

FOUR SERMONS ON GENESIS 1

MATTHEW P. ANSTEY

Sermon 3 - The Good Life of Creation

Introduction

In 1974, when I was just three years old, more than 2,300 Christian leaders from 150 different countries gathered on the other side of the world in Lausanne, Switzerland, for the International Congress on World Evangelisation. The Congress produced the famous Lausanne Covenant, and was a catalyst for Christians around the world to engage in and reflect more deeply upon mission. Dr René Padilla, now International Director of Tearfund,¹ regards the 1974 congress “the most important worldwide evangelical gathering of the twentieth century”.²

However, during the conference, a draft Lausanne Covenant was circulated, and a small group of prominent Christians were concerned that it failed to mention social justice. So this small group set up during the conference a Radical Discipleship study group, which included John Stott, David Claydon, John Hirt,³ and Os Guinness. They wrote a response to the draft Lausanne Covenant, from which I quote:

“There is no biblical dichotomy between the word spoken and the word made visible in the lives of God’s people. ... There are times when our communication may be by attitude and action only, and times when the spoken word will stand alone; but we must repudiate as demonic the attempt to drive a wedge between evangelism and social action. Those who proclaim the cross must be continually marked by the cross. With unashamed commitment to Jesus Christ, we must engage in the mutual listening of dialogue, the reward of which is understanding.”

This challenging response resulted in an entirely new clause being added to the Lausanne Covenant.⁴ It included the following:

“Because [humankind] is made in the image of God, every person, regardless of race, religion, colour, culture, class, sex or age, has an intrinsic dignity because of which he should be respected and served, not exploited.”

In linking the concept of “image of God” to social justice, this statement makes a crucial link between Genesis 1, the creation story, and social justice. As the Radical Discipleship Group at Lausanne stated, it is “demonic to drive a wedge between evangelism and social action.”

In today’s sermon, I want to explore this profound connection and show that it goes right to the foundations of the good world God gave us. That is, the link between evangelism and social justice is an expression of the deeper link between creation and ethics, between the story of who we are and how we are to live.⁵

The Image of God

The place to begin is where Lausanne indicates: the fact that all people are made in God's image. But this raises a problem, for the Scriptures assert that this God has no image. How then are we to be like God's image?

In interpreting any scripture, we must always give primacy to the actual text in which each idea is found, so in this case, we must give primacy to Genesis 1 itself. That is, to be made in God's image means primarily to be like the God of Genesis 1.

On one hand, *being* the image of God is a given – all people are made in God's image.

On the other hand, *becoming* the image of God is a *vocation, a way of life*. To be God's image is to live as God lives. This call to be like God is repeated throughout God's Story - "Be holy, because I the LORD your God am holy" (Lev 19:2), "Imitate God, therefore, in everything you do, because you are his dear children." (Eph 5:1). "We love, because God first loved us." (1 John 4:19).⁶

So then, what does God look like *in detail*? Who is this God that we are to imitate? Genesis 1 is remarkable in recording over twenty-five different activities God did in creating.⁷ Together they divide into three groups of *speaking, acting, and resting*. Each of these three can also be further unpacked.

God Who Speaks

First, let's consider God's speaking, which occurs in five different ways.

The first and most common speech act in Genesis 1 is the *let there be*.⁸ Listen to them together: let there be light, let there be a space, let there be gathered, let them be seen,⁹ let them grow, let them symbolise,¹⁰ let them swarm,¹¹ let them fly, let them bring forth, let them look after each other.¹²

When God speaks, God let's everything else find its own way and place and vocation. How contrasting with our words, "Let me do it! Let me take over!" or worse, "Let him alone, it's his fault! Let her suffer!" But God speaks energising life into creation – let creation thrive! I love this God who lets go – let there be space, let things be seen, let them look after each other. In other words, God the Creator says, *let the world create as well*.

The second way God speaks is to *name*. God names the day, night, sky, earth, seas. God names humanity as bearers of God's image, *male* and *female*, perfectly equal.¹³ To name is to give something or someone its identity.

The third way God speaks is to *command*. "Be fruitful! Multiply! Fill the place! Manage¹⁴ it!"¹⁵ These commands are crucial, for they say – to all living creatures¹⁶ and to all people – that *life is a project*, life has a vocation. There is a way of living that is congruent with the way we have been made. Be fruitful, multiply, fill the place, look after each other. It is a command that gives life. The call to live well, therefore, is grounded in the fundamental goodness and beauty of our being, not in our fallen nature.

