Pulpit & People

Essays in honour of William Still on his 75th birthday

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THE LAND IS MINE...AND YOU ARE...MY TENANTS*:

reflections on the Biblical view of Man and Nature

ROWLAND MOSS

The story of man in society as it is unfolded in Scripture begins in a garden and is consummated in a city (Gen.1:28-31; 2:8-17; Rev.21:9-22:5). Between its birth in abundant provision and delegated responsibility and its completion in the blessed felicity of the continual presence and superabundant mercies of God the Lord, the story moves through many phases and dispensations, in the manner of the unfolding of an epic drama, or of the development and coherent growth of a grand symphony. At every point the changing patterns are rooted in the relation of man to the natural world, in both its inanimate and its non-human animate dimensions, for the Lord God is the creator of heaven and earth and everything that is in them. This relationship of man to the natural world is a constant theme throughout Scripture, but one which is perhaps rarely surveyed as a whole, though particular facets are more frequently examined.

Two sermons preached by William Still in Gilcomston South Church on such topics are deeply embedded in the memory, and epitomise two themes which form essential motifs in the inspired structure of this supreme symphony of God's sovereign grace and incomprehensible glory. One was an exposition of Leviticus chapter 25, which emphasised the fact that the earth and its abundant provisions for the needs of man belong to God, and that God requires responsible use and active gratitude as conditions for the fulness of blessing in that provision. The other, an exposition of Psalm 104, saw the wonder of the created universe as an expression of the unfathomable wisdom of God, as an object of God's pleasure, and as a vehicle for his praise. Both utterances were not only inspiring, but also pointedly salutary, for an aspiring natural scientist in the early days of his career in agricultural research in tropical Africa. In this essay these and other themes dealing with man in relation to nature will be explored by ranging throughout Scripture. Such an approach must of necessity mean that many profound issues must be left unexplored, and some points of controversy remain undiscussed. It is my hope that the broad conspectus may provide a framework into which more particular questions may be fitted, and suggest links which may illuminate more specific issues.

The symphonic analogy may be utilised further. The thematic

*(Leviticus) 25:23 (NIV))

approach suggests a treatment in sonata form. The main themes are all stated in the early chapters of Genesis, forming the primary *exposition*; they are traced and developed in the history of the covenant people under the old dispensation, in the events of that story, and the religion and literature associated with those events — a *development* section. This grows to the point when the *re-capitulation* can be postponed no longer, and all things are summed up in Christ Jesus (Col.1:15-20); from that a further *development* leads to a glorious climactic *coda*, in which the choirs of saints and angels, the trumpets of judgment, the harps of sweet rejoicing and contentment, articulate the spontaneous and unfettered praise of a new heavens and a new earth redeemed, transmuted and glorified out of the shattered and divided futility of the old. The symphony begins with the glory of the old creation and ends with the greater glory of the new creation, of which Christ Jesus is the first fruit, and in which we who belong to him are already a part. And all to the glory of God the Lord, who is above all and through all and in all.

Exposition

The book of Scripture begins with two complementary narratives concerned with the relation of the transcendent God to the book of nature. The early chapters of the Bible are carefully constructed documents displaying an intricacy of designed style that marks them out as quite unique in the literature of the ancient world, and perhaps of any age. The symmetry of their arrangement from their overall grouping of material to their use of particular words and combinations of words and the significant images by which the events recorded are described marks them out as uniquely inspired in both the divine and the literary sense. Nor can their extreme age be any longer seriously doubted. It can be no surprise that the Holy Spirit inspired the ancient author to such heights of literary skill when the importance of the truth to be conveyed is appreciated.

