

## **Post Paris: the Psychology of a new World Order**

Late last year the Paris Climate conference and its final communiqué felt like new hope. It appeared that we may have turned a corner. The glass half empty view of the conference and communiqué will continue to focus on the reality that targets are not binding and countries like India and China will continue to increase emissions in the short term. (Despite Greg Hunt's protestation Australia probably will too). The glass half-full version, to which I subscribe, is that the conference has significantly changed the psychology of the climate debate. In many respects progress is no longer as dependent upon passive politicians, subservient to big business. The market knows that the game is up for fossil fuels and already disinvestment has begun on a grand scale. New fossil projects will be increasingly hard to finance because investors will not risk being stuck with stranded assets. More and more people will switch to renewable energy and as they do, dirty energy will be more expensive to deliver. It is no longer credible for media to peddle the view that there are two sides to the argument. There is only one scientifically credible story; for the rest obfuscation will continue and spurious theories masquerading as fact will continue to be peddled. However the majority of the world is now, hopefully, on the same page. The only question is how passionately and by whom will change be prosecuted.

Let me tell you why I think people of faith must be in the vanguard of prosecution and action, before I finally return to the Paris conference.

We generally prosecute what we believe to be true. In the environmental context what is truth and how does it relate to wisdom? We are meeting in the Chapel of the Australian Centre for Christianity and Culture whose slogan is "Wisdom for the Common Good". For many years I have been fascinated by storytelling as a means of conveying truth. The Christian community has a 66 book library of narrative which has the potential for universal truth but it has become a rich vein of mockery for people like Stephen Fry or Richard Dawkins. There are various reasons for the mockery however it is painful to admit that the custodians of the library, the Church and its

members, have frequently misrepresented the narrative insisting on the literalness of each word rather than truth being conveyed

CS Lewis and his friend JRR Tolkien were twentieth century masters of storytelling in the English language. Their aim was to construct a carrier for inner truth that had the capacity to transform a merely functional life into a life of lived wisdom. It is a little early to tell who those giants of storytelling of the 21<sup>st</sup> century will be.

Since I first became a lecturer in Old Testament in 1973 I have been particularly fascinated by the primeval narratives of Genesis (Genesis 1-11). These narratives are not about a moment at the beginning of time, they are conveyers of truth about the whole of time, of all existence. They are about the destiny which humanity is called to share with the whole created order. For example, the Noah narrative is not the account of a calamitous historical event, but is a continuation of the creation narrative. At its core this narrative makes it plain that human hubris and greed has the capacity to reverse the order of creation. That is to say, creation, which we often refer to as the 'natural order' is hard wired for mutuality, and yet humanity seeks an exploitative independence with the capacity to break down this life giving balance. In the past this capacity has been restricted regionally or locally. From this narrative, which has canonical authority for Muslims Christian and Jews alike, there can hardly be a greater warning that today's human hubris based within a human population of 7+billion has the capacity for unprecedented global disruption.

Within the whole primeval narrative my work in relation to the environmental challenge has been focussed on four little verses at the beginning of Genesis 2, the verses about sabbath. When we hear this word 'sabbath' our mind goes immediately to Jewish laws (halakha) which dictate how one day in seven is to be kept.

While not in any way wishing to denigrate Jewish practice, set within the primeval narrative there is much more to sabbath than this. Sabbath is essentially about the relationality of the whole created order, how it is that blessing is to be experienced, how sacredness is to

be understood. Sabbath is the fundamental biblical ethic, it is about how everything is called to relate to everything else and to find its blessing in relationship with everything else. If you like, sabbath is about how life is to be celebrated. In the early biblical narrative the presence of God was understood geographically in the fire and cloud and finally in the temple. When the temple was destroyed and the exile complete in 586, a crisis of gigantic proportions had to be addressed. Had the Israelites been wrong to believe that God could somehow be present to humanity? In the context of this awful question, the primeval narrative in Genesis was finalised. The amazing outcome is that God's presence finds universality not in a single location but in sabbath, within the whole created order. As we seek to be in harmony with the whole created order we are also in harmony with God; as we seek to exploit the created order for selfish gain we are distanced from God. The book of Revelation Chapter 13 brings this point into sharp relief. The mark of the beast so famously described in this chapter, 666, can be understood as the bite of a serpent, but equally and perhaps more appropriately it is to be understood as the self inflicted burden that humans impose upon themselves and the whole creation when exploitation for selfish gain becomes the dominant cultural hallmark. We will come back to this point later, but sabbath presents a counter position to the ubiquitous, exploitative, working of the market, the dominant feature of 21<sup>st</sup> century economics. The market has appeared to replace 'values' (morals) with 'value' (monetary gain) as the standard by which life and wellbeing is to be judged.

