



Find Joy in Creation!

Creation and Covenant: a biblical kaleidoscope

'The heavens are telling the glory of God.' So says the author of Psalm 19. But it is not obvious that they do. The heavens declare their own glory - we can all agree on that. But 'the glory of God'? That comes from a perspective of faith in God which then surveys the firmament and recognises that it proclaims his handiwork. It is from within the covenant that God is recognised as 'creator' and then nature affirmed as 'creation'. It is within the covenant relationship with God that we can discern that the glory of the heavens tells of God's glory. It is when the covenant community is coming to terms with the uncertainties of exile, that they provide us with the richest record of the revelation of God as Creator.

In other words, how we see the world, how we understand 'nature', depends on which way we are looking. And 'nature' has been looked at in many different ways. For some people in C20th, as Alister McGrath argues, 'nature' is a mindless force, causing inconvenience - something to be tamed. For others, 'nature' means an open-air gymnasium offering leisure and sports facilities. Yet others use the word 'nature' to describe a wild wilderness, associated with scuba-diving, hiking and hunting. And for others 'nature' is a supply-depot producing minerals, water and food to sustain human life. 'Nature' can be homely - as in the 'nature study' which we used to do in my primary school. Or it can be awesome. If you have stood on the edge of the Grand Canyon, you will know that some people's first reaction is 'O my God!' - a sense of the awesomeness and hugeness of nature which dwarfs our sense of human identity. It must tragically and terrifyingly have been the same - though negatively - on the coast of Japan when the tsunami followed the earthquake.

We do not simply see nature, we see nature 'as' something. From within the covenant of grace, the people of God have always seen nature *as* 'Creation'.

But having said that, there are a number of different perspectives on creation in the biblical narratives. I want to explore some of these different perspectives - in fact they are a kaleidoscope of different colours - and see how they relate to the environmental questions being forced on us by climate change.

Here are six colours:

1. The colour of Job 38 - 42 is awesome astonishment.

After 37 chapters of misery, the Lord at last answers Job out of the whirlwind, and it is not encouraging. "Where were you when I laid the foundation of the earth... when all the morning stars sang together and all the heavenly beings shouted for joy?"

Then the poem elaborates the Lord's presence in the sea and the snow, the rain and the frost, the lions and the ravens, the goats and the wild asses, the ox, the ostrich and the horse, and then Behemoth the hippopotamus and Leviathan the crocodile - even these frightening monsters are part of God's creation. They were there long before Job, or even humanity, were thought of. Here are the creatures on their own territory - not there for humanity, but in their own right. Each has their own being in God's purposes. With Leviathan, Job is taken into the watery chaos. There are limits - the earth rests on firm foundations - but there is fierce strength, wild beauty, scavengers and predators, vibrant brutality. Yet God seems to speak with astonishment and appreciation - a proud celebration of nature's diversity. And where was Job? "Look at Behemoth, which I made, just as I made you" (40.15). Job, too, is part of the intricate web of biodiversity, with humanity interconnected with the creatures of the wild. You, too, are part of the community of creation. And the proper response is astonishment and humility and awe. Creation points to the Creator.

Lynn White's charge against Christianity that it is the most anthropocentric of all religions, and so the cause of our environmental crisis, is true to the extent that we have colluded with that aspect of the enlightenment approach to nature which replaced awe and humility with exploitation and management. The perspective of the Book of Job is to move us from the wildness of creation to the wisdom of the Creator - to hear behind the roar of the lion the voice of God in the whirlwind. Or, to change the key, to see beyond the birds of the air, the Heavenly Father who feeds them; beyond the lilies of the field, the God who clothes them with glory. (Matt. 6. 25ff).

2. The colour of Genesis 2 – 3 is intimacy and interconnectedness.

The interconnectedness and interdependence of humanity with the rest of the natural world in God's garden is also one of the themes of Genesis 2 and 3. But the tone here is much more intimate and homely. Adam is made out of the dust of the ground - which we now know to be the dust of dying stars; 'you are dust and to dust you shall return.' Humanity is earthed within the rest of the created order, and yet alone among the creatures is addressed by God, charged with the responsibility of royal service (to guard and to keep the garden), enabled to live in relationship, given the capacity for moral choice, can experience shame, guilt, alienation, and knows that he will die. James Barr argued that Genesis 2 and 3 are essentially a reflection on mortality. And I think that is a large part of it. And yet Adam does not die - or at least not physically then. He is clothed by God's provision, and driven out of the garden for his own protection. But then we find that there are cherubim with flaming swords guarding the way back to the tree of life. What is that about? The tree of life symbolises the life of God - the presence of God in the midst of the garden. The symbolism of the tree appears again in the design of the tabernacle and the temple for the people of covenant faith - the seven branched candlestick is the tree of life - God's presence in the midst of God's temple. So here humanity has an ambiguous role. Through God's gift, humanity is set in a place of responsibility. Through human choice and human sin, damage is done to the life of God's garden and the relationships within it. In a world in which creation is fragile and sometimes broken, humanity is protected by God - but humanity is now separated from the tree of life. Access to God's presence is no longer obvious. The temple itself illustrates the

barriers to God's presence separated off from the court of the Gentiles and the court of Israel, and the court of the priests, in the holy of holies where only the high priest can enter but once a year. There is a sacredness to God's creation, but it is not obvious. And the Genesis story continues into strife and violence and separation. How powerful the imagery in the Gospel, then, when as Jesus dies, the veil of the temple is torn two from the top to the bottom. The separations are ended, the barriers are down, all are welcome - a pointer to the time when the whole of creation celebrates the presence of God in the new heaven and the new earth. Or as Hans Kung put it 'the kingdom of God is creation healed.'