The craft in the use of language matches the sublime content of the themes. The world and the universe in which man lives, in all its intricate complexity and inconceivable extent, its awesome power and inexpressible beauty, is entirely and completely the product of the Word of God; *God speaks* — and *it is*! (Gen.1:3,6,9,14,20,24,26). Moreover, he takes pleasure in his work, for he sees that it is good, indeed very good (Gen.1:4,10,12,18,21,25,31). But more. Man is not simply part of that creation, full of wonder and glory as it is, for *God speaks to him* and he with God (Gen.1:28-30; 2:16-17; 3:9-13), and with such intimacy that God's presence can be known in the garden as really as that of another human being (Gen.3:8). Nor, though his communion with God is ultimate and all-sufficient, does he remain solitary, for God creates a complementary being of equal abilities and comparable status before God to be a 'helpmeet' for him (Gen.1:27;

2:18-24). Moreover the purpose of that complementary person is that together they may produce a race of similar individuals to live together in the wonder of the wider creation (Gen.1:28; 2:24).

This is the grand triumphant major key theme of the symphony of nature — a created and sustained world of abundant provision, exquisite delight, supreme beauty, and all to be enjoyed in social intercourse through communion with God the Lord. Indeed it is a world in which God himself takes supreme delight. It is not thereby a world of effortless self-satisfaction and indolent pleasure; the theme includes a motif which involves effort and responsibility. God sets apart a garden in the midst of his creation, a region provided with all that was necessary for a satisfying life, but man is set within it to cultivate it and to care for it. Man is charged with responsibility as the steward of God's creation, to make it productive, and to tend and preserve it for God's pleasure and glory, and thus for his own blessing (Gen.2:8-17). To test the freedom of man's obedience in this role, his stewardship is fenced with one, and one only, prohibition, and also by one positive and precise implied requirement; he is *not* to eat the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, but he *needs* to eat the fruit of the tree of life (cf. Gen.2:16-17 with Gen.2:9).

The second subject introduces a dark minor key. The flowing beauty of the first subject is abruptly interrupted by the introduction of the sharp discord of a dissonant element in the harmony. An unresolved discordant clash jars the ear: "*Has* God said you shall not...?" (Gen.3:1). This subtle suggestion from the implacable rebel against the order and rule and utter supremacy of God insinuates itself into the pattern, and quickly becomes the dominant element, as man disobeys the direct command, denies his dependence on God, and refuses to accept the very contingent nature of the created order. He arrogates to himself the right to act without the constraint of outside standards, he seizes the bountiful gifts of God as though they were his own, and he proudly asserts that the created order is the only reality worth considering. And man has been doing the same ever since.

God's judgment is swift, clear, and absolutely appropriate. Disobedience brings retribution, independence produces alienation, and the making absolute of that which is relative and contingent divorces it from the very source of its balance and cohesion (Gen.3:14-21). In one act the basis of morality is flouted, the foundation of social harmony cracked, and the fundamental balance of the whole created order shaken to its roots. All that was once in gracious and serene communion with man now becomes implacably against him — God the Lord, his fellow man, nature and the universe itself. The fruitful and constructive co-operation of life in the garden under the loving and joyful control of God the Lord becomes a constant labour to wrest from nature the necessitites for mere animal life, a continual effort to maintain social cohesion and minimise the inevitable conflict, and there is no longer any claim on God's help and

assistance (Gen.3:22-24).

Nevertheless, embedded almost unnoticed in the dark tones of the jagged, grating, dissonant second subject, are a few notes which as a motif are destined to grow and develop so as to dominate the development as it unfolds to its glorious climax. It is subtly interwoven and integrated with the first subject so that at the great climax they are one in their transformation. For the second subject is there set aside, or rather revealed for what it really is and purged and purified by that insignificant motif, so that the glory of creation is magnified by the glory of final judgment and the supreme glory of costly redemption. Thus is produced a new creation whose wonder and beauty and purity transcends by orders of magnitude that of the first creation, which God himself even then pronounced very good. This motif is the promise that the offspring of the woman will crush the head of the root of all evil, symbolised by the serpent (Gen.3:15b). The apostle Paul, at the resolution of the climax, recalls this quite specifically when he writes to the Christians at Rome: "The God of peace will soon crush Satan under your feet." (Rom.16:20). The motif in Genesis, though clearly referring pre-eminently to Christ on whom the whole symphony centres, is also a promise to all who participate in the redemption he buys by his once-for-all sacrifice of himself. The apostle to the Gentiles also makes clear in the same letter that the blood-bought redemption is an act and a process which includes the whole of the created universe by virtue of its relationship to man in the creative and redemptive purpose of God (Rom.8:18-25).

