

The Doctrine of Creation

Week 5: Creation and Human Nature

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However much interest theological views of creation may have garnered in the context of scientific theory about the origin of the cosmos, there can be but little doubt that the one purpose for which the biblical creation narratives have been written is their account of the creation of humanity. This forms the climax of Gen. 1, and the next chapter, which offers another and in some ways different perspective on creation is almost entirely focussed on the divine-human relationship.

This observation is not trivial, and it is not be explained either simply by pointing out the anthropocentric character of the biblical worldview. It shows that within the biblical context interest in creation is bound up with the broader theological horizon which is formed by the account of a relationship between God and humanity, a relationship that is started by God himself, broken by his human partners and finally restored to everyone's satisfaction.

The creation of humankind at the apex of the creation story reminds us of the fact that this story is ultimately told in order to offer the widest possible framework for this relationship: humanity was specifically made by God so that it could then enter into a special relationship with him. It was not only created like every other part of creation, but it occupies a special place in his creation, and in some ways the big picture of the creation of the world as a whole is only provided to give due weight to the fact that at the climax of this process humanity comes into existence. The special role it has within God's creation is expressed famously in the phrase that human beings were made 'according to the image and likeness of God':

Then God said, 'Let us make humankind in our image, according to our likeness; and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the birds of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the wild animals of the earth, and over every creeping thing that creeps upon the earth.'
So God created humankind in his image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them.

It is far from clear what these words mean, and more than a single hour could be filled simply by enumerating some of the more important interpretations this passage has received in the course of the history of theology. Often these attempts have been focussed on the question what it is in human nature that makes us 'like' God, and this should not surprise us. For by approaching the problem in this way, an interpretation of the Genesis terminology does at the same time help us understand what we are *and* what God is. Is he, for example, primarily mind and is therefore our own intellectual ability the key feature that sets us apart from the world at large, but connects us with God? Is it the possession of a free will that makes us, like God, moral persons who are responsible for what we do? Is it perhaps creativity, God's own property shown in the *making* of humanity, that displays our similarity? Is our own power over the rest of creation a mirror of God's universal stewardship over the world? Or is it, finally, our ability to enter into a loving relationship that makes us, to whatever extent, *like* God? Evidently, crucial questions about the nature of God and of humanity open up here. For each of these possibilities seems to say as much about God as it does about the human being: is God himself primarily to be conceived of in intellectual or in volitional terms, is he in the first place the omnipotent or the loving being? It is thus at this point that the doctrine of creation shows its deepest connection with the most fundamental theological issues for each of those possibilities will inevitably have repercussions for a plethora of other doctrinal questions. For we must not, of course, make the mistake of thinking of this divine-human relationship that is expressed through the phrase 'image and likeness' as something essentially static and stable.

The church father Irenaeus of Lyons in the late 2nd century was the first to argue that the two words used in the Genesis account, image (*eikon*) and likeness (*homoiosis*), carry a slightly different meaning. Thus the former would refer to a similarity with God which we actually possess here and now whereas likeness would refer to a property we shall only inherit at the end of salvation history.

This interpretation was later connected with the tension between creation and fall – accordingly salvation history meant that we are about to obtain something *again* that we had lost in the fall. In either way, the point is clear: the Genesis account, mentioning a point of contact between humanity and God, does not thereby merely speak about the current situation of humanity; it does not simply say what we *are* right now, but also what we are meant to become. In other words it expresses a process as much as a reality.

It is extremely doubtful that the use of the two terms in either Hebrew or Greek does actually bear out such an interpretation. Be this however as it may, much more important than this linguistic detail is the underlying theological intention which quite appropriately connects God's creation of humankind with the ambiguities of our own history and our own existence. We cannot speak about our likeness to God without mentioning at the same time the immense amount of differences that separate humanity from God. We cannot, in other words, speak of the link established in creation between God and humanity without speaking of sin as that which separates and divides us from him. We cannot see the account of humanity's creation isolated from humanity's need of salvation; likeness with God is as much a promise, a task, and a hope as it is a gift; it is a perfection looked for as much as a condition underlying our current existence.

For this reason, there is also a close connection between the notion of humankind's creation in the image of God and the doctrine of the Incarnation. Jesus Christ, who in the New Testament is called the 'image of the invisible God' *restores* the relationship between God and humankind that had been established in our first creation. It is for this reason also that the New Testament speaks, in various places, of salvation as a 'new creation' – there is a direct parallel between the original making of the human being and our *remaking* through the encounter with Christ.

