

St. Augustine's Sermons

Calgary, Alberta

September 30, 2007

The Rev. Jonathan Gibson

The Text: Genesis 1:26-

The Title: The Dignity and the Destiny

8:30 and 10:30 am, Holy Communion

Genesis 1:26-2:3

26 Then God said, "Let us make man in our image, after our likeness. And let them have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the heavens and over the livestock and over all the earth and over every creeping thing that creeps on the earth."

27 So God created man in his own image,
in the image of God he created him;
male and female he created them.

28 And God blessed them. And God said to them, "Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth and subdue it and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the heavens and over every living thing that moves on the earth." 29 And God said, "Behold, I have given you every plant yielding seed that is on the face of all the earth, and every tree with seed in its fruit You shall have them for food. 30 And to every beast of the earth and to every bird of the heavens and to everything that creeps on the earth, everything that has the breath of life, I have given every green plant for food." And it was so. 31 And God saw everything that he had made, and behold, it was very good. And there was evening and there was morning, the sixth day.

The Seventh Day, God Rests

1 Thus the heavens and the earth were finished, and all the host of them. 2 And on the seventh day God finished his work that he had

done, and he rested on the seventh day from all his work that he had done. 3 So God blessed the seventh day and made it holy, because on it God rested from all his work that he had done in creation.

Introduction

Genesis 1 and 2 are to the Bible what the border is to a 5000 piece jigsaw puzzle. It would be very hard, if not impossible, to construct the puzzle unless you began with the border. Once the border was in place, the puzzle would, over time, take shape. I think the same can be said of the Bible. Genesis 3 – Revelation 22 can only be fit together properly once Genesis 1 and 2 are in place. When these two chapters are properly understood, then what follows can be pieced together.

What we find in these two chapters is the original blueprint of God's purpose for his creation. But not only does it give us the original blue print, the more fully we understand what is taught here, we will in turn be able to better to piece together Genesis 3 – 11.

As we turn now to the end of chapter one, we continue to construct the boarder to the Puzzle. I have entitled this sermon *The Dignity and the Destiny* and will show you three points that can be derived from this text. They are:

1. Our dignity is seen in this text because we are told that God has created us in His image;
2. Our destiny is defined through our commissioning to have dominion over the world;
3. He has given us the boundary of Sabbath rest in which to live out our lives so that we can rightly reflect his image and exercise dominion

Therefore this sermon can be summarized by three words: Image, Dominion and Sabbath. Let's begin to unpack each of these words now.

1. He has created us in His image

As we look to the latter part of verse 26 there is one thing that is immediately evident in this brief account of the appearance of man and woman upon the earth, and that is: The origin of humankind is strikingly different from the origin of animals. Animal life appeared much as plant life did, and as the fish and birds appeared. It is all described in very much the same language and was evidently following

the same manner of emergence. But now a different note is struck, and a completely different atmosphere prevails. You notice, for instance, that humans appear only after God has held a divine consultation about them. This has not happened previously. In previous verses God speaks, and that which he has declared materializes. But here God says: "Let us make man in our image, after our likeness." The question immediately arises, to whom is God speaking? Who is the other party or parties to this conversation?

It is worth noting that the word used for God in Genesis 1 and 2 is the word *Elohim*. It is found some thirty five times in these two chapters. This Hebrew word *Elohim* is a plural noun. Now that means more than when we say a thing is plural. The Hebrew also had another form called the dual form, and if the dual form had been used it would have meant that God consisted of two Persons. But it is the plural that occurs, which means that the Godhead can consist of not less than three persons. It is this plural word that is used throughout this passage, a plural noun but with singular verbs. It is remarkable that here on the very first page of the Bible I think we have more than a strong hint of the Trinity, the triunity of the Godhead. "God said, 'Let us make man in our image,'" and "So God created man in his own image." This play back and forth between the singular verb tenses and the plural nouns is strong confirmation of what the rest of the Bible tells us, that God exists in a strange three-fold unity, three-in-one -- not three Gods but only one, yet subsisting eternally in three remarkable Persons.¹

This tells us something integral about what it means for us to be made in the image of God. Just as God exists within this perfect triune community so we live in community. While we cannot yet live in the kind of unity that will one day mark God's kingdom family, we are to understand that true community is integral to God's original purpose. This is underlined for us in the Bible's first poem. At verse 27 we read:

27 So God created man in his own image,
in the image of God he created him;
male and female he created them.

There is a wonderful rhythm and balance to this poem that is only three lines long but has staggering implications. It speaks so clearly to us about the dignity we have as human beings.