Thus the main themes are stated and linked, and the basic elements in their development are hinted at subtly but none-the-less suggestively. But the symphony is not simply the product of human creativity, however divinely inspired; it is not a human attempt to express in invented stories, however wonderful, the facts of the human predicament as they are experienced by all men at all times. The symphony concerns actual real events in the world in which man in fact lives; God is composing the symphony by working out his purpose through the events of the history of the universe and earth and man, though as they are narrated by the writer the Holy Spirit uses figurative devices to bring out their meaning. These themes are of vital concern to all men in all ages and in all places: a fallen creature trying to be what he is not; a fallen world of nature disrupted in its working and groaning in the futility of its emasculated glory; and human societies wracked by tension and torn by the conflict which inevitably follows from moving the centre of all existence from God the Lord to his appointed steward. The tenant makes himself the owner as well as the occupier. And the form of the life within which all men have subsequently worked out their individual and collective destinies is thus closely defined. Man is free to defy God and sin, but only within the prescribed framework for disobedience. The true freedom of responsibility to a loving and caring God is exchanged for the bondage of self-seeking and obedience to

another master whose attributes are the antithesis of all that is good and pure and holy and beautiful. The thrice-blessed tenant becomes the thrice-cursed slave — apart from the sheer grace of God in redemption.

Development

The development begins with the promised pain of childbirth (Gen.4:1-2), the toil of working the soil and tending the flocks (v2; & 7:29), and the tension within the family, leading to fratricide (4:3-8). But, though God the Lord is no longer accessible and available, he is still very much present, in both mercy and judgment. And at the outset the fundamental division of the human race is established, into those who turn to God and say, "Thy will be done", and those *to whom* He says, ultimately and reluctantly, "your will be done", as C. S. Lewis so aptly puts it. Abel and Cain are universal types. So mankind multiplies in numbers, but not in wisdom and devotion. Man devises, no doubt through the common grace of God, new technologies of using God's earth, and of expressing the creativity not lost, though grossly corrupted, through the fall (Gen.4:17,20-22). But, despite the deep yearning after God (4:26), degeneration into rebellion and gross immorality increasingly infects the whole race, until an act of universal judgment becomes inevitable (Gen.6:11-13). The very natural creation which God had provided for man's pleasure, profit, and provision becomes, paradoxically, the instrument of that judgment (Gen.7:11-12). But then sin is a paradox; the declaration of independence by the tenant turns the very property of his lease against him. The confusion of freedom with anarchy produces bondage, and a bondage which extends to nature from man. Early in the symphony it is the second subject which is dominant. Both Cain and Abel bring to God an offering which is the fruit of their labour in using God's earth to meet their ordinary needs. But Abel's offering is a vicarious offering of himself, a demonstration of his recognition of his need of redemption. Thus nature becomes a symbol of the need and the means of redemption. So with Noah and the flood; as natural forces are the medium for judgment, so their right use in obedience to God the Lord becomes the means and the type of salvation. Noah builds an ark which uses the laws of flotation as a means of preservation through judgment; more than that, it is the way of salvation for *both* the chosen of God and of animal nature (Gen.6:17-22; 7:1-4; cf. 1 Pet.3:18-22). No sooner has God the Lord renewed his covenant with man in nature (sealed by a visible sign which is itself a natural phenomenon produced by the transmutation of light, the symbol of the righteousness of God, through the instrument of judgment, the retreating stormclouds), when Noah plants a vineyard, abuses its products, and falls into gross sin. But yet again the hint of the redemptive theme is there, for Shem and Japheth, realising the deep moral significance of their father's

recumbent nakedness, chastely cover the unseemly sight of the sinful stupor of the man who had so recently experienced the glorious deliverance by the sovereign grace of God (Gen.9:8-23). This renewed covenant is, significantly, a covenant between God the Lord and all mankind in Noah, and *all living creatures* (9:9-11;16). It is an *everlasting* covenant; God is committed by his promise never again to destroy life on earth by water: perhaps here in the earliest passages of the symphony there is also the implicit promise of redemption and renewal, a nuance of the new heavens and the new earth which are yet to be.