The fourth way God speaks is to *draw attention*.¹⁷ In verse 29 God says to humanity *Look!* – God invites the listener to pay attention to our context, to what is before us, a good world pregnant with hope and possibility. *Look! See what I have created and given you!* This centres human life on our particular context, and not on ourselves.¹⁸

This fifth and final way God speaks is the *declaration* – “I give you everything. It is yours.” The whole creation is an act of giving and culminates in God’s first declaration to humanity, “I give you everything. I have withheld nothing.”

To be made in God’s image means to speak the way God speaks – letting be, naming, commanding, calling attention, and declaring. We are to speak in ways that generates life, that invigorates and builds up, in ways that calls others to their vocation, in ways that says *Look!*, this is your context, this is what is before you, this is what has been given to you. God provides a dynamic model of ethical and spiritual speech that cares equally for the outer and inner and relational worlds.

This model can be insightfully applied to all aspects of life – family, work places (teachers, doctors, plumbers, etc).

This is the first of three strands of God’s being presented in Genesis 1. The other two are God’s actions and God’s resting. I will consider in detail God’s resting in the final sermon, and its four components of lingering (v2), finishing (2:2), resting (2:2), setting aside¹⁹ (2:3).

God Who Acts

So we will now consider God’s actions, which complement at every point God’s words. These can be grouped in three ways.

The first group of activities is the most obvious: God creates, makes, separates, and sets in place.²⁰ The life that creation entails is a life of shaping, separating, setting in place. Notice that God works in a way that maximises the creative work of others. God doesn’t actually fill, or multiply, or bring forth, but creates the environment and spaces where life arises naturally. These actions by God, in other words, correspond to the speaking of *let there be* and *naming*.

The second activity is *seeing the good* – Seven times the story declares that God sees the good. Each particular thing is seen as delightful, as interesting and important in its own right. You too have your own particular beauty and way of being, that is yours alone.

Seeing the good corresponds to God’s exclamation of *Look!*, because the good life that creation entails requires paying attention to the goodness all around, despite the distortions of sin. As in the parable of the four soils, each “bad” soil is in fact good underneath. The hard soil is good soil gone hard, the rocky and thorny soils are good soil full of rocks and thorns. So the good soil is foundational.

The third activity is *blessing* – God blesses. This corresponds to God’s commands²¹ to *be fruitful, multiply, manage*, whereby God calls creation to live out its life abundantly and responsibly. That is, to bless is to reveal the true nature of something, to show someone who they are and what they are called to become. Blessing is not about material possessions.²²

When we receive something, like a job, money, a gift, to say that the *object* is a blessing is all wrong²³ – the blessing is in how that thing reveals more of our nature and vocation. Children are a blessing from God precisely because more than most things, they reveal more of our nature and vocation; their presence invites us to a deeper integration. Not just our own children either; the presence of all children in our communities invites us to deeper integration, due to their unique way of being, their unique blessing to us all.²⁴

So we can see that God’s activities cohere perfectly with God’s speech,²⁵ and to be made in God’s image means to act the way God acts. We are called to shape our lives and our world to reveal and further its goodness, we are called to see the good in those around us, to consider carefully each person²⁶ until we truly see them in *the specific beauty that is theirs alone*.

Much relational conflict, as between husband and wife, father and son, mother and daughter arises precisely because we deny the other person’s unique way of being and doing, different as it will be from ours.

God Who Speaks–Acts–Rests

More profoundly, it means to be God’s image entails a way of living in which all our speech and activity (and intentional non-activity) intertwine together in a flawless integrity. With respect to the world around us, we could call this *creation ethics*.²⁷

With respect to our inner life, we could call this *creation spirituality*. Creation spirituality is pursued by practicing the disciplines corresponding to God’s activities: speaking, letting go, separating, naming, seeing the good, blessing, resting, and so forth. Creation spirituality always involves the *Look!*, which identifies one’s context; it considers the unique history of a person,²⁸ so that each person’s life may “bring forth” the distinctive spiritual life it is yearning to express.²⁹

Implications

This represents a radical shift in our thinking.