¹ Ray Stedman, *Born to Reign*, at <http://www.raystedman.org/genesis/0307.html>.

Now let's pause for a minute and define the word "dignity". It comes from the Latin word *dignitas* and means "intrinsic worth."²

Our dignity is seen in this text because we are told that God has created us in His image; The Bible tells us in its first chapter that we have dignity, intrinsic worth, because we are made in the image of God. This is something that is worth remembering. Perhaps right now, for any number of reasons you are experiencing a low sense of self worth, because of what is happening in some interpersonal relationship in your life. Remember that the very first way the Bible says we are to be seen is as those who have dignity because we are made in God's image. Yes, of course we know that this image has been marred and there are others words the Bible uses to describe the consequences of what we call Sin. But all these others ways of describing what it means to be human our found within the boarder of dignity. It might be worthwhile for us to cultivate the habit of expressing a breath prayer that affirms: "Thank you Father that I have dignity because I am made in your image." It might also be helpful for us to pray this for others, especially someone with whom we may be experiencing conflict and difficulty. It could go something like this: "Thank you Lord that NAME has dignity because he/she is made in your image."

David Short, the Rector of St. John's Shaughnessy, says of this phrase "Image of God"

I cannot think of any philosophical, ethical or personal issue that does not go back to being made in the image of God. To say that we are made in the image of God subverts abortion, elitism, and any form of racism. It subverts Marxism, Freudianism or hedonism. It subverts sexism, ageism, eugenics, and euthanasia, just to name a few.³

This declaration, found in poetic form, is the highest compliment that God can pay to us and shows us his wonderful generosity. He has bestowed upon us a dignity that has not been granted to any other creature in creation because we alone are made in his image.

Within the Community of the Church this is to be one of our distinctive features. Unlike those who do not know God, we are those who are

² "dignity." *Webster's Third New International Dictionary, Unabridged*. Merriam-Webster, 2002. <http://unabridged.merriam-webster.com> (29 Sep. 2007).

³ From a sermon by The Rev. David Short: "In His Image". This is a quote transcribed from an audio file found at:

<http://www.stjohnsshaughnessy.org/files/01oct06.mp3>

shaped by the doctrine of Imago Dei because as God exists within the complementarity of the Trinity so we are to live with each other in ways that reflect this true Communion. We reflect this true Communion by seeing in each other our intrinsic worth. The reason we are to reflect this true Community is made clearer when we better understand what it means to be made in God's image.

In the ancient world, as indeed in some parts of the modern world, leaders would set up statues of themselves in prominent places to remind their subjects that they were in charge.⁴ It was common that the farther the province from the centre of power, the greater incidence of images. Far more statues of Roman Emperors are found today in places like Greece, Turkey and Egypt than say in Rome. Not only did the statue remind subjects who was in charge, but it was also a reminder to them that they needed to behave themselves.

Now for those of us who live in Democratic states this might rub us the wrong way. If somehow imaging God is in any way associated with despotic rulers, could not the Scripture have come up with a better image? I don't think so.

We need to look behind the often despotic application to the symbolic meaning. As we read Genesis 1 it is clear that the creator God loves the world so much that he wants to look after it in the best possible way. To that end he placed in the world a looking after creature, or we could say a creature who would demonstrate to the creation, who he the creator really is. This creature, as we will see when we look at the second point, about dominion, was to work developing the creation, to make it flourish and so fulfill its purpose which as we saw last week is to know God's blessing within God's boundaries. This family of creatures, the human race, would model and embody that inter relatedness, that mutual and fruitful knowing, trusting and loving, which was the creator's original intention.⁵

If being made in the image of God proclaims loud and clear our true dignity, to then be entrusted with the responsibility of dominion says something about our true destiny. This brings us to my second point:

Our destiny is defined through our commissioning to have dominion
over the world

⁴ Think for instance of Iraq under Saddam Hussein or China under Mao Tse Tung. Their images and statues where very common.

⁵ N.T. Wright: *Simply Christian* (Harper One New York New York) , pages 36-37

Again let's begin by looking at a dictionary definition of the word. It comes from the Latin *destinatus* and means "that to which any person or thing is destined : as a predetermined state; condition foreordained by divine will or by human will."