The second subject is transformed into a new dimension when man uses his technological creativity in transforming the mineral resources of the earth into the blasphemous construction at Babel (Gen.11:1-9). God's judgment is then to inhibit the communication of ideas by confusing language, which is not only the facilitator of creative thought, but also the very stuff of social and cultural cohesion. And in all problems of human conflict and disagreement there is always an essential element of non-communication, an inablility fully to appreciate the real content of the opposing point of view. The confusion not only inhibits the transfer of wrong ideas, but also of good and true notions. In the very judgment therefore is implicit the necessity of the direct work of God if truth is to prevail and right understanding to spread. The word of God applied by the Holy Spirit is thus the pre-requisite for effectuation of redemption.

The theme of redemption then begins to become increasingly prominent. Shem and his descendants are chosen by God as the vehicle for his special revelation of himself. And Abraham is called out to be the progenitor of the nation to whom God commits that revelation and its concomitant responsibility, to be the father of that spiritual Israel which is the company of all faithful people in all ages and in every place, and to be the recipient of the first concrete articulation of that covenant of grace which is the only basis of redemption of both man and nature (Gen.12:1-9; 13:14-17; 15:1-21; 17:17-22). In that covenant God the Lord not only promises unique offspring, but also, and equally, a *land* — a specific area of the earth's surface to provide for the needs of his holy people. The parallel with the promise and provision of God to Adam in the garden can scarcely be missed.

Throughout the old dispensation of the covenant of grace the intimate connection of the observance of their obligations and the ability of the land to provide for the needs of the people is a constantly recurring theme. The chosen people are tenants in their new God-given land flowing with milk and honey, and they are to behave as befits tenants. Abraham and the other patriarchs never settled in the land, though they attained their final resting place there, for first the people of God had themselves to multiply and be subjected to cruel bondage (Ex.1:6-7; 11-14; 20-22). Surely during the sojourn in Egypt the people of Israel must have seen and discerned both the benefits and

the temptations of a sedentary life in which needs are richly met from the bountiful earth, for ancient Egypt was a richly fertile land. As the poor they suffered oppression by the rich; as slaves they endured the pain of providing treasure cities to safeguard the ill-gotten gains of a ruling dynasty; as servants of Yahweh, the Creator Lord of heaven and earth, they saw the results of the worship of false gods and the deification of man. Surely they were well warned of the insidious web of evil which could be woven by God's enemy, if man treated the riches of God's earth as his own, an all too potent temptation in a sedentary culture richly provided with the means of subsistence.

Under Moses, by the miraculous deliverance from bondage in Egypt, the twelve tribes are constituted a people, and the trek to Sinai brings them face-to-face with the awesome presence of Yahweh, and they learn that salvation and deliverance imply significant, indeed all-embracing responsibilities. The response to the boundless grace of God includes direct reference to nature. The fourth commandment requires rest for animals as well as man; the tenth forbids covetousness with reference to the animals, and by implication, the land of another. The tablets of this law are given with a terrifying display of the majestic magnificence of natural forces, and Yahweh is there within them. Thus at Sinai the themes of nature belonging to God and existing in its own right to glorify him, and that of the responsible use of the resources of nature by man, come together, echoing the exposition of Genesis 1 and 2 (Ex.19:16 - 20:21).

The detailed instructions contained in later chapters of Exodus, in Leviticus, and in the Deuteronomic parallels, display no less a concern for the right use of nature, and its intrinsic value to God. Non-human nature is to be treated with consideration, even compassion. And in the laws of hygiene may be seen the redemptive activity of God as in some measure mitigating the results of the curse of Genesis 3. It is in the laws of tithing and of the sabbath, however, that the elements of responsible use and the inherent value of nature to God are most strikingly displayed.