What I have tried to say so far amounts to two things. Firstly, the biblical account of creation culminates in the creation of humankind; it is ultimately told as a whole to make the point that we are created by God. Secondly, this shows how the doctrine of creation is connected with the broader framework of the biblical narrative about the relationship between God and humankind. To say that human beings were made at the end of God's creative activity – and the 'end' clearly does not refer to a point in time, but indicates importance – sets the scene for the ensuing history of salvation driven by the tension between our actual separation from God and our ideal community with him.

If we then look at some influential interpretations of the notion of human godlikeness we must keep this broad sweep in mind. Whatever answer we give will inevitably have wide-ranging consequences for the whole of one's theology. Take, for example, the classical interpretation, encountered in Aquinas and many others, that the likeness mentioned in Gen. 1, 26f refers in the first place to rationality, to the ability to think. This has obvious consequences for the way human beings conceive of themselves; our distinctive mark in comparison to the rest of the world is then found primarily in our rational abilities. It implies equally that God is thought of as the perfect mind – a

tradition with deep roots not only in Christianity, but in the Greek philosophical tradition, not least in Plato and Aristotle.

Yet this is not all. If the image of God is seen primarily in human rational and cognitive abilities, then our current separation from God will once again be understood along those lines. It will be seen as a failure to understand the world and God appropriately. It will be this limitation of our cognitive abilities that salvation has to address – Christ comes to restore our knowledge of God, which is currently dim and insufficient, and the task of the Christian seeking to follow the guidance offered by the saviour may be seen in intellectual meditation. We can easily see here how an ideal of Christian existence that emphasises withdrawal from the world, concentration on the spiritual contents of the gospel, prayer, fasting, and meditation could arise from such an initial conception of what humanity is meant to be.

Quite otherwise if, for example, the link is seen in the possession and the exercise of free will. This will inevitably stress the moral aspect both of God and man. Both, it is claimed somehow have this in common that they are able (and obliged) to act responsibly; they are what we call persons. Yet once again, this is not all there is to it. For if thus human and divine agencies are emphasised, the sinful separation of humankind from God will be perceived in a failure to do the right things. We are cut off from the state intended for us not so much by our inability to think and understand the world and God clearly and distinctly, but by our failure to exercise our free will appropriately and thus to act rightly. We are meant to be free and good, but are very far from this ideal. God's salvific plan for humankind would then be aimed at correcting this failure in the first place; salvation means that we are liberated to do the right things, it is action oriented. Christ is thus teacher and example encouraging us and helping us on the way to a new life in accordance with God's will. The ideal of

Christian life will here inevitably be much more practical. The aim is not withdrawal from the world, but transforming action within it. The proof of the Christian vocation is not the reclusive existence of the monk, but the paradigm of the good Samaritan.

Or again, to take one final example, it is hardly coincidence that during the time of the Renaissance the idea became popular that it was, in fact, the very notion of creativity that constituted the bond between God and humankind. This allowed giving theological support to the new emphasis on creativity as a major human property. It is creativity that makes man ‘a second God’ – a phrase frequently encountered in the literature of the time. Yet once again, thinking of God and humanity in this way also and inevitably meant seeing humanity in a process, a development. One of the most famous texts from that time, *On the Dignity of Man* by the Italian Pico della Mirandola expresses this idea in classical form. The text is partly styled as a speech given by God to the newly created Adam, and this is what God says:

We have given you, O Adam, no visage proper to yourself, nor endowment properly your own, in order that whatever place, whatever form, whatever gifts you may, with premeditation, select, these same you may have and possess through your own judgement and decision.

In other words, the absence of any ‘natural’ gift in God’s creation of the human being is precisely his way of setting him apart from the rest of creation. Whatever other beings have they owe fully and entirely to God. Whatever Adam will have will be in an important sense his own possession.

We note here a number of important variations of our theme. Instead of the idea that humanity was created, fell and will be restored, Pico thinks of a linear development. Perfection will only occur in the future; it has not existed in the past. And the achievement of this future perfection clearly is a human task much more than divine salvation. This then in some ways is no longer ‘orthodox’ Christian doctrine, and yet

we can see how it is spun out of the notion that human beings were made in the image of God, and that it preserves the dynamic element originally contained in this idea. This it is important to note as it indicates how pervasive the Jewish-Christian tradition of creation in the image of God remained even after some of its more orthodox and traditional elements had been dropped. I shall come back to this in a moment.

