



9 June 2013  
The Second Sunday after Trinity  
Choral Evensong  
Genesis 1 vv. 26–31  
Matthew 19 vv. 1–8

## Ethics and Creation

By Dr Jonathan Chaplin

Director of the Kirby Laing Institute for Christian Ethics,  
Cambridge

In the name of the Father who sustains creation, the Son who reconciles creation, and the Spirit who renews creation. Amen.

*Jesus saith unto them, Moses because of the hardness of your hearts suffered you to put away your wives: but from the beginning it was not so.*

‘From the beginning it was not so’. We get our ethical bearings, Jesus is saying, ‘from the beginning’. In our reading, we find Jesus telling a group of supposed specialists in ethics, that they’ve got it all wrong because they have not taken their bearings *from the beginning*. They’ve seized on a particular legal rule, one that happened to suit them very well, and so missed the deeper good that the rule was intended to protect. In the beginning – that is, by creation – men and women were fashioned for covenant, not mere contract; for fidelity, not mere utility. So if you want to grasp the unique good of marriage as it was intended from the beginning, Jesus is saying, you must dig beneath the accommodations Moses made to your self-centredness and stubbornness. From the beginning, to truly enjoy this unique good you must undergo a radical shift of perspective, one that takes you out of ‘I’ and into ‘we’, out of self-absorption into a loving solidarity with another, one you did not create and one you may not control. You cannot turn one made in God’s image into an instrument of your own desires; for from the beginning, it was not so.

The shock is palpable. The passage we read doesn’t report what the Pharisees said, but the verse right after it shows the disciples once again reeling at the sheer radicality of Jesus’ teaching: ‘If the case of the man be *so* with his wife’, they say, ‘it is not good to marry’ (v.10). The beginning is too hard. Let’s stick with Plan B.

Jesus, it seems, held to an ‘ethics of creation’. Well what is such an ethics? It’s not an ethics designed for an irretrievable Garden of Eden. It’s not a backward-looking ethics, a symptom of a nostalgic yearning for older, simpler times. ‘From the beginning’ does not mean ‘in the past’. It means ‘*ever since* the beginning’, so crucially it means *in the present* and *in the future*. For what God brought forth ‘out of nothing’ in the beginning, he continues to hold in force, and will also bring to restored wholeness at the end.

In an ethics of creation, the content of human morality finds its deepest anchorage in God’s first, cosmic act of sheer generosity, his original blessing, his unconstrained, utterly gratuitous constitution of the fabric of the world. Christian ethics starts with the outpouring of God’s boundless, reckless love in the things he has made. And just as God is always on the move, so too is his creation. In the Bible creation isn’t a static lump of matter, but a vibrant, pulsating, dynamic order, sustained and carried forward moment by moment by God’s powerful word, abundant with possibilities, evoking wonder, inviting discovery and development. It is this created world that God pronounces ‘good’. And when God completes his work by creating humankind, he pronounces it ‘very good’.

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I want to suggest that the deepest idea in a biblical ethics of creation is the primordial goodness of creation. We would have no idea what ‘the good’ is, unless it had been given to us by the Creator, from the beginning. An ethics of creation will certainly contain many others ideas – principles, rights, freedom, rules, conscience, consequences and more – but all of them will derive whatever meaning they have, from the original source of all goodness, God’s work in creation.

But an ethics of creation isn’t only about what God gives; it’s equally about how humans respond to God’s gifts. In the creation account in Genesis 1, the plenitude of divine wisdom and love calls forth the glad, obedient service of humankind. Indeed, exercising ‘dominion’, responsible authority, over creation *just is* what it means to be made ‘in the image and likeness of God’. So in an ethics of creation, to live rightly, and so to enter into a flourishing and fulfilled human life, is to dance to the infectious rhythms of creation – to seek out, in gratitude and wonder, the pathways of blessing graciously marked out by the Creator, and to walk along them.

Now, some will immediately pose the question whether an ethics of creation (even one set to music) is any longer defensible in a modernist culture where ethics seems increasingly intimidated – or even eliminated – by reductionist scientific accounts of reality which seem to leave no place for either divine or human purpose. Or, if modern scientific naturalism hasn’t finished it off, then surely postmodern deconstructionism has – by exposing any supposedly universal ethical claims as little more than concealed land-grabs by those with superior cultural power.

Well, mounting a defence of a creation ethics against those formidable opponents is a task for another day – you’ll be relieved to hear. I simply want to record the remarkable fact that today, after an extended period of neglect,<sup>1</sup> the prospects for a creation ethics have never seemed brighter. I wish I could report that the reasons for this are hopeful ones. But sadly, the chief one is the devastating effects of our rampant ecological crises. We have crashed headlong into the limits of creation in a big way. In our insatiable thirst for endlessly rising economic prosperity, we humans are storming blindly past all the signposts marked ‘limits to growth’ or ‘enough is enough’ – and the non-human creation is urgently pushing back, issuing ever-louder warnings of the irreversible damage we are doing to it, and to ourselves. I don’t hesitate to say that in these warnings, those who have ears to hear are hearing a word of God – an echo, perhaps, in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, of the stark language of ‘blessings and curses’ presented to ancient Israel as it stood on the threshold of the promised land.<sup>2</sup> For God’s natural creation is not inert matter, passively surrendering itself to endless human exploitation. Rather it is an awesomely complex labyrinth of robust but finely balanced, dynamic systems; and if we ride roughshod over it we will surely pay a price, for we earthlings are wholly dependent on the wider community of creation without which we would simply shrivel up and die.

