

Sermons on the Subjects of the Day (6) **Creation, Redemption and Nature**

Creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the children of God (Romans 8:19)

When the governing committee of the Church of Sweden proposed to its General Synod last year the sacramental celebration of same-sex marriage, it wrote: “Here the distinction between what belongs to creation and what belongs to salvation loses its significance”. Innovative as the sacramental proposal was, it is the doctrinal proposal that is likely to shake the foundations. The creation of the world by God and its redemption in Jesus Christ are the poles in relation to which Christians have consistently narrated the moral history of the world. There are moments in the narration, of course, that do not lie at either pole but in between them - *e.g.* the sacraments themselves, which have no place either in the Garden of Eden or in the New Jerusalem. But these still depend on the *distinction* of creation and redemption; they are sustained by the dynamic tension between them. If the distinction between creation and redemption has no significance, then a sacrament has no significance either. The narrative of creation and redemption has accompanied and disciplined Christian attempts to think about the moral dilemmas thrown up by every age: slavery, war, technology, wealth and markets, etc. etc. In each dilemma they have asked, What gifts of the creator are to be rejoiced in here? What evils are to be repented of and lamented? What transformations are yet to be hoped for? As these strands in each dilemma have been separated and clarified, so resolution has seemed possible. But now, it is suggested, the same-sex question is better thought about without this narration. In contemplating a same-sex union we need not ask whether we are rejoicing in the bounty of creation, lamenting the distortion of human affections or looking forward to the lineaments of the new creation. What could such a proposal amount to - in relation to this or to any other question?

When people ask with greater or lesser bewilderment why *this* issue should have proved so divisive in the churches of our time, one answer lies close to hand: it is anxiety about doctrinal revisionism. The origins of this anxiety lie more than a century back, in the growth of critical academic theology, that speculative ant-hill from which so many questions have marched forth to nibble at the Christianity of the Scriptures and the creeds. But the focus of the anxiety now is not now upon the university departments, where reconstructing Christianity from the ground up is out of fashion, but upon the diocesan offices and synods. Yet if this is the true meaning of the crisis over homosexuality it remains to be seen *whose* meaning it is. Is doctrinal revisionism a frontier reached by gay Christians in pursuit of their moral challenge to the church? Or is the gay movement a frontier reached by a liberal church leadership in its

pursuit of their doctrinal-revisionist agenda? It was because the answer to this question did not seem at all obvious, that the authors of the *St. Andrews Day Statement* ten years ago framed their contribution in the form of a doctrinal confession, and asked gay Christians to say how far they could go along with it. Nobody can speak for gay Christians about doctrine except gay Christians, and until an intellectual gay voice is as widely heard in the Christian community as it has long been outside it, there is little point anyone asserting what gays do or do not believe in. There have been straws in the wind, however, suggesting that not all gays are enamoured of the liberal bear-hug.

The dialectic of creation and redemption is not merely one episode in the struggle between orthodoxy and revision. It is its central and decisive battleground. It gives their shape to the creeds that differentiate Christianity from deism. What is it, then, that tempts Christians to loosen their hold on it? What is the underlying doubt that causes them, with greater or lesser embarrassment, to shuffle uncertainly towards doctrinal revision at this decisive point? The answer is, as I take it, a simple moral mistake, centrally characteristic of liberal Christianity. The mistake is called “historicism”, and it consists in confusing the good with the future. It induces a profound loss of nerve over any claim to discern the good hand of God within the order of a good creation.