There is a further aspect to be considered first. I have thus far always spoken of God's creation of 'humanity' or of 'humankind' – what exactly is the object of God's creation here? Is it not, someone might ask, Adam, the first human person? Some of you may know that Adam in Hebrew means precisely human being, and the text of Genesis that speaks of the creation of man in God's image clearly has the generic term in mind. We can easily see why this is relevant by considering the relevance for religion of the assumption that each human person is entitled to think of themselves as a creature of God. Does this only refer as it were to an indirect creation – God created the first human person, we are somehow descended from that person so God in some sense has also created me? Surely not, the idea is that there is something like a personal bond between the believer and God expressed through the assumption that he or she *is* a creation of God.

Theology has tried to conceptualise this by understanding the creation of humankind in Gen 1 not in an individual but in a collective sense. According to this interpretation, God's creation as reported in that verse is not that of a single human person, but strictly speaking of humankind in general. What this means specifically is not easy to understand. Yet it means, and this is relevant for us here, that the notion of God's creation of humanity in his own image is not exhausted in an individualistic interpretation of which particular trait in our own character shows similarities with

God or fails to show them, but that there is a communal dimension to it as well. If God has not created a single human person in his image, but humankind as a whole, then questions concerning human society, human culture and human history cannot be indifferent for this topic either. We are thus led from the notion of human creation in the image of God to wide ranging questions about the development of humanity over time and its direction. We are also led to questions about human interaction, about the structure of societies, about issues of right and wrong, about political and social justice, about the relationship between men and women.

This leads me to my two final points. What is the relevance of our topic for current debates about human issues in theology and beyond? I think we encounter a certain paradox here. On the one hand, many scientific and philosophical insights developed over the past 250 years have led us to question some of the basic presuppositions of the Genesis account. And I don't mean the problem of its literal interpretation, which I think is something of a bogus problem. What I mean is its anthropocentrism. It would appear that our own knowledge about the temporal and spatial dimensions of the world and of our own seemingly insignificant place in it has made it extremely difficult for us to appreciate, let alone identify ourselves with, a world view that presupposes a homely universe with ourselves at its centre. It has often been claimed that the various forces of modernity have conspired to push ourselves out of the centre of the world and into its periphery where the whole of humanity now seems to inhabit a tiny planet in a small solar system at the margins of one out of millions of galaxies. The whole history of humanity seems to occupy hardly more than a split second in the vast duration of the universe, hardly the stuff to encourage our self-perception as the crown of creation and the preferred object of divine love.

And yet, at the same time developments have taken place that seem to run exactly in the opposite direction. Ideas of human rights and human dignity have only gained prevalence over this same period in time. We seem today much more alerted than ever before to the need to treat each individual human being with respect and to respect their individual dignity. I am not of course saying that this today is a reality, but we merely have to think of issues such as social injustice, torture, or warfare to see how much our perception of those has changed over the past 100 or 200 years. Torture may still be practices, but even those who do so would hide themselves while doing it and pretend publicly that they do not; less than 300 years ago this was a commonly accepted interrogation technique in practically every country in Europe.

It is difficult not to see in the rise of the political ideas of individual dignity and individual human rights an echo of the Jewish-Christian tradition of human creation in the image of God. The nagging question then of course is why those consequences were not drawn much earlier and why, when they were applied, this often happened in the teeth of bitter opposition of influential forces in the established churches? There is not a simple answer to this. The unclear relationship between the doctrines of creation and the fall meant of course, that any claims the former made about human godlikeness could be mitigated for all practical purposes by the empirical distortions of that godlikeness in a fallen world. In other words, as long as one could argue that individuals in fact did not conform to the ideals implied in the concept of the 'image of God' even the most inhumane treatment of them seemed justifiable. Whatever explanation one may offer though it seems one of the great ironies in the history of our own culture that some of those political and social ideas in which we now see most clearly the Christian heritage even in a secular world were in fact introduced

into this world by those who were often opposed by mainstream Christianity in their own day.

Thinking about the contemporary relevance of this notion, however, we should not confine ourselves to the level of political, legal and social developments. There is a lasting ethical challenge contained in the biblical idea, which has importance for each individual. I said earlier that the notion of human godlikeness has a dynamic element to it; it says something about what we are, but also about what we should be. This has been for a long time one of the most powerful motivations for ethical reflection. Our potential for self-improvement through education and moral practice is deeply informed by the underlying idea that we can become something that, in a sense, we are not yet. You will hear more about the ethical consequences of the doctrine of creation next week, and so I should only point out at the end of today's lecture that there is a direct path from this insight expressed in the Genesis story and leading ideas about how we ought to live our individual lives.