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<sup>1</sup> For much of the last century, many theologians (led notably by Barth and Bonhoeffer) gave creation ethics a very wide berth because of the ways it had so evidently been abused in the 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. A twisted doctrine of ‘ordinances of creation’ or ‘natural orders’ had been enlisted to furnish ideological legitimation for the terrible evils of colonialism, fascism and apartheid, apparently discrediting the very idea of deploying creation as a foundation for ethics. See Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Ethics* (Fortress Press, 2005), pp. 377, 388-9 notes 2, 3, 4; and Clifford J Green’s ‘Editor’s Introduction to the English Edition’, in Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, pp. 17-22.

<sup>2</sup> Deuteronomy, chs. 27, 28.

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Hardly surprising, then, that the literature of ecological theology is now flourishing – the best of it appealing to a recovered biblical notion of creation as an all-embracing canopy of life, an integrated, dynamic reality expressing the ordering wisdom and loving purposes of the Creator – a reality with which we must reckon. The ethical injunctions of this new eco-theology are ‘radical’, in the literal sense of going back to the roots of a problem, calling us to a fundamental reassessment of our society’s intoxication with endless material growth, and exploring new ways of personal and collective living that will allow us to ‘tread lightly upon the earth’ and liberate us from the burden of never-satisfied desire.

Nor is it surprising to see the emergence of a new creation-based economic ethics, since it is the collective irrationality of our economic behaviour that is most fuelling our ecological crises. Such an economic ethics has been around for some time in the academy, but it is now gaining a hearing in the boardrooms of some of our largest corporations, for example in the language of ‘sustainability’. It’s even finding its way into our banks. The near-collapse of the global financial system in 2008 that was another moment of ‘revelation’ – again, for those who have ears to hear – exposing the alacrity with which otherwise sophisticated human beings can place their faith in unrealities: in the vast, computer-controlled, global flows of virtual money we assumed would keep the engine room of the real economy going – and for a time they did, with seemingly spectacular results. The sums involved in these virtual flows are often termed ‘astronomical’ but a more suitable term would be ‘astrological’, so far removed are they from the real economy in which ordinary humans actually live. It’s as if we’ve allowed our financial system to try to jump out of creation itself, to operate above and beyond the limits imposed by the facts of real, vulnerable people, living somewhere not anywhere, doing finite tasks and having modest needs. Once again, creation has pushed back decisively; this time not the nonhuman creation, but human themselves, as we see in the chaos, deprivation and fear unleashed across Europe by the economic crisis. A creation ethics obviously doesn’t supply a blueprint for the reform of our global economic system, but it does offer a salutary reminder that humans are created by God, from the beginning, to engage in economic activity that is socially useful, and marked by solidarity and justice, and that we cannot persistently breach these norms with impunity.

This example of ‘push-back’ against the deep distortions of our economic life reminds us that the biblical vision of creation embraces not only individual humans as image-bearers of God, but also the social structures and systems that humans everywhere establish as they set about the awesome task of exercising responsible authority over creation. All human activity is inescapably social. The uniquely intimate solidarity exemplified in marriage is but a paradigm for the essential complementarity of all human life. The structures and institutions we create – families, educational communities, even banks and governments – realise particular human potentials and meet specific human needs, all arising in some way from our created nature, even if they are also profoundly damaged by the fallenness of that nature.

The task of an ethics of creation, then, is to *trace the lineaments of created goodness* amidst the brokenness and corruption of the human realities we have actually made for ourselves. The task isn’t easy. It involves distinguishing, in any area of created life, that which bears witness to the abiding goodness of God’s created gifts, from that which results from the dreadful mess we have so often made of those gifts. It requires a patient effort of corporate discernment, one that is never finished, and one that can easily go wrong. But its goal is to help assist the church, and even nthe world, to imagine how we can edge some aspect of a fallen creation that bit closer to God’s original purpose, which is to bless all of creation, human and nonhuman – so that creation, in turn, may bless God.

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Let me conclude. The picture I've sketched of a Christian ethics of creation is obviously far from complete. To complete it we'd need to consider how the good yet broken gifts of creation are reconciled once again to their Creator through the death, resurrection and ascension of Jesus Christ, and how those gifts will be taken up and transformed by God in the promised new earth to come. Yet an ethics rooted in creation is an indispensable part of the 'good news of the kingdom' that Jesus proclaimed. For, as Hans Küng puts it, the kingdom *just is* 'creation healed'.<sup>3</sup>

So, in the face of ecological crises that threaten to tear up the delicate eco-systems on which we, and especially the poor of the world, depend; economic crises that reveal our addiction to the short-term maximization of consumption; political systems that trample upon their own citizens and those of their neighbours; any human relationships in which those with power suppress the flourishing of others; in the face of all these things, we can gain wisdom by recalling that, 'from the beginning, it was not so', and we can take courage from the promise that, one day, it will no longer be so. Amen.

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<sup>3</sup> Hans Küng, *On Being a Christian*, translated by Edward Quinn (London: William Collins, 1977), p. 231.

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