I want to explore this answer more deeply with the help of a recent essay by Professor R M Adams, a Christian philosopher with a well-earned reputation for having breathed new life into moral philosophy by recovering the central importance of the notion of the good.¹ Adams’ short contribution to the pro-gay cause is an essay in three parts, of which the first sets out a critical challenge to the objection that homosexuality is “unnatural”. He makes a deft job, as one would expect, of marshalling some of the more common objections to the use of “nature” as a normative category: it depends on an Aristotelian conception of species; laws of nature are merely statistical; a species is simply a population of similar genetic traits; the use of “natural” and “unnatural” to express moral discrimination is un-theoretical, supplying no reason for favouring or disfavouring anything. Natural teleology is of interest today, Adams holds, only to some Roman Catholics. (That it was the view of Hooker, Taylor, Butler and all the classical Anglican divines, this generous Presbyterian omits to mention, sparing our blushes!) What “most of us” think, Adams holds, granting too much too quickly, I would judge, to the views of Richard Dawkins, is that functional behaviour is measured by the successful gene-propagation of individual organisms. At any rate, in discriminating between good and evil behaviour, as we must, we should not confuse genuine moral intuitions with subjective likes and dislikes. Adams shudders at the thought of eating grasshoppers, though he knows some people like them.

So far the common objections to the objection. Pausing at this point, we may observe that “so far” is not actually *very* far. One might, I think, concede more or less everything Adams says in this section of his

essay, and still go on saying that homosexuality was “unnatural”. One would have to allow, of course, that the term was derived from a now outdated Aristotelian notion - one would be mistaken, but one would have to allow it! - yet that need not rule out a post-Aristotelian correlation of kinds and goods. One would have to allow that expressing a moral intuition in this way was un-theoretical, needing a deeper level of justifying description; but for most people most of the time it is enough to be reasonably sure that such a deeper description could in principle be given. But of which moral intuition may that *not* be the case? Express the view that it would be “unnatural” for a human infant to be brought up by chimpanzees. Call it “unnatural” for deaf parents to want their child to be as deaf as they are. Observe that it is an “unnatural” diet that destroys the human body by clogging up the valves of the heart with trans-fatty acids or coating the lungs with tar. Contrast a Caesarean operation with “natural childbirth”. All these uses of “natural” and “unnatural” are subject to the same line of criticism as calling homosexuality unnatural - and that does not make all, or any, of these moral intuitions wrong; it merely means that they require further explication and justification. Adams’s argument is addressed simply to the efficiency and clarity of one element of our moral vocabulary; and from such an argument as that one can never expect to reach a substantive conclusion that different sexual orientations are of no more moral importance than differences of taste over eating grasshoppers.

So we could stand stubbornly by the substance of the objection that homosexuality is unnatural, while conceding more or less all these objections to the objection. But I think it would be injudicious to concede anything like as much as that. In the first place, consider the bogey of Aristotelianism. One so deeply versed in seventeenth-century moral thought as Professor Adams is can hardly be unaware that the wide currency given to the category of “nature” in that period actually owed much less to Aristotle than it did to Stoic influences mediated through Cicero. As the philosophers of the early Enlightenment used it, “nature” can be seen to do a fairly precise job, and to do it tolerably well. That job was to focus attention on the dual constitution of the human being as body and soul, at once a free self-directing spiritual entity and at the same time a material organism. The virtue of “living according to nature” was precisely that of harmonising the demands of these two aspects of one’s being, achieving a rational self-direction that respected the structural limits and possibilities of the bodily condition. “Natural” and “unnatural” are terms that come into play when questions arise about how we shall conduct ourselves as embodied souls and ensouled bodies.

At the cost of a slight detour from Professor Adams’s argument, we should note that there are strong Christian grounds for interest in such a line of questioning. It is commonly said – though the generalisation has nothing to recommend it other than the charm of naiveté – that Christianity traditionally despised and ignored the body. The opposite is the truth. Belief in the Incarnation made any

such attitude impossible. Even in the eighteenth century, when the temptation for enlightened souls to take wing was, perhaps, at its height, Christians would sing:

Soul! Take no offence at this,
That the Light of spirits' bliss,
True likeness of God's radiance,
Makes disguise of servile stance.ⁱⁱ

Christianity has, in fact, harped upon the body. It has harped upon the conditions of the body's mortal existence, and it has harped upon the body's share in the hope of the Kingdom of God. "No one hates his own body," says St Paul, "but nourishes and cherishes it." (Ephesians 5:29) And if Christianity has earned little credit for its harping, that is because its late-modern critics have their own ideas of what should be said about the body, which often begins and ends with the body's erotic powers. Talk of the body's sickness or death is all too easily dismissed as talking the body down. *Gute Nacht, o Wesen!* Christians sing to their dying bodies with all due respect and seriousness.ⁱⁱⁱ But that is not a song the late-modern eroticist wants to join in!

