



16<sup>th</sup> November 2008  
Trinity XXVI  
Choral Evensong  
Genesis 1 vv. 20–31  
Romans 8 vv. 19–23



## **The Groaning of Creation**

By Dr Christopher Southgate

I was delighted to be asked to come and speak in this fascinating series engaging with themes from science. I've chosen to reflect on that enigmatic passage we have just heard from Romans 8. It's one of the very few passages in the New Testament that relates the great Christian narrative of salvation to the non-human creation. With only four or five verses to go on it is to be honest very hard to know what St Paul was on about. But that wonderful phrase 'groaning in travail' has resonances for modern Darwinian thinkers going well beyond what Paul could have thought or imagined. The biological world is a world of struggle, of competition between organisms and species, leading to enormous extents of creaturely suffering. Nature is in Tennyson's famous phrase 'red in tooth and claw'.

So we can no longer blithely or simplistically assert that creation is 'very good', as we heard in the passage from Genesis. Creation is a profoundly ambiguous place, full of beauty of all sorts of diverse kinds, full of ingenious strategies for being alive, but also full of disvalue, of creatures parasitized from inside, or subject to violent predation, living and dying in profound distress. Creation seems to be, then, both good *and* groaning. Now for most of Christian history people have tended to think that the groaning of creation was the result of the fall, of human sin corrupting the creation. One of the most important implications of evolutionary theory for theology is that this cannot be the explanation of the groaning. There was predation, and creaturely suffering, long before there were humans. Antelopes were being caught glancing blows by sabre-toothed predators, and dying in slow festering agony, long before our species existed. But there are other theological implications of the Darwinian narrative. Not only does the chronology of evolution eliminate naïve pictures of predation only setting in with Adam's sin, but we can draw a far more theologically troubling inference from the way evolution seems to work.

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That is – that it is this very process, red in tooth and claw, driven by competition and predation and the suffering they necessarily imply – it is this very process that God seems to have used to engender the beauty and ingenuity and complexity that we see in creatures. The American naturalist Holmes Rolston has a wonderful phrase to summarise this: he writes that ‘the cougar’s fang has carved the limbs of the fleet-footed deer, and vice versa’ – predation has sharpened the abilities of creatures to an exquisite degree, giving rise to the grace of the cheetah, the skill of the peregrine, the power of the killer whale, and all the avoidance strategies by which their prey survive. Suffering is not a by-product of the evolutionary process – it is one of the main drivers by which creaturely faculties are refined.

That poses sharply the question – how can we speak of God’s love and care for creatures? Most biologists, if you ask them this question, would say, well, it’s a package deal, you can’t have life without death, you can’t have flourishing without struggle and pain, all these things balance out. That’s the beginning of a response to the problem. But it won’t do by itself. As Dostoevsky pointed out to us long ago through his character Ivan Karamazov, it’s not the overall calculus of suffering that stands as a charge against the goodness of God, it’s every individual instance of evil. Nature is full of instances in which individual creatures know no flourishing but only a life of pain and distress. The new-born impala calf that is found by the hyenas before it can even stand knows nothing of the package deal. The pelican chick elbowed out of the nest to starve because it was only hatched as insurance - in case its sibling doesn’t make it - is not consoled by the fact that this strategy has served pelicans well for thirty million years.

This is not the moment to try and articulate a full defence of the goodness of God in the face of this groaning creation – though two resources I would want to suggest would be firstly to posit that God both delights in creaturely selves, and longs for those selves to transcend themselves, that God indeed suffers with the suffering of every creature, Secondly that we should not be afraid to suppose that non-human creatures find redeemed life with God – that there is such a thing as pelican heaven, and even dinosaur heaven. I get a lot of stick from my students for this conviction, but I think there are sound reasons, both biblical and doctrinal, for asserting it.

But the passage from Romans 8 says another very striking thing which I want to explore with you. The creation does not only groan. In Paul’s words, it waits with eager longing for the revealing of the children of God, it will be set free from bondage to decay and obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God. Here again there are resonances in this text that are strong for us as modern readers, though they go beyond what we can easily imagine Paul himself thinking. The liberation of creation, for Paul, seems to depend on humans finding their freedom. And here we *may* draw on our knowledge of the way human greed has intensified creation’s groaning – is plunging creation, indeed, into a sixth great extinction event. Among the most alarming projections of the climate change scientists is that the level of extinction caused by human activity in the next century might be up to 40% of animal species – some estimates are even more extreme. The burden we place on our environment will be relieved, indeed, only when we find our freedom.

