

Christian faith in a world moving into crisis

The title we agreed upon for my address concerns **Christian faith in a world moving into crisis** and having seen the titles given to the other speakers I have decided, hopefully to avoid repetition, to try in this opening address to put the growing crisis into some sort of theological context. Or to be a bit more specific, I want to try to read the growing crisis through the lens of the Bible and to try to use it to interpret what is happening around us. This I hope will give some sort of biblical and theological framework within which we can operate. This is going to involve a bit of dipping into the Book of Genesis, not because I am a creationist and believe in a seven day creation – let me assure you of that – but because I believe that these ancient texts address with extraordinary power the human condition generally, and specifically the ecological mess that we find ourselves in today. And I would hope that even those of you here today who do not in any way regard these Scriptures as holy or sacred might nevertheless recognise them as wise and insightful. My talk therefore is going to take the shape of a kind of Bible study or exposition of the early chapters of Genesis. So – here goes, Genesis 1, with extracts from the first two days of creation...

‘In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth. The earth was a vast waste, darkness covered the deep and the spirit of God hovered over the surface of the water... and God said, let there be a vault between the waters, to separate water from water. So God made the vault, and separated the water under the vault from the water above it, and so it was and God called the vault the heavens’.

There you have, if you like, the ancient cosmology where the starting point is the vast watery waste, ‘the deep’ as it is sometimes translated – in other words chaos. Here is this surging, threatening, raging, formless, destructive maelstrom which God will tame and out of which a world teeming with life will be birthed. But in order to create this zone of order, in order to establish this arena where life may flourish God must deal with the chaos. And God does this by, as it were, clearing a space in the midst of it, cleaving a hiatus in the midst of the chaos which can become a safe location for life as the forces of chaos are held at bay.

Picture for a moment in your imagination a sight to which we are inevitably and deliberately pointed by his passage, a much later scene that we know of as the exodus, the crossing of the Red Sea. There the threatening, deathly waters are parted, held back on either side, so that the people of God pass through. And what you picture there in a horizontal dimension is happening here in Genesis 1 in the vertical, with waters above separated from waters below and a vault in between. And that vault becomes the setting within which a habitable world takes form. Here life emerges. But the world is always bounded and bordered by chaos which is held back and restrained by the creative act of God - and you sense that it is always there, a threat, poised with destructive possibility, but more of that later.

But then as we read on through the story of creation we come to Day six with the creation of humankind, made in God’s image and mandated with dominion over the fish of the sea, the birds of the air etc etc., and commissioned to subdue the earth, and to harness nature’s possibilities. And how often have you heard that here God finished God’s creation, and God then rested on the next day, the seventh day? How often have you heard that the creation of humankind was the pinnacle of creation, this creature with dominion, God’s masterwork over all things, after which God took a well-deserved day off. The trouble is that this is not what the text says and perhaps there is no mis-reading that has been more damaging to life on the earth. Because if you read the text carefully humankind is not the pinnacle of God’s creation, we are

not God's masterwork and God most certainly did not finish the creation there as some translations wrongly and misleadingly suggest. Humankind was created and there was evening and morning, the sixth day, but only the sixth day for there is still one day to come. And what happened on the seventh day?

Well, listen to what Genesis 2:2 says:

'And on the seventh day God finished the work he had done and he rested on the seventh day.'

Get that? God finished creation on the seventh day! And so the ancient rabbis concluded that there was an act of creation on the seventh day without which the universe would have been incomplete¹. And what was created on this seventh, sabbath day? Well, the Hebrew word for it is *menuha*, translated 'rest', only it has a positive sense of tranquillity, serenity, peace, harmony. And this is the pinnacle of creation. This and not humankind is the goal of creation. This is God's masterwork: Sabbath, menuha, peace. And furthermore what is interesting and frequently noted is that in this Genesis creation account the seventh day does not end. Each day up until then ends with the words, 'and there was evening and morning the first day...', 'and there was evening and morning the second day...', and so on. But that is not said of this seventh, sabbath day. Those words do not appear. This day does not end, for Sabbath pervades all time. There is to be a perpetual Sabbath quality about all time, all creation. And humankind's commission to have dominion over the earth and to subdue it must be understood in the light of this goal: to continually bring harmony and peace and repose to creation. That is our ultimate commission and we neglect it at our peril.

We could think of it this way: that vault, that space inserted between the waters of chaos, separating the waters above from the waters below is to be a Sabbath space, a menuha space. And Sabbath holds back and restrains chaos. But when humankind set themselves up as the pinnacle and goal of creation and forget this wider project in which they are merely a means to an end then what happens? What happens when the goal of Sabbath and menuha is forgotten and humankind's dominion becomes an end in itself? Well, what happens is that that vault, that space ceases to be a Sabbath space and then chaos, poised and waiting at the boundary, irrupts into the world and invades it.

And as we read on that is what we find happening. Continuing in Genesis there follows the flood narrative and the key to this story is that the world becomes a wicked and violent place, a place that falls far, far short of its sabbath goal. Genesis 6:5,

'The Lord saw the wickedness of humankind was great in the earth...'

v.11: Now the earth was corrupt in God's sight and the earth was filled with violence'

Someone has described the image of the earth here as like an apple rotten at its core. And what happens? It collapses. It implodes. And so it is that this Sabbath space that separates and intrudes between the waters of chaos has become corrupt and rotten and what happens? Well, the earth implodes as chaos irrupts and invades from above and from below. It's like the waters of the Red Sea rushing back into place, only on a vertical axis. Listen to Genesis 7.11: '... on that day all the fountains of the great deep - the waters from below - burst forth, and the windows of heavens - the waters from above - were opened.' That zone of life, that sabbath space inserted into chaos and holding it back and restraining it has become a zone of violence and wickedness. And chaos gushes and rushes in and destroys it.