To "cherish" the body is to care for very much about the body besides its erotic powers. It is to care for its internal organs and their functions, for the extraordinary capacities of its hands and feet, for its processes of growth. It is to take care of its weight, its rhythms of sleeping and waking, its powers of hearing and seeing. Even if we make a sharp distinction between the *created* and the *fallen* body, so bracketing out illness and death, we can hardly attend to the body and cherish it if we fail to notice its temporality, its exposure to physical risk, or its processes of aging. Jean-Yves Lacoste has reminded us recently that the phenomenon of fatigue cannot be assimilated to illness and suffering.^{iv} Yet sickness and death should not, in fact, be excluded from our view, for Christians have historically seen mortality not as an accident befalling human bodies, but as a created possibility of bodily life that never need have become an actuality. But above all these things, we have to cherish the body's role in interpersonal communications, its essential sociality. It is through the face that one human being is known to another, and all types of relation are built up through the body's strategies of nearness and distance: its attraction and repulsion, its power to dominate and threaten and its power to charm and endear. And this entails the learning of disciplines that surround the body's bearing of itself. We can none of us endure everybody else's bodies intruding constantly on our own; society is enabled by sustaining spaces around bodies, by holding the body back as well as bringing it forward, by turning the eyes away from it as well as fixing our gaze upon it. Gesture, clothing, styles and patterns of movement: all contribute to form the software by which the body loads its repertoire of social arts and achievements.

The *erotic* body, in fact, stands out as the exceptional moment in the repertoire. Here the body conveys a hint of eternity that beckons and calls us from beyond it; here it reaches out to point beyond itself. It was surely an irrevocable insight on Plato's part (whatever reservations we may have about the rest of his theory of love) to see in eros an *implicitly philosophical* reaction to the human body. It is possible, of course, to use the word "erotic", as a great many of our contemporaries do, simply as a synonym for sexual desire. But that is to miss almost everything of interest that has been thought about the erotic. Eros is precisely *not* sexual impulse; it is an aspect of the spiritual life of mankind, though inevitably engendering bodily experiences to accompany it since we are psychosomatic beings whose every moment is a mediation of the spiritual through the bodily. Reflecting on the body, it responds with yearning for its lurking hint of beauty and truth. It responds to something beckoning through it from beyond it. Precisely that moment of reflection is the temptation, as Plato, again, understood. The familiar body, the body that we live in, object of wonder though it is, is too essentially present to us, too intimate, too enclosing - let us say, too *heavy* to beckon us beyond itself. But the body of the spiritual imagination is light and elusive. If we fail to carry the act of reflection through to its conclusion, if fail to enquire what the erotic body is a medium *for*, then we end up investing our perfectly ordinary experiences of sexual attraction with an ontological weight that is, in fact, a borrowed transference, and in our confusion we fail to understand either ourselves or our bodies. We cannot and should not take that moment of rapture in the presence of the beautiful body quite at its face value - though we cannot and should not ignore it, either. We must interrogate it for its meaning. So Plato taught, and much Christian philosophy after him; for Christianity mostly (though not universally) found this aspect of Plato's thought suggestive and helpful. His warning has been echoed in most Christian thought about the erotic; it was certainly echoed by Rowan Williams, in his characteristically indirect way, in the much-celebrated but little-understood essay on "The Body's Grace". An unwelcome warning, perhaps, to an ethical intuitionism that puts its trust in the immediacy of feeling; and since Plato, by and large, is more spoken of than read, Christianity has had to shoulder the blame for the reserve - though it never was a reserve *at the body*, but a reserve *at the erotic image* of the body. Ever since St Paul it has been the *phronêma sarkos*, "the mind caught on the flesh", not the flesh itself, that has caused alarm.

