tradition. It is rich vein we cannot leave untouched both to avoid duplication and making the same mistakes.

## **THE SCOPE OF THE SUBJECT**

The ecological crisis is now seen as one of the defining features of the late modern era. Most accounts include certain common features, in summary:

- The loss of species originated by human action at a rate of decades rather than millennia,
- Climate change said to be caused by human activity,
- Industrial and local pollution continues apace,
- Soil erosion and desertification are affecting the food growing areas of the planet.

Embedded in these problems are the scientific and technical issues associated with the provision and use of water, the place and meaning of cities, the economics of global late modernity, food, population, and energy. They also include poverty and environmental inequity for the poor, powerless and dispossessed.

But perhaps also we are finding that no matter how hard technical difficulties may be to solve the more difficult issues lie elsewhere. They lurk in the much more murky world of politics, public policy and a tendency of late modernity according to Anthony Giddens to disembed human life from prior attachments to place, custom and tradition which have in the past helped to conserve the environment. It is an environment where, as Peter Singer so succinctly puts it 'ethics is not part of the structure of the universe.' And neither is meaning. According to this view we may choose to construe the natural order as having meaning and purpose but it does not present itself that way.

In this world of competing ideologies, political, social, religious, where the use of power, influence and prestige become as important players as good ideas and technical expertise we will necessarily become involved. Most of us are not technical experts in clearly defined areas but we all swim in these turbid waters where the future will be determined by power and ideology. In this social soup we have a stake. It is in this mix that debates about sustainability are conducted and muddled. As we do we are drawn into debates about the construction of nature as a resource bank ready for reordering for human purposes we recognise we are living and debating an ideology in which the natural world that has no prior moral significance before we impute to it beauty, value or utility.

Enter Christian theology.

## **CHRISTIAN THEOLOGY, CHRISTIAN ETHICS, CHRISTIAN LIVING**

Ever since Lyn White's attack on Christian ideas about creation and God the nature of the growing crisis has posed theological questions. Some of those questions are: The nature of God and God's relationship to the whole of the natural order and not simply humans; The place of eschatology and/or apocalyptic in Christian ecological thinking; and the nature of redemption. Can the Christian ideas of the Triune God, the incarnation of the Word of God and the resurrection have something to contribute to the debates?

But systematics has not been the only Christian discipline put under the microscope; so has biblical studies. The interpretation of texts has become significant. Genesis 1, Genesis 2 and Genesis 9 have received much attention but careful attention to the Psalms, Isaiah, Hosea and other texts in the Old Testament need further attention. But New Testament texts about the Word, about Christ and Creation and apocalyptic visions call for further interrogation.

What we long for most are some practical outcomes for Christian discipleship. After all, this is a matter of living. How shall we be disciples living out God's call to us in Christ to be a blessing to the world?

Colin Dundon

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