Why? Because it means that just as the good, the true, and the beautiful are intrinsic to creation, so are the good *life*, the true *life*, the beautiful *life*, and, the just *life*.³⁰ When we find ourselves in the story of Creation, we realise that the call to care for the world, the environment, for one another, for ourselves, *is intrinsic to the very fabric of the universe that God freely gives us in creation*.

This is radical because most people, including most Christians, live in a story that begins not in creation but in the fall – we think either that the world sucks, so let’s do nothing. Or the world sucks, so let’s fix it up. The church is a mess, let’s forget about it; the church is a mess, let’s fix it.

We alternate between the two great polarities of modern society – numbing paralysis or frenzied activity; sulking or protesting; withdrawal through addiction or engagement through revolution; hands flung up in despair or fists drawn in a fight to the death. And these polarities exist whenever we think the foundation of life is a cursed, wretched existence, that the good soil is in fact toxic, not just poisoned beyond repair, but *intrinsically* poisoned to its roots.

Genesis 1 however locates us in a story where spirituality and ethics are as natural as breathing and eating, a world where soul-care and neighbourhood-care are the *only* way to live in harmony with being God's image. That is, the *ethical imperative is grounded in the goodness of creation and not the fallenness of humanity*.³¹ And not just the ethical imperative, but the spiritual imperative, to nurture our spiritual life.³²

Can you see how this is so liberating?³³ I've spent too much of my life oscillating between inaction and frantic activism, trying either to whip up enough motivation to care for those around me, or racing around trying to save the world.

But the Creation Story, the birthing narrative of us all, tells another way. In imitation of God, we come to participate in "letting be", in "let others be fruitful", "let others take care of things", because love lets go and delights in the particular beauty of the other in and of itself. Thus the goodness of creation shapes not only a way of seeing the world but a way of being, a way of living compassionately, with the appropriate interlocking of speech, activity, and rest.

Our Australian Context

We have heard much in the news lately about the distressing situation of many Aboriginal communities, struggling with violence, substance abuse, and social disintegration.³⁴ God calls each of us to speak and act in a way that brings care and hope and blessing and wholeness to these communities because this is intrinsic to living in God's good world.³⁵

To follow Jesus, the perfect image of God, who fully revealed the good and just and peaceful life of Genesis 1 in human form, is to be committed to political and social and personal justice and well-being. There is no alternative.³⁶

Desmond Tutu put it this way: "[the Bible is] explosive dynamite in situations of injustice and oppression, ... When people have been told they don't matter, they are inferior by reason of their race or skin colour, nothing could be more subversive ... than the declaration that each person is created in the image of God."³⁷ "When will we learn that human beings are of infinite value because they have been created in the image of God, and that it is a blasphemy to treat them as if they were less than this...?"³⁸

But more specifically, these particular Aboriginal communities are within *our* context; that is, they are an integral part of the landscape to which God says to the Australian churches, *Look!* They are part of *our* story and our call to be God's image must involve the pursuit of their well-being.³⁹

Conclusion

In 1974 the Radical Discipleship group wrote, “There is no biblical dichotomy between the word spoken and the word made visible in the lives of God’s people”. We could add that there is no biblical dichotomy between the goodness of creation and the good life God calls us to, between the aesthetic and the ethical, for our life is to be lived in imitation of the God who made heavens and earth and saw all that he had made and said, “Look! It is very good.”⁴⁰

We love, because God first loved us. (1 John 4:19)

We speak, because God first spoke to us.

We let others be, because God first let us be.

We see the good in and around us because God first saw the good in and around us.

We separate and shape and name, because God first shaped us.

We bless and give, because God first revealed who we are and who we are to become.

We call the world to its true vocation, because God first called us to the good life.

We pursue the holistic integration of word and action and resting, because God first spoke and acted and then, rested.

Indeed, we love, because God first loved us.

Amen.

