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## 'A licence to dominate or a promise for creation?'

If there is one thing that Sir David Attenborough really hates, it's being referred to as a "national treasure". True, he has been around on British television for over half a century (and many of us may well have seen the first episode of his latest series "Life" on Monday evening); and thankfully he isn't guilty of making awful jokes like that other fixture on our screens, Bruce Forsyth. Instead, Sir David has spent his entire life travelling to the remotest places on earth in order to show us the wonderful creatures that are to be found there. His enthusiasm and energy are still remarkable.

Earlier this year Sir David became the victim of a hate-mail campaign from some Fundamentalist Christians who told him that he "was going to burn in hell" because he failed to credit God for the wonders of creation. More significantly, Sir David – who is an atheist – had dared to criticise the Judaeo-Christian tradition which (he believes) assumes that God gave the Earth to humans for them to populate, use and even abuse in whatever way they saw fit. He said that the Bible not only peddled untruths about how animals and plants appeared on earth but also lies at the root the greedy overexploitation of the earth's resources. According to Sir David, Christianity has led to the devastation of vast areas of the world.

These allegations – which are held by many environmentalists – are very serious ones indeed. They are actually not new, but date back to a seminal article written in 1967. Its author, Lynn White, claimed that Christianity was far less sympathetic to nature than any other religion. Indeed, she said that the Bible has been responsible for the basic notion that the world is there for us to exploit and that, if it doesn't actually serve our purposes, it is dispensable. Human beings are far more important than anything else on this planet.

And we must admit that, in the past, many powerful leaders and magnates who held the title of "Christian" gave virtually no thought to the effect they were having on the ecosphere. They cared little for their fellow human beings and even less for the world's flora and fauna. Moreover, they used up the world's resources with little or no thought for the generations which were to succeed them. To our shame, this largely came about through the Industrial Revolution which, itself, is strongly linked to the so-called "Protestant work ethic". And Britain was one of the countries at the very forefront of this destruction: you only have to look at those old photographs of Manchester or Stoke-on-Trent, covered in a haze of smoke, to know how true this is.

But is the Bible really responsible for all this? In a moment, we're going to look at one of the best-known – and most reviled - verses of the Bible to see what it says. But, before that, I would just like to say that the Bible revels in creation, which it sees as the work of God's hands. In the Psalms there are glorious descriptions of the beauty of the natural world. The Bible takes a very different view of the world to many other religions: it is not one in which every tree, rock, river and tree has its own spirit (a common idea throughout history); nor is it (as some Greek philosophers claimed) illusory, impermanent and basically bad. After all, at the end of each section of the creation story, God looks at what he has made and says, "That's good!"

So let's return to the verse we must consider, God's command in Genesis to the first humans in which he said, "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 air and over every living thing that moves upon the earth". This is the verse that Attenborough himself cites as the root cause for all that has gone wrong in our relationship with the created world: to many environmentalists quoting it is like a red rag to a bull, for their belief is that humanity should live in harmony with nature rather than dominating it.

But what does it actually say? Well, the Hebrew word translated "subdue" in our English Bibles is

certainly strong: it not only means “subdue” but also “enslave” and, in the harshest instances, can even signify “molest” or “rape.” That certainly does seem to suggest that we humans are being told that we can do as we please with the world, it is there for us to use up. But there’s a catch in this: for the word we’re thinking of only means “subdue” when the party on the receiving end is already hostile – for instance, a country would need to subdue an attacking army if it were not to be overrun. It is a word which relates to defence and protection rather than aggression.

Well, we are not necessarily on the defensive against rampant nature – although, if you’ve lived in the tropics, you will know how quickly it can take over! But this word must mean that we only have licence to take control of nature when, if we were not to do so, it would overpower and yield death for us rather than providing life. In other words, we can fight back against the natural world with the aim of making it fruitful: agriculture, pruning and weed-killing fall happily into this way of looking at things. That is quite different to going on the offensive and ripping the world to shreds simply because we think we’re the bosses. Acting in such an arrogant manner just exposes the twistedness and sin that are latent in humanity. (I’ll return to that).

So that’s the word “subdue” dealt with. But what about the one which means “dominion” or “rule”? I’m no Hebrew scholar; but I understand that this is a royal word which speaks of a king’s reign. It is used in Psalm 72, which was originally a coronation psalm for Solomon and says: “May he have dominion from sea to sea” (v.8) That seems straightforward until we look at some later verses in the Psalm which show us the precise character of that dominion: “He delivers the needy when they call, the poor and those who have no helper. He has pity on the weak and the needy, and saves the lives of the needy. From oppression and violence he redeems which life; and precious is their blood in his sight” (v.12-14). It is clear God’s desired way of ruling is not exploitative but one which protects the defenceless and gives justice to the oppressed.