3. Ecclesiastes has a different colour - resignation, at times bordering on despair.

One of the biblical texts which keeps looking down at the frustration of it all is that enigmatic book of Qoheleth – Ecclesiastes. The Creator gets a mention in the very last chapter 'Remember your Creator in the days of your youth' (12.1) Why? Because you are getting old and will die, just as the whole this creation is dying. But the majority of the book is of waste and frustration. The author does not engage with the cruelty and apparent wastefulness of the evolutionary process. But gets close. Vanity of vanities, all is vanity. What comes around, goes around. Everything gets recycled in some way. What is the point of it all?

And yet there are just a couple of glimpses of hope that the author can look beyond the frustrations of the present to something deeper, something more profound, even more real. God is in heaven, and you upon earth (5.2), he says; yet, 'he has put eternity into man's minds' (3.11). That is why the young man is to remember his Creator, and why Qoheleth ends in the way he does: 'The end of the matter: all has been heard. Fear God and keep his commandments: for that is the whole duty of everyone. For God will bring every deed into judgement.' In other words, even though everything looks futile and vanity, and as though nothing has meaning under the sun, that nothing ultimately matters at all, the end is this, which we can receive as good news: everything matters - God judges every deed - so fear God and keep his commandments.

This is not so far from that remarkable paragraph in Romans 8, of creation groaning in travail, subjected to futility, waiting for God's new world to be born. And the end of the remarkable chapter about cosmic resurrection in 1 Cor 15 which surprisingly ends with 'You know that in the Lord, your labour is not in vain.' Everything matters. In the story about Luther, he was right to say that if the Lord is coming tomorrow, he, Luther, would plant a tree.

4. The colour of Genesis 1 is majesty and order.

The faith of the writer of Genesis 1 reaches beyond the frustrations of the present to discern the goodness of God's hand. If written from the exile, it gives grounds for comfort and hope to God's people. All things are ordered; all creatures have their place; you, too, belong within the panorama of God's purposes for the whole

creation, for you are made to be his image, cultivating the earth and exercising responsible care for the animals.

There is a profundity to Genesis 1, which moves from the majesty of God to the mystery of God. It celebrates an emergent creation, whose potential is 'very good'. It tells us that all things are created by God's Word 'and God said'. As John's Gospel has it 'In the beginning was the Word'. And creation is animated by God's spirit, the Lord, the Giver of Life, moving over the face of the waters. It is by the commanding Word and the animating spirit that all things are upheld - as Psalm 104 (a sort of commentary on Genesis 1) says; 'These all look to you to give them their food in due season... when you take away their breath, they die.... When you send forth your spirit they are created; and you renew the face of the ground.'

The order of Genesis 1 (six days, leading to a seventh, with a rich pattern of emerging life) and its contingency, are not far from the mind of science, in which order and contingency, chance and necessity, are coupled together.

Genesis 1 also suggests the process of creation, as a divine 'Letting be'. 'And God said 'Let there be'. This theme is picked up in Ruth Page's book about the web of creation, suggesting a divine companionship with creation, but with a divine detachment which allows creation to be itself. She goes so far as to suggest that it is entirely fortuitous how things have worked out - whereas Simon Conway Morris and others who speak about evolution's convergence suggest that the way things are has a certain inevitability about it - which is much nearer to the weak anthropic principle many people find convincing. And the divine 'letting be' is coupled with the mandate for agriculture (subdue the earth) and for appropriate care of animals (hidden in that difficult word 'dominion').

Whatever the process, the climax of Genesis 1 is Genesis 2.2 - the six days lead to a seventh; creation leads to Sabbath. As William Brown put it, "Sabbath confirms the sufficiency of cosmic and biological organisation... in Sabbath, God releases creation to thrive on its own." (p. 76)

Humanity in the divine image is humanity the worshipper - *homo religiosus*. We are back to the sacredness of creation, and the role of humanity not only as royal servant, but as creation's priest. Our response to climate change, then, cannot only be acceptance, but responsible action.

