Theme 2 – Living Resources

Presentation: Sacrifice and Covenant, Prometheus and Noah

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The waters of the Black Sea are heavily freighted with memories of some of the stories which come from the springtime of human culture. The narrative of the Great Flood exists in various forms but perhaps the best known is recorded in the Book of Genesis and has Noah as its central character. Noah and his family together with representatives of 'all flesh' were preserved from the inundation by the Ark which eventually, we are told, came to rest on Mount Ararat to the east of the Black Sea.

When it was safe to do so, the survivors emerged. God established a covenant with Noah and his sons that he would never again bring destruction on the earth. In Noah, God blessed not just some chosen race but the whole of humanity, and he made a covenant which embraced 'all' and not just human flesh. In particular he set a limit to what human beings could eat. They were forbidden to consume the blood of the beasts and fowls. The ancients believed that life itself was in the blood and so the divine prohibition established a balance between human appetite and the integrity of the created order, which was not to be simply for consumption.

When I mentioned the story of Noah to a scientist friend, his brow clouded. He began to brief me about certain disputes about whether the veritable ark had been identified in the region of Ararat. Here is clearly an initial problem about paradigms. I have no difficulty in believing that there were great floods in pre-history but I am frankly not very interested in the Noah story if it is little more than the record of a meteorological catastrophe. The fundamentalist approach, which insists that, had a camera been available, it would have been possible to make a home video of the Ark's progress exactly as it is described in Genesis, is a relatively modern and unhappy tribute to the dominance of the scientific way of establishing and describing truth by reference to evidence accessible to a detached observer and ultimately quantifiable. While the achievements of this way of exploring our environment are not in doubt, in the case of the Noah story and other spiritual writings the method leads us into a dead end. It sometimes increases our information but does not add to our wisdom.

The climax of the Noah story also illustrates another profound paradigm shift. God promises never again to bring destruction upon the earth and appoints the rainbow as a sign of his promise. Clearly the world was experienced as reverberating with the divine footsteps and any threat was seen as coming from the divine wrath. For most people, even religious believers, in western countries, this way of looking at the world has yielded to one in which the main source of anxiety comes from the use human beings make of their atom-splitting power. The sign which hangs over our generation is not that of the rainbow but of the mushroom cloud of 1945.

The divine was being evacuated from the western world-view long before this century. Before the seventeenth century western culture shared the almost universal view of nature which persists still in many parts of the world, that nature was sacred and that the divine signature was visible. However, from the seventeenth century onwards nature was seen as an inanimate machine to be dominated and exploited by man. Nature came to be soulless and it is instructive that the strategy of denying soul has been applied in other cases where man has wished to dominate and possess, in particular in the debates about the souls of slaves and native people in the early modern period. Descartes frankly avowed that the motive behind his method of reasoning was to make man 'maŒtre et possesseur de la terre'.

What happened next is anticipated in another ancient story associated with the Caucasus mountains to the east of the Black Sea. The story of Prometheus fascinated both Renaissance and Romantic thinkers in the West. When the gods and human beings came to be divided it was through the agency of Prometheus, whose name means Fore-thinker. He cut up an ox for sacrifice, concealing the choicest portions beneath the paunch of the beast for himself and his people. He covered the ox bones with an alluring veneer of gleaming fat and then called out: 'Zeus, most famed and greatest of the eternal gods, choose thou the portion that thou desirest'. Some say that Zeus saw through the imposture but the fraudulent sacrifice and the trickery of Prometheus made a divide between gods and men.

There are also various versions of the story of Prometheus' theft of fire from the gods. As a punishment, Zeus had Prometheus chained to the highest peak of the Caucasus. An ancient vase painting shows him with a pillar driven through his middle being attacked by an eagle. The bird may represent the mental world of the Fore-thinker and it is significant that every day the eagle comes to devour his liver, the seat of the intuitive life. All that is consumed by day however, grows back again by night. It was prophesied that Prometheus would be unbound in the thirteenth generation.

The sixteenth century French philosopher Charles de Bouvelles compared the emancipated man with Prometheus, whose seizure of power, which allowed human beings to change their nature, was presented in a positive light. In his book de Sapiente written in 1509 he pictures man as 'no longer part of the universe but as its eye and mirror; and indeed as a mirror that does not receive the images of things from outside but that rather forms and shapes them in itself.'

With the de-animation of nature, however, and the substitution of dominance for connectedness in the relation between the Fore-thinker and the universe around him, the ambitions of Promethean man become literally inordinate. At the same time the development of the rational calculating faculty at the expense of other ways of knowing has led to

distress and disorder in the liver of the intuitive life. The capacity to be aware of the sacred and animated character of the cosmos has been impaired. Although the word sacred is still in use, it tends to be used in a sentimental way. How can objects of our own thought be sacred in the same way that once the world permeated by the divine was held to be sacred?

