



SERMON

In the 17th Century a young English mathematician named Richard Norwood began to behave rather strangely. He stood with his back hard against the Tower of London and placed a length of carefully measured chain on the ground and began walking to York, placing chain end upon end for 208 miles taking 2 years. Every time he put the stick down he made an entry in a note book. What was he doing? He was getting information from which he believed he could calculate the radius and circumference of the earth. The calculation had to be based on straight lines and so in his notebook each day he recorded degrees of turn in the road and changes in elevation for slopes and hills, and at the end of the day he would do a complex set of calculations to work out the distance he had travelled in a straight line. Eventually he had a long enough line to do the big calculation by trigonometry and angles to measure the earth's dimensions and his results turned out to be remarkably accurate even by today's standards. People thought he was mad, but his eccentric behaviour was perfectly rational and connected with purpose, a much bigger purpose than his day to day conduct would suggest. He was driven by a bigger picture.¹

It was the same for the stonemasons in Europe in medieval times. Three generations from one family could work to build a cathedral. A man would spend all his working life below ground level laying the stone work for the foundations to support the glorious building that his grandson would complete. There was a bigger picture that was behind the daily grind, that these stonemasons knew about which kept them going. Their knowledge of the long term purpose to what they were doing gave meaning to what otherwise would be a dreary and empty vocation.

And so it is with us. To become mature in our faith we have to realise that our relationship with Christ, our testimony of change, our baptism, laying on of hands etc are actually only small part of a massive cosmic plan of God's intention and purpose. We have to realise that our personal story is just a part of a big picture (sometimes called the *metanarrative*) of God's intention for creation which existed before time itself, and so the plan and purpose for creation stands outside of time and above and beyond any personal testimony of ours, no matter how precious that might be to us.²

¹ Norwood is mentioned in Bill Bryson's *A Short History of Nearly Everything* (Black Swan 2004) p 75

² Hebr 6: 1-3

Out of a void of nothingness God created and produced a universe of breathless beauty. God created our world, infusing it with meaning, substance and purpose, replacing the former emptiness with majestic character, diversity, intrigue, life and the sustenance for life, finally making humanity in His image to whom he entrusted the perfectly completed project. Creation was an expression of the magnificent beauty of God's own character – an environment within which special relationships were to exist. Firstly, at the centre would be a completely free and intimate relationship between God the Creator; and humanity the created; secondly, there would be relationships of perfect harmony person to person; thirdly, a relationship of perfect harmony between humanity and creation; and fourthly, within creation itself an innate unity and perfect harmony. It was paradise.

God's pre-existent plan was that humanity would have a role as caretaker or trustee for the nurture and protection of nature, it being implied that the relationship of unity and love that humanity had with God would translate into a loving and respectful relationship that humanity would have with creation³ and this was always clearly understood in later times as writings show.⁴

Then the primary relationship of all creation was broken by Adam and Eve. In the Genesis account, God is seeking that relationship in the cool of the day walking in the garden when asking "Where are you?"⁵ The anthropomorphic aspect in describing God like this, is not the point, the point being to show the level of unrestricted freedom and intimacy that there was in this special relationship. I have always thought that God's question was barbed – "I know what you've been up to – I want to have a word with you....!" but it is not. The language is the language of love seeking a relationship. It is a tender invocation more akin to a request "Come- let's enjoy each other's company". The response of Adam and Eve tells its own tale. They were afraid and had hidden⁶. In a relationship of perfect intimacy and unity there will be neither fear nor any reason to hide, and so now we know that an impediment had struck the relationship and the image of God planted in humanity was lost.

However, the very next thing we learn is that God declared His intention to restore the lost relationship and signals a commitment to ensure that nothing will prevent His plan that existed before time, from being fulfilled. God rebukes and curses the serpent for seducing Adam and Eve into disobedience and foretells that there will one day be restoration through an offspring of Eve who will gain victory over the serpent's offspring and regain the lost relationship.⁷ Whilst to us, this is a strange way to express a redemption plan of cosmic significance, we must remember that it arises at the very

³ Gn 1:27-30

⁴ Psalm 8:4-8; Is 45:18

⁵ Gn 3:9

⁶ Gn 3:10

⁷ Gn 3:14-15

earliest stage of the biblical narrative and is really the first hint we get of a bigger plan. What we have seen is a 3 stage cycle that is repeated time and time again in the story of God and man that flows through the scriptures, creation – fall - redemption. This is the way that God’s plan is revealed. Persistent falling, results in persistent redemption. Nothing will prevent God’s ultimate purpose from being fulfilled. There will be a final permanent redemption. Paradise lost will indeed be paradise regained.

Now it must be pointed out how paradise was lost. There were four key relationships put in place by God in creation that were made dysfunctional. Firstly there was the broken relationship of humanity to God. Secondly, as a result the relationship of humanity to humanity was made dysfunctional; thirdly, the beautiful relationship of humanity to creation as a loving caretaker was lost; and fourthly, the intrinsic self supporting relationship of cyclical balances innate within creation was disrupted and creation suffered.⁸

These fallouts can be immediately seen because in no time an interpersonal relationship is destroyed in Cain’s murder of Abel and after that, interpersonal dysfunction simply spread hand in hand with the growth of population so that at Noah’s time the whole of humanity was characterised by evil thoughts, corruption and violence.⁹ The flood is an example of the voice of the biblical message that can be found time and time again, of redemption after fall.

