

*The God in human form*

Last week, in introducing this short series on Paul's letter to the Church in Philippi, I said something about Paul's circumstances as he writes. He is in prison, possibly in the city of Ephesus, and that is not hugely surprising - if you did as Paul did and went round the ancient world proclaiming the message he proclaimed, sooner or later you would get into trouble. Because the world has been shaped by 2000 years of Christianity and Paul's message has become commonplace it is easy to forget how apparently absurd and offensive it actually was. What the Christian Gospel did was to identify God, the supreme Creator and Lord of all, with a Jewish Galilean peasant who had been executed in the most despised and shameful manner possible: crucifixion, reserved for slaves and political agitators. And Paul, incarcerated in prison for preaching this 'nonsense', shows no sign of soft-peddalling or backing off. On the contrary, he doubles down on it. He quotes what was probably a current Christian hymn, familiar in worship, and which extols Jesus Christ, who, though he was in the form of God, did not snatch at equality with God but in an act of cosmic humility humbled himself, being found in human likeness, coming to us in human form, stooping down to the deep, dark depths of death on a cross. And from there, from that place of humility and humiliation, God has exalted him and given him the above every name.

Now, what we find in this hymn, what we find Paul celebrating so defiantly, is a completely new and subversive understanding of power. When people in Paul's day proclaimed, as they did, that Caesar was Lord they thought they knew what power looked like. They saw it exhibited everywhere, all around them, in weaponry, and in violent symbols and in the disdain of Roman soldiers, and in the corpses of crucified rebels which lined their roads. They thought that was what power looked like. Now, however, Paul, quoting this hymn, was telling them to see it differently – to see power precisely in one of those roadside crosses, and as a symbol not of defeat but of triumph. Now, when power looks like that, everything changes, and eventually the world changed as a result of the preaching of this crucified God. But in the meantime there emerged a new kind of community that learnt to live by this vision – it was known as 'church'. Here ancient enmities and power-plays and hierarchies were subverted and laid to rest. And that is why Paul quotes this hymn here, because he was writing to one such church and evidently there were reasons why they needed to be reminded of all this.

So the preaching of the crucified God, expressed so powerfully here in this passage, had social and political implications. It affected the world's understanding of how society is ordered. It turned the world upside down. I want to suggest however, on this morning especially, when we celebrate Harvest Thanksgiving, that this passage might have not just social and political implications, but ecological ones as well. And this matters. Today our service is as kind of celebration of nature, of creation. Once more, for us at least, the earth has brought forth its gifts and produce: summer and winter, seedtime and harvest have not failed. And yet, as we know, nature is in a bad way. I do not need to brandish all the terrifying figures and statistics about climate change and the melting of ice-caps, but in the past couple of weeks we have heard the great environmentalist David Attenborough issues dire warnings: there are an estimated 8 million species inhabiting our planet, he tells us, and almost one million are currently threatened with extinction. Since the 1970s, vertebrate animals have declined by at least 60%... and so on and so on. So how on earth did we get ourselves into this mess and is there any way out?

Well, I will argue that our reading from Philippians this morning addresses this issue and we will return to it – but first we turn to our passage from the Book of Genesis, and here we find something quite troubling. Here we have the story of creation, culminating with the creation of human beings, God's special creatures who bear God's image. So we read that God said, 'let us make humankind in our image according to our likeness and let them have dominion over the fish of the seas and the birds of the air and over every creeping thing that creeps upon the earth.' Now, here we hit a problem. That phrase 'have dominion' is repeated again in the verses we read

and it seems to depict the relationship we have been given over the animal world. And we are also told here that we are to ‘fill the earth and subdue it’ and that seems to depict our relationship to the rest of creation, the non-animal realm. And just think for a moment what those words evoke: ‘dominion’, ‘subdue’. They would seem to depict our stance versus nature in combative and violent terms. Nature is a threat that must be overcome; it is wild and must be tamed. And some have seen in this passage in Genesis the very roots of our ecological crisis: Genesis set us humans in mastery and in conflict over nature, and is it therefore surprising that nature has ended up imperilled and endangered? The charge is therefore that Christianity is an anti-ecological religion that bequeaths us a skewed relationship with the rest of God’s world.

