

The Wild Patience of God: A Christian Perspective

Often, in current green thinking and writing, you will hear criticism of Christianity for a legacy of dominion over nature, and behind this is the notion of a God over against the world, dialectically, transcendent, wholly Other, who exercises power as domination rather than dominion, teaching humanity to do likewise. An article was written in 1967 by the mediaeval historian Lynn White, who claimed that the “dominion text” of Genesis 1:28 (“have dominion over the earth and subdue it”) was at the root of the ecological crisis because it licensed humanity to regard the earth as their possession, to do with what they wanted, to exploit and turn its resources to material advantage. Lynn White went on to say that it was important to draw on religion to counter this. But that’s seldom remembered.[i]

There are many, many Christian poets and writers and activists today who offer more profound interpretations of God’s creative power, and the ways humanity participates in that power, but their counter arguments haven’t dislodged the mindset of most (secular) ecologists. And, of course, Christians, along with the rest of humanity, have been guilty of poor – no, sinful – stewardship. But within the Judaeo-Christian tradition are resources that can inspire us to live in hope, even as we struggle in the shadows of a bleak future.

Such resources remind us that we are within creation, and can – indeed, must – listen deeply and attend to the wisdom that is the deep note, the *cantus firmus* of God. Some call this Gaia, drawing on the work of James Lovelock – a word to express the connectivity, non-separability of all things, the entanglement that holds us all, and all there is.[ii] “Gaia” helps us think theologically about God’s presence in the world, without compromising God’s mystery – fully in accordance with Judaeo-Christian language of God and God’s creative power as sound that goes out into all lands and words to the ends of the world, a sound that never dies away. As if sound and sense are entangled as God with the world in love.

Take Psalm 104, for instance. This is a song of praise to God the Creator. God who can be seen in the light, and wind; wrapped in light as in a garment; riding on the wings of the wind. And the myriad diversity of the created world is there: the leviathan, playing in the deep; the coneys, the animals of the forest, the birds of the air. And from the rich gifts of creation, humanity is satisfied. Meat, vegetables, wine, oil, bread. What more could humanity need? This is a God whose love reached beyond the farthest star; is deeper than the deepest ocean; is greener than the greenest green. A God whose glory fills the earth. A God, wrapped in light, as in a garment, who leads as in a dark cloud, a thick darkness.

There are passages, too, that remind us of God's wrath. Jeremiah, for instance, where the prophet has a dire instruction to,

"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 are gone" (Jeremiah 9:10).

To threaten the covenant between God and humanity causes the land to turn to desert, forest to be destroyed, the rivers to run dry, the crops and vineyards to fail, the animals to stop reproducing. When we read such passages, and the psalms and other Wisdom literature in the light of global warming, we hear a judgement upon us, a call to repent.

Humanity needs to listen out for the wild patience of God, who creates and sustains the universe, despite the human sin that desecrates the natural world. The sound of God's moral purpose is there – not only for humanity, but for the whole of creation of which we are a part. In the psalms that accountability (for creation) is clear. It is expressed most particularly when things go wrong; when humanity is not wise in its relationship with creation. Then we must tune ourselves to God's lament and anger at a sinful humanity that is careless and unwise in its treatment of the world.

The earth trembled and quaked;

the foundations of the mountains shook;

they reeled because he was angry (Psalm 18:8).

The earth trembles and quakes; the foundations of the mountains shake; thunder, hailstones and coals of fire, lightning – all are the blast of the breath of God's displeasure.

The anger is always secondary, though, to God's primary covenantal love.

It's important to read such passages with the truth of poetry, metaphorically. There isn't a literal connection between God's wrath and natural disaster. It isn't true that each time there is a tsunami, or hurricane, God is visiting vengeance on the people who suffer. But yes, when the deep order and pattern of the natural world is thrown out of kilter, when the earth is no longer securely founded and becomes shaky, then there are consequences.

God's engagement with creation is characterized by sustaining love, and the order and pattern of the natural world is a direct expression of that love. When humanity disrupts that divine order, then the consequences are clear: God's wrath, disappointment and

anger is expressed, and humanity should repent and change. Rev Dr Frances E F Ward.