With 7 league boots we can traverse thousands of years of human history in a few sentences and vividly demonstrate the evidence of dysfunctional relationships. Look at the inhumanity of man to man in genocide through the ages even to the present time (slide of hundreds of skulls from: Rwanda). Look at the grotesque abuse today of young girls in the trade of child prostitution (slide). Look at the obnoxious and obscene self indulgence of extreme wealth in the face of poverty (slide of Nicolae Ceausescu’s opulent palace: the President of the people of Romania’s communist era). Look at the irony of impoverished children living in the garbage heaps of a city (slide).

And as for the dysfunction of humanity’s care of creation, look at the abuse of nature arising from the recent BP Oil well disaster (slide of a seabird wallowing in oil). Look at the denuding of the landscape by massive destruction of rain forests causing a gigantic trauma to the cycles of nature (slide of aerial view).

Paradise has been lost.

It was St Augustine who said “Our hearts are restless until they find their rest in thee.” He was echoing the cry of the human condition that is out of harmony with the Creator. There is a yawning gap that is felt, a yearning of the heart for something more

⁸ Rom 8:19-22

⁹ Gn 6:5-12

than and beyond the puzzles and perplexities of our daily lives. There is a deep hope that we might be able to discover a bigger picture of purpose that gives more meaning to our lives than we feel from day to day.

The Psalms of David demonstrate this. David as much as anyone felt failure and dysfunction in relationships but he was always honest and his writings take us deep into his search within himself and equally into the farthest reach of the search outside of himself. When people search like this, discoveries can be made which while not based on knowledge or data nevertheless produce a comforting resonance with a truth that it is possible to believe. Every discovery about God will have its beauty and so David's journeys of thought lead him to that realisation and enable him to rejoice in the belief that there is a bigger picture about his life beyond the circumstances of his day, - a picture that involves redemption and restoration. He believes in God's loving protection of himself in spite of himself, writing..... *keep me as the apple of your eye; hide me in the shadow of your wings.....* and then gives a clear picture of a restored relationship, very intimate and personal reminiscent of the relationship in Eden before paradise was lost.....*And I - in righteousness I will see your face; when I awake, I will be satisfied with seeing your likeness.* (Psalm 17:8 & 15 NIV)

And in an outburst of confidence his thoughts plummet right into the centre of the big picture of God's plan for fallenness..... *But God will redeem my life from the grave; he will surely take me to himself. Selah.* (Psalm 49:15 NIV)

Job is another. Compared to the knowledge we have through scripture and revelation in Christ and the church, he knew so little about God, and yet in the morass and complexity of his problems, with the loss of his health through a vile disease, with the loss of all his family and of all his substantial wealth, he refused to cut loose his basic belief that there must be a reason for these things, and without getting any answer he bursts out with stunning revelations which do not come from his knowledge but from his hope:*God is not a man like me that I might answer him, that we might confront each other in court. If only there were someone to arbitrate between us, to lay his hand upon us both.* (Job 9:32-33 NIV). He was stating a fundamental tenet of God's redemption plan that one day a mediator would indeed be provided by God in Christ Jesus.¹⁰

And later he says with even more revelation that.....*I know that my Redeemer lives, and that in the end he will stand upon the earth. And after my skin has been destroyed, yet in my flesh I will see God; I myself will see him with my own eyes.* (Job 19:24-26)

Both David and Job show us that the intuition of a searching person can lead to confidence and hope that there is a big picture for existence and life that is all about

¹⁰ 1 Tim 2:5-6 *For there is one God and one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus, who gave himself as a ransom for all men—the testimony given in its proper time.*

redemption and restoration, and that will address the restlessness of the human heart that St Augustine spoke of. Our deepest belief, waiting to be liberated by faith, is that there is a sovereign God who holds everything in control and in waiting for the redemption of all and a new creation.

In paradise there would have been justice and equity for humanity, and a harmony and balance that was always intended between humanity and creation, so the prophets through their eyes of inspiration too, saw a new paradise and spoke of a world of social justice, of peace between people, and harmony with creation as in nature. Isaiah writes for example that *with righteousness he will judge the needy, with justice he will give decisions for the poor of the earth (Isaiah 11:4).....* and that *the wolf will live with the lamb, the leopard will lie down with the goat, the calf and the lion and the yearling together; and a little child will lead them. The cow will feed with the bear, their young will lie down together, and the lion will eat straw like the ox. The infant will play near the hole of the cobra, and the young child put his hand into the viper's nest.* (Isaiah 11: 4,6-8) There would no longer be the debilitating presence of fear. We further read that when the Spirit.....*is poured upon us from on high, and the desert becomes a fertile field, and the fertile field seems like a forest, justice will dwell in the desert and righteousness live in the fertile field.*

The fruit of righteousness will be peace; the effect of righteousness will be quietness and confidence forever. My people will live in peaceful dwelling places, in secure homes, in undisturbed places of rest. (Isaiah 32:15-18 NIV)

Paradise lost will be regained. This is the metanarrative. God's purpose in Creation will come about. It will not be "derailed" by a fall. There will be redemption through recreation, and like Job and David, this assurance is a voice that we hear in our hearts which is affirmed for us in the teachings of the scriptures we read. We have become recreated in Christ and our lives are lived awaiting the fullness of our redemption and the redemption of all things?

So let us "go on to maturity....." ¹¹ and look beyond the circumstances and events of our own life and find a new and deeper way to praise and worship the sovereign God of redemption and join the song of all creation.¹²

Empowering people to be Christ's followers in the world...

¹¹ Heb 6:1-4

¹² Isaiah 55:12-13. *The mountains and hills will burst into song before you, and all the trees of the field will clap their hands. All this will be a memorial for the Lord, a sign that for all time will not be cut off.*