

Sabbath Reflections 3

Capitalism and Inequity versus a Gospel Mandate

Sabbath: Blessing and Hallowing within the Family of Creation

The Genesis creation story portrays a world in which all parts are deemed by God to be good and the whole to be very good. Likewise those whose lives are entwined in ancient cultures find it unthinkable that life could have meaning and fulfillment if not deeply rooted in extended family and the values and traditions that belong to it. In contrast, those who live in a culture dominated by western values, ironically a culture which was initially greatly influenced by Christian values and assumptions, live as if the goal of life is to seek individual blessing and fulfillment. It is becoming increasingly obvious that the accumulation of individual wealth, on its own, as a source of blessing, is illusory.

Individualism is deemed by many¹ to be a particular feature of modern industrialized society and the ideology that undergirds the economic principles of the free market, with its overriding and ubiquitous commitment to exponential growth. Christian values support and encourage the flourishing of the individual, but such a flourishing arises within the life of a healthy community. Christian values do not support the flourishing of an individual independent from the communities to which all belong, least of all at the expense of those communities. These communities now include the global human community, together with generations yet unborn.

Accountability includes the ecological community of the non-human creation. If expectations of continuous exponential growth are unsustainable, as many economists now argue,² and if the expectations of individuals for accumulating personal wealth are allowed to override commitment to 'Common Wealth,'³ then commitment to 'individualism' has become a stumbling block to a sustainable future for all human beings and is self-defeating. Individualism exalts the right of personal freedom; however if individual actions on a vast scale (the world is now populated by 7 billion people)⁴ put a sustainable future for all at risk then it is legitimate to ask what personal freedom means in this context. If freedom means the right of individuals to do whatever they want then we must agree with Paul Ricoeur that 'evil is an invention of freedom.'⁵ Freedom must always be understood to exist within the constraints of a relational world. In a relational world individual actions are constrained by the necessity of justice towards others and indeed toward the non-human creation. Ricoeur, expanding the arguments of Kant and Plato states:

'If injustice can be the figure of radical evil, it is because justice is not one virtue out of many but the very form of virtue, the unifying principle which makes the soul, from being several, into one.'⁶

Sabbath . . . is the canopy or shelter that hangs protectively over a relational world. As a 'Sabbath people' we live together under this canopy and are jointly recipients of its blessing and hallowing. The human fault line (original sin) is that no matter which generation we are born into, we think we know better and can find greater blessing beyond this canopy. It is really the height of arrogance for humanity to think we can reorganize life slightly better, that we can ignore some principles that lie deep within the created order and replace them with our own.

1. For example: 'Increasingly, it seems, the institutions of consumer society are designed to favour a particularly materialistic individualism and to encourage the relentless pursuit of consumer novelty because this is exactly what's needed to keep the economy going.' Tim Jackson, *Prosperity without Growth*, (London: Earthscan Publishing, 2009), 163. Tim Jackson is Economics Commissioner on the Sustainable Development Commission, the UK Government's independent adviser on sustainable development.

2. Jackson, *Prosperity without Growth*, 77-82.

3. A theme promoted by the eminent American economist, Jeffrey Sachs, in his *Common Wealth: Economics for a Crowded Planet* (London: Penguin, 2008).

4. World POPClock Projection, <http://www.census.gov/population/popclockworld.html> (accessed 4 November 2011).

5. Paul Ricoeur, *The Conflict of Interpretations* (Evanston, Ill: Northwestern University Press, 1974), p. 300.

6. Ricoeur, *The Conflict of Interpretations*, p. 302.

Every generation shares the same fault line with the generation before it and the one that follows after it. However there is one significant difference between our generation and all those who have gone before us. We are now a global population of seven billion persons. The consequences of our actions, if they lack accountability to others and the whole created order, are infinitely more wide reaching. Past actions of all of us who wish to live beyond the canopy of Sabbath have an immediate impact upon those whose lives are touched by ours. Now we live in a global world and the accumulative consequences of our actions have global reach. Every other living thing is impacted by us as are the world's rhythms and cycles (climate change).

The individual colours of the rainbow are good; the whole rainbow is very good. The diminishment or loss of any life is personal diminishment for all, the protection, and enhancement of another life is personal enhancement. The English scientist James Lovelock has described the universe as a single living organism 'Gaia.'⁷ In this respect it seems that science is partnering with Christian belief, so much so that science (which generally restricts itself to that which is provable by observation) ventures into the world of morality -- that which emanates from living with the accountabilities of relationship.

7. James Lovelock, *The vanishing face of Gaia; a final warning* (London: Allan Lane 2009).

FOR FURTHER REFLECTION

1. How do you connect with those around you and with the environment? What is appropriate behaviour and what is inappropriate behaviour?
2. How does Sabbath protect us from excess?
3. How do you react to Lovelock's description of earth as Gaia?

SABBATH REFLECTIONS,
a series of studies
by Bishop George Browning
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is published by the Anglican
Communion Environmental
Network through the Anglican
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