5. Proverbs 8. 22-31 has the colour of playfulness and delight.

The Wisdom of Proverbs is wonderfully free from religion. No tabernacle or temple, no priests or scribes, no sacrifices or rituals. Instead a farrago of pithy sayings about relationships and money, wine and work, sex and death, animals, gossip, justice, royalty, language and lethargy. What Derek Kidner once called 'godliness in working clothes.' But behind the moral wisdom of the sayings of Proverbs lies a view of the world in which God's Wisdom can be discerned. She is there with him in the beginning. "I was there beside him, like master worker; and I was daily his delight.' (Prov.8 30). Wisdom's world is one of discovery and excitement. Everything is to be explored. And her delight is described in terms of play, just as God seems to enjoy the play of Leviathan in Psalm 104.26. Wisdom's path is one of delighted discovery, a sense of wonder and enjoyment. Are there echoes of the Lord God walking in the

Garden in the cool of the evening, just to enjoy the flowers and the breeze? Or of the morning stars singing together and all the heavenly beings shouting for joy (Job. 38 7). I am reminded of that wonderful piece from Thomas Traherne:

You never enjoy the world aright, till the Sea itself floweth in your veins, till you are clothed with the heavens, and crowned with the stars: and perceive yourself to be the sole heir of the whole world, and more than so, because men are in it who are every one sole heirs as well as you. Till you can sing and rejoice and delight in God, as misers do in gold, and Kings in sceptres, you never enjoy the world. (Centuries, 29).

Part of our responsibility is to safeguard the possibilities of delight for ourselves and others and future generations.

6. The final colour is my kaleidoscope is from the second half of Isaiah. This time the colour is expectancy and renewal.

No where do God's covenant faithfulness and God's creative purpose come together more obviously than here. 'Who has measured the waters in the hollow of his hand and marked off the heavens with a span, enclosed the dust of the earth in a measure and weighed the mountains in scales (Isa 40.12)...The Lord is the everlasting God, the creator of the ends of the earth'. (40.28). 'When the poor and needy seek water, and there is none, and their tongue is parched with thirst, I the Lord will answer them, I, the God is Israel, will not forsake them. I will open rivers on the bare heights, and fountains in the midst of the valleys; I will make the wilderness a pool of water, and the dry land springs of water. I will put in the wilderness the cedar, the acacie, the myrtle, and the olive; I will set in the desert the cypress, the plane and the pine together; that men may see and know, may consider and understand together, that the hand of the Lord has done this, the Holy One of Israel has created it.' (Isa. 41. 17f.).

'Thus says God, the Lord, who created the heavens and stretched them out, who spread forth the earth...who gives breath to the people upon it.. I am the Lord, I have given you as a covenant to the people, a light to the nations.'" (Isa. 42.5f.). But now thus says the Lord who created you... Fear not for I have redeemed you...you are precious in my eyes...and I love you. (Isa 43. 1f.)

The Creator is the covenant God of Israel, their redeemer, and God's coming Servant is the one through whom redemption comes. Behold I am doing a new thing: I will make a way in the wilderness... I will pour water on thirsty land (Isa. 43.19; 44,3f).

The same theme is repeated several times through the Servant Songs. Then in the third part of Isaiah, the Messianic figure whom we have met both as King and as Servant, is now disclosed as the Victorious Conqueror in whom God's purposes are fulfilled. 'You shall go out in joy, and be led forth in peace; the mountains and the hills before you shall break forth into singing, and all the trees of the field shall clap their hands. Instead of the thorn shall come up the cypress; instead of the brier shall come up the myrtle; and it shall be to the Lord for a memorial, for an everlasting sign which shall not be cut off. (Isa. 55. 12f).

'For behold, I create new heavens and a new earth; no more shall be heard in it the sound of weeping.. they shall build houses and inhabit them; they shall plant

vineyards and eat their fruit... the wolf and the lamb shall feed together, the lion shall eat straw like the ox; and dust shall be the serpent's food. They shall not hurt or destroy I all my holy mountain, says the Lord.' (Isa.65.17f).

Here the covenant God, who is creator of heaven and earth, is depicted as ruling over a peaceable kingdom from his holy mountain. This is temple theology again - picked up in its rich imagery in the Book of Revelation which also speaks of a coming new heaven and new earth, as heaven and earth meet in the holy city Jerusalem. It is picked up by the Second Letter of Peter, where the coming Day of God is described as a 'new heavens and new earth in which justice dwells.

The Isaianic vision is of the Redemption of all people and the whole of creation through his Suffering Servant, and establishment of his kingdom, where heaven meets earth, where humanity is once more fully in the presence of God, where justice dwells - or as the Psalmist put it where 'justice and peace embrace'.

7. Those are my six colours - they do not all bear directly on the posed for us by climate change. But they do fill out aspects of an answer to the question: how do we see nature? Taken together the biblical narratives point us to a Creator God, who creates by Word and Spirit, who lets creation be itself within limits, whose creation gives delight and provides food, and is to be kept and guarded by humanity as God's royal servants, creation's priests. There is much about the ambiguity of the present time which suggests futility and weariness, but hidden behind that is the playful delight of God, the invitation to discover and explore, the call for a just sharing of the rich bounty of God's earth. And the whole story belongs within a narrative of redemption and hope - what Hans Kung calls 'creation healed', and what the psalmist calls God's glory dwelling in our land.

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