Sabbath therefore presents a lie to the sometimes assumed truth that Christianity is primarily about corralling souls to heaven. Christianity is about a life fully immersed in this world. It is about living appropriately in relation to God others and the world around us. I am arguing that the sabbath ethic can and should be the foundational source of moral discernment for all humanity as together we face the environmental crisis, for set within the primeval narrative it does not simply address people of faith but humanity as a whole

The sabbath ethic, rather than the sabbath day, is played out in the history of Israel. According to Jeremiah and the Chronicler, Israel faced the ignominy of exile not because they were not religious enough, but because they were not moral enough: not because they were not worshipping appropriately one day in seven, but because they did not keep the sabbath ethic. Specifically they put economic gain above the sabbath principle as it relates to fellow human beings – they refused to set the slaves free. The sabbath ethic is all encompassing, it relates to the land, to animals both wild and domestic, to the plants, indeed to all living things – not least fellow human beings. In the sabbath ethic neither fellow human beings nor land could ever be owned.

It is not only in the Old Testament that sabbath features as a way of describing the meeting and combining of the divine and human endeavour. In the New Testament, Jesus' ministry is set in the context of sabbath roots. Luke achieves this by having Jesus read Isaiah 61, the Jubilee passage, in the synagogue. Jubilee is the heart of the sabbath ethic; it is about release from debt. Debt of any kind is seen as the ultimate evil because it holds the one in debt and the one to whom the debt is owed in a position of unequal power that potentially destroys both. Debt and how it is dealt with is perhaps the dominant feature of the New Testament indeed of the cross itself.

Fast forward to the 21<sup>st</sup> century and debt continues to plague relationships everywhere, not least because inequity is growing exponentially. Ten percent of the human population now control 90 percent of global assets. This is not simply a position of unequal wealth it is more seriously a position of gross inequality of political power. The wealthy hold disproportionate lobbying capacity. It is as a result of the lobbying of the wealthy and self-interested that the most serious debt of all, environmental debt, is not being properly addressed. It is not in the interest of the wealthy to do so. Humanity now consumes 140+ percent of the earth's capacity annually, leaving a monumental and growing debt into the future. The aspect of this debt which properly receives most attention is in the growth of green

house gases, inevitably trapping more heat and causing weather events as well as the climate itself to become overly charged.

The sabbath is about relationality, about the truth that none of us lives alone, can live alone, we are all mutually interdependent, more than that, this interdependence is intergenerational. Now, coming to the heart of the matter, because this is not simply a mechanical world, it is a relational world, all our lives are determined as much by limits as they are by aspirations. We have to live with the other in mind, for it is within shared common good that abundance ultimately lies. Creation is an act by which God creates space for that which is not God. According to the biblical narrative humans are to imitate this divine activity by making space for that which is not self. The great 20<sup>th</sup> century dogmatic theologian Karl Barth once posed this enigmatic question “will humanity keep the sabbath or not?” His question has never been more appropriate than today. Will humanity be prepared to live within the limits which will enable sustainability in the long term and which will demand a reduction in the culture of individualism which so pervades the world and its economic aspirations.

I suggest two interrelated areas within which humanity must accept limits. The first is to the growth of the human population. Thomas Malthus and the Club of Rome were not fundamentally wrong in their arguments. They are of course right that there cannot be an endless expansion to the human population. They miscalculated technological advancement such as nitrogen fixation which has enormously increased agricultural production. However we are warned that it would be a huge mistake to continue to rely upon technology to solve what is essentially a problem of human behaviour. Logic tells us that the earth cannot carry an endlessly growing population. Professor Paul Crutzen describes this as the age of the Anthropocene. An age, like none before, where a single species – humanity - determines the destiny or survival of every species and indeed of the future of the planet itself.

To bring the population to a static and perhaps a falling state three matters need to be addressed. The first is that the poorest must be lifted out of their poverty and become educated. The remaining pockets of very high fertility are in areas of gross disadvantage. It is foolish and short sighted of the Australian government to have drastically reduced overseas aid. Secondly there must be a concerted effort to ensure that everyone has access to family planning technology appropriate to them. The Roman Catholic Church in particular must become quite unambiguous in its support for family planning. This is the one serious gap in what is otherwise an excellent encyclical from Pope Francis, *Laudato Si*. The third matter is that the nexus between economic growth and population expansion must be broken. Economic growth is the ubiquitous mantra of political leadership everywhere. In countries that are undeveloped economic growth is possible without population expansion. In developed countries like Australia economic growth is dependent upon population expansion. Others have argued that exponential growth is not necessary to maintain living standards. This is one of the great challenges of the capitalist system. At the moment capitalism's survival depends upon human population expansion. If this is the only way capitalism can survive, it will itself be a significant reason why human civilisation as we know it might itself struggle to survive into the 22<sup>nd</sup> century.

Is population control anathema to the biblical narrative? No it is not. One of the important ethical suppositions of the bible is that each generation must live with the next generation in mind. In the past a growing population was necessary to secure the future of humanity. Disease and natural disaster kept the population relatively static despite high levels of fertility. In the current age when medicine and quality of lifestyle more or less guarantee length and flourishing of life, this is no longer necessary. Not only is it no longer necessary, a constantly growing population is clearly a threat to the stability and well being of future generations.