Freedom, the freedom of the glory of the children of God, our revealing as our new selves in Christ, these are great motifs of the Pauline gospel. But so difficult to cash out ethically. Freedom almost by definition doesn’t come with prescriptions as to how to act it out. How then are we called as Christians to exemplify freedom, to reveal its true nature, and so to be a part of the relief of creation’s groaning? Paul, confronted by this question, would almost certainly have spoken of having the mind of Christ. The mind of the one who as Paul articulates in Philippians 2 did not snatch at status, but emptied himself, taking the form of a servant.

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In my recent writing I have developed this theme of our ethical kenosis, our self-emptying. I have suggested that we need to cultivate a kenosis of aspiration, appetite and acquisitiveness. The first element in such ethical kenosis, after the example of Christ, is what I call kenosis of aspiration. Like Christ, the believer is called not to make of status a ‘snatching-matter’, not to aspire to a status beyond that which is most helpful to other creatures. The essence of a kenosis of aspiration is of resisting the temptation to grasp at a role which is not God-given, not part of the calling of the individual believer or community. The consequence of such grasping is at once to fail to respect fully the status of the other creature, and to fail to receive our situation as gift from God. This is the sense in which I believe the Genesis 3 account of ‘the Fall’ has a profound wisdom to it. It is an account of the tendency in human nature to grasp at more than is freely given, to seek to elevate our status beyond what is appropriate and helpful, to seek to be ‘as Gods’. So Simone Weil writes: true love means ‘to empty ourselves of our false divinity, to deny ourselves, to give up being the centre of the world’.<sup>1</sup>

And just as the ‘Fall’ account in Genesis reflects a general condition rather than a historical chronology, so the status of believers as being ‘in Christ’ is a general condition which reverses our ‘fallenness’, and makes possible a life that transcends the self, a life lived for others.

With kenosis of aspiration, however, must go a kenosis of appetite, whether that appetite be for power over others or for sex for sex’s sake or for an excess of intake of alcohol, drugs, food or sensation of whatever kind. All these draw us into idolatry - they make of a substance or experience a kind of substitute god. All drain away the freedom that comes from worshipful dependence on God. Particularly evidently in respect of the ecological crisis, disordered appetite harms our freedom to contemplate appropriately and relate lovingly to the non-human creation. Such appetite consumes more of the world’s fullness than is our share. A particular aspect of the kenosis of appetite, which links it to the kenosis of aspiration, is the kenosis of acquisitiveness. Just as we must be willing to order our ambitions and our experiences in accord with the freedom of the redeemed order, so we must order our acquisition of the material trappings of life, which again are often acquired at the expense of the well-being of others, be it through sweated labour to make trainers or printed circuit boards, or the mining that delivers exotic metals and other raw materials at great expense to human health and natural ecosystems.

The difficulty, of course, in articulating these as the contours of Christian freedom is that as soon as one goes into any detail it begins to sound like a set of rules. Ethical kenosis then lapses into legalism, and loses its essence, which is the freely given response of love to the one whose love gave us our lives in freedom. To offer rules based on the Romans 8 passage would be totally contrary to the ethos of Paul’s writings. Rather he stresses the role of the Spirit. Romans 8 goes on, famously, to the conviction that we do not know how to pray, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us. Equally, Paul might have written, we do not know how to live, but if we open ourselves up to the Spirit we can be led into paths of love and joy and peace. The Spirit is the one resource that never runs out, the one source of joy that never distorts our lives, but rather purifies them. In the Spirit the lives of Christians become symbols and examples of the glory of freedom. What we learn from the passage on groaning in travail is that this must find its outworking in environmental practice, in seeking nothing less than to be part of the liberation of the whole creation.



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One last point about the role of science, which has done so much to show us the extent of our predicament in an age of resource depletion and global warming. The simplicity of heart I have just been advocating, the simplicity that seeks the mind of Christ and does not snatch at status or sensation, must not be accompanied by an anti-scientific turn that draws back from investigating the natural world and retreats into a sort of folk wisdom about what is good for humans. We shall need all our God-given ingenuity to devise ways out of our current mess. We are in the paradoxical position of needing an ever-more careful and intensive investigation of how the natural world works and how we are damaging it, combined with a profound restraint as to how we make use of that knowledge and the power it gives us. But it is freedom, ultimately, which will be our reality in Christ, our glory, and hence the beginning of the liberation of this ambiguous but lovely world.

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<sup>i</sup> Simone Weil, *Waiting for God*, transl. E. Craufurd (New York: Harper and Row, 1951), pp. 159-60.