-
- ¹ Tearfund (*The Evangelical Alliance Relief Fund*) has the following mission (www.tearfund.org): “The purpose of Tearfund is to serve Jesus Christ by enabling those who share evangelical Christian beliefs to bring good news to the poor.. - Proclaiming and demonstrating the gospel for the whole person through support of Christian relief and development. - Working through a worldwide network of evangelical Christian Partners. - Encouraging partnership in prayer and support from Christians in Britain and Ireland. - Seeking at all times to be obedient to biblical teaching.”
- ² http://micahchallenge.org/Christians_Poverty_and_Justice/98.asp. I was referred to this web-site and the story in Paterson, *Never Alone: The remarkable story of David & Robyn Claydon*. 2006. SPCK Australia, pp. 150-151. Revd David Claydon was my minister in my teenage years and was the first to show me a Hebrew Bible when I was about 12-13, which planted in me a seed that led to my eventual Ph.D. in Biblical Hebrew linguistics. His incredible life story is told in Paterson’s biography.
- ³ An Australian Baptist minister at the time, and now the Uniting Church chaplain to Sydney University.
- ⁴ Note, as normal for 1974, it uses ‘man’ for ‘man and woman’: “We affirm that God is both the Creator and Judge of all men. We therefore should share his concern for justice and reconciliation throughout human society and for the liberation of men from every kind of oppression. Because mankind is made in the image of God, every person, regardless of race, religion, colour, culture, class, sex or age, has an intrinsic dignity because of which he should be respected and served, not exploited. Here too we express penitence both for our neglect and for having sometimes regarded evangelism and social concern as mutually exclusive. Although reconciliation with man is not reconciliation with God, nor is social action evangelism, nor is political liberation salvation, nevertheless we affirm that evangelism and socio-political involvement are both part of our Christian duty. For both are expressions of our doctrines of God and man, our love for our neighbour and our obedience to Jesus Christ. The message of salvation implies also a message of judgment upon every form of alienation, oppression and discrimination, and we should not be afraid to denounce evil and injustice wherever they exist. When people receive Christ they are born again into his kingdom and must seek not only to exhibit but also to spread its righteousness in the midst of an unrighteous world. The salvation we claim should be transforming us in the totality of our personal and social responsibilities. Faith without works is dead.” Lausanne Covenant Clause 5. It was edited into its final form here by John Stott.
- ⁵ Indeed, between aesthetics (sermon 2) and ethics (sermon 3).
- ⁶ But is the Creation Story simply a grand idealistic vision? Well, don’t make the mistake of thinking Genesis 1 was penned by some aristocrat in Ancient Israel, dropping grapes in his mouth while dictating a utopian – Utopia literally means “nowhere” – pipe-dream to

an underpaid scribe. No, Israel's scriptures were penned in conditions of exile, displacement, war, and often deplorable hardship, making Genesis 1 all the more remarkable. It is not an abstract vision, but a detailed, intricate, poetic depiction of God at work in shaping the world. I find the idea of the inspiration of Scripture to be most remarkable in Genesis 1, because the author wrote a Story about which he had no reason to even imagine. Proved by the fact that very few of us ever imagine life to be really based in creation's goodness.

- ⁷ Create v1, lingering v2, speaking v3, let there be ... light v3, ... space v6, seeing the good v4, separating v4, naming v5, making v6, let it be gathered v9, let it be seen v9, let them grow v11 (i.e. let *it* create), symbolising v14 (let the lights be *signs*), interrelate v16 (the lights 'rule' the seasons), setting in place v17, let them swarm v20, let them fly v20, blessing v22, be fruitful! v22, 28, multiply! v22,28, fill! v22,28, letting land bring forth v24, letting rule v26, subdue v28, look! v29, giving v29, finishing 2:2, resting 2:2, sanctify (make holy) 2:3.
- ⁸ What in linguistics are called *jussives*.
- ⁹ v9, "let the dry land *appear*."
- ¹⁰ v14, "let the lights be for *signs* for seasons"
- ¹¹ i.e., teem, thrive, populate
- ¹² or govern, or superintend, administer, rule.
- ¹³ Again, a radical statement in the context not only of the Ancient Near East, but even in the context of the Old Testament writings.
- ¹⁴ An alternative way of conceptualising *subdue!*
- ¹⁵ Verses 22 and 28.
- ¹⁶ Remember that in v22 the first three commands are given to all living creatures.
- ¹⁷ In linguistics, this is called an exclamative, which is a deictic. This means it invites the addressee to notice something the speaker is gesturing to.
- ¹⁸ It is the first word to humanity after the commands to multiply etc.
- ¹⁹ Which I will argue is actually *not* the best sense of sanctify.
- ²⁰ Verse 17 "And God *set* them in the expanse [space] of the heavens to give light on the earth."
- ²¹ As in v22 and v28 both times God blesses it is followed by the imperatives.
- ²² I develop this more fully in my sermon on Jacob's wrestling, available on the St George's website under Resources.
- ²³ To be precise, it is idolatry.
- ²⁴ "I tell you the truth, unless you change and become like little children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven" (Matt 18:3).
- ²⁵ The declaratives "I give you" is perhaps therefore best analysed as a performative, which is a speech act that *performs* what it says (e.g. "I baptise you"). That is, no activity is tied to "I give you" because the speech *is* the activity of giving.
- ²⁶ And place and context and community and environment. To follow Christ is to be an environmentalist.