The second area of limitation within which humanity must learn to comfortably live is consumption. Currently each generation consumes

quantitatively more than the generation preceding it. This cannot endlessly continue. The advertising industry likes to tell us our identity is tied to consumption. We know that not to be true. We know that apart from those in real poverty, the level of happiness and fulfilment experienced by those on a modest income and those who are very wealthy is marginal at best. Indeed there are some indicators that show great wealth to be a happiness or wellbeing prohibitor. So why are we caught in a trap of ever increasing consumption when we know it does nothing to increase happiness or well being?

In 1975 Bishop John Vincent Taylor published a little book called *Enough is Enough*. He begins each chapter with a quote from Alice in Wonderland. I especially like:

I wish you wouldn't squeeze so', said the dormouse who was sitting next to her.' I can hardly breathe'. 'I can't help it,' said Alice very meekly: 'I'm growing'. 'You've no right to grow here said the dormouse'. 'Don't talk nonsense,' said Alice more boldly: 'you know you are growing too.' 'Yes, but I grow at a reasonable pace,' said the dormouse: 'not in that ridiculous fashion'.<sup>1</sup>

Whether Charles Dodgson had the environment in mind we cannot know, but this quote cannot be more apposite to our current dilemma. We are all part of a culture in which the rights of the individual to 'grow in a ridiculous fashion' are exalted. By way of contrast a core descriptor of the New Testament community was that they shared all things in common. The 21<sup>st</sup> century human population has to grasp something of this ethic in order that there might be space for other species and for climatic stability. That we can do this without any loss of wellbeing or happiness makes the task quite doable.

And so we return to Post Paris, the psychology of a new world order.

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<sup>1</sup> Taylor, *Enough is Enough*, 1.

First it is clear that we live in a single house. It is simply not possible for a single nation, let alone a single individual to act as if self interest can somehow be secured independently of the best interest of the whole global community. In the past and to a degree even now, nations have approached global climate conferences with national self interest in mind. This is ludicrous. Responding appropriately to the environmental crisis and especially to climate change must be the single goal to which all aspire. The 1920 Lambeth Conference of Bishops meeting in London at the conclusion of the 1<sup>st</sup> WW concluded that national self interest was the world's greatest evil. They were responding to the needless suffering and devastation that had been inflicted on the world out of national hubris. Up until Paris national self interest was doing the same in relation to climate change. Hopefully now the psychology has changed.

A single house is an underlying biblical theme. Ecumenics, ecology and economy all have their roots in the Greek word *οἶκος*. Ecumenics has to do with the relationship between the occupants of the house. Ecology has to do with the wisdom of the house, while economy has to do with rules or housekeeping. It is a very strange, if not an idiotic matter, that human culture has not only allowed but encouraged housekeeping to be at the apex of the triangle. 'It is the economy stupid' we hear at every political rally. Well it is not! The economy must function to serve the kind of house we want to have. It cannot decide that. Market based economy has only one motivator – profit. The 21<sup>st</sup> century community of humanity must work much harder at the wisdom of the house and make absolutely certain that the housekeeping serves this wisdom. We must move past our obsession with the economy and GDP as the only or even the most important indicator of national or individual health.

Secondly it is clear that what remains of historically stored solar energy (fossil fuel) must stay in the ground. The industrial revolution was possible because of the availability of fossil fuel. For this we should be grateful, although of course a very high price



was paid in the early days by those who went underground to dig it out, often children. The technology to power the world from renewable energy sources is now increasingly available and will become more available the more it is used. The argument frequently peddled by Australian politicians that coal is required to drag the poor of the world out of their poverty, particularly in India, is simply untrue. The poor are poor because they are disempowered. What the poor require is control over their own energy sources. This is possible with renewable energy. The poor do not need to be forever at the mercy of very large companies.

Relying on the resources of today rather than depending on a benefaction from the past or worse, diminishing the opportunities of the future, is a strong biblical theme. It is there in the manna narrative and of course it is present in the Lord's Prayer. The gifts available every day are infinitely more than we require. Energy resources from the sun available to us every day are thousands of times more abundant than we need. It is absolutely critical that we rejoice in the abundance that is available every day and learn to harness its blessing for the well being not simply of humanity but of all living things. This is no longer a matter of can it be done, the question is, why is it not being done.

Finally, it is clear that in one sense we do not have an environmental crisis, what we have is a crisis of the human vocation. Humans, particularly since Reagan and Thatcher have been seduced into believing we are what we consume, or what we own. You remember Thatcher's famous quote, mimicked by the extreme right such as Bronwyn Bishop, that there is no such thing as society. How wrong and how foolish?! We are to whom we belong. The creation narrative says that humans (male and female) are 'adam' from the 'adamah' the earth. If we belong first to the creator we belong secondly to the creation. We do not live apart from the world. The world is not a resource put at the disposal of humanity; we are part of the world and indeed of one another. Africans have a word for this - Ubuntu. Our destiny is entwined with the destiny of everything else. Human vocation is not to seek

an advantage over others it is to find a way in which being a blessing to others and particularly to the created order might become a source of deep fulfilment and blessedness; Common Life emanating in Common Good.

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