This helps us to understand what I mean when I say that our destiny is to have Dominion over Creation. In others words this is God's foreordained purpose as clearly described here in Genesis 1.

But what does it mean for us to have dominion? Verse 28 gives us a *clue*.

28 And God blessed them. And God said to them, "Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth and subdue it and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the heavens and over every living thing that moves on the earth."

All of verse 26-30 are dominated by this idea of dominion. And a very unpopular idea it is too. Within the ecological movement, it is popular to blame the ecological crisis on the biblical doctrine of dominion. In the late sixties a man by the name of Lynn White wrote an important essay called *The Historical Roots of our Ecological Crisis*, and said in part, that the abuse of the environment is inherent in this doctrine of dominion. Here are his words:

Christianity inherited from Judaism... a striking story of creation. By gradual stages a loving and all- powerful God had created light and darkness, the heavenly bodies, the earth and all its plants, animals, birds, and fishes. Finally, God had created Adam and, as an afterthought, Eve to keep man from being lonely. Man named all the animals, thus establishing his dominance over them. God planned all of this explicitly for man's benefit and rule: no item in the physical creation had any purpose save to serve man's purposes. And, although man's body is made of clay, he is not simply part of nature: he is made in God's image.⁶

Now there is so much of this that is a mis-representation, not only of Genesis, but more importantly the biblical doctrine of Dominion in what Lynn White has written here. While there might be some Christians who would say that we have been given authority to exploit

⁶ Lynn White, Jr. "The Historical Roots of our Ecological Crisis" (<http://www.zbi.ee/~kalevi/lwhite.htm>), p. 5

our natural resources, the question we need to ask is: "What did God mean by Dominion?" When we see what Scripture says, the conclusion is very different from what Mr. White has taken from a mis-reading of Genesis 1 and 2.

To answer the question: "What did God mean by Dominion? we look to three places.

The most obvious place to begin is here in chapter one. Remember what God is doing, He calls creation into being and he shapes it by giving it boundaries in which he can then bless it. It is the opposite of exploitation and self-centred control. Everything God does he does for the good of others. He has such a relationship with his creation that in blessing it, he also delights in and enjoys what he has made. If we are made in the image of God, and we are to demonstrate to the creation who God really is, then we like God are to relate to creation for its greater good.

The second place we turn to in the Bible to understand the word Dominion is the Psalms. There are two in particular; Psalms 72 and 145.

Psalm 72 is a meditation on God's Messiah King. And at the heart of the Psalm are the very familiar words of verse 8.

May he have dominion from sea to sea, and from the River to the ends of the earth!

This is familiar because on the morning the Father's of Confederation were deciding on what to name Canada, one Leonard Tilley was late arriving at the meeting. He had been meditating on Psalm 72. The story goes that he came into the room and said "I propose we call it the Dominion of Canada because of Psalm 72".

What kind of dominion is the Messiah King supposed to have? Verses 1-7 give the answer.

*1 Give the king your justice, O God,
and your righteousness to the royal son!
2 May he judge your people with righteousness,
and your poor with justice!
3 Let the mountains bear prosperity for the people....*

I need to pause her for a minute. The word in Hebrew that we translate prosperity is the word *Shalom*. It means harmony, peace, fullness. Dominion you see has to do with integration, not exploitation.

*3 Let the mountains bear prosperity for the people,
and the hills, in righteousness!
4 May he defend the cause of the poor of the people,
give deliverance to the children of the needy,
and crush the oppressor!*

*5 May they fear you while the sun endures,
and as long as the moon, throughout all generations!
6 May he be like rain that falls on the mown grass,
like showers that water the earth!
7 In his days may the righteous flourish,
and peace (*Shalom*) abound, till the moon be no more!*

Do you see what this is saying? The Dominion of Christ is a dominion of righteousness, justice, deliverance and *Shalom*. Here is a picture of what the world will be like on the other side of Jesus' Second Coming. But it is also a picture of our destiny as those who bear the name "Christian", a word that means "little Christ" As those who bear his image we are to in the present embody these qualities which will one day be fully known. What a destiny we have, what a privilege we have been given to be those who are to exercise this kind of dominion.

