

Genesis 1 and Romans 8:18-25

I'm the king of the castle –
Keep out, you dirty rascal.'

These were the somewhat unfriendly words with which I taunted my brother when, at the age of 5 or 6, I successfully defended my carefully constructed sandcastle from all invaders, only to have it washed away later by the in-coming tide. According to Iona and Peter Opie, the rhyme can be traced to pre-Christian times, and a version of it is quoted by Horace.¹ It's typical of childish views of the character of a king: kings are top people, ordering their subjects about, and imposing their will on everyone, so that they and their immediate families can live in luxury. To rule is to indulge in an ego-trip. Childish, did I say? Sadly, it is a view that has pervaded much of so-called civilization, and can still be seen today, with many heads of state thinking that power is an excuse to exploit their people; witness the fortunes stashed away overseas and the gold bath-taps at home. To be given power, dominion, is interpreted as an excuse for domination. Nor is it just kings and rulers who behave like this. It's true of ordinary men and women. Those who have power like to exercise it.

When so many think this way, it is not surprising that the story in Genesis 1 we heard earlier was so often misread. The account of the creation of the world reaches its climax in vv. 27-8:

'God created human beings in his own image;
In the image of God he created them;
Male and female he created them.

God blessed them and said to them, "Be fruitful and increase, fill the earth and subdue it, and have dominion over all living things".'

The idea of ‘dominion’ was understood to mean ‘domination’ – a licence for exploitation. Take the example of an American millionaire, a conservative Christian, who made his fortune in mountain-top coal mining. He argued that – notwithstanding the damage he was doing to the environment – he was exercising a God-given right, since in Genesis God gave Adam dominion; nature, he declared, was ours to control and exploit for our own benefit. The Bible is a dangerous book when you quote a text out of context, for its words can be twisted to support what you like. The author of Genesis certainly did not understand God’s words to be a *carte blanche* for exploitation.

But what *is* the context? God, we are told, created men and women in his own image; they are to be *like* him. Read on in the story and you will discover that God is revealed to be loving, caring, compassionate, just; in his relations with men and women and his creation he acts with grace and forgiveness. The psalms proclaim God as King, but this is clearly a very different understanding of kingship. In the most famous of all the psalms, Psalm 23, we learn that ‘the Lord is my *shepherd*’, and the kings of Israel were called to be shepherds of their people; in the New Testament the same idiom is applied to Jesus. And men and women, Genesis affirms, were created in God’s image – to be *like* him.

The biblical story of creation offers us a picture of what the world was intended to be. This, it affirms, is the divine plan: men and women living in harmony with each other and with nature. They are to subdue the earth – bring it under control – and exercise rule over all living creatures, caring for their wellbeing. Out of the chaos of formlessness described in v.1, God has created a coherent universe, which is interconnected at every level. Men and women in relation to one another; plants providing food for the animals as well as for humans; everything living in harmony.

It didn’t last, of course. Genesis attributes the ensuing mayhem to the Fall; men and women disobeyed God’s command – instead of exercising dominion over the animals they listened to a snake and ate the one fruit that they had *not* been given for food. They had misused their position, and the result was disaster for them and corruption for creation. We may well dismiss

the story as pious myth – was it really all the fault of Adam and Eve? Are we, their descendants, responsible for earthquakes and tornados and plagues? Perhaps not, but it is remarkable how often disasters *are* linked to human activity. The biblical authors tend to see invading armies and famines as punishments – but as so often the punishment doesn't just 'fit the crime' but is rooted in it. Famines were – and are – often due to warfare; invasion the result of the greed and the rivalry of monarchs; the plunder, rape and murder that follow the result of individuals satisfying their own desires and ignoring the well-being of others. Senseless assassinations the outcome of distorted minds that think they alone are right, and any other view must be eliminated.

My in-box, like my letterbox, gets jammed with petitions and appeals from charities trying to cope with what the Bible terms 'a fallen world'. Our rainforests are being destroyed. Why? Because logging firms want to make money by planting something more profitable. Oil spillages are polluting our seas. Why? Because oil firms use dangerous ships in the hope of making more money. Famine is spreading once again in Ethiopia, Yemen, Sudan, and many other countries. Why? Sometimes because the rains fail, but largely because of conflict which not only destroys agriculture but prevents aid from being distributed. Refugees arrive on our shores and are turned away, because we do not want to share our riches with those who have nothing. Men, women, and children are homeless, because we do not care. And of course there is the crisis of climate change, to which, whatever its origins, we are certainly making a very large contribution, whether as individuals, boosting our own lifestyle, or as businesses, pursuing profits. 'The whole created universe groans,' wrote St Paul, and his words are even more true today than when he wrote them.

Equally true are the words of John Donne, penned almost 400 years ago: 'No man is an island' – but we continue to behave as though we *are* islands, everyone concerned with his or her own ego, rather than with others. Our actions affect others, as theirs affect us. As human beings we are responsible, every time we leave a light burning when we don't need it or make an unnecessary journey by car, or add to the pollution of our world by using yet more plastic, or eat animals that have suffered cruelty or wear clothes that have been manufactured by those paid a pittance. And we cannot

escape our responsibility, because we are all inter-connected: connected to one another – to rich and poor – but also to the world in which we live and which was entrusted to us. When I pick a product from a supermarket shelf, I am making an individual choice, but it links me with others and with nature herself. Was the product grown in a sustainable way? Were those who grew it and marketed it paid a living wage? Was it transported miles to reach me? We are all interconnected, and our actions affect others, whether for good or ill.

God created men and women in his own image, declares the author of Genesis – a God who is characterised by generosity and love and justice, and who is concerned for the welfare of his people. To live ‘like God’ means accepting that we are all interconnected, responsible for each other, concerned to reflect those same characteristics of generosity and love and justice. But as the story of the Fall suggests, we prefer to indulge in our own ego-trips, to satisfy our own desires, and ignore the rest of creation.

Simon introduced us to this term’s theme last week by reminding us of the exploits of Captain Kirk. On Wednesday William Schatner finally boldly made it into space, and though he described it as a profound and moving experience, his ten-minute foray wasn’t quite as impressive as his former exploits in *Star Trek*. Prince William was certainly underwhelmed. We should be repairing *this* planet, he commented, not looking for other places to live. There’s certainly plenty in need of repair, and it’s a task in which, in various ways, we can all share.

¹ His version, however, conveys a very different message: ‘Rex erit qui recte faciet; qui non faciet, non erit’ (*Epistulae* I.I.59-60).