The "unnatural", then, is a falling-short, or perhaps an overreaching, of the transcendence of the soul over the body. Still, Christianity has not been content to leave philosophical programmes for transcendence where it found them; and that is because it has had a more complex and more critical view of transcendence than much philosophy has had. There is bad transcendence as well as good. And there is a transcendence *of* the terms of creation as well as a transcendence *within* the terms of creation. Getting a distance on the body is not an end in itself, and may even be a temptation. The key to achieving *right*

distance is to locate the powers of the soul precisely where every created power of human nature must stand, under the judgment of God and awaiting his transforming redemption. The language of “nature” and its concerns for the body-soul relation must be framed within a fully theological account of creation and redemption.

What we have achieved by our digression into the concept of the “natural” is to identify a range of features in human existence that ought to excite our wonder and admiration, and can clearly ground some moral discernments. These then point the way to the understanding that a doctrine of creation can supply. Adams, for his part, having cut short his treatment of the natural with the common objections, finds himself at a loss, when he addresses creation in the second part of his essay, to know what moral discernments this category could possibly disclose. What worries him especially is the difficulty of speaking of a world at the same time created and fallen. If we distinguish a “natural” created world from an “actual” fallen world, he complains, it “breaks the epistemological teeth” of the concept of the natural and unnatural. Is war natural, or merely actual? And how would we know the difference? We can only pretend to do this, he fears, on the basis of “presuppositions” about the purposes or commands of God, which look as though they are smuggled in to make sense of a creation which, on its own, is unable to tell the difference between good and evil. But this is altogether too sceptical. There are some value-distinctions we may make quite clearly simply by reflecting upon the way the world works.

Consider, for example, how we know the difference between the health of a natural organism and its sickness - let us say, between the flushed cheek caused by a high temperature and the ruddy glow in the cheek promoted by a vigorous walk. We could, of course, say that nature knows of no such distinction; that it is only our own preferences that make us call the one flushed cheek “health” and the other “sickness”. But the preferences are obviously not arbitrary; they have to do with the predictable outcomes of high fevers on the one hand and of good circulation on the other, with the subjective experiences we have of the one and the other, and with our innate resistance to the prospect of dying. This is all “nature”, too. Nature is, to be sure, highly dialectical. She assigns death to all living organisms, and then instils in the higher and more organised ones a passionate opposition to the fate she has appointed. Yet, though there may be various ways of making sense of this, saying that nature knows no distinctions is not one of them. At the very least Nature knows that life is better than death! We may be guided by the Book of Genesis and the Gospels to understand life and death theologically as the imprint in us of creation and fall - but we do not need the Book of Genesis and the Gospels to tell us that there *is* an order of value in which life is preferable to death. We only need - just once in our life - to be dangerously ill, or to find ourselves at the bedside of someone else in that condition, and to wonder at the remarkable conviction with which we hold on to the good of life.

To take the step from a philosophy of nature to a theology of creation is not to abandon one set of interests in favour of another. The revealed purposes of God in creation will direct our attention back to *the world*, i.e. the totality of what there God has made, and teach us how to see the good he has given us within it. Any purposes God has in making the world are to be discerned in the world; they are not set apart from it somewhere else. Any discernment of how the world works will, *pari passu*, be a discernment of the purposes of God. No “presupposition” is required for this discernment other than that it is a *morally intelligible* world, a world in which there is good and evil to be distinguished, a world fit for humans to act in. All we need to assume is something that Adams, at any rate, is always quick to grant, namely, that the goods of this world are ontologically more basic than the evils.