Tithing and sacrificial offering certainly were a part of worship, and the means of providing for the poor and those whose role was to maintain the acts of religious worship by which Yahweh was brought close to his people; but they were equally a recognition that all the produce of the land belonged to God, and that the firstfruits and the best of the animals supported by it were his by right. The tithe was a token that *all* belonged to God. Then the seventh day of rest was not only set aside for worship; it was a recognition that the beneficent provision of the land depended on the grace and blessing of God, and not upon the amount of work that was expended by man. Leviticus 25 and 26 encapsulate the significance of the sabbath. The seventh fallow year was to be a rest for the land and an experience of God's bountiful and gracious provision for his obedient people without their expending effort in meeting their needs. The fiftieth year was to be both a similar

exercise of trust in God, with no less a glorious experience of sheer grace, and a time at which the basic resource — the land itself — was to be redistributed in accord with the original patrimony. This prevented the accumulation of the land as a resource in the hands of a few individuals. Thus God provides a way of life both for man and for nature; and so it is offered in chapter 26. Obedience brings fruitful blessing; disobedience an unchecked outworking of the consequences of the fall. For nature, however, the further judgment will produce the rest that man refused to give it, for it will "*enjoy* its sabbaths" when the disobedient nation is removed from it by the chastening hand of God (26:34-35). And, remarkably, even wild animals are to participate in the joy of the sabbath (25:7).

Thus the principal themes become intertwined and linked into an interactive development. For his chosen people God the Lord provides a land which is to yield superabundantly to meet in bountiful excess all of their needs; but that rich provision is realised only through obedience to the total requirements of the appropriate response to the redemptive acts of God in the deliverance from Egypt. Those requirements are not only religious, but also moral, embracing not only the relation of man to God, and man to man, but also man to nature. The care of God the Lord for his non-human creation in itself, independent of man, is also integral to the exquisite and intricate conflation of the major subjects of the initial exposition.

The glorious promise of benevolent and equitable material prosperity is thus offered freely out of God's grace and love for his people, but it can only be experienced and enjoyed by acting on the promise and responding to it in the way set out. On both counts the people of God fail. On reaching the border of the land they refuse to enter in the strength of Yahweh, the reality of which is the corollary of the promise (Deut.1:6-2:46). After forty years of wandering in the wilderness they enter the land but do not possess it completely, and despite their protestations of faithfulness to Yahweh, they quickly succumb to the allurements of the land (Josh.24:14-27; Jdg.2:6-15). God's redemptive acts through the judges he raises up are repeated frequently, but in every case sooner or later moral declension follows, and the fruits of the land are taken away by fresh oppressors. The repeated formulae in the book of Judges are: "The Israelites did evil in the sight of the Lord ... he gave them into the hands of their enemies ... when they cried out ... he raised up a deliverer ... the land had peace ... once again they did evil ..." (Jdg.3:7-12). The gloomy conclusion to the book is: "In those days ... everyone did as he saw fit." (21:25). The harsh minor key subject is dominant. And the land suffered as well as the people.

God then raised up a deliverer comparable to Moses in stature — Samuel, "attested as a prophet of the Lord", to whom he "revealed himself ... through his word" (1 Sam.3:20-21). He established the coherence of the nation, reformed the worship of Yahweh, instituted