This is a clear picture that is made even clearer in Psalm 145:

This Psalm is a meditation on Genesis 1 and on the theme of Dominion.

*8 The LORD is gracious and merciful,
slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love.
9 The LORD is good to all,
and his mercy is over all that he has made.*

Is this a wonderful thought? God does not only have compassion on us as humans, but rather on all that he has made. Everything that finds itself the result of his Genesis One Sermon is treated by him with compassion.

Jesus expressed this so wonderfully when in talking to his disciples about their propensity to worry and fear:

29 Are not two sparrows sold for a penny? And not one of them will fall to the ground apart from your Father. 30 But even the hairs of your head are all numbered. 31 Fear not, therefore; you are of more value than many sparrows.⁷

Yes, we are of more value than many sparrows, but even on the sparrows God has mercy. Now we go to verse 13 of the Psalm where the word "Dominion" is mentioned.

13 Your kingdom is an everlasting kingdom,
and your dominion endures throughout all generations.

How does this happen so that his dominion endures for all generations? Look to verse 15:

*15 The eyes of all look to you,
and you give them their food in due season.
16 You open your hand;
you satisfy the desire of every living thing.*

Again notice that it is the eyes of all God's creatures look to him. The animals look to God and he feeds them. Have you ever thought about this that God opens his hand to feed us? When we get hungry we go to the restaurant or the supermarket. But actually it is God who is opening his hand to us. The soil, the seed, the sun, and rain, the cattle, they are all his. Yes we live outside of the Garden of Eden, yes the image is defaced in us. Yes, the whole of creation is groaning because things are not as they will one day be. Now there is famine, not there is hunger. But when there is food, it comes to us from the kindness and dominion of God.⁸

To be made in the Image of God means that we are to be a sign to all of creation that he is its ruler. It would be worth our while I think to meditate on these two psalms and prayerfully allow the qualities described here sink deeply into our minds and souls. By knowing these psalms we will be helped in living in this world with a right understanding of dominion and so reflect God's image.

⁷ Matthew 10:29-30

⁸ Short: "In His Image".

Time is fleeting and so I will only touch on the third point. I will develop it in more detail next week.

3. God has given us the boundary of Sabbath rest in which to live out our lives so that we can rightly reflect his image and exercise dominion.

This point is absolutely essential to the framing of the puzzle. For those of you who know Genesis, you will remember that chapter 11 is about the story of human beings building the Tower of Babel. They do this we are told that they can make a name for themselves. It is put this way:

The people said, "Come, let us build ourselves a city and a tower with its top in the heavens, and let us make a name for ourselves"⁹

Does this strike a dissonant note for you? Here in Genesis one we are told that our destiny is to have dominion over the earth by reflecting God's image. By chapter the human creatures has lost his dignity and original destiny and exchanged it for an idol: To make a name for himself. What a distortion of God's purpose for humankind and yet how aptly contemporary.

I want to suggest that Genesis tells us that we will lose a sense of our true dignity and destiny is we lose sight of the Sabbath. The Sabbath is to be to our lives what the beat is to a song. If the beat is lost, the song cannot be properly song. If the Sabbath is lost we cannot sing the song of our dignity and destiny.

Please notice that after the creation of humankind, their first full day is the Sabbath, an entering into the rest of God. Jesus understands the centrality of the Sabbath when in Mark two he says:

"The Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath."¹⁰

The Sabbath was made for us to know that at the centre of creation, at the centre of our lives is God. And that if we are to live fully as his image bearers our lives need to be lived from this centre. Psalm 100 is a Sabbath Psalm. It declares:

⁹ Genesis 11:4

¹⁰ Mark 2:27

1 Make a joyful noise to the LORD, all the earth!
2 Serve the LORD with gladness!
Come into his presence with singing!

3 Know that the LORD, he is God!
It is he who made us, and we are his;

we are his people, and the sheep of his pasture.

4 Enter his gates with thanksgiving,
and his courts with praise!
Give thanks to him; bless his name!

5 For the LORD is good;
his steadfast love endures forever,
and his faithfulness to all generations.

What a foil this is to the ideology of making a name for ourselves. When we live our lives from the Sabbath outwards it is God's name that we will exalt because we know that he is the one who has made us and we are his. When we live from this place, then we can in turn more fully know our true dignity and destiny as we reflect God's image and exercise His dominion.

Amen.