Well, one way that some Christians have tried to get out of this is to say that rather than being in ‘dominion’ over nature, with a mandate to subdue it, we should think in terms of ‘stewardship’: that our role is not to dominate but to care for creation and to nurture and develop it as good and wise stewards do. But this suggestion has also met with criticism. The idea of stewardship, after all, still elevates us to a position of trust and management over nature that is beyond us and reflects our hubris. It assumes that we are qualified to enhance and to prosper nature when in fact are singularly poorly equipped for this. As the scientist James Lovelock has put it, ‘we are no more qualified to be stewards or developers of the Earth than are goats to be gardeners.’ Perhaps, however, the real problem with stewardship, as with dominion, is that it sets us apart and over and against nature, rather than seeing ourselves as part of it. Nature, after all, is not something out there and over there: it is me, it is you. We are embedded in creation, in nature. I am as much a creation as a rock or a tree or an ant or a sparrow or a chimpanzee, and everything is inter-connected, inter-related. And here we come upon what I would suggest is a real problem for humanity, that rather than seeing our unity and community with all created things our uniqueness as creatures has alienated us from nature, separating us from it and setting us over and against it. We have lost any sense of nature as ‘mother nature’, to whom we are bound in dependence and from whom we receive life. And when that happens – well, everything falls apart.

And, furthermore, this setting apart from the rest of nature, unfortunately, can easily be encouraged by the scientific mindset. Science, after all, teaches us to observe. Science relies on objectivity and therefore detachment. It distances us from what we investigate. And so the great 17<sup>th</sup> century pioneer of the modern scientific method, Francis Bacon, saw nature as hiding its laws from us – they are buried deep beneath nature’s surface. And we must wrestle with nature if it is to reveal its secrets. And Bacon’s contemporary, the philosopher René Descartes, believed that scientific rationality would make humans ‘the masters and possessors’ of nature’s forces. Here is confrontational, coercive language – and here lurks the dangers in the scientific and technological mindset. We are in danger of no longer seeing ourselves as part of nature but as set over against it – and then we end up destroying it. And of course, the tragedy is that then nature bites back. When we break our bond with nature, standing over against it as a foe, as its destroyer – then it breaks its bond with us and stands over against us and becomes our foe, our destroyer. And we see it all around us as human life is threatened by eco-disaster.

Well, perhaps this is the moment to return to our Philippians passage, and a more Christian understanding of power. The key point in this passage is God’s total identification with us in Jesus Christ. He did not grasp at equality with God but he emptied himself, being born in human likeness, being found in human form. This God does not stand over against us in detached objectivity. This God does not stand above us as master and possessor, indeed he identifies with us in our most debased and lowly state, taking the form of a slave, fastened to a cross. Here is humility - and here is what power should look like. What this passage from Philippians teaches us is that dominion, power, authority comes out of total solidarity with those over whom we rule. And it’s time for us to rediscover what our solidarity with nature means – indeed what humility before nature looks like.

One image to close with. A few chapters further on in Genesis we come to the story of Noah and the flood. The earth is facing destruction and Noah gathers the animals together in the ark. Can you imagine the scene: Noah and his family and the animals all together in the ark? One scholar, following Jewish rabbinical interpretations, has suggested that God here is training Noah and his family to live with creation, that God has Noah build the ark to train him for living with his fellow creatures. In a sense he has dominion but he is dependent upon them as they are dependent upon him in that ark. They must learn to live together – as fellow creatures.

This ancient Christian hymn that is quoted in our reading this morning turned power and dominion inside out and upside down. It transformed the ancient world and its politics. On this day of Harvest Thanksgiving it addresses us in our ecological crisis, and it offers us hope for the future. Amen, and to the God of Jesus Christ be praise and glory. Amen.

Almighty and gracious God,  
 Eternal Maker, Saviour and redeemer,  
 we praise and worship you this day, giver of this world  
 in all its wonder and diversity.  
 We praise you for a world teeming with life,  
 a world that pulses with the rhythms of the seasons,  
 summer and winter, seedtime and harvest,  
 a world that is poised in a delicate balance  
 and where all created things may flourish and  
 resound to the praise of its Maker.  
 Today in particular we praise you for the gifts of the earth,  
 rejoicing that once more you have shown  
 yourself faithful in providing for our needs.  
 Truly, earth has brought forth plenty  
 and bears witness to your generosity.  
 O God, forgive us that we are part of a world  
 that is out of kilter,  
 where all created things do not flourish  
 and where your God given balance is violated  
 by our mismanagement and our greed.  
 We confess that we are part of that world  
 and contribute to its groaning and its pain.  
 Forgive us, O God, that we are poor stewards  
 of what we have been entrusted with.  
 Have mercy upon us, we pray.  
 Free us from captivity to what harms,  
 Free us for one another and for the world you have made.  
 Send your Holy Spirit, we pray, to renew us,  
 and to renew the face of the earth.  
 We pray in Jesus' name and we join together in the words he taught us saying...