the prophetic office which was later to be such a significant element in the life of Israel, and, like Moses, became the agent of God's revelation of his will to his people. And the land became the undisputed possession of God's people under Samuel's God-given wise authority (7:13-17). Not content with God's governance, and casting envious eyes at the peoples round about, the people of God make the sins and misdemeanours of Samuel's sons the reason for asking for a king (1 Sam.8:1-5). Their request is granted by God, but the social and agricultural consequences are clearly set out; all the compassionate provisions of Leviticus 25 are finally set aside. The rich will become richer and the poor poorer, and the resources of the land will be inequitably distributed with increasing starkness. But the reason for such developments is not only social and economic, it is the implicit rejection of Yahweh as their leader in battle and the substitution of a human leader (8:10-20). In a fallen society and a fallen nature such a change can only presage disaster, for God's land is laid open to conquest by his enemy. The second subject becomes even more dissonant and bleak in its dominance of the development, for such is the theme of much of the subsequent history recorded and commented upon in the Old Testament. Saul, initially strong and successful, sinks into madness and megalomania. David is raised up by God and under him the land of the people of God expands to its greatest extent, but even he, by adultery and murder, and weakness in his old age, makes a contribution to the decline. Absalom was the fruit of his adulterous marriage with Maacah, and exploited the weakness of David's later years. The bitter conflict concerning the succession of Solomon to the kingship was a direct consequence of David's behaviour as a typical king in that cultural milieu. Solomon taxed and oppressed the people to finance the building of the temple — and his own house and palaces. In his trade agreement with Hiram, king of Tyre, the hills of Lebanon were denuded of their magnificent cedar forests over large areas, which have never returned to their former glory. Rehoboam, an arrogant fool, brought about the division of the kingdom, and therefore of the land as well as the people. Thereafter the story in both Israel and Judah is dominated almost completely by the second subject. Only a few kings, like Hezekiah and pre-eminently Josiah, disturb the pattern of developing wickedness, oppression, and conformity to the ways of the surrounding nations and tribes. The people of God become the people of mammon, indistinguishable from those who did not know God the Lord. Judgment falls. First the northern kingdom and then the southern fall and the people are carried into captivity. And the land enjoys its sabbaths for 700 years — ten sabbaths and one full jubilee. God judges his people but has compassion on his land.

Recapitulation

Bursting into this solemn sequence of rebellion and increasing

conformity to the world at intervals, producing light and hope, are two other themes which begin to recapitulate the major themes of the exposition in Genesis 1 to 3. On the one hand there is the glorious nature poetry found in some of the Psalms (e.g. Ps.19 & Ps.104), in Job (especially chs. 38 to 41), and Isaiah, where so often in the later chapters the prophet skilfully employs vivid natural images to reinforce his message of hope (40:3-8,11-26; 41:17-20; 43:18-21; 44:24-28; 45:12-13,18-19; 55:10-13; *inter alia*). The other theme is the prophetic voice promising both judgment and forgiveness in response to repentance, in which so often the unfruitfulness of the land is linked with the gross sins of the people — spiritual and physical adultery, oppression of the weak and the poor, of the alien and the stranger, and the sensual luxury of the effete rich (Hos.2:9-15; 4:1-3,10-12; 8:7-10; 13:15; Joel 1:2-12,16-20; 2:18-27; 3:19-21; Amos 6:1-7; 9:11-15; Micah 2:8-16; 6:9-15; 7:1-6; *inter alia*). Even after the return from exile in fulfilment of God's promise the link between the fruitfulness of the land and the devotion and singlemindedness of the people of God is quite explicit (Hag.1:5-11; 2:15-19).

The former theme is a bold and transformed restatement of the first subject from the exposition. God the Lord is the creator and sustainer of all that is; it exists for his glory and pleasure; he alone knows and controls it in all its intricate, elegant and beautiful complexity, and its awesome, colossal and terrifying magnificence. More than that, nature, inarticulate, even inanimate, as it is, not only glorifies God by its very existence, but also *utters* his praise — the heavens *declare* his glory, the skies *proclaim* his work, daily they *pour forth speech* (Ps.19:1-4). Man, whom God created to be the articulate high priest of creation, as George Herbert expresses it, is deaf to their voice, blind to their proclamation, but God hears, God sees, and his heart is thrilled by the glorious harmony and counterpoint of that praise. But man needs the law of the Lord to revive his deaf, blind, dead soul, before he can truly participate in, indeed lead, that paean of praise (Ps.19:7-10). The response to that law is repentance and faith, and thus it links into the second theme, the proclamation of the prophets. In the exposition man is given the responsibility of both caring for and tilling the land; the first surely is the seed motif for his God-given role as leader of the praise and worship of nature, and the second equally surely is the motif from which the prophetic linking of the fruitfulness of the land with the obedience of the chosen people. But the pervasiveness of the second subject makes it impossible for fallen man to fulfil either without response to the law of God in repentance and faith.