What theology as well as philosophy must seek in the world are simply *the conditions of intelligibility of human life*, which is at once bodily, and therefore mortal, and yet “with eternity in its heart”, transcending its bodily state and aspiring to all the goods there are - not only bodily satisfactions, but moral recognitions, intellectual comprehensions, and even fellowship with God. To pose the question of homosexuality in *these* categories is precisely to ask about its intelligibility. Can there be any sense in an affection that appears to defy the logic of human bodily sexuality? Or is it not defiance after all, but a new disclosure of the good? These are questions that have to be raised (and, indeed, are constantly raised by homosexuals), if we are to treat sexuality with the seriousness that the task of living a human life invests it with.

But Adams makes a different, and unnerving, move. A wedge is driven between creation, which is all about “beginnings”, and the goods, which are located in “the future”. There are, it appears, purposes of God in creation. Loosely following the Western tradition, he conceives of three purposes that might be discerned in sexuality, a procreative purpose, a unitive purpose and a co-operative purpose. But when we think of how these are to be fulfilled, our imagination is not tied to the way the world actually functions. Each of them, he argues, can be realised just as effectively in independence of the others, and that has the advantage of giving space for sexual partnership between what he calls “physical and genital” homosexuals. (The apparent conviction that homosexuality and heterosexuality are “physical”, indeed “genital”, conditions is one of the more baffling features of the argument at this point!) For procreation it is enough that the heterosexuals get on with their usual business, or if they are unwilling or insufficient, the IVF industry can be stepped up. For the unitary good homosexual partnerships are as good as heterosexual. For co-operation of the sexes what is needed is equal job-opportunities and women in the boardroom. All of which construes God’s purposes in a purely voluntarist and arbitrary sense, detaching them from the philosophical task of understanding the goods of human existence as we find it. When the tradition spoke of three God-willed goods of sexuality, (offspring, faith and sacrament, in Augustine’s

formulation), it did so precisely to point out the convergence of the three in one and the same natural institution. The point of the analysis was to account for the form of marriage as all human cultures knew it, not to reinvent the world. Once we separate God's purposes in creation from the inherent goods of creaturely existence, there is little reason to hold on to the view that God meant anything at all by making the world.

Creation narratives focus our attention on beginnings, he tells us, and though beginnings pretend to provide fixed norms, they cannot do so. Sexuality and sociality have changed, and change is only evaluated in the light of eschatology. How, then, are we to situate ourselves at the end of history, to evaluate it? Through "the goods God offers us to love". That is puzzling, indeed. The whole normative content of creation has been transferred to eschatology, moved out of the world we inhabit into a world yet to be revealed, *and then assumed to be immediately accessible to moral judgment!* Actually, the conflation of the good with the future is a confusion. Goods, as such, are not in the future tense; we do not predict them. Neither are they in the past tense; we do not narrate them. Goods are in the present tense, offered to us as the objects of our action, here and now. But we are historical beings; we live by narrative and hope; we grasp the present tense as set "between" past and future. That is to say, the present in which we live and act always has its two horizons, reaching back and reaching forward. We focus our attention on the good presented to us by approaching it through narrative and projecting it through hope. Christians have their own reasons for doing this: they have encountered a God who has made himself known as Beginning and End, Alpha and Omega, whose beginnings are a faithful token of his endings. They therefore speak not only of a good to be loved in action here and now, but of a good to be looked for in the future. But philosophy is not free simply to borrow the notion of a future good from Christian faith and substitute it for the present good. Philosophy knows nothing of the future.