²⁷ The aesthetic and ethical built-in-ness of creation fill us with hope and point to a deeper *epistemological* foundation of knowledge in *delight* and not dispassionate rationality; in fact, truth, as Hart (*The beauty of the infinite: The aesthetics of Christian truth*) says, is rational precisely because of its “poetic coherence and richness of detail. ... Beauty is the beginning and end of all true knowledge: really to know anything, one must first love, and having known, one must finally delight; only this corresponds to the trinitarian love and delight that creates.” Hart, p. 132. “Truth is ultimately aesthetic, ... a unity of form and message, having no separable essence or content for dialectic to pry loose.”

²⁸ Their biography and their art.

²⁹ Genesis 1 has no drive toward bare and unadorned worship, free supposedly from the negative gravity of shape and colour and dance – it has no iconoclastic tendencies. Rather, our worship is grounded in creation’s responsive song to God, and creation includes the whole world, and not some disembodied mind or will or pure thought.

There is no authentic Christian spirituality that denies the particularity of anyone’s journey, or context, or culture, or place. Be wary of anyone who promises “the key to the spiritual life”, if it means your life has to be squished into a one-size-fits-all model – a Procrustean bed – some outside-in pattern of prayer and worship, that is, if it involves a denial of the particularity of your life, your unique place and peculiarities, passions and pains. Examples of such (outside-in, Gnostic) spiritual straight-jackets range from insisting on the speaking in tongues to the seemingly innocuous yet ultimately suffocating ACTS (Adoration, Confession, Thanksgiving, Supplication).

To clarify, nothing is necessarily wrong with either of these, or any other spiritual “program” or discipline or way. The problem is when they are compulsory, and/or applied willy-nilly to every life irrespective of appropriateness and individuality. This is the importance of the *if* in the preceding paragraph.

³⁰ For some related reflection on Riceour’s idea of “economy of the gift, see W. David Hall, *The economy of the gift: Paul Riceour’s poetic redescription of reality. Literature and Theology*, 2006, 1-16.

³¹ Ethics, that is, living for justice and righteousness, are not tacked on apologetically to an otherwise complete theology, the pursuit of justice is not even a necessity arising from the fall, but from creation itself.

³² Another way to say this is that *mission* is born in Genesis 1 and *not* in Genesis 3. Mission, that is, in the broadest sense of caring for all of God’s creation.

³³ Middleton’s book is appropriately called, *The Liberating Image: The Imago Dei in Genesis 1*, 2005.

³⁴ Particularly regarding the community of Wadeye and the more general problem of abuse of children and babies. Adele Horin in *The Sydney Morning Herald* on Saturday, May 20, 2006, reported that the life expectancy in Wadeye, NT, is 46.

³⁵ Our responses will each be different, depending on our situation of course.

-
- ³⁶ To be Christian is to be a politician, in the broad sense of concern for the *polis*, the *city*, the community. It is to be an environmentalist.
- ³⁷ He continues "[each person] is a God carrier, ... [and] their worth is not dependent on something as extrinsic as ethnicity or skin colour. God does not love me because I am loveable; I am loveable only and precisely because God loves me. Biblical truth could never be an opiate to the people, for it spoke of a God who was notoriously biased, biased in favour of the poor, of the despised, of the weak, who rejected as abomination a religion no matter how elaborate and meticulous its ritual and worship if it did not issue in a concern for those who turned out to be God's favourites, the orphan, the widow and the alien" (http://www.ecusa.anglican.org/3577_74789_ENG_HTML.htm).
- ³⁸ Archbishop Desmond Tutu in his 1984 Nobel Prize lecture, <http://nobelprize.org/peace/laureates/1984/tutu-lecture.html>.
- ³⁹ In every respect.
- ⁴⁰ Note that v.31 repeats the exclamative *Look!*, tying together definitively goodness and participation.