The tension between the first subject and the second is still present, stark and unresolved. Repentance and faith are essentially subjective responses on the part of man to objective moral and ritual law, to an ultimately unattainable prescription of perfection, under the old dispensation of God's covenant of grace. The realisation dawns on his inspired servants that God must act objectively in order to change the

whole set of disturbed relationships. Mere return from exile in humility and singleminded worship of Yahweh is not enough; it alone cannot rectify that which is wrong with man and nature. So God will create a new heart in man, write his law in their hearts, and create a new heavens and a new earth in which righteousness dwells, fully, permanently, and without any antagonistic forces (Ps.51:10; Jer.31:23-34; Isa.11:6-9; 65:17-25). Such a free, sovereign, gracious act of God relates not to man alone, but to nature in itself, and in man's use of it, and is associated with the coming of the righteous Branch springing from the root of the old Israel, the vine of God; with the coming of the Messiah, who is both Lord and King, and Suffering Servant, despised and rejected by men. During the exile and after the return the vision is amplified and embraces the creation of a new Jerusalem, and a new land with an equitable distribution of resources (Ezek. chs. 40 to 48). Thus the symphony moves towards its glorious and divinely ingenious climactic final resolution of the tension between the first subject and the second. To it everything that has gone before has been moving; from it all that follows is derived.

Climax and New Development

The divine composer's act of resolution is as simple as it is profound, as completely perfect as it is totally effective. He becomes part of his creation. God takes upon himself full humanity. By the miraculous conception in the womb of the virgin Mary, with her full consent and co-operation, the Eternal Word experiences gestation, birth, childhood, adolescence, and maturation as a man. He knows what it means to live in a fallen world, a degenerate and oppressed society, and an environment subject to futility. He reveals a deep understanding of nature both in itself and in man's use of the resources of the earth; his Father clothes the simple wild flowers so lavishly that all the expensive finery of Solomon is dowdy by comparison, and his care and concern extends even to the most insignificant and common of his creatures. He feeds the hungry who seek his word by multiplying the ordinary fruits of the earth and the waters. He stills the storm and blights the fig tree. He heals the sick and recreates the minds and bodies of the handicapped. He promises that those who seek God's kingdom and make his will the way and goal of their lives need have no anxiety about material needs, for God himself will provide all these abundantly. As he rides into Jerusalem to claim his kingdom, the very stones would burst forth in praise if children were silent. Everything he does echoes the themes of the recapitulation.

All this, however wonderful, is but a prelude to the real glory, the proper climax. The deepest, the root tension has yet to be gathered into himself and finally resolved, completely and for eternity. He moves deliberately and with complete control towards the ultimate clash with the second subject which has seemed to dominate the whole

symphony for so long. At the moment he decides he subjects himself, apparently, to the final triumph of that second jarring, jagged, dissonant, gloomy theme. He gives himself up to death, the sacrament of sin. But in so doing he takes into himself all the evil and futility of nature as well as all the sin and rebellion of man, and, because that second subject has no content in itself and can exist only as the antithesis of the first, it is overcome and transformed and revealed for what it truly is, a subtle inversion of the first subject. It is none-the-less potent and powerful, real and pervasive. Its present power is residual, for the vindication of the victory is to be discerned in the resurrection, the trumpet call of the fulfilment of the promise implicit in the five-note motif contained in the first statement of the second subject: 'he will crush your head' (Gen.3:15). Since those climactic events occurred in which the people of God and the whole created universe were fully redeemed objectively and in fact by the sovereign grace of God, the ultimate consummation of the symphony is sure and certain, and the content of the triumphant coda is known, for the composer has revealed that too. While now the people of God, his Church, work, wait, and watch, in the light and power of those events through the inspiration and activity of the Holy Spirit, so the whole created order also waits and groans and travails until all the sons of God are brought to birth in Christ in this present marred and mutilated creation (Rom.8:18-25). The living presence of God, the Holy Spirit in his people and in his creation is the guarantee of the final outcome, for in Christ his people were 'chosen ... before the creation of the world; they have redemption through his blood; and they know the mystery of his will ... which he purposed in Christ ... *to bring all things in heaven and on earth together under one head*, even Christ.' (Eph.1:4-10). *All things* means precisely what it says. Nothing in all creation is excluded. The divine composer has been in control of the whole symphony from before it began — the exposition of both subjects, their development, their recapitulation, their building to an incomparable, inconceivable, incredible, even impossible climax. Not only the people of God, but the whole of the natural universe, is created and redeemed, and will be perfected, in Christ, when the times have reached their fulfilment (Eph.1:10).