If we take this principle and apply it to the command for humanity to exercise dominion over nature, we can see that we are called to protect creation as much as rule over it. As a king accepts tribute or taxes from his subjects, so too we can receive a bountiful sustenance from creation’s fruits. Yet, as a king should take care of the weak and poor in his kingdom, so too we are called to guard natural beauty, preserve endangered species of God’s creatures, and even restore the places which we have too often ruled “with force and harshness”. As a result, one scholar has interpreted our verse in this lovely way: “Be fruitful and have children, filling the earth with your life so that you can have power to fight against everything in it that leads to death. Rule with care and fairness over the natural world, over the myriads of my beautiful creatures - from tropical fish to soaring eagles to dogs and cats – every creature that is a part of this living world”.

These thoughts are not new. Back in 1987, the late Archbishop of Canterbury, Robert Runcie, talked about some of these issues in a lecture given to both Christians and Jews. While agreeing that humans are creative beings who have a vocation to join God in his work, Runcie noted that we are tempted to usurp God’s place and exercise a “tyrannical” dominion over creation. And so he asked, “Are we to accept that the rest of creation has been created only for humans? Does dominion necessarily lead to domination?” His answer is clear: “Our concept of God, both Jew and Christian alike, forbids the idea of a cheap creation, of a throwaway universe in which everything in principle is expendable save human existence”. Those were radical ideas twenty years ago – but Christians were at last catching up with the ecological movement! Attenborough would surely have been delighted.

And we can go back much further: one of the greatest Reformers (not one I particularly like!) was Jean Calvin, born precisely 500 years ago in 1509, and he said this about our relationship to creation: “The custody of the garden was given in charge to Adam, to show that we possess the things which God has committed to our hands, on the condition, that being content with a frugal and moderate use of them, we should take care of what shall remain. Let him who possesses a field, so partake of its yearly fruits, that he may not suffer the ground to be injured by his negligence; but let him endeavor to hand it down to posterity as he received it, or even better cultivated. Let him so feed on its fruits that he neither dissipates it by luxury, nor permits to be marred or ruined by neglect. Moreover, that this economy, and this diligence, with respect to those good things which God has given us to enjoy, may flourish among us; let every one regard himself as the steward of God in all things which he possesses. Then he will

neither conduct himself dissolutely, nor corrupt by abuse those things which God requires to be preserved". The language may be archaic, but the ideas being stated are entirely up-to-date.

So where have things gone wrong? If the Bible suggests that humanity should have a harmonious partnership with creation, why have we so often despoiled and raped it? Well, this surely has something to do with sin and what the Bible calls the "Fall", although none of us probably believe any more in the literal story we find in Genesis. Nevertheless its message is clear: people have got above themselves and tried to usurp the position of God, they have taken it upon themselves to take advantage of creation rather than simply obey the command to tend and cultivate it. To put it bluntly, the problems in our relationship with the natural world do not stem from the Bible but from our own pigheaded sin and pride.

However, there is a message of hope for the world. Calvin's English contemporary Francis Bacon, who was instrumental in laying the basis for modern science, wrote this: "Man by the Fall fell at the same time from his state of innocence and from his dominion over nature. Both of these losses, however, even in this life, can in some part be repaired; the former by religion and faith, the later by the arts and sciences." The Church has not always remembered that, and needs to confess its failure. But surely Christians, who have been returned to fellowship with God through Christ, and who believe that his work of redemption will ultimately encompass the entire cosmos, should exercise a proper use of nature. Yes, we have dominion over it, but we are called to exhibit our dominion rightly: treating creation as something with value, exercising power without being destructive.

In a few moments I am going to finish; but I have one final thought to bring you. Earlier on I mentioned the industrial hellholes of the 19th and early 20th centuries, the landscapes and skylines formed by coal, brick and iron in our supposedly Christian nation. Today we would rightly regard those conditions as appalling; none of us would want to turn back the clock. As believers in God, we would want to repent of what we have done both to the world and to our fellow humans.

But, before we flay ourselves too severely, I'd like you to picture the spouting chimneys and despoiled landscapes of today's world. I'd like you to think of the pollution, which we are still having to deal with, created by factories in the former Communist states; of the burgeoning economies of China and India which drain the world's resources and spew pollutants into the air; and of the destruction of the Amazonian rain forests with one of humanity's most damaging tools, the chain-saw. I have to say that none of these things are being inspired by a Christian ethic of creation or care for humanity; instead they show us what humans can do when they have no faith to hold them in check. Indeed, it is often the Church – among other voices – which is crying out, "Stop!"

And so I believe that we have come to regard the Bible in a different, possibly more thoughtful, way than our ancestors. We no longer believe – if we ever did – that it gives us the liberty to act as domineering lords over creation. Rather, we think that it gives us a message about acting stewards in partnership with God – stewards, moreover, who are looking forward to see an ultimate redemption of harmony and wholeness being restored to all the created world. I am sure that David Attenborough does not share those views, although I do hope he may hear and listen to them. And, in "One World Week" especially, may we never forget that God has given us precisely one earth, and the responsibility to look after it as well as we possibly can.