These cultural developments go some way to explaining why, with a few exceptions, western theology has tended to concentrate on the development of environmental ethics rather than attempting to re-assert the religious view of nature. There is, however, a renewable energy which flows from the recovered awareness of the sacredness of nature, which is not available when nature is regarded as a mental projection of Promethean man.

I want to suggest that a revival of this way of living in nature, knowing oneself to be a pontifical person, a bridge builder and a part of the natural order, offering unforced sacrifices and observing the covenant which prohibits inordinate appetite, sheds some light on a puzzle which is often unremarked because it is so common.

There have been many meetings of scientific and religious bodies which have issued solemn declarations built on a rigorous scientific appraisal of the ecological challenges facing humanity as we near the end of this millennium. Some can still be studied with profit. As long ago as 1971 my own Church solemnly declared that pollution was not just a serious mistake but a 'blasphemy'. The first European Christian Assembly held in Basel in 1989, which brought together leaders of all the main churches, chose 'engendering a sense of responsibility to the environment' as one of its main themes. The Assembly made some very specific recommendations in line with the Brundtland report about the need for industrialised countries to reduce energy consumption and 95% of the delegates voted for this programme. However, very little has been done subsequently in the life of the churches themselves to achieve the targets. We know what should be done but we do not do it.

As well as investigating the ecological problems of the Black Sea region with scientific rigour, I believe that we must also focus on the problem of translating what we know into what we do. As the psychologist C.G. Jung observed, 'Mere appeals to ethical fraternity can never evoke in human beings the slightest trace of that age-old power which drives the migrating bird across the sea'.

Working away at codes of ethics is not to be despised and there is some important work going on at present to develop a 'global ethic'. We need to establish internationally agreed standards and of course secular ethicists are partners in the task. Preaching about personal ethics, however, is only part of the necessary response to the ecological challenge of our day. Spiritual practice is needed of the kind which enlivens awareness and connects with inexhaustible spiritual energy. Some people are finding their way into the reality and energy disclosed by this awareness but there is a great intellectual challenge confronting western theology in particular to remove the obstacles and inhibitions which hamper and deflect the spiritual progress of so many modern people.

The importance of education has already been stated. However, alongside the analytical way of seeing the world, an adequate education should also develop the faculty for contemplation which reveals other beings in a new luminosity. 'Sin' was defined by one of the saints of this century, Simone Weil, as 'Inattention'. We need an education in contemplative attention.

Theology and science have to negotiate a new partnership in the problems facing us all in our common ark. We ought not to divide the one reality and seek, as Moltmann the distinguished German theologian has expressed it, 'peaceful co-existence at the price of mutual irrelevance'.

We need to look again at the philosophical foundations of the way we perceive the world and to reflect on the question posed by the poet T.S. Eliot in one of the choruses from 'The Rock':

Where is the wisdom we have lost in knowledge? Where is the knowledge we have lost in information?

There is also an institutional as well as an intellectual challenge. The institutional problem goes some way to explaining the disappointing response to so many well-formulated statements from conferences and commentators in the past. Scientists have successfully created an international community and to a large extent a common language but the faith communities sometimes seem less disposed for dialogue with one another than they were in previous generations. The task is to translate the moral imagination and awareness of individuals into institutional forms which can have an impact on the emerging global forum. Earth summits and international scientific congresses need a more adequate partner to express the contribution of the faith communities. As the Brazilian proverb puts it, 'If I am the only person who dreams, it remains only a dream but if several of us live the same dream it can become a reality'.

The point about living the dream is the most important of all. I have sketched an intellectual and an institutional response but we also need the awareness which transforms behaviour with spiritual practice. A profound response to the ecological challenge facing us will be difficult without the recovery of the capacity to sacrifice on the part of people in the richer part of the world. Awareness of what we are doing with the divine gift of life in this world can bring home the injustice that is being done to the world's poor and, at the same time, the injustice of expecting our children to pay for the style of life we enjoy now. Sacrifice has always meant giving up some cherished possession and referring it to the divine, so that it can be seen in a different light and received back as a gift, charged with a new valency and capable of sustaining us in our role as bridge builders, pontifical persons in the creation.

Again, however, we need not so much exhortation as a new breed of spiritual entrepreneurs, rather like the earliest friars who embraced the insecurity and fear of the mediaeval cities in a vulnerable but joyful lifestyle. These eco-friars need to be able through their spiritual practice to organise and knit together the frayed strands of community. Such

people will need, like Mother Theresa, to express themselves in visible symbols rather than in tracts. Certainly in the western Christian world they will need to re-invigorate the Sabbath festival as a celebration of sustainability and 'enoughness', rather than present it as a pause before the next bout of frantic activity or as a dowdy day of gloom and restriction. The Sabbath offers both relief from the pressures of the passing moment and an anticipation of the crown of creation, a foretaste of the divinely intended state of sustainable equilibrium. The living resources which have always flowed from the Sabbath in the Jewish tradition need to be available to refresh us all.