Coda

The people of God today live in the development which proceeds from that climax. It is no less under the control of the composer. But it is worked out towards its certain completion in a completely new context. God, the Eternal Word, has in fact become part of his creation. By taking upon himself full human nature he also takes upon himself the burden and the promise of the natural creation, for man is part of that act and activity of God. By redeeming his people through giving himself up to death, he has also redeemed the non-human

creation, so that it is inevitable that through long ages since it was 'subjected to frustration ... not through its own choice but by God's will, it should not only groan in pain, but also wait in eager expectation, for its full liberation from bondage to decay into the glorious liberty of the sons of God' (Rom.8:19-21). For the redemption of the sons of God, though accomplished, is not yet fully applied, for the people of God also groan with nature as they wait eagerly for the redemption of their bodies. (Rom.8:22-23). Christ Jesus in his resurrection body is the firstfruits of that new creation, not only of the sons of God who already have the firstfruits of the Spirit, but also of the whole of nature, the total universe of the original creation (1 Cor.15:20-28, 42-49).

Thus the beloved apostle at the completion of the revelation of God in Scripture can look with absolute confidence to that new creation, to a new heavens and a new earth, just as the blessed seer had done more than eight centuries before (Rev.21:1-5; Isa.65:17-25). The blazing reality of that glorious work of God will make that reality in which God's people now live seem but a dream, ephemeral and transparent, insubstantial and insignificant. And onto that earth to people it comes the Holy City, the bride of Christ — that is the completed and perfected people of God, living in the close, unbreakable, gracious bonds of a community of divine love (Rev.21:9-14). The symphony began in a garden set apart from the old creation for the care and use of man; the symphony ends in a city in which the people of God live in perfect community centred on God and the Lamb, set in a new heavens and a new earth. The parallel between Genesis 1 and 2, and Revelation 21 and 22 can scarcely be missed. There are five elements common to both. First, the presence of minerals and precious stones, but in the apocalypse they are not simply present, but used; second, the abundance of flowing water, but in the latter picture, flowing through the centre of the city from the throne of God; third, the presence of the tree of life, but in Revelation not a single specimen, but a forest on both sides of the river; fourth, the presence of God in person, but in the city not only the centre and focus of it, but also the centre of worship, and there as the Lord God Almighty *and the Lamb*, the Eternal Word in his human form with the glory of his sacrifice indelibly imprinted upon him; and fifth, the people of God dwell in the city to serve him (Rev.21:11-21; 22:1-2; 21:22-23; 22:3). And light is unnecessary because the source of all light dwells within and his glory and that of the Lamb provides a brilliant effulgence of dazzling purity in which his servants bask. And the link to both dispensations of the covenant of grace is to be seen in the gates and the foundations of the city — the twelve tribes of the old Israel, and the twelve apostles of the new Israel (21:12-14). The coda thus encapsulates the whole symphony; the Lord of the symphony will come to complete it:

'Behold, I am coming soon! ... I, Jesus, have sent my messenger to give you all this testimony for the churches. I am the Root and the

Offspring of David, and the bright Morning Star.' (22:7,12,16). I am coming soon! — to compose and conduct a new, unimaginably glorious symphony of creation, redemption and glory?

Amen. Come, Lord Jesus.