¹ For the following, see Abraham Heschel, *The Sabbath*, p.22.

And that is not just the story of the flood. That is the story too of Israel. As we read on in the biblical narrative we find that Israel was called to be a nation living by Sabbath principles, and we learn more of what Sabbath entails. It's not just a day a week on which to chill out. We find that written into Israel's constitution as a nation is the practice of Sabbath. And sabbath is to include remission of debts every seventh year, so as to prevent the growth of extremes of wealth; it was to include release of slaves every seventh year to prevent the growth of an underclass; and it was also to include leaving the land to lie fallow every seventh year, to prevent over-farming and exploitation of the earth. In other words the sabbath was to be a year of rest, release and peace that had social, economic and ecological dimensions. And this is crucial of course because the environmental catastrophe that we are facing with climate change is not just about ecology in the narrow sense of mistreating nature and the environment: the economic and the ecological are tightly interwoven and to address the catastrophe it's not enough to switch to low energy light bulbs and to use our cars less, important though those things are. There are fundamental economic habits and practices that have become systematised and routinised that need to be radically undone.

So, returning to Genesis 1 and creation, think again of this image of a Sabbath space inserted into the cosmos, holding the chaos at bay – for this now becomes an image of the nation of Israel. By living according to these practices the life of Israel becomes a Sabbath zone, a hiatus of well-being that holds back chaos. Now, what we have to understand is that, tragically, all these Genesis texts that we have been considering reflect and echo a period in Israel's history when they had been engulfed by chaos. Not the cosmological chaos of the deep but the political chaos of defeat and exile at the hands of the Babylonians. At the beginning of the sixth century BC the kingdom of Judah and its capital Jerusalem was invaded and destroyed by the armies of Babylon under King Nebuchadnezzar and thus the nation collapsed as chaos engulfed it. And what is fascinating to read is the interpretation of this catastrophe by the Chronicler. As we read at the end of the 2nd Book of Chronicles, describing defeat by the Babylonians and the period of exile: 'Those who escaped the sword he carried captive to Babylon... while the land of Israel ran the full term of its Sabbaths. All the time that it lay desolate it kept the Sabbath rest.' The implication is clear. The sabbatical zone of rest and peace and justice that was to be the nation of Israel has not been a reality. Sabbath has not been practiced. And so the nation has imploded as chaos has irrupted once again into that space and engulfs it. And only when sabbath is reconstituted, only when the land lies at rest in the desolation of exile for all the years that Sabbath has been neglected, only then will the chaos once more be banished, and the waters parted and a zone of life re-created.

And it is perhaps the prophet Jeremiah particularly who emphasises that ecological devastation is a key feature of exile and that such devastation is the product of social injustice and unsabbatical practices. Listen to Jeremiah 47, speaking of Babylon and Nebuchadnezzar's invasion:

'Thus says the Lord: See waters are rising in the North and shall become an overflowing torrent; they shall overflow the land and all that fills it, the city and those who live in it.'

There the armies of Babylon are pictured as the waters from below rising up to engulf the land. And it is the land and the eco-system that suffers. Nature is devastated by this 'flood'. Listen again, Jeremiah 9:

'Take up weeping and wailing for the mountains, and a lamentation for the pastures of the wilderness, because they are laid waste so that no-one passes through,

and the lowing of cattle is not heard; both the birds of the air and the animals have fled and gone.’

And how will restitution come? How will chaos be banished once more and a hiatus of life re-established? Listen to extracts from Jeremiah 17:

‘Hear the words of the Lord, you kings of Judah, all you people of Judah and all you citizens of Jerusalem who come through these gates. These are the words of the Lord: Do not put your lives at risk by carrying any load on the Sabbath day or bringing it through the gates of Jerusalem. You are not to bring any load out of your houses or do any work on the Sabbath, but you are to keep the Sabbath day holy as I commanded your fore-fathers... Now, if you will obey me... and refrain from bringing any load through the gates of this city on the Sabbath... then kings will come through the gates of the city, kings who will sit on David’s throne... But if you do not obey me by keeping the Sabbath day holy and by carrying no load as you come through the gates of Jerusalem on the Sabbath, then I shall set fire to the gates; it will consume the palaces of Jerusalem and will not be put out.’

Note – not water, but the fire this time!

Now there are big interpretative issues on this passage which we can’t go into here, but the point is the connection between Sabbath and well-being on the one hand and neglect of Sabbath and the intrusion of chaos on the other.

So what do we learn from all this, from these ancient texts? Well, whatever we learn perhaps our imagination is furnished with a new image of the world and of life in it. We must purge away the image of the human set in dominion over nature as the pinnacle of creation. And we must re-imagine the world as a space inserted into chaos and bounded and threatened by it. And where that is a space shot through with Sabbath then the chaos is held at bay and life becomes viable and fruitful. And when that space is shot through with the violence of greed and injustice then chaos erupts, with a vengeance.