It is, of course, right that philosophers should speak as believing Christians. It is right that they should do their philosophising in a conscious openness to theology. By doing both these things R M Adams has earned our appreciation. But it is not good that they should confuse the philosophical task of understanding the world as it presents itself with elements randomly introduced from Christian proclamation. The result of that will be a deformation both of theology and philosophy. Theology needs the philosopher's reflection on the moral sense of the world, in order to think seriously about the fulfilment of creation. For without the love of what is, the "new creation" is an empty symbol - or is it a clanging cymbal? New creation is creation renewed, a restoration and enhancement, not an abolition. Not everything that can be thought of as future can be thought of as the Kingdom of God. A brave new world of cyborgs is not a Kingdom of God. God has announced his kingdom in a Second Adam, and "Adam" means "Human".

One thing that is at risk in this approach, as in a thousand less articulate and less measured approaches along the same path, is the disappearance of scientific knowledge from the criteria of moral responsibility. We are invited to set the observation of nature aside, to cast ourselves on novelty. It is, indeed, striking how scientific curiosity - inadequate, one-sided and inconclusive as much of it may have been - has come to be banished from the discussion of homosexuality. Adams has done us the service of displaying the intellectual underpinnings of this development: a concept of value that has parted company with a concept of reality, a division between the good and the real. But moral responsibility to the real is precisely what the dialectic of creation and redemption in Christian theology safeguarded. Intellectually the outcome is curious and a little depressing: not only the approximations of medicine and psychology, but even the cultural-philosophical legacies of a Foucault - hardly a defender of a traditional view of created goods, but resolutely interested in the complicated constructions of human culture - disappear over the edge of an increasingly moralistic public discussion of the gay phenomenon.

It would be ungrateful to leave our critique at that point. For Professor Adams has a final turn to make, which may, after all, really prove helpful. From the notion of the good as future he steps back, in a kind of gracious retreat, into speaking of the good as “vocation”. A vocation is not a future; it is a future horizon to which we respond in the present, and it corresponds to a past horizon expressed in the idea of an agent or a situation which has summoned us. “God *has* called me,” we say, “that I *may* do, or be, this special thing.” Now, vocation cannot provide a comprehensible idea of the good on its own. To appreciate its contribution, we have to tie it back into the goods of creation, from which Adams has apparently sought to cut it loose. A “vocation” is a *special* calling to a *distinct* good, different from that to which others are called. It is a distinct path of human action, offered to this person or that, but not to all. It is not a vocation to love one’s neighbour; it is not a vocation to refrain from stealing; these are commands that apply to all. But it may be a vocation to serve the community by writing novels or driving buses. And it is an obvious question to raise in the face of any strikingly distinct line of conduct, whether it can be understood as a special vocation. The answer will depend on how and to what extent it can be a true way of realising goods that are for all humankind. We may sensibly talk of the vocation of a Goya or a Bosch to depict the horrific and the disturbing in their art; we may not sensibly talk of a vocation of a Hitler or an Attila to realise the horrific and the disturbing in their military endeavours. Why make this distinction? Because artistic representation can benefit us simply by expanding our imaginations; warfare can only serve us as it is kept within the constraints of justice and directed to the end of peace. The distinction turns upon what it is to be human. A vocation, which necessarily departs from the general rule, needs to be recognisable as an authentically *human* form of service to the human community. How this observation may help open up

the question of homosexuality is something to which we must return next month in the seventh and last of this series of *Sermons on the Subjects of the Day*.

ⁱ R.M. Adams, “Human nature, Christian vocation and the sexes” in N. Coulton (ed), *The Bible, the Church and Homosexuality*, London: Darton Longman & Todd 2005, pp100-113. Adams’s major contribution to the philosophy of the good is *Finite and Infinite Goods*, Oxford University Press 1999

ⁱⁱ From Salomo Franck’s libretto for Bach’s Cantata BWV 186, *Ärgre dich, o Seele, nicht*

ⁱⁱⁱ Bach again. These words are from the seventeenth-century hymn *Jesu, meine Freude* by Johann Franck, used as the basis of the Motet of that name, BWV 227

^{iv} “Petite phénoménologie de la fatigue”, in *Presence et Parousie*